

KATHLEEN HUGHES MEMORIAL LECTURES 10

THOMAS CHARLES-EDWARDS

St Patrick
and the Landscape of Early Christian Ireland



HUGHES HALL
&
DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Hughes Hall was founded in 1885 as the Cambridge Training College (CTC) for graduate women schoolteachers. It is therefore Cambridge's oldest Graduate College, consisting currently of around 50 Fellows and some 400 student members, men and women, who study for doctoral or M.Phil. degrees or for the postgraduate diplomas and certificates offered by the University. We also have an increasing number of mature undergraduates in a variety of subjects. As a result, the academic community of Hughes Hall is now extremely diverse, including students of over 60 nationalities and representing almost all the disciplines of the University. Enquiries about entry as a student are always welcome and should be addressed initially to the Admissions Tutor, Hughes Hall, Cambridge, CB1 2EW, U.K. (<http://www.hughes.cam.ac.uk/>).

An important step in this transformation came with the granting of Cambridge degrees to women in 1948: the CTC was then given the status of a 'Recognised Institution', the crucial first move towards integration with the University proper. The College took the name of CTC's charismatic first Principal, the celebrated women's educationist, Elizabeth Phillips Hughes. Apart from Miss Hughes's Welsh heritage, there is no known connection between the College and the scholar now commemorated in this series of lectures.

Kathleen Winifred Hughes (1926-77) was the first and only Nora Chadwick Reader in Celtic Studies in the University of Cambridge. Previously (1958-76) she had held the Lectureship in the Early History and Culture of the British Isles which had been created for Nora Chadwick in 1950. She was a Fellow of Newnham College (and Director of Studies in both History and Anglo-Saxon), 1955-77. Her responsibilities in the Department of Anglo-Saxon & Kindred Studies, subsequently the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, were in the fields of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh history of the early and central Middle Ages. Her achievements in respect of Gaelic history have been widely celebrated, notably in the memorial volume *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, published in 1982. The Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures both acknowledge her achievements and seek to provide an annual forum for advancing the subject. Each year's lecture will be published as a pamphlet by the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic on behalf of Hughes Hall.

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St Patrick and the Landscape of Early Christian Ireland
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PREFACE

The Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lecture was initiated as an annual event by Hughes Hall as the result of an anonymous benefaction in her memory and to mark the establishment of the Welsh Assembly. This benefaction came to the College as a result of an initiative taken by our Fellow, Dr Michael J. Franklin, Director of Studies in History and in Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic.

Each lecture will be published, both on the College's web-site (<http://www.hughes.cam.ac.uk/>) and as a printed pamphlet, to coincide with the following year's lecture. Hughes Hall is grateful to the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic for acting as hard-copy publisher.

Hughes Hall hopes that this academic initiative will make a significant scholarly contribution in those areas which fall within the research interests of Kathleen Hughes, and that the series will continue for many years. We are pleased that it continues to be a fixed point in the College's calendar.

Sarah Squire
President
Hughes Hall

ABBREVIATIONS

- AFM *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann: The Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1616*, ed. and trans. J. O'Donovan, 7 vols. (Dublin, 1856)
- AT *The Annals of Tigernach*, ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes, 2 vols. (facsimile reprint, Felinfach, 1993)
- AU *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131), Part I, Text and Translation*, ed. and trans. Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (Dublin, 1983)
- HDGPN *Historical Dictionary of Gaelic Placenames: Foclóir Áitainmneacha na Gaeilge*, ed. Pádraig Ó Riain, Diarmuid Ó Murchadha and Kevin Murray, Irish Texts Society (Dublin and London, 2003-)
- LL *The Book of Leinster, formerly Lebar na Núachongbála*, ed. R. I. Best, O. J. Bergin, M. A. O'Brien, and A. O'Sullivan, 6 vols. (Dublin, 1954–83)
- LU *Lebor na Huidre: The Book of the Dun Cow*, ed. R. I. Best and O. J. Bergin (Dublin, 1929)
- M Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii*, ed. Ludwig Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), 62–122
- MD *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, ed. E. J. Gwynn, 5 vols. (Dublin, 1903–35; reprinted Dublin 1991)
- Notulae* *Notulae*, ed. Ludwig Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), 180–2
- Onom.* *Onomasticon Goedelicum locorum et tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae*, ed. Edmund Hogan (Dublin, 1910)
- T Tírechán, *Collectanea*, ed. Ludwig Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), 124–62
- VT *Vita Tripartita*, ed. K. Mulchrone, *Bethu Phátraic: The Tripartite Life of Patrick* (Dublin, 1939), with references to her line numbers.
- ZCP *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*

SAINT PATRICK AND THE LANDSCAPE OF EARLY CHRISTIAN IRELAND

I only met Kathleen Hughes once or twice after returning to Oxford from Dublin in 1969. She was kind enough to include a short piece of mine in her *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources*, an indispensable book for students of early Irish history; but I knew her scholarship better than I knew her. She had three gifts that shone from everything she wrote: first-rate judgement when weighing up primary sources; a prose style that was exceptionally lucid; and a fine sense of the appropriate organization of ideas, whether in an individual argument, an article, or a whole book. I shall borrow a theme from one of her articles in this lecture. This is only a minor act of respect to someone who was, until her death, the premier historian in Britain of the Celtic countries in the early-medieval period; nevertheless, I am very grateful to the President of Hughes Hall, Mrs Squire, for this opportunity to recall her memory and honour her work.

My starting-point is a generalization about Old-Irish narrative: that it was divided into two principal streams, hagiography and saga, and that the composers of saga avoided explicit references to Christianity. That was left to the hagiographers. This is where I propose to adapt a theme from Kathleen Hughes's article 'Sanctity and Secularity in the Early Irish Church'.¹ I shall do so in the knowledge that the sense I shall give to it is only one of the concerns of her article. This division between two streams of narrative, hagiography and saga, applied to post-Patrician times: in the perception of the seventh and eighth centuries at least, the first generation of Irish saints were portrayed as Patrick's contemporaries and often as his assistants. The hagiographical narrative of Ireland thus began with Patrick, even if, in reality, Christianity reached Ireland at an earlier date. In narrative about pre-Patrician Ireland, the gods were imagined as every bit as violent as the heroes. The depth in imagined time was thus quite different in the two narrative streams, shallow for hagiography, deep for saga. To get a deep narrative, hagiography had to be linked with biblical history; and that, a priori, had nothing to do with the landscape of Ireland. The narrative evoked by the special places scattered across the Irish landscape, therefore, divided into two streams. The special places of

¹ *Studies in Church History*, 10 (1973), 21–37, reprinted as No. IX in K. Hughes, *Church and Society in Ireland, A.D. 400–1200*, ed. D. N. Dumville, Variorum Collected Studies (London, 1987).

hagiography evoked the non-violence of the saints just as those of saga evoked the violence of god and hero.

Early-medieval Ireland, then, had a dual literary culture. With certain exceptions, Christianity was kept out of saga narrative. On the other hand, the other great category of narrative, hagiography, might be influenced in a subterranean fashion by saga, but it occupied its own, quite separate, place. This is one of the fundamental differences between Old-Irish and Middle-Irish literature: in the Middle-Irish period, the barrier between saga and hagiography was progressively broken down. Before the ninth-century *Bethu Brigte*, a Life of St Brigit mostly in Irish but still partly in Latin, and the Tripartite Life of Patrick, still more of which was in Irish, but some remained in Latin, there was also a difference of language: hagiography was in Latin, saga in Irish. To this difference corresponded others: canon law was in Latin, while ‘the law of the men of Ireland’ (*recht fer nÉirenn*, also *senchas fer nÉirenn*) was in Irish;² Irish clerics and monks studied Latin grammar in Latin, but the grammar of Irish was studied in Irish. Irish canon law made extensive use of the Old Testament; native Irish law sometimes did the same, but only native Irish law introduced such pre-Patrician authorities as Cormac mac Airt. Two mental worlds interacted, but they remained distinct: one set of texts was largely in Latin, was explicitly part of the culture of Latin Christendom, and was therefore accessible to non-Irish as well as to Irish readers; the other set of texts was in Irish and therefore only intended for Irish-speaking readers, was largely about the pre-Christian past of Ireland, and imagined pre-Christian figures such as Cormac mac Airt as authorities, not just for their own day, but for early Christian Ireland as well. Pre-Viking Ireland had two cultures which were in a creative tension.

The element of tension is revealed in the Middle-Irish period, when, for example, Cormac mac Airt is made to receive a special Christian revelation long before Patrick set foot in the island.³ It is also revealed in the early-ninth century in the famous contrast made in the prologue to the Martyrology of Óengus the Culdee.⁴ This contrast has two elements: one is between the Church and the World, between monastic ascetics and kings

² *LU*, ll. 9777-8; Introduction to the *Senchas Már*, §1, ed. and trans. R. Thurneysen, *ZCP*, 16 (1926-7), 175; L. Breatnach, *The Early Irish Law Text Senchas Már and the Question of its Date*, E. C. Quiggin Memorial Lectures 13 (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 4-5, §1.

³ *LU*, p. 127.

⁴ *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé: The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*, ed. and trans. W. Stokes, Henry Bradshaw Society, 29 (London, 1905; reprinted Dublin, 1984), Prologue, ll. 221-8; K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (London, 1972), pp. 205-6.

and this contrast includes very recent history, namely of the late-eighth century. Much of this Prologue is thus constructed as a contrast between kings and saints, between the powers of this world, and the powers of saints in heaven. It stretches from Nebuchadnezzar, ‘king of the world’, who is opposed to Paul the Hermit, down to Donnchad ‘the wrathful’ and Bran ‘of the Barrow’, namely a king of Tara who died in 797 and a king of Leinster who died in 795. They are contrasted with Máel Rúain, the saintly abbot of Tallaght, near Dublin, who died in 792. Whereas visiting the tombs of Donnchad and Bran ‘takes not from me the weariness of weakness’, at the grave of Máel Rúain ‘is healed the sigh of every heart’.⁵ The contrast was one between extremes, leaving many in the middle: the counterpart to Nebuchadnezzar was not any good Christian, lay or clerical, but the first hermit, the one who shared the full loaf in the desert with St Anthony, an incident often recalled in sculpture.⁶

But the Prologue also has another contrast, coupled together with the opposition between kings and ascetics; and this other contrast is between places in the Irish landscape—between, on the one hand, Tara’s mighty fortress that decayed with the fall of her lords and, on the other, Armagh; between Ráith Chrúachan which ‘vanished together with Ailill, offspring of victory’ and great Clonmacnois; and between ‘the proud fort of Ailenn’ and Brigit’s cemetery, at Kildare.⁷ And so it continues from one royal fortress of early Irish saga to the next, each contrasted with one of the great churches. The great places of saga, with their kings, such as Ailill, king of the Connachta and enemy of Conchobor, king of the Ulstermen, are seen as having wasted away together.

The root of the contrast is clear: the famous royal seats owed their distinction to the heroes of saga, and the latter owed their power and fame

⁵ *ní beir dím sním lobrae* as opposed to *ícthair cnet cech cridi*: *Féilire Óengusso*, ed. Stokes, Prologue ll. 223 and 228.

⁶ Jerome, *Vita S. Pauli*, ed. J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* xxiii, pp. 17–28, (cc. 10–11) trans. H. Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (London, 1936), p. 48; P. Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland: An Iconographical and Photographic Survey*, Römisch-Germanisch Zentralmuseum, Forschungsinstitut für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, 3 vols. (Bonn, 1992), under Arboe, Armagh, Castledermot, Clonca, Duleek, Galloon, Kells, Monasterboice, and Moone; for fine Pictish examples, see G. Henderson and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London, 2004), figs. 202, 204.

