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Ériu, Special ICM edition, 2017, (Article)

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EARLY IRISH SAINTS' CULTS AND THEIR CONSTITUENCIES¹

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the differences between early Irish saints' cults, concentrating mainly but not exclusively on those associated with the Fothairt. It begins with a simple and local cult, that of Damnat of Tedavnet, and a complex and widespread cult, that of Brigit. It is argued that Brigit's cult had at least four constituencies: the Fothairt, Kildare, Leinster, and the weak throughout Ireland and even in Britain. Brigit's cult among the Fothairt is then contrasted with that of another Fothairt saint, Fintan of Clonenagh; and Fintan's cult, in turn, is contrasted with that of Rígnach. The Uí Ércáin, a branch of the Fothairt, illustrate how the political status of a cult's constituency may determine its character. Finally, the shift from an alliance between cults to competition is studied in the example of Cainnech and Columba.

This paper arises from one fundamental idea, that there were major differences not just between one saint's cult and another in pre-Viking Ireland but also within the cult of a single saint. Approximately, the idea is that the major cults had more than one constituency, and that, because they had more than one constituency, they were themselves complex. Moreover, the balance between one constituency and another was likely to change over time. An implication of this idea is that the entire dossier of a saint may not always be best understood as advancing the interests of the leading church of that saint. This mode of interpretation has had notable successes, but it also has its limitations, since the community of the leading church of a saint was only one constituency of the cult.² My starting-point needs to be distinguished from the allied notion that a particular piece of hagiographical writing was directed at more than one readership:³ that is a point about a text, whereas my concern is with the cult and with texts only as evidence for the cult.

To illustrate the possibilities, I shall begin with two cults of female saints, one local, that of Damnat of Tedavnet in Co. Monaghan, the other

¹ This paper originated as a lecture given under the auspices of the Michael O'Clery Institute in UCD. I am very grateful to Dr John McCafferty for inviting me to give the lecture and for his hospitality, to those present for their contributions to discussion, and to Fiona Edmonds for making the maps.

² For a survey of Irish hagiography see Máire Herbert, 'The Latin and vernacular hagiography of Ireland from the origins to the sixteenth century', in Guy Philippart (ed.), *Hagiographie: histoire internationale de la littérature hagiographique latine et vernaculaire en occident des origines à 1550* (3 vols, Turnhout 2001), vol. 3, 327–60.

³ So, for example, J.-M. Picard, 'The purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', *Peritia* 1 (1982), 160–77, argues that the Life of St Columba was directed at three readerships: the *familia* of the saint, Northumbrian churchmen and continental churchmen.

widespread, the cult of Brigit. The latter will lead to a general theme, the different and complex relationships of the Fothairt to their saints.

THE CULT OF DAMNAT

Damnata is described in the Martyrology of Tallaght as Damnata of Sliab Betha, the mountain on which the counties of Monaghan, Fermanagh and Tyrone meet (see Map 1).⁴ Her church, Tedavnet, Tech nDamnata, lies east-south-east of Sliab Betha, but a well at Caldavnet is in the lower foothills, and it remains to this day an active centre of her cult. She was later identified with St Dymphna of Gheel in the Netherlands, patroness of the insane;⁵ the signpost to the well directs one not to St Damnata's Well, in spite of the name Caldavnet, but to St Dymphna's. There is no Life, but the genealogies of the saints connect her, through her mother, with several

Map 1 Damnata

⁴ *MT*, 13 June.

⁵ J.F. Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland: ecclesiastical. An introduction and guide* (New York 1929), no. 314.

saints, including Mo Chóe of Nendrum and Bishop Mac Ercae of Domnach Mór Maige Coba, namely with an Ulster saint of the first rank and with the saint of an important and, given its name, presumably very early Cruithnian church.⁶ An indication of the local nature of Damnat's cult is, however, that she was not mentioned in the Lives of the major saints of the area, Tigernach of Clones, Mac Cáirthinn of Clogher and Mo Lua of Drumsnat and Clonfertmulloe.⁷ These were major churches of the Uí Chremthainn, divided by Sliab Betha between Síol nDaimíni around Clogher and Uí Nad Sluaig in Fernmag, around Clones and Drumsnat. By contrast, the Life of Tigernach of Clones is concerned with his relationship with Clogher.⁸ The cult of Damnat appears therefore to have been located in the interstices of power—in the borderlands between two related kingdoms, and between the great churches of the Uí Chremthainn. The constituency was local and probably popular, very similar to some other northern female saints, such as Brónach of Kilbroney, by Rostrevor in Co. Down, Duinsech of Strangford Lough, and Ercnait of Dún dá Én, by Toome in Co. Antrim,⁹ but also similar to some local male saints, such as Domongart mac Echach of Slieve Donard in the Mourne Mountains.¹⁰ It seems to be characteristic of these important but local saints that no Life survives, that they have a single church, or at most two or three in the same region, that the connections claimed for them by the genealogists of the saints are regional or provincial, and that the onomastic and physical evidence indicates how effective the impact of the cult was within its home district, which was likely to become a parish in the late-medieval period.

⁶ CGSH §§702, 722.92.

⁷ W.W. Heist (ed.), *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi* (Brussels 1965), 107–11 (fragment), 131–45, 343–6 (fragment); Charles Plummer (ed.), *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae* (2 vols, Oxford 1910), vol. 2, 262–9. For shifting relationships among the leading churches of the Uí Chremthainn, see Katharine Simms, 'The origins of the diocese of Clogher', *Clogher Record* 10 (2) (1980), 180–98, esp. 181–6.

⁸ Kim McCone, 'Clones and her neighbours in the early period: hints from some Airgialla saints' lives', *Clogher Record* 11 (1984), 305–25.

⁹ Brónach: see 2 April in *MT*; *Fél.2*, notes; CGSH §670.36. The old church is at grid ref. J 188 195. Ercnat (Ercnait) of Dún dá Én (par. Duneane, bar. of Toome, Co. Antrim; deanery of Turtrye, dioc. of Connor; the name occurs on the modern 1:50000 map in Duneane Cottage, J 02 92; par. includes Fertas Tuamma; cf. VT2 1954–5); see 8 January in *Fél.2* (both text and notes); *MG*; *MD*. Duinsech of Cell Dunsige: see 5 August in *MG*; *MD*; 6 August (prob. by a slip) in *MT* (Duissech for Loch Cuan); 11 December in *Fél.2*, notes, which says that 'she has three churches among the Ulaid'—see A.J. Hughes, 'The virgin St Duinsech and her three Ulster churches near Strangford Lough', *Celtica* 23 (1999), 113–24.

¹⁰ Domongart macc Echach maicc Muiredaig Muindeirg: see 24 March in *MT* (Domongart mac Echdach); *Fél.2*, notes, but also in the Laud 610 copy on 18 March ('in hoc die Domangart mac Echach ó tSléib tSlanga'); CGSH §§162, 358. §162 reveals an alliance with Mo Chumma of Druim Bó and Cillén (Cillán) of Achad Céol near the shore of Dundrum Bay. Cf. also VT2 2655–71. CGSH §722.27: his mother was Derinill, who was also said to be the mother of Muru Othna, Mo Chumma of Druimm Bó and others (not all possible coevals). His church was Ráith Murbuilg: 