⁷ *Ráth Chrúachan ro scáichi/ la hAilill gein mbúada/ cáin ordan úas fhlatib/ fil i cathir Chlúana* ‘Ratheroghan, it has vanished with Ailill offspring of victory: fair the sovereignty over princes that there is in the monastery of Clonmacnois’; *Borg Aillinne úallach/ atbath lia shlóg mbágach/ is mór Brigit búadach/ is cáin a rrúam dálach*. ‘Ailenn’s proud burgh has perished with its warlike host: great is victorious Brigit: fair is her multitudinous cemetery’: *Féilire Óengusso*, ed. Stokes, Prologue ll. 177–80 and 189–92.

to violence, just like Donnchad, the king of Tara, and Bran, the king of Leinster, both recently dead; the saints, however, did not. The wrath of Donnchad ‘the wrathful’ was precisely the evil disposition that led to violence and killing.⁸ The heroes of saga, and even contemporary kings, were all put in the same moral basket with Nebuchadnezzar and the emperor Nero. The ordinary penitent layman, on the other hand, had to renounce the carrying of weapons for the entire period of his penance: penitence entailed renouncing the world of violence.⁹ The early Irish Church made an emphatic distinction between people given to violence, *laích*, and those incapable of significant violence, such as children, those much more likely to be the victims rather than the perpetrators of violence, women, or those who renounced violence, clerics and penitents.¹⁰ Saga celebrated successful violence as in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, or mourned tragic violence, as in *Fingal Rónáin*; hagiography celebrated the virtues, miraculous and otherwise, of those who had embraced a life of peace. Here, too, a qualification is in order: a saint may inflict harm or even death, but this is by spiritual means, the curse or prayer that God will punish the saint’s enemy.

The tension between these two elements of the culture of early Christian Ireland and its extension to places as well as to persons, to the places of saga as opposed to the great churches, raises the question whether the same tension can be seen as Tírechán and the Tripartite Life take St Patrick round the northern half of Ireland. Were Patrick’s places inherently opposed to the places of saga, places of peace opposed to places of violence? Or does the opposition only become acute when the places of violence were also the places of the pre-Christian gods? When one exceptional place, such as Tara, played a major role in both saga and hagiography, how did the two traditions handle such places?

At this point one must make some qualifications: first, there are clear exceptions, such as in the story of the death of Conchobor;¹¹ secondly, this statement is only valid for the Old-Irish period; in Middle-Irish literature it progressively breaks down. ‘The Battle of Allen’, *Cath Almaine*, already allows saints to enter the narrative as supplementary forces assisting the

⁸ Penitential of Cummin, V, ed. and trans. L. Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin, 1964), pp. 118–20; The Old Irish Penitential, ed. and trans. Binchy, *ibid.*, pp. 271–3; cf. John Cassian, *Institutiones*, Bk. 8.

⁹ Penitential of Finnian, c. 35, ed. and trans. Bieler, *Irish Penitentials*, pp. 86–7.

¹⁰ R. Sharpe, ‘Hiberno-Latin *Laicus*, Irish *Láech* and the Devil’s Men’, *Ériu*, 30 (1979), 75–92.

¹¹ *Aided Chonchobuir*, ed. and trans. K. Meyer, *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes*, Todd Lecture Series 14 (Dublin, 1906), pp. 2–21.

armies engaged in battle;¹² in ‘The Battle of Conall’s Cairn’, *Cath Cairn Chonaill*, the sixth-century king, Díarmait mac Cerbaill, goes to battle *via* Clonmacnois and returns victorious to give land to Ciarán.¹³ The culmination of this change can be seen in *Acallam na Senórach* (c. 1200), in which the warriors pass on to Patrick the ‘place-lore’, *dindshenchas*, of Ireland, or in ‘The Warlike Progress of Cellach’, *Caithréim Cellaig*, in which Cellach’s victories are confined to the spiritual sphere and he ends his life as a martyr bishop—more hagiography than saga.¹⁴ The eighth century, when the division between the two forms of narrative was relatively strict, was no less Christian than the twelfth, in which they were largely fused together: the issue was not one of Christian versus pagan, but of a radically new form of life, without violence, offered by Christianity but only adopted by a minority of Christians.

The richest early sources for an enquiry into the relationship between the places of saga and those of the saints are two texts about St Patrick and one about St Brigit: Tírechán’s *Collectanea*, the Tripartite Life of the Saint and *Bethu Brigitte*, the Old-Irish Life of St Brigit. The two Patrician texts are, however, related, probably as shown in Table 1.¹⁵

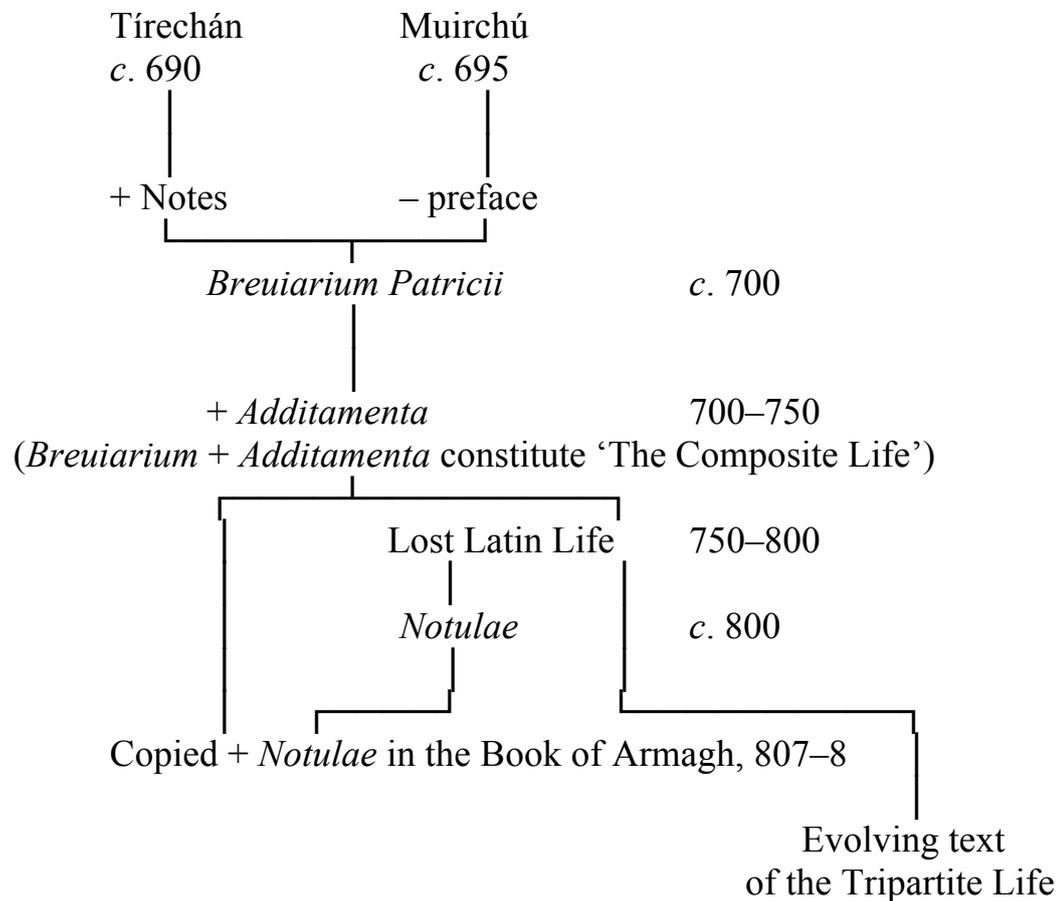
¹² *Cath Almaine*, ed. P. Ó Riain, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series XXV (Dublin, 1978).

¹³ *Cath Cairn Chonaill*, *LU*, pp. 288–92; ed. and trans. W. Stokes, ‘The Battle of Carn Conaill’, *ZCP*, 3 (1900), 203–19.

¹⁴ *Acallam na Senórach*, ed. W. Stokes, *Irische Texte*, iv: 1 (Leipzig, 1900); trans. by Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, Oxford World Classics (Oxford, 1999); *Caithréim Cellaig*, ed. K. Mulchrone, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series XXIV (2nd edn., Dublin, 1971): the earlier version in the *Lebar Brecc* lacked a title; ‘*Caithréim Cellaig*’ derives from the later version in the *Yellow Book of Lecan*; the version by the seventeenth-century scribe Míchéal Ó Cléirigh, on the other hand, was entitled ‘*Beatha Ceallaig episcopi*’ and the copy of the later version in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* has the title ‘*Beatha Cheallaigh Naeimh*’ (see Mulchrone’s edition, p. xiii). M. Herbert, ‘*Caithréim Cellaig*: Some Literary and Historical Considerations’, *ZCP*, 49–50 (1997), 320–32, also sees the influence of ecclesiastical history in the manner of Bede in this text; that type of ecclesiastical history, however, explicitly contained much hagiographical material. For the history of Irish literature, it should be associated with the hagiographical tradition.

¹⁵ The table largely derives from that in R. Sharpe, ‘Palaeographical Considerations in the Study of the Patrician Documents in the Book of Armagh’, *Scriptorium*, 36 (1982), 3–28, at p. 18, with some omissions and an extension to include the Tripartite Life. My lost Latin Life is the BPh of L. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), p. 30 (I have avoided his siglum since it encourages confusion with *Bethu Phátraic*, namely the largely vernacular Tripartite Life).

Table 1. The textual tradition of early Patrician hagiography.



An important point made by Sharpe concerns the *Notulae*, written in a cursive minuscule.¹⁶ They come at the end of the second quire of the Book of Armagh, in which the final folio was cancelled. The third quire contains supplementary Patrician material, presumably not available when the first quire was written, since among the supplementary items are the preface to Muirchú's Life of Patrick and its chapter-headings. This third quire, with its supplementary material, was copied by Ferdomnach, whereas the first two quires were written by Scribe A. It is very likely that Scribe A cancelled the last folio of his second quire before Ferdomnach had brought together the supplementary material in the third quire. If one were to suppose otherwise, there would be no reason for the cancellation: Ferdomnach should have used that folio to begin copying his supplement. Sharpe draws the conclusion that the *Notulae* are likely to have been written by Scribe A, who then cancelled the last folio before Ferdomnach

¹⁶ Sharpe, 'Palaeographical Considerations', p. 14.

began copying the supplement. If the *Notulae* reflect a lost Life of Patrick close in substance, but not identical, to the Tripartite Life, that lost Life already existed in 808. Ludwig Bieler had other reasons for dating the lost Life to the eighth century.¹⁷ In principle, the *Notulae* might have been put together before the Lost Life and might have referred to materials assembled together in the early eighth century and subsequently used in the Life;¹⁸ but the linguistic evidence assembled by Fergus Kelly does not suggest that Scribe A copied them from a much earlier exemplar.¹⁹ It is simpler to suppose that they refer directly to the Lost Life.

The *Notulae* are important because, among other things, they show that there already existed by 808 a much more detailed conception of Patrick's circuit round the southern half of Ireland than the brief mention made by Tírechán.²⁰ *Notulae* (28)–(44) pertain to Leinster, (48)–(59) to Munster. The construction of a detailed circuit for Patrick round Munster, from the Pass of Gowran to the Little Brosnagh is most unlikely, therefore, to have been as late as 823, when the Law of Patrick was enacted 'in Munster by Fedilmid son of Crimthann (king of Munster) and by Artrí son of Conchobor' (abbot of Armagh).²¹

I should emphasize that my concern is the Patrick of the hagiographers, not Patrick himself. To judge by St Patrick's own *Confessio*, written in the fifth century, the saint spent much of his time as a bishop in Ireland on the move, from small kingdom to small kingdom.²² Tírechán, who wrote about Patrick's journeys from the vantage-point of the late-seventh century, took serious liberties with the saint's career, but on Patrick's mobility he was, in essence, entirely right. Admittedly he confined Patrick's journeys in the northern half of Ireland into one great circuit, a *circulus*,²³ yet, he did not disguise what he had done. He declared

¹⁷ L. Bieler, 'Bethu Phátraic. Versuch einer Grundlegung des Verhältnisses der irischen Patriciusviten zu den lateinischen', *Anzeiger der phil.-hist. Klasse der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 111 Jahrgang 1974, So. 10 (Vienna, 1974), 253–73, reprinted in L. Bieler, *Studies on the Life and Legend of St Patrick*, ed. R. Sharpe (London, 1986), No. XIV.

¹⁸ See L. Bieler, 'The *Notulae* in the Book of Armagh', *Scriptorium*, 8 (1954), 89–97, reprinted in Bieler, *Studies on the Life and Legend of St Patrick*, No. XIII, at p. 96.

¹⁹ Kelly, 'Notes on Irish Words', in *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, ed. Bieler, p. 248.

²⁰ T 51.

²¹ AU 823.

²² *Confessio*, ed. L. Bieler, *Libra Epistolarum Sancti Patricii Episcopi*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1952; reprinted Dublin, 1993), cc. 38, *populi multi*; 49, *baptizauí tot milia hominum*; 53, *per omnes regiones quos ego frequentius uisitabam*.

²³ T 51: *Finito autem circulo*.

at one point that Patrick crossed the Shannon three times, even though he had only allowed for one crossing in his text.²⁴ Muirchú, Tírechán's contemporary, also acknowledged that Patrick was an itinerant, although his Life of the saint is centred on one great confrontation at Tara, the Babylon of the Irish, 'the head of all paganism and idolatry'.²⁵ Muirchú's dramatic triumph enjoyed by Patrick over both king and druids at Tara and Tírechán's circuit round Ireland were combined in the *Breuiarium* preserved in the early ninth-century manuscript, the Book of Armagh; the *Breuiarium*, together with the *Additamenta*, also in the Book of Armagh, formed what has been dubbed 'The Composite Life'. The lost Latin Life (as we can see from the *Notulae*) and then the Tripartite Life expanded Tírechán's brief mention of a further journey by Patrick through Leinster, into Munster, culminating at the capital of the province, Cashel, into a full account of Patrick's circuit round the southern half of the island. Patrick's circuits now defined two Irelands, northern and southern. In the lost Latin Life and in the Tripartite Life, therefore, Patrick became even more of a wanderer across the face of Ireland than he had been in Tírechán's *Collectanea*. The Tripartite Life is in substance ninth-century but most of it is in Irish; and the Irish is of different dates suggesting that the translation was not done all at the same time.²⁶ These, then, are my principal sources, stretching from the late-seventh into the ninth century: the later texts derive from the combination of Muirchú and Tírechán in the *Breuiarium* and the further combination of the *Breuiarium* with the *Additamenta*.

²⁴ T 48.

²⁵ M, I. 13; cf. I. 10.

²⁶ K. Mulchrone, 'Die Abfassungszeit und Überlieferung der Vita Tripartita', *ZCP*, 16 (1926–7), 1–94; F. Mac Donncha, 'Dáta Vita Tripartita Sancti Patricii', *Éigse*, 18 (1980–1), 125–42, and 19 (1982–3), 354–72; K. H. Jackson, 'The Date of the Tripartite Life of St. Patrick', *ZCP*, 41 (1986), 5–45; D. N. Dumville, 'The Dating of the Tripartite Life of St Patrick', in D. N. Dumville *et al.*, *Saint Patrick, A.D. 493–1993*, Studies in Celtic History, 13 (Woodbridge, 1993), 255–8; G. S. Mac Eoin, 'The Dating of Middle Irish Texts', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 68 (1982), 127–34; F. J. Byrne, 'Introduction', in F. J. Byrne and P. Francis, 'Two Lives of Saint Patrick: *Vita Secunda* and *Vita Quarta*', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 124 (1994), 6–7; *sloicsi*, VT 1504, with a simple verb + suffixed pronoun, is a good example of a form which is more characteristic of the eighth rather than the ninth century: L. Breatnach, 'Suffixed Pronouns in Early Irish', *Celtica*, 12 (1977), 75–107.



Map 1: The Provinces

First, however, we need a sense of the provinces of Ireland in the pre-Viking period and, secondly, of the broad nature of early-medieval Irish culture. Some of the names are familiar to English speakers in what was originally a Norse guise, Munster in the south, Leinster in the south-east, and Ulster in the north-east. Tírechán's Patrick was busy in part of Ulster, but the provinces covered in greatest detail are the ones across the middle. He lands in Brega, in the east, an area exposed to Late-Roman influence; from there he goes west into Mide, roughly the modern Co. Westmeath; then he crosses the River Inny into Tethbae, roughly Co. Longford. Both Mide and Tethbae were bounded on the west by the greatest river of Ireland, the Shannon. These three provinces—Brega, Mide, and Tethbae—are later described as 'the lands of the Uí Néill from the Shannon to the sea', namely the Irish Sea.²⁷ This is because, probably shortly after Patrick's death, they were conquered by branches of what would become the premier royal dynasty of Ireland, a kindred claiming descent from Níall Noígíallach, Níall of the Nine Hostages. West of the Shannon was the province ruled by the Connachta, a group of royal lineages, most of them said to be descended from Níall's brothers;²⁸ but one ruling lineage holding lands on both sides of the Shannon, Uí Choirpri, was supposed to derive from one of Níall's sons, Coirpre. Some of the Uí Néill remained as neighbours of the other Connachta in what Tírechán called 'The Western Lands', west of the Shannon and the Foyle. What was distinctive about 'the lands of the Uí Néill from the Shannon to the sea' is that these were the prime 'sword-lands' conquered and ruled by the Uí Néill alone.

Tírechán's text was organized by provinces: Book 1 was for the lands of the Uí Néill from the Irish Sea to the Shannon; Book 2 was for the lands of the Connachta.²⁹ Once Patrick had left the Connachta behind, only a small section of Tírechán's text remained before the circuit of the northern half of Ireland had been completed and Patrick had returned to the province of Brega.³⁰

The journeys of Patrick in these texts supply much of my evidence, and it will therefore help to have some idea of the practicalities of travel in pre-Viking Ireland. Here, however, the Lives of Brigit are more

²⁷ AU 837. 4: *Bellum re genntibh oc Inbiur na mBarc for Hu Neill o Shinaind co muir...*

²⁸ For Tírechán's Connacht, see C. Swift, 'The Social and Ecclesiastical Background to the Treatment of the Connachta in Tírechán's Seventh-Century *Collectanea*', unpublished Oxford D.Phil. thesis (1993 [1994]).

²⁹ T 17. 2: *Finit liber primus in regionibus nepotum Neill peractus. Incipit secundus in regionibus Connacht peractus.*

³⁰ T 50. 2; 51. 1: *Finito autem circulo.*

informative, on the whole, than are the Lives of Patrick. There is a most instructive story in *Bethu Brigte*, the Old-Irish Life of Brigit, and in part also in the *Vita Prima*, which ends with the saint travelling east from Tethbae, across Mide, to Tailtiu in Brega, where she arrives during the Fair of Tailtiu (and thus in early August). It gives one a feel of what travelling the roads in Ireland might have been like at a time of the year, to judge by the laws, when travel was most frequent.³¹ From Tethbae, Bishops Mel and Melchú set out for Tailtiu to meet Patrick. They invited Brigit to accompany them and she agreed. But soon a cleric caught them up on the road so as to ask if he, together with a company of people and animals, might accompany them. The bishops were in too much of a hurry to wait, but Brigit was prepared to go at a slower pace. The company led by the cleric included one blind woman and one lame man; these occupied their two carts, while the able-bodied carried the loads.

The cleric's company is called an *immairche* or *immairge*, a group of migrants who are moving from one home to another. The Old-Irish text 'The Expulsion of the Déissi', envisaged most of the population of the kingdom of Déissi Muman (Co. Waterford) as having been recruited from such migratory bands.³² This is why they have their animals with them and also their disabled, who are in the carts. They want to travel with Brigit, Mel, and Melchú, because that will make the roads safe for them, but the bishops want to travel faster than they can go. Brigit, however, is willing to travel more slowly, and so it is her protection alone that assures their safety. What seems to be involved is *snádud*, the protection or safe-conduct that one person may give another, for example across a territory or for a period of time.³³ As we know from an earlier part of the Life, Brigit, though a nun, is of episcopal status.³⁴

It should not be assumed from this story that, provided one had a companion of high status a journey was always safe. When Tírechán comes to the point at which Patrick wishes to leave Tara and go westwards to Connacht, he hears a nobleman identifying himself to another: 'I am Énde son of Amolngid son of Féchre son of Echu, from the western lands, from Mag nDomnon, and from the Wood of Fochloth.'³⁵ Patrick is delighted to

³¹ *Bethu Brigte*, ed. and trans. D. Ó hAodha (Dublin, 1978), § 38; *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, ed. D. A. Binchy, 6 vols. (Dublin, 1979), ii. 580. 7–9.

³² 'The Expulsion of the Déissi', ed. and trans. K. Meyer, *Y Cymmrodor*, 14 (1901), § 22; for the term *immairge* for a migratory group see § 7.

³³ *Críth Gablach*, ed. D. A. Binchy, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series XI (Dublin, 1941), pp. 106–7.

³⁴ *Bethu Brigte*, ed. Ó hAodha, § 19.

³⁵ T 14. 2: *Endeus filius Amolngid sum ego, filii Fechrah filii Echach, ab occidentalibus*

hear the name ‘Wood of Fochloth’ and asks if he may accompany Énde to his home. Énde replies, ‘You shall not set out with me, lest we both be slain.’ This may be an echo of Patrick’s own words in the *Confessio*, where he describes the danger he faced on his travels;³⁶ yet even poets, whose profession often took them on circuits such as the one on which Patrick went, might be killed on their journeys.³⁷

A journey from Tethbae to Tailtiu takes Brigit and her companions out of one province, across a second, and into a third. A story in Cogitosus’s Life of Brigit demonstrates what one might call a provincial road: the king of Leinster requires the peoples of his province to provide workers to construct a road, and the Fothairt, Brigit’s people, because they are politically weak, get saddled with a specially difficult stretch.³⁸ Some names corroborate the existence of roads that cross the boundaries of provinces: *Slige Chúalann* is called after the district of Cúalu in north-east Leinster, from the Liffey south to the neighbourhood of Glendalough, but it was not conceived simply as a road that crossed Cúalu, but as one that went from Tara towards Cúalu (and from the present Co. Kildare towards Cúalu: Cúalu, and more specifically Áth Clíath, was the hub).³⁹ It thus took the traveller, as it took Conaire Mór, from Brega into Leinster.⁴⁰ What may be the very same road is termed earlier in the saga, when Conaire is at Áth Clíath (the ford over the Liffey between Brega to the north and Cúalu to the south) ‘one of the roads of Tara’, since from Conaire’s current position at Áth Clíath the road led towards Tara.⁴¹ The same method of naming roads by their destinations is found in *Tírechán*, in this case for a road within a province: from Selc, ‘where there were the halls of the sons of Brión’, ancestors of Uí Briúin, Patrick ‘went to the Gregrige road’, namely the road leading to the small kingdom of Gregrige.⁴²

plagis de campo Domnon et de silua Fochloth.

³⁶ *Confessio*, c. 52.

³⁷ Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, ed. and trans. A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson, *Adomnan’s Life of Columba*, Oxford Medieval Texts (London, 1961; revised edition, 1991), i. 42.

³⁸ Cogitosus, *Vita S. Brigidae* (Bollandists) *Acta Sanctorum*, Feb. 1, pp. 135–41; trans. S. Connolly and J.-M. Picard, ‘Cogitosus’s Life of St Brigit: Content and Value’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 117 (1987), 11–27, c. 30.

³⁹ H. Morris, ‘The Slighe Cualann’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 68 (1938), 113–29.

⁴⁰ *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. E. Knott, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series VIII (Dublin, 1936), § 30.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, § 13, l. 151, and one ‘of the four roads by which they go to Tara’ (*cacha sráite dina ceithri sráitib día tiagad do Themair*), ll. 154–5.

⁴² T 31. 1; Bieler’s translation, ‘proceeded to Gregirge’, is over-simplified.

Selc is important for Tírechán's account of Connacht. Eoin MacNeill made an acute observation about Tírechán's representation of Patrick's travels in the province and, in particular, about Selc (Latin Selca), 'where there are the halls of the sons of Brión'. He noted that individual movements are sometimes described as 'coming', *uenire*, to somewhere, sometime as 'departing for', *exire* or *pergere*, somewhere.

'In describing Patrick's movements, Tírechán uses *venit* as the itinerary approaches Selca, *exiit* and *perrexit* to describe departures from the main line of approach. When the circuit passes beyond Selca, the use of these verbs is just the converse. The main journey is described by *perrexit* and *exiit*, the turnings in the direction of Cruachain by *venit*.'⁴³

Selc and Crúachain are only about six miles apart, and so could perhaps be treated as forming the central area of the province. MacNeill thought that Tírechán was himself resident at a church close to Selc, so that the verbs betrayed his viewpoint, but the phrase 'the turnings in the direction of Cruachain' offers another interpretation, that, just as 'the four roads' of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* radiated from Tara in Brega, so roads radiated from Crúachain and Selc in Connacht.⁴⁴

What MacNeill saw was entirely real but not quite as simple as he made out. The verb for coming, *uenire*, was indeed used as Patrick approached Selc,⁴⁵ *exire* and *pergere* as he went away from 'the halls of the sons of Brión'.⁴⁶ But once he had reached his first major destination, namely Croaghpatrick, *Cróchan Aigli*, the verb changed back to *uenire*. Tírechán kept to verbs of 'coming' until he got to his second main destination in Connacht, the Wood of Fochloth (near Killala in North Mayo). If the focus had been a crucial Patrician site, the verbs should have changed to *exire* and *pergere* after the Wood of Fochloth; but in fact *uenire* is retained as far as the church of his disciple, Bishop Brón, close to Sligo Town.⁴⁷ I suggest that the area of the Sligo River was another focal position

⁴³ E. MacNeill, *Saint Patrick* (2nd edn., Dublin, 1964), p. 153.

⁴⁴ *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. Knott, § 14.

⁴⁵ Excluding verbs relating to other people, *uenire*, T 19. 5; 20; 21. 1; 23; 26. 1; 27. 1; 30. 1; and *exire* only 21. 2.

⁴⁶ *Exire*, T 32. 1; 36, 37, 38. 3; *pergere*, 31. 1; 33. 1; 34. 1; 35. 1; 38. 1; *uenire* only 34. 2; 35. 2.

⁴⁷ *Uenire*, T 39. 1; 39. 2; 40. 1; 40. 2; 41. 1; 42. 1; 45. 2; 45. 3. 46. 1 is a doublet of 24. 2 and topographically belongs there. Bishop Brón's church is Killaspugbrone (G 608 372), by the sea just on the north side of the runway of Sligo airport.

in the road network. Patrick has come from the River Moy along Muiresc Úa Fíachrach, the coastal strip of north-west Co. Sligo. Elsewhere, he is said to have travelled from the area of Elphin north-north-west, over the Curliu Mountains, ‘the mountain of the sons of Ailill’ to the church of Tamnach;⁴⁸ that direction, if maintained, would have brought him to the Sligo River. From roughly where now is Sligo Town, Tírechán also made Patrick take a diversion eastwards to Callrige Tremage, where he founded Druim Leas (Drumlease), and to Aílmag, where he founded Domnach Aílmaige, identified by Hogan as Donaghmore townland, just to the south of Manorhamilton, in the parish of Cloonclare, barony of Dromahaire, Co. Leitrim.⁴⁹ From the Sligo River Patrick would eventually leave in a northwards direction, roughly along the line of the present N15. Even within Tírechán’s text, we can see routes coming to the Sligo River from the west, the south, the east, and the north. These texts are not so dominated by the special places of the hagiographer or alternatively the saga writer, that they ignore the plain facts about the landscape.

Both for Tírechán and for the Tripartite Life, Patrick’s main business on his journeys was the foundation of churches. Muirchú, by contrast, has no such preoccupation. Whereas Tírechán records eight churches founded in Brega before the great confrontation with Lóegaire, Muirchú does not mention even one.⁵⁰ Tírechán can even write of Patrick ‘planting’ churches, as if he were a saintly gardener planting out the seedlings of a new Christian Ireland.⁵¹ Sometimes, however, a particular place sees more than just the foundation of a church and the installation of disciples; occasionally, indeed, no church is founded. Yet it remains true that a central aim behind Tírechán’s work and behind the Tripartite Life was to claim particular churches for the *familia Patricii*, Patrick’s community. Thus he says of the church of Dumech in Co. Roscommon that Patrick’s bishops, Brón and Bítthe, ‘demanded nothing of the community of Dumech except their friendship only, but the community of Clonmacnois does make such a demand, and they hold many of Patrick’s churches by force after the most recent plagues.’⁵² The great churches of seventh-century Ireland were rivals for the allegiance of lesser churches; some of these great churches made heavier demands on their subject-churches than did others. In what

⁴⁸ T 24. 2; 46. 1 (a doublet). Tamnach is Tawnagh, a townland and parish in the barony of Tirerrill, Co. Sligo, G 737 177.

⁴⁹ G 90 39 just to the east of Manorhamilton. *Onom.* 20, s.v. Aílmag (*rectius* Aílmag), MacNeill, *St Patrick*, 204, *HDGPN*, A, 59–60, s.v. Aolmhagh (1).

⁵⁰ T 8.

⁵¹ *Plantauit*: T 16. 1; 24. 2; 30. 5; 33. 1; 35. 2; 38. 4.

⁵² T 18. 4.

follows I shall concern myself with places visited by Patrick in which the business in hand was not just the foundation of a church or even did not involve any such foundation. I am concerned with the exceptional cases, not with the norm.

We may now turn to the places in which Tírechán's Patrick showed a particular interest. The next map shows the principal places visited by Tírechán's Patrick where the business was more than mere foundation, planting of churches. As it shows, there are major empty spaces in the map: this St Patrick was concerned with the midlands of Ireland, from the Irish Sea right across to Croaghpatrick, Cróchan Aigli, overlooking Clew Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. Otherwise there is only a small cluster in Ulster. Moreover, if we remember our provinces, the middle one, the province of Mide, only has one special site, Uisnech, whereas Brega to the east and the province of the Connachta to the west each have five. Tírechán was a native of the north-west of Connacht, which partly accounts for his interest in the Connachta, but he also believed that a special purpose behind Patrick's mission in Ireland was the desire to obey a divine command to preach the Faith at the Wood of Fochloth.⁵³ The north-west of Ireland was an area where the *familia* of St Columba was stronger than the *familia* of St Patrick; in that region, therefore, Tírechán's Patrick travelled fast. He further believed that the prosperity of the community of churches owing allegiance to St Patrick depended on an alliance with the Uí Néill of Brega in the east.⁵⁴

Patrick first came to Inis Pátraic, *Insola Patricii*, Patrick's Island, off the coast of Brega, about sixteen miles north of Dublin, and from there he landed at dawn on the nearby coast of Brega. Here, Tírechán, whose prose usually lumbers in an ungainly fashion across the Irish countryside, indulges himself in one of his purple passages:⁵⁵

He (that is, Patrick) went on land in the Plain of Brega at sunrise, with the blessing of God, with the true sun of wonderful teaching, enlightening the thick darkness of ignorance. As a great lightbearer (*lucifer*) the holy bishop arose and went onto the land of Ireland.

At *Vallis Sescnani*, Patrick built his first church and recruited his first

⁵³ T 14. 3.

⁵⁴ C. Swift, 'Tírechán's Motives in compiling the *Collectanea*: An Alternative Interpretation', *Ériu*, 45 (1994), 53–82.

⁵⁵ T 4, perhaps a development from Patrick, *Confessio*, c. 60, and also a reminiscence of the Easter liturgy.



Map 2: Patrick's Special Places

Irish disciple. There is no direct evidence for the site of this church, but it must have been close to Balrothery, which is where I have placed it on Map 3. In the evening of the first day, Patrick, going north, arrived at *Inber nAilbine*, the mouth of the River Delvin.⁵⁶ Here he was welcomed by ‘a good man’, whose son instantly became deeply attached to Patrick; Patrick baptized him, proclaimed him as his heir in the church of Armagh, and gave him the name Benignus.

Although Tírechán made Patrick land almost due east of the great ‘seat of kingship’ at Tara (Temair), the saint did not make directly westwards, but approached it only once he had gone northwards towards the valley of the Boyne, the great river of Mag mBreg, ‘the plain of Brega’. Part of his journey cannot be reconstructed for lack of evidence with which to identify some of the places named; but those that can be identified are consistent with a journey that, with the odd diversion, took Patrick from the coast near the Skerries (now Co. Fingal) to the edge of the Boyne close to modern Drogheda and then westwards to Slane (Co. Meath). This encourages one to suppose that there is a geographical logic behind the sequence of Patrick’s journey across Brega. The most obscure part of the numbered list of eight churches founded by Patrick in Brega is from No. 5, Collumbus, to No. 8, Argetbor.⁵⁷ It is possible that these four churches were north of the Boyne, and that he approached Slane from the north, but they may have been small churches on the south side of the Boyne.

From the mouth of the Delvin, where he met Benignus, he did make one westwards detour into a district called Cerne.⁵⁸ Cerne appears to have been the land around the Bellewstown ridge; it included *Mullach Cernai* or *Cnoc Cernai*, ‘The Hill of Cerne’, which is probably the western summit of the ridge, adjacent to the townlands of Carnes West and Carnes East.⁵⁹ This site was later identified as the burial-place of the kings of Brega and as a *síd* or seat of the pre-Christian gods.⁶⁰ Tírechán makes no reference to any such characteristic, but they need to be borne in mind when assessing why his Patrick diverted his course westwards at this point. He also mentions

⁵⁶ T 5. 2; since Patrick landed south of the Delvin, he landed in what Adomnán called *Ard Cenachte* (Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, ed. Anderson and Anderson, ii. 4) defined as *ab illo riuulo qui dicitur Ailbine usque ad uadum Cleeth* (I have adopted two superior readings from the B MSS, *cenachte* and *cleeth*).

⁵⁷ *Collumbus* is certainly not, as Bieler suggested, Skreen (Scrín Choluim Chille), since that was a later foundation: E. Bhreathnach, ‘The Documentary Evidence for Pre-Norman Skreen, County Meath’, *Ríocht na Midhe*, 9 (1996), 37–45.

⁵⁸ T 8. 1.

⁵⁹ E. Bhreathnach, ‘The Medieval Kingdom of Brega’, in eadem (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin, 2005), pp. 410–22, at pp. 418–20.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* The crucial evidence is the *dindshenchas* poem on Cernae, *MD*, iv. 202–8.



Map 3: Patrick in Brega

later a principal church of the people known as the *Cíannacht* of Brega, namely Duleek, just across the River Nanny from the Bellewstown ridge.⁶¹ Before Patrick founded his church of Cerne, he founded another *in culmine*, literally ‘On the Hill’. The hill in question may have been at the east end of the Bellewstown ridge, namely Mullaghteelin. From Cerne he turned northwards again. The next identifiable place (No. 4) is Blaitine, probably now Platin, to the south-east of Drogheda, but before Blaitine he founded a church *in cacuminibus Aisse* ‘on the hills of *Ais*’. The meaning of *Ais* in this context is ‘ridge’.⁶² There is a scarcity of hills between Cerne and Blaitine: a possibility is Redmountain, a ridge just to the south of the Boyne, a mile and a half west of Platin and looking across the river at the land in the bend of the Boyne, known as Brug na Bóinne.⁶³ After Blaitine *Tírechán* cites three other churches, none of them located.

At this point *Tírechán* changes gear. From the eight churches founded on this first journey across the Plain of Brega, northwards to the Boyne, he switches to the confrontation between Patrick and the pagan king of Tara, *Lóegaire* son of *Níall*, at *Fertae Fer Féicc*, at or near Slane.⁶⁴ This story is given in a more elaborate and somewhat different form by *Muirchú*. I shall not discuss it, since it is well known, except to say that it

⁶¹ T 27. 3.

⁶² *HDGPN*, A, 48.

⁶³ If the sequence of *Tírechán*’s named places makes sense as a journey, the preferred identification in *Onom.* 551, namely Mullaghash (N 97 84), also given by *HDGPN*, A 48, in the townland of Belpatrick, parish of Collon, barony of Ferrard is improbable; the Ashe given by *Onom.* 27 (under *Aisse*) adjacent to Garistown, N 71 71, is too far west. Nor is the Ard n-Aisse of *MD*, iv. 162, if it is preserved, as suggested by *Onom.*, in the townlands of Ash Big (H 97 05) and Ash Little (H 96 04) in the parish of Louth, a possibility, since that was in Mag Muirthemne, not Mag mBreg.

⁶⁴ The evidence for the identification comes primarily from the notes to the Martyrologies of *Óengus* and *Gormán*, under 2 November: *Féilire Óengusso*, ed. Stokes; *The Martyrology of Gorman*, ed. and trans. W. Stokes, *Féilire hUí Gormáin: The Martyrology of Gorman*, Henry Bradshaw Society, 9 (London, 1895); *Erc* of Slane, who was the only one to rise up before Patrick at *Fertae Fer Féicc*, M I. 17. 3, *VT* 468–70, is described as being from *Fertae Fer Féicc* (*Féilire hUí Gormáin*, Notes 2 Nov.: *Erc Sláne epscop Liolcaig ocus ó Fherta fer Feicc i ttáebh Síodha Truim aniar* ‘*Erc* of Slane, bishop of Lilcach and from *Fertae fer Féicc* next to *Síd Truim* on its west side’; for *Síd Truim*, see *Cath Ruis na Ríg for Bóinn*, ed. and trans. E. Hogan, Todd Lecture Series IV [Dublin, 1892], § 25). The statement in the Martyrology of Gorman was copied both in the Martyrology of Donegal and in the Annals of the Four Masters (*The Martyrology of Donegal: A Calendar of the Saints of Ireland*, ed. J. H. Todd and W. Reeves, Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society (Dublin, 1864), 2 Nov. and AFM i. 166–7, AD 512; similarly J. Colgan, *Trias Thaumaturga* (Louvain, 1647; reprinted Dublin, 1997), p. 20 n. 60) and thus, reinforced by the authority of O’Donovan, the identification became generally accepted.

was a confrontation with several aspects: it was Christian bishop versus pagan druids; it was Christian bishop versus a king who adhered to his paganism until death; and it was an assault on the privileges of Tara. As in the poem of Óengus the Culdee, Tara is both the preeminent centre of royal power, to which noblemen in dispute would come for judgement, even from as far away as the far north-west of Connacht, and an ancient site which could not be detached from its pagan past. For Tírechán's Patrick, as for Muirchú's, the place was an issue as well as the people.

The next special place was further north in Brega, on the River Blackwater, the most important tributary of the Boyne. Tailtiu was the principal assembly-place of Brega and the most important in Ireland: there many of the Irish came together for entertainment and for serious business at the beginning of August. It was associated with the kingship of Tara and of Ireland up to the time of the English invasion in the twelfth century.⁶⁵ Like Tara, it was already an ancient site before Patrick. It was important for kings, but it was not merely the possession of kings. Although a king of Tara 'held' the fair of Tailtiu, kings, even kings of Tara, also committed on occasion the serious offence of 'disturbing the fair'.⁶⁶ The law tract *Críth Gablach* makes it clear that both the king and the people have a share in arranging an *óenach* or 'fair'.⁶⁷ At Tailtiu St Patrick executed one of his characteristic manoeuvres: he met two sons of Níall, brothers of Lóegaire, the king of Tara, namely Coirpre and Conall. Coirpre rejected Christianity; Conall accepted baptism. Patrick declared to Coirpre: 'Thy lineage shall serve the lineages of your brothers, and there shall be no king of thy lineage for ever.'⁶⁸ To Conall, however, he declared: 'The seed of your brothers shall serve your seed for ever'.⁶⁹ The sequence of Tírechán's narrative implies that the encounter with Coirpre was at Tailtiu itself, whereas the house of Conall was said to be 'where there is now the Great Church of Patrick', just to the south-east of Tailtiu; this is the church that the Tripartite Life calls Domnach Pátraic, the modern Donaghpatrick.⁷⁰ Conall marked out the church; and, in turn, Patrick marked out a new residence for Conall, very close to Tailtiu, so close that they have not been separated on the map. In spite of the wicked brother, Coirpre, Tailtiu itself was not cursed.

This is not surprising. There was not just Domnach Pátraic close by,

⁶⁵ Rúaidrí Úa Conchobair held the Fair of Tailtiu in successive years: AT 1167, 1168.

⁶⁶ AU 717. 6; 774. 7; 777. 6; 789. 18; 827. 6, 7; 831. 5.

⁶⁷ *Críth Gablach*, ed. Binchy, ll. 501–8.

⁶⁸ T 9.

⁶⁹ T 10.

⁷⁰ VT 744, 780.

a church to which Tírechán attached great importance, but also a church at Tailtiu itself;⁷¹ moreover, church synods were held at Tailtiu, probably at the same time as the *óenach*. Adomnán says that St Columba was tried there;⁷² and the *Vita Prima* of St Brigit and *Bethu Brigitte* have a story about a false accusation brought against Patrick's disciple, Bishop Brón, that he had fathered a child; the case was heard in a synod at Tailtiu, where Brigit resolved the case.⁷³ In 789 the most special relic of Armagh, namely the Staff of Jesus, *Bachall Ísu*, and the other relics of St Patrick, were dishonoured by Donnchad mac Domnaill, the king of Tara whose condemnation by Óengus the Culdee I mentioned above.⁷⁴ The record in the Annals of Ulster specified that the insult took place at Ráith Airthir, next door to Tailtiu, 'on the occasion of an *óenach*'.⁷⁵ Admittedly 'a congress of the synods of the Uí Néill and the Leinstermen' was held at Tara in 780, but that was an exceptional event that followed shortly after a great assault by Donnchad mac Domnaill on Leinster.⁷⁶ These two sites, Tara and Tailtiu, were in many ways very similar: major prehistoric sites associated with the very same kingship; in the eighth-century Airgíalla Charter Poem, the king of Tara is not named by that title, but rather as 'lord of Tailtiu';⁷⁷ but in the eyes of the hagiographer, and in their actual relationship to the Church, Tailtiu and Tara were very different.

After Tailtiu, Tírechán brought Patrick to Tara, where the king, Lóegaire, declared that he could not accept Christianity because his father, Níall, had instructed him to be buried on the summits of Tara facing his great enemy, Dúnlán, buried in the same way at Maistiú, his seat of kingship (Mullaghmast, Co. Kildare).⁷⁸ There, too, he met Énde son of Amolngid, who had come, with his brothers, to seek judgement from Lóegaire about their inheritance.⁷⁹ Énde, as we have seen, would accompany Patrick to the Wood of Fochloth.

⁷¹ AU 723. 5; 784. 9; *The Martyrology of Tallaght*, ed. and trans. R. I. Best and H. J. Lawlor, Henry Bradshaw Society, 68 (London, 1931), 9 May, 5 Oct.

⁷² Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, ed. Anderson and Anderson, iii. 3.

⁷³ *Vita Prima S. Brigitae*, ed. Colgan, *Trias Thaumaturga*, c. 39; *Bethu Brigitte*, ed. Ó hAodha, c. 40.

⁷⁴ See above p. 3.

⁷⁵ AU 789. 17: *ar oenach* (the translation is mine: T. M. Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, 2 vols., Translated Texts for Historians v: 44 [Liverpool, 2006], 789. 18).

⁷⁶ AU 780. 7 and 12.

⁷⁷ 'The Airgíalla Charter Poem', ed. E. Bhreathnach and K. Murray, in *Bhreathnach Kingship and Landscape of Tara*, pp. 124–58, at pp. 128–9.

⁷⁸ T 12.

⁷⁹ T 14.



Map 4: Mide and Tethbae

When Tírechán's Patrick left 'the very great plain of Brega' to go west through Mide towards the Shannon, he went from one small plain to the next. As he went westwards, the flat landscape with a foundation of carboniferous limestone, was increasingly subject to the effects of high rainfall. These small plains of Mide were often defined by surrounding boglands, which can be recognized even on modern Ordnance Survey maps by the scarcity of farms — the apparent emptiness of the landscape. So Patrick went first into Mag nEchredd, which I have not shown on the map, partly because I have only a vague idea of its location, then into Mag Taidcni, and then into Mag nEchnach, the last being, by the time of the Tripartite Life, part of the small client kingdom of Delbnae Assail, which gave its name to the modern village of Delvin.⁸⁰ From here Patrick went into Mag Singitte on the east side of Lough Owel. The loughs on the west side of Mag Singitte and of Mag Teloch, namely Lough Owel and Lough Ennell divide Mide into two, East Mide between the loughs and the border of Brega, and West Mide between the loughs and the Shannon. East Mide is presented as a land of small plains, as we have seen, and no reference is made to its nearest equivalent to Tara and Taitiu, namely Tlachtga, on the Hill of Ward.⁸¹

As Patrick travelled across West Mide, however, the reverse is true: no mention of the small plains, but instead a concentration on Uisnech, a hill that was reckoned to be the centre of Mide, itself the middle province of Ireland. As with Tara and Taitiu, Uisnech was and is full of prehistoric monuments.⁸² This was where Patrick confronted two more of the sons of Níall of the Nine Hostages, Fíachu and Éndae, if we allow for a repunctuation of Bieler's edition, a repunctuation necessitated by the early geography of the area.⁸³ Uisnech was one of the three sites honoured by having a 'rock of Patrick', *petra Coithrigi* or *petra Patricii*, the others

⁸⁰ T 16. 1–3; VT 827–8.

⁸¹ AU 733. 7.

⁸² R. Schot, 'Uisneach Midi a meadón Érenn: A Prehistoric "Cult" Centre and "Royal Site" in Co. Westmeath', *Journal of Irish Archaeology*, 15 (2006), 39–71; eadem, 'From Cult Centre to Royal Centre: Monuments, Myths and Other Revelations at Uisnech', in R. Schot, C. Newman and E. Bhreathnach (eds.), *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship* (Dublin, 2011), pp. 87–113.

⁸³ In T 16. 3–4, Bieler's punctuation requires one to suppose that Uisnech was in Mag Teloch, which it was not. Here Stokes's edition is to be preferred: *in campo Teloch, in qua sancta Brigita pallium cepit sub manibus Filii Caille. In Huisniuch Midi mansit iuxta Petram Coithrigi ...: The Tripartite Life of Patrick with Other Documents relating to that Saint*, ed. and trans. W. Stokes, Rolls Series, 2 vols. (London, 1887), ii. 310.24.

being Cashel, royal seat of the province of Munster, and Dunseverick, *Dún Sebuirgi* or *Sobairche*, the royal seat of Dál Ríata in the far north-east: the three span the south, the centre, and the north-east. Also Tírechán called Uisnech *Huisnech Midi*, ‘Uisnech of Mide’, suggesting that it then played a central role in Mide, the ‘Middle Province’ of Ireland. Yet, all that he then tells us is that the son of Fíachu mac Néill killed some foreigners who were in Patrick’s company; and he was then the recipient of the standard curse: ‘There will be no king from your lineage, but you will serve the lineages of your brothers.’⁸⁴ Uisnech, therefore, is given a treatment very close to that meted out to Tara: an ancient site is treated as central to a province and associated with a king, but that king is portrayed as an enemy to Patrick and his dynastic prospects are given short shrift.⁸⁵ Uisnech, Tara, and the Tailtiu of Coirpre, together, are opposed to the Tailtiu of Conall.

From Uisnech of Mide, Patrick went north-west and crossed the River Inny into the neighbouring province of Tethbae, a combination of Northern and Southern Tethbae, the *duae Tethbiae* of Tírechán.⁸⁶ Here the most important church for the hagiographers was Ardachad, the modern village of Ardagh.⁸⁷ But that is because it was also an important church for the cult of Brigit: the bishop, Mel, was allied both with Patrick and with Brigit.⁸⁸

The next map takes us away from Tírechán and his Patrick to the secular side of early Irish culture, namely to a vernacular story about the pre-Christian gods and their dealings with men, *Tochmarc Étaíne* ‘The Wooing of Étaín’.⁸⁹ In this tale, the gods are very much the gods of the Irish midlands, the lands of Uí Néill from the Shannon to the sea, the provinces of Tethbae, Mide, and Brega. Midir has his home at Brí Léith, ‘The Hill of the Grey Man’, just to the west of the Ardagh where we left

⁸⁴ T 16. 4.

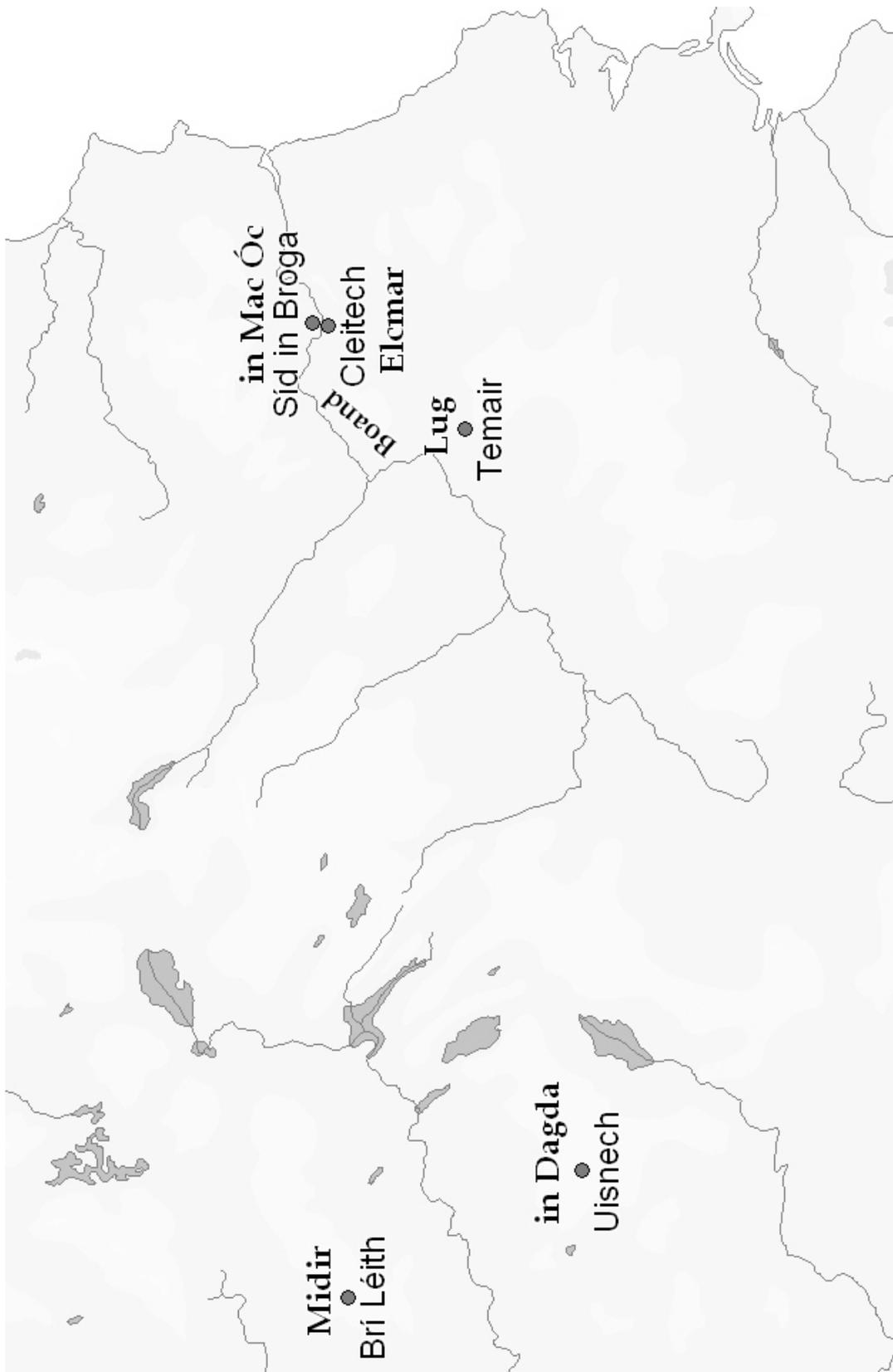
⁸⁵ Carn Fíachach, ‘The Cairn of Fíachu’, presumably commemorates Fíachu mac Néill, since his descendants (and probably a branch of Cenél nÉndai) were long settled nearby: P. Walsh, *The Placenames of Westmeath* (Dublin, 1957), 89 and n. 2, 245–9; on the south side of Uisnech, Carn townland, parish of Conry, barony of Rathconrath, Co. Westmeath, N 29 46, is an element in the Uisnech complex and is likely to be the site of Carn Fíachach; a battle there, AU 765. 5, was part of a struggle between two sons of Domnall mac Murchada (d. 762 as king of Tara) for the succession.

⁸⁶ T 16. 6.

⁸⁷ VT 947; at VT 951, 980, 982, 986, and 988 the scribe of the Egerton MS writes Mél, as if the *e* were long; this raises the possibility that the name is a borrowing from an early form of Welsh *moel* (*mɛ:l*) corresponding to Irish *máel*.

⁸⁸ *Bethu Brigte*, ed. Ó hAodha, c. 30; the *monasterium grande* of *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, c. 29 (trans. Connolly, § 30).

⁸⁹ *Tochmarc Étaíne*, ed. and trans. O. J. Bergin and R. I. Best, *Ériu*, 12 (1938), 137–96.



Map 5: The Geography of the Gods

Patrick, one of the two episcopal churches of Tethbae.⁹⁰ In Dagda, ‘The Good God’, has his seat at Uisnech, where Patrick confronted the unnamed son of Fíachu, one of the sons of Níall, and where, in the Tripartite Life, he confronted Fíachu himself and his brother Éndae. In the east, in Brega, I have borrowed Lug at Tara from another tale about the gods, *Cath Maige Tuired* ‘The Battle of Mag Tuired’;⁹¹ but In Mac Óc, ‘The Young Son’, alias Óengus, the son of the Dagda, and Elcmar come from ‘The Wooing of Étaín’; moreover the River Boyne, Boand, is a goddess; all three, Boand, In Mac Óc, and Elcmar are clearly attached to Brega; and they confirm that the geography of the gods in this tale is determined by the provinces, Brega, Mide, and Tethbae.

The Dagda is the principal god, but like Zeus, he is very badly behaved. He has fallen for Boand, the goddess of the River Boyne, but she is married to Elcmar, who, at this stage, is resident at Síid in Broga, ‘The síid of the Brug’, the Brug being the land within the bend of the Boyne as it flows round the Neolithic sites of Newgrange, namely the síid of the Brug, Knowth, and Dowth. The Dagda contrives by his magical powers to get the husband, Elcmar, off the scene for nine months, which he, Elcmar, thinks is just one day; and in those nine months the Dagda begets In Mac Óc on Boand; he is born; and everyone is contriving to look innocent when Elcmar returns. In Mac Óc is given in fosterage, according to medieval Irish custom, to Midir at Brí Léith, so that in his person he unites the provinces of the Southern Uí Néill: his mother is of Brega; his father is of Mide, and his foster-father is of Tethbae. Subsequently, by an appalling piece of legal chicanery, the Dagda removes poor Elcmar from the Brug, across the Boyne, to Cleitech.⁹² Síid in Broga, Newgrange, is given to In

⁹⁰ The obit of someone named Ailill of Brí Léith, AU 739. 4, suggests that Brí Léith was a site of some significance in the political landscape of Southern Tethbae. In *VT* 980–94, it appears as the hill separating the churches of Ardagh to the east, the church of Bishop Mól, and Druim Céu to the west, the church of the bishop’s sister; the story justifies the segregation of the sexes after they had taken vows of chastity.

⁹¹ *Cath Maige Tuired*, ed. and trans. E. A. Gray, *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, Irish Texts Society, 52 (London, 1983).

⁹² *Tochmarc Étaíne*, ed. Best and Bergin, , i. 8–9: Cleitech was to the south of Síid in Broga (*alla andes*), i. 9; the *macrad* of Cleitech were playing **in** the Brug and **in sight of** Cleitech; the Brug was north of the Boyne, *ibid.* i. 5. According to *Senchas na Relec*, *LU*, II. 4055, 4057, Cormac mac Airt died at Tech Cletig ‘Cleitech’s House’; he gave instructions that he was to be buried at Ross na Ríg, on the south side of the Boyne, not in the Brug. When his *áes gráda* decided, nevertheless, to bury him in the Brug, the River Boyne rose preventing any crossing. Hence, in order to get from Cleitech to the Brug, one had to cross the Boyne; Cleitech, therefore, was south of the Boyne (*Senchas*

Mac Óc, so that the River Boyne, Boand the mother, flows serenely between her son and her husband — all very lovely except that the son was begotten in despite of her husband, and by this time these facts are well known. Relations between In Mac Óc and Elcmar are, unsurprisingly, poor; each has a *macrad*, ‘group of boys’, who play some violent version of hurling. The two teams end up fighting each other; and Midir, who happens to be staying with his foster son, attempts to act as referee and gets badly hurt.

It is an entertaining tale, but its importance for my purpose lies in the places and their combination of contemporaneity and the remote past. The assumed time of this part of the tale is far back, more than a thousand years before Christ, let alone St Patrick; and yet the places take for granted the political geography of the eighth and ninth centuries. We can therefore juxtapose this geography of the ancient gods with the geography of the major midland kingdoms of Tírechán’s time, and also with the places to which Tírechán took St Patrick. It may even be suggested that, since the Dagda, king of the gods, has his seat at Uisnech in Mide, the date of the text is after Cland Cholmáin of Mide took the leadership of the Southern Uí Néill away from the ruling dynasty of Brega, SílnÁeda Sláne.⁹³

Sometimes St Patrick chooses the dwelling-places of the gods for his major confrontations with kings. Tara and Uisnech both fall into this category. Sometimes he goes close to a site of this kind, but does not actually visit it; and then there is no confrontation. Ardagh and Brí Léith in Tethbae are a case in point. Cernae in Brega may be another example. The name Cernae, as we saw earlier, appears to refer to a district within Brega, but Mullach Cernai, the Hill of Cernae, was later said to have been the burial-place of the kings of Brega, those who had their seat at Lagore, a few miles to the south.⁹⁴ In Tírechán’s day there was no assumption that even the grander kings would be buried in a church cemetery, although the *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* shows that church burial was beginning to gain ground in the generation after Tírechán. Tírechán imagined King Lóegaire being buried at Tara with his weapons; but Elizabeth O’Brien has pointed out that weapon-burial was never the custom in Ireland even in the fifth century, let alone the seventh, so that Tírechán seems to have taken his idea of a grand pagan burial from Anglo-Saxon inhumations.⁹⁵ What

na Relec) and opposite the Brug (*Tochmarc Étaíne*). Where the houses are marked on the low ridge at O 004 715 would suit admirably.

⁹³ T. M. Charles-Edwards, ‘The Uí Néill 695–743: The Rise and Fall of Dynasties’, *Peritia*, 16 (2002), 399–407.

⁹⁴ Above, nn. 55–7.

⁹⁵ E. O’Brien, *Post-Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon Ireland: Burial Practices Reviewed*,

remains, however, is the notion that a king might choose to be buried at the ancient site through which his kingship was linked to the remote past. Whether this use of these ancient sites was more than a literary motif I do not know, but as a literary motif it had a long future, well into the period in which kings were buried in a church cemetery. The Middle-Irish text *Senchas na Relec* is based on the idea. By then some ingenious scholar had had the idea that Cormac mac Airt, the King Solomon of the Uí Néill, had had some personal revelation of the one true God.⁹⁶ As a consequence, he is said to have given firm instructions that he was not to be buried in Brug na Bóinne, as was the expectation, but at Rosnaree, a little way up the Boyne and, crucially, on its southern bank, outside the Brug.⁹⁷ The Brug was imagined as the cemetery of the gods and, before Cormac, of the kings of Tara. Knowth, within the Brug, was chosen in the late-eighth century as the seat of the kings of Northern Brega.⁹⁸ It may be that, for the severer elements among the clergy, such a choice might be controversial. As far as one can see — though certainty is impossible because some of the place-names in Tírechán's text cannot be located on the map — Patrick came close to the Brug but skirted round it.

Similarly, Map 2 showed how, when St Patrick got to Connacht, he came to the edge of the conglomeration of prehistoric monuments at Crúachain, modern Rathcroghan. It was there, at Clébach, that he met the two daughters of King Lóegaire, who were being fostered by two druids, and had that wonderful conversation that is the literary highpoint of Tírechán's *Collectanea*, when Ethne asked Patrick:⁹⁹

Who is God and where is God and whose God is he and where

BAR British Series, 289 (Oxford, 1999), pp. 55–6.

⁹⁶ The story is alluded to by the tenth-century poet Cináed ua hArtacáin in his poem on Brug na Bóinde, *MD* i. 14, ll. 57–80.

⁹⁷ An extended inhumation of the 4th/5th century has been found at Rosnaree: E. O'Brien, 'Pagan or Christian? Burial in Ireland during the 5th to 8th Centuries', in N. Edwards (ed.), *The Archaeology of the Early Medieval Celtic Churches: Proceedings of a Conference on the Archaeology of the Early Medieval Celtic Churches, September 2004*, Society for Medieval Archaeology Monographs, 29 (Leeds, 2009), pp. 139–140 (and Figure 7. 4), 142.

⁹⁸ AU 789. 4. For the political background see F. J. Byrne, 'Historical Note on Cnogba (Knowth)', in G. Eogan, 'Excavations at Knowth, Co. Meath, 1962–1965', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 66 C (1967–8), 383–400; and C. Swift with F. J. Byrne, 'The Early History of Knowth', in F. J. Byrne *et al.*, *Excavations at Knowth 4: Historical Knowth and its Hinterland*, general editor G. Eogan (Dublin, 2008), pp. 5–132.

⁹⁹ T 26; cf. James Carney's treatment of this text in his *Medieval Irish Lyrics* (Dublin, 1967), No. II, pp. 2–4, and in his *The Problem of St Patrick* (Dublin, 1961), pp. 131–3.

is his dwelling-place? Has your God sons and daughters, gold and silver? Is he ever-living, is he handsome, have many fostered his son? Are his daughters considered lovable and beautiful by the men of this world?

She might almost have said, ‘How does your god compare with the Dagda?’

What is interesting is that Patrick did not go right into the centre of Crúachain. In 783 the Law of Patrick was promulgated in Crúachain by Dub dá Leithe, abbot of Armagh, and Tipraite mac Taidgg, king of the Connachta.¹⁰⁰ At that date the Patrician community felt no repugnance to the ancient site. Nevertheless 783 is nearly a century later than Tírechán’s *Collectanea*. Attitudes to pre-Christian sites may well have changed. The later *Vita Tripartita* still has Patrick coming no further into Crúachain than this well on its east side, but the *Vita Tripartita* is here largely a translation of Tírechán.¹⁰¹ In the Middle-Irish text, *Senchas na Relec*, Crúachain was the burial place of pre-Christian kings, but not of the gods.¹⁰²

It is worth noting that, although the midland geography of the ‘Wooing of Étaín’ is contemporaneous with the tale, this is not universally true. When In Mac Óc went to Ulster to ask for Étaín as a wife for Midir, he went to Mag nInis, the land around Downpatrick in Co. Down,¹⁰³ and that was indeed the principal power in the Ulster of the eighth and ninth centuries.¹⁰⁴ Yet, Étaín’s father refused to give her to Midir and demanded a bride-price. Part of the bride-price was that In Mac Óc should clear twelve plains within his kingdom that were then forests or wasteland. In Mac Óc got his father, the Dagda, to do the job for him. In *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, ‘The Book of the Settlement of Ireland’, of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, clearing plains was the job of the ancient pre-Milesian inhabitants of Ireland;¹⁰⁵ and ‘The Wooing of Étaín’ shows that in the Old-Irish period this was specifically the work of the gods. When one maps the

¹⁰⁰ AU 783. 9.

¹⁰¹ VT, pp. 60–3.

¹⁰² LU, pp. 128–9 (l. 4084 as against l. 4107).

¹⁰³ *Tochmarc Étaíne*, ed. Best and Bergin, i. 11–13, pp. 148–50.

¹⁰⁴ F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London, 1973), pp. 108, 119, 124; T. M. Charles-Edwards, ‘The Province of Ulster in the Early Middle Ages’, in C. J. Lynn and J. A. McDowell, *Deer Park Farms: The Excavation of a Raised Rath in the Glenarm Valley, Co. Antrim* (Belfast, 2011), pp. 40–60, at p. 44.

¹⁰⁵ LL i. ll. 498–501 (Partholón) = *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, ed. and trans. R. A. S. Macalister, 5 vols., Irish Texts Society, 34, 35, 39, 41, 44 (London, 1938–56), ii. 270 (§ 204); LL i. ll. 624–30 (Nemed) = *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, ed. Macalister, iii. 122 (§ 240).



Map 6: The Plains of Ulster

known plains of Ulster cleared by the Dagda, it is evident that they stretch right across into Co. Donegal (Map 6).

This is not the Ulster of the eighth or ninth century but the Greater Ulster of the Ulster Cycle. The geography is thus inconsistent: to get back to the Greater Ulster, Étaín's father should have been located at Emain Machae, Navan Fort just to the west of Armagh, from where Conchobor reigned over the Ulster of the past.¹⁰⁶ In the seventh century quite ordinary kings were aware of this geography of the Ulster Cycle: when Tírechán was writing his account of the journeys of Patrick, a king of the territory around Armagh and Emain Machae was called 'Conchobor Machae', Conchobor of the plain of Machae, a name that could not have failed to recall the legendary Conchobor.¹⁰⁷

Another Old-Irish text that presents us with a landscape of the gods is *Cath Maige Tuired*. In modern terms, this is Co. Sligo: in the northern part of the county the Fomorians landed, and in the south they were, with immense bloodshed, defeated by the gods, the Túatha Dé Danann. The St Patrick of Tírechán, the *Notulae*, and the Tripartite Life went this way. Yet, this is a very different case from the Brega of Tara, the Mide of Uisnech, and the Tethbae of Brí Léith; and it is instructive to see why.

There are some difficulties, however, in identifying all the places mentioned, whether in Patrician hagiography or in *Cath Maige Tuired*. Although the texts we are considering belong to the Old-Irish period, much later evidence is sometimes crucial for the identification of the places or districts to which the names refer. Map 7 offers a possible interpretation, not incontrovertible truth.

First, then, we may consider Patrick's journey and then turn to *Cath Maige Tuired*. Tírechán's Patrick came from the mouth of the River Moy and thus from the west along the coastal strip known as the Muireasc, the strip of fertile land by the sea, of Uí Fhíachrach of the Muireasc, the northern branch of one of the leading dynasties of the Connachta.¹⁰⁸ With his disciple, Bishop Brón, he crossed the Strand of Authuile into the district

¹⁰⁶ Cf. the inconsistency in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Recension I (ed. and trans. C. O'Rahilly [Dublin, 1976], ll. 666–70), over whether Slíab Fúait was the border of Ulster, excluding not just Mag Muirthemne (ibid., l. 400), home of Cú Chulainn, but Taitiu, the home of Conall Cernach and his father (ibid., ll. 3394–3409, 3486, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. Knott, l. 1514); Taitiu was the burial place of the Ulstermen according to *Senchas na Relec*, LU, l. 4103.

¹⁰⁷ AU 698. 1.

¹⁰⁸ T 45.1 (to be distinguished from Muireasc Aigli, 38.2, by Croaghpatrick); AU 603. 2; 683. 1.



Map 7: The Gods of Co. Sligo

of Irae and to a small plain at Ross Dregnige, where Patrick's tooth fell out and he gave it as a relic to Bishop Brón for his church, called Caisel Irrae in the Tripartite Life.¹⁰⁹ So far, all is clear: the Strand of Aurthuile, *Litus Authuili*, recurs as Trácht Eothaile in *Cath Maige Tuired*. It must be Ballysadare Bay dividing the main part of western Co. Sligo from the peninsula west and south-west of Sligo town; the latter, which includes Knocknarea topped by a huge Neolithic cairn and much prehistoric archaeology besides, has at its north-west end Killaspug Point named after the nearby Killaspugbrone, 'The Church of Bishop Brón', which the Tripartite Life called Caisel Irrae, the stone building of the district formed by the peninsula, a district that Tírechán called Irae. Ros Dregnige must be the small plain on the north-west side of Knocknarea, where Sligo Airport is now situated.

At this point it is as well to remember that Patrick had arrived at one of those boundaries that saw much warfare in the seventh and eighth centuries. Moreover, as has been suggested on the basis of MacNeill's observation, Tírechán appears to have seen the area round the modern Sligo Town as the central place in the road system of northern Connacht, the focus of routes taken by Patrick from the west and the south and both eastwards and northwards. In the same area lay the boundary between the Uí Fhíachrach Muirsce to the west, the Luigni of Connacht to the south-west, the Uí Ailella to the south and Cenél Coirpri to the north. Cenél Coirpri was a close ally of Cenél Conaill, the predominant power of north-west Ireland down to the 730s: Tírechán's Patrick was a strong supporter of Uí Néill of Brega, Síl nÁeda Sláne, but Cenél Conaill constituted the principal rival of Síl nÁeda Sláne among the Uí Néill. The lands of Cenél Coirpri were never to be favourable territory for the *familia Patricii*. The principal church near Sligo Town was to be Drumcliff: it is not known when it was founded but its allegiance to Columba, principal saint of Cenél Conaill was in the post-Viking period unquestioned.¹¹⁰ Moreover, before the political decline of Cenél Conaill in the 730s, it is possible that its close ally, Cenél Coirpri, held one great over-kingdom stretching from northern Sligo across north-eastern Connacht as far as northern Tethbae, the territory of the later Cenél Coirpri Thethbae. Only after the 730s do we begin to hear of the smaller kingdoms of Cenél Coirpri Dromma Clíab *alias* Cenél Coirpri Móir (around Drumcliff) or Cenél Coirpri Thethbae.¹¹¹ Rather than Cenél Coirpri itself, Tírechán was interested in what may have been one of

¹⁰⁹ VT 1601.

¹¹⁰ Drumcliff is first attested in AU 923: M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford, 1988), p. 283.

¹¹¹ AU 752. 9; 771. 7.

its client-peoples, Callrige Tremaille ‘Callrige of three plains’. This people were settled around Drumlease, in what is now the barony of Dromahaire, Co. Leitrim, and probably on the north side of Lough Gil, where the parish is called Calry after the ancient people.¹¹² The third constituent *mag* was Aílmag, ‘Lime-White Plain’, further east around Manor Hamilton, where Patrick was said to have founded a *domnach* church.¹¹³ At this point Patrick was about fifteen miles east of Drumcliff. Since he was travelling north towards Assaroe on the River Erne and the lands of Cenél Conaill, he could have followed the valley, later known as Glenn Éda (Glenade), formed by the upper courses of the River Bonet and the River Duff, northwards and emerged back on the coastal plain where Co. Leitrim meets the Atlantic.

The Patrick of the Tripartite Life, at least, did no such thing, but returned westwards through Callraige and into the heart of Cenél Coirpri territory, ‘past Druim Clíab, away from Caisel Irre, past the Rosses’ and then ‘eastwards along Mag nEne’.¹¹⁴ This must mean that Patrick was first travelling west, between Benbulbin and Carbury Bay, and that after he had rounded Benbulbin and was now travelling north-east, he was going across Mag nEne. After he had founded another *domnach* church, Domnach Mór Maige Ene, he arrived at the River Duff, where he was refused fish by the fishermen and duly cursed the river. He was in Mag nEne, therefore, after Benbulbin and before the Duff. Subsequently he reached the Drowes (Dróbés), which the Tripartite Life treated as the northern boundary of Connacht. The *Notulae* do not have any information about Patrick’s journey before he rounded Benbulbin and went into Mag nEne, but they do mention Domnach Mór Maige Ene and the River Duff, so it would appear to be reflecting the same narrative from Benbulbin to the Drowes.

Tírechán, however, has a different story. From Domnach Aílmaige his Patrick went to Mag nEne (Aine) and founded a church; as in the *Notulae* no mention is made of the Rosses or of Druim Clíab. But once he has got to Mag nEne, (Patrick) *uersus est Euoi et in campum Cetni*.¹¹⁵ This ought to be the perfect medio-passive of *uerto* in the sense of ‘turned himself’,¹¹⁶ but one would expect a preposition before *Euoi* just like the preposition introducing *in campum Cetni*. Bieler translated the phrase as ‘he turned to *Euoi* and to Mag Cetni’. Tírechán does not use *uerto*

¹¹² The modern church is at G 74 37.

¹¹³ T 46.2, *HDGPN* s.v. Aolmhagh (1); the name may be preserved in the townland of Donagh (More), G 90 39. The Domnach Aílmaige named by Tírechán is also in the *Notulae* (4), but the equivalent in *VT* 1686 is Domnoch Sratha.

¹¹⁴ *VT* 1689–90.

¹¹⁵ T 46.3.

¹¹⁶ A. Ernout and F. Thomas, *Syntaxe Latine* (2nd edn., Paris, 1953), pp. 201–2 (§ 223).

elsewhere, although he does use *reuertor*; Bieler's translation must, however, be correct. After this diversion, Tírechán has the same unfortunate encounter with the fishermen of the River Duff and the happier encounter with the River Drowes as in the Tripartite Life.

Two interpretations of Tírechán's account seem possible. First, as we have seen, he may have followed the valley northwards from Domnach Aílmaige, near Manor Hamilton. The church he founded in Mag nEne would thus have probably been situated in the coastal plain close to the Duff. He would then have made his diversion; and, since his general direction of travel was north-eastwards, the diversion should have been south-west. *Euoí* and Mag Cétni should have been in the area between Benbulbin and the sea, either north of Benbulbin and thus around Grange or south-west of the mountain towards the headland at Roskeeragh. The second interpretation is that Tírechán's Patrick was taking the same path as in the Tripartite Life, only with less detail. He would then have retraced his steps from Domnach Aílmaige westwards, past Drumcliff, and would have gone round Benbulbin into Mag nEne. The latter would thus be the coastal plain north of Benbulbin as far as the Duff. The diversion would take Patrick back from the church he founded in Mag nEne (north of Benbulbin) to the land running out into the sea west of the mountain. After this diversion he would have returned north-east through Mag nEne to the Duff. This second interpretation seems on the whole preferable, since in Tírechán's text the diversion is from Mag nEne, not from the Duff, and yet the valley which Patrick, on the first interpretation, would have taken northwards is the valley from which the Duff flows out into the coastal plain. If that had been his route, the natural sequence would have been Duff – Mag nEne – *Euoí* and Mag Cétni, whereas it is Mag nEne – *Euoí* + Mag Cétni – Duff.

To get any further we need to locate *Euoí* and Mag Cétni. Hogan, in his *Onomasticon*, was in some difficulties over Mag Cétni: on the one hand, he had O'Donovan's authority for placing it between the Drowes and the Erne and thus just into Co. Donegal;¹¹⁷ on the other, his texts pointed to 'the barony of Carbury, Co. Sligo, N. of Benbulbin and bordering on the sea'. He also suggested, following another note by O'Donovan, that Mag Cétni and Mag nEne might be alternative names for the same area.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ AFM iii. 474 n. (m) (*s.a.* 1301).

¹¹⁸ AFM iv. 843–4 (*s.a.* 1420), n. (i). Colgan, *Trias Thaumaturga*, p. 180 (notes on the Latin version of the Tripartite Life), had identified Mag nEne with the plain between the Drowes and the Erne. Since regional names sometimes moved for political reasons (as illustrated by the midland baronies of Morgallion and Lune), it is entirely possible that this was the area so named in the seventeenth century.

Tírechán's text, however, renders O'Donovan's identification of Mag Cétni impossible, at least for the pre-Viking period; and Hogan's own location between Benbulbin and the sea is much more likely. Since, however, the Tripartite Life suggests that, once Patrick had rounded Benbulbin, he was travelling through Mag nEne, it may be that Mag Cétni should be the coastal plain facing out north-westwards towards Inishmurray at least as far north-east as Grange, whereas Mag nEne was further inland, from Benbulbin to the Duff.¹¹⁹

The problem with *Euoi* is rather different. The form itself is difficult to interpret, although the temptation to think that it refers to an area elsewhere called Mag nEba is strong.¹²⁰ A relic of this plain may be the townland of Maugherow (Machaire Eabha, G 61 44), just to the west of Lissadell House. The strand or strands along this part of the coast, looking south across Sligo Bay, are likely to be the Tráig Eba of the *Metrical Dindshenchas* and Roskeeragh may have been Rind Eaba.¹²¹

The small plains visited by Patrick in what is now Co. Sligo were also the scene of the great struggle between the Fomorians and the Túatha Dé Danann. Mag Cétni was later known as Mag Cétni of the Fomorians;¹²² according to *Lebor Gabála* it was where the Clanna Nemid had to bring 'two thirds of the offspring and of the corn and of the milk of the men of Ireland' as tribute to the Fomorians.¹²³ In *Cath Maige Tuired* it is likely that the Fomorians landed at Mag Cétni, when they came to impose the rule of the unjust Bres upon Ireland.¹²⁴ Where they landed was north of Trácht Aebae, another form of the name Tráig Eba, the coastline facing south across Sligo Bay: the Dagda, when he had gone north to visit the Fomorian

¹¹⁹ N. Ó Muraíle (ed. and trans.), *The Great Book of Irish Genealogies*, 5 vols. (Dublin, 2003), iv. 466, identifies it with most of the parish of Ahamlish, which seems to be correct for the period of Tírechán. The evidence for the situation of Mag Cétni by the sea is clear from *Annála Connacht: The Annals of Connacht*, ed. and trans. A. M. Freeman (Dublin, 1944), 1310. 10 (20 casks of wine washed ashore in Mag Cétni).

¹²⁰ *LL* i. 20 (l. 625), *AFM* i. 10, AM 2859.

¹²¹ *MD* iv. 292.

¹²² *Annals of Connacht*, ed. Freeman, 1310. 6 (Mag Cedne na Fomorach).

¹²³ *LL* i. 20, ll. 635–6: *Da trian clainne 7 etha 7 blecta fer nHerend*.

¹²⁴ This depends upon an emendation to *Cath Maige Tuired*, ed. Gray, § 85. The sole manuscript has Maug Scéne, but after their landing the Fomorians subsequently advance until they are at Scétné, from where they threaten battle against the Túatha Dé Danann in Mag nAurfolraig (§ 94). Scétné can hardly have been in North Roscommon at the time of the text, as suggested by Elizabeth Gray, since that would mean that the Fomorian army had come from the north round the army of the Túatha Dé Danann and was now threatening it from the south. The topography would suggest the area around Colloony for Scétné and a coastal plain north of Tráig Eba/Trácht Aebae for the landing-place of the Fomorians.

camp and had been feasted on a gargantuan meal of porridge, was coming back south and reached Trácht Aebae, where he saw the daughter of one of the kings of the Fomorians, Indech mac Dé Domnann. He travelled further south with her and they made love at Beltraw Strand on the south side of Ballysodare Bay. This journey from north to south makes it likely that the manuscript's *Maug Scéne* is an error for Mag Cétni caused by confusion with Scétne, as Dr Gray suggested.¹²⁵

One detail might suggest that the Fomorian host landed further north, in Cenél Conaill territory between the Drowes and the Erne, the area that O'Donovan suggested was Mag Cétni. In the townland of Heapstown, just on the north side of Lough Arrow, is a huge Neolithic cairn. According to *Cath Maige Tuired*, *Carn Ochtríallaig* was created when Ochtríallach son of Indech mac Dé Domnann told the Fomorians that they should each bring a stone from the River Drowes and throw it into the well called Sláine, but this evidence on its own is insufficient.¹²⁶ What this story does show is that the Fomorian army advanced so that it pushed back the Túatha Dé Danann from the Unshin, where they had gathered.¹²⁷ The battle occurred about three miles east-south-east of Heapstown, on the north-east side of Lough Arrow, where the two townlands of Moytirra preserve the name of Mag Tuired.¹²⁸

The juxtaposition of St Patrick's journeys in what is now Co. Sligo, as perceived by Tírechán, with those of the Dagda and others in *Cath Maige Tuired* helps us to specify the topographical background of both texts. In both traditions, narrative has behind it a real physical landscape. Just as Áth Clíath was the focus of 'The Road to Cúalu', *Slige Chúalann*, and the area of Selc and Crúachain in Mag nAí contained the focus of the roads of central Connacht, so was the area of the modern Sligo Town the focus of the roads of northern Connacht. Yet the implications of the juxtaposition between the landscape of the gods and the landscape of Patrick's journeys are very different in northern Connacht from that other juxtaposition between Patrick in the midlands and *Tochmarc Étaíne*. In Co. Sligo there are no ancient central sites which Patrick had to confront — no

¹²⁵ *Cath Maige Tuired*, ed. Gray, p. 140.

¹²⁶ Even in the early sixteenth century, Magh Céidne was south-west of the Drowes, as shown by AFM v. 1428, *s.a.* 1536, where O'Donnell and his allies were encamped between the Drowes and the Erne and sent scouts on ahead along the road that went to Magh Ceidne; in AFM vi. 2034, an army proceeds from the Erne south-west to *Magh cCedne hi cCoirpre Droma Cliabh*.

¹²⁷ The initial position of the Túatha Dé Danann appears to have been at 'The Ford of the Unshin', *Cath Maige Tuired*, ed. Gray, § 85, not just for the *áes dána* but for 'the hosts', *slúagaib*.

¹²⁸ G 81 14.

Tara, no Taitiu, and no Uisnech. Here Patrick travels from plain to plain, as in eastern Mide, planting churches. He plants four quite close to Mag Tuired: Tamnach, Echenach, Cell Angle, and Cell Senchue.¹²⁹ Of these, Cell Senchue is especially close and was a church of some significance.¹³⁰ Echenach is mentioned in *Cath Maige Tuired*, but only in a gloss that appears to be mistaken.¹³¹ Co. Sligo is full of visible prehistoric monuments; yet not one of them is of any significance for Tírechán, and only one, Carn Ochtríallaig, was mentioned in *Cath Maige Tuired*. Some elements of these stories of Patrick and the ancient gods remained attached to specific places: Mag Cétni was long remembered as the landing place of the Fomorians, as shown by the references in the *Annals of Connacht* and the *Annals of Loch Cé*, s.a. 1310, to ‘Mag Cétni of the Fomorians’.¹³² Bishop Brón’s church at Caisel Irre long treasured Patrick’s tooth as its most precious relic.¹³³ Here, too, the two traditions appear to have existed side by side without explicit conflict.

Earlier I raised the question whether — remembering that almost always Christianity was kept out of saga — Patrick’s places were inherently opposed to the places of saga. Was there, for Tírechán, an ineradicable tension between two landscapes, the landscape of Patrick and the landscape of worldly kings and of the kings and gods of the past? Was Óengus the Culdee making a controversial challenge to normal assumptions from the standpoint of a rigorist and an ascetic or stating the obvious? The answer seems to be that there was such a tension, but that direct confrontation is relatively rare. No such confrontation occurred between the Co. Sligo of Tírechán and the Co. Sligo of *Cath Maige Tuired*, even though the many prehistoric monuments of that area should have given opportunities. However, when Patrick is said to have gone right into an ancient site of the pre-Christian past, this was indeed for the purpose of confronting kings; but that only occurred with the great royal sites of the midlands. When confrontation was not the order of the day, the usual tactics were to avoid an ancient site of this kind. Where some reference to

¹²⁹ T 46.1; Tamnach is Tawnagh, G 737 177; Echenach is Aghanagh, G 783 096; Cell Angle may perhaps be Killala, G 73 25 (*HDGPN* s.v. Ceall Aingle); Cell Senchue is Shancough, G 823 162.

¹³⁰ *Notulae* (1), VT 1041; AT 541, CS 542, AU 542. 2; and possibly AU 783. 2.

¹³¹ *Cath Maige Tuired*, ed. Gray, § 84 and n. on Allod Echae, p. 138: if *Loscondaib* is for *Lioscondaib* and refers to Lisconny townland, G 70 22, *Allod Echae* can hardly be Echenach.

¹³² *Annála Connacht*, ed. Freeman; *The Annals of Loch Cé: A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from A.D. 1014 to A.D. 1599*, ed. and trans. W. M. Hennessy, 2 vols. (London, 1871).

¹³³ Lord Killanin and M. V. Duignan, *The Shell Guide to Ireland* (2nd edn., London, 1967), 428.

the ancient site was desired, but a confrontation was not in order, Patrick could be made to come close or even onto the edge of a site, as at Clébach on the edge of Crúachain. The nearest one gets in Tírechán to a direct Christianization of the ancient places of Ireland is at Tailtiu; but that, as we have seen, was for special reasons and did not preclude a confrontation with Coirpre mac Néill. The hagiographers were not unaware of the legendary history of Ireland, but there was a real opposition between their values and those of both contemporary kings and of contemporary saga: Óengus the Culdee was not some ascetic extremist, even though he pressed his contrast fairly hard. The Irish Christian culture of the time had to cope with a split imagination, just as any medieval Christian who read the classic school texts of the Greek-speaking east or the Latin-speaking west, Homer and Virgil, had to cope with two imaginative worlds rubbing up against each other, both Mount Olympus and Jerusalem.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ I am deeply grateful to Fiona Edmonds for her help with the maps and to Máire Ní Mhaonaigh for many improvements to the text and for compiling the bibliography.

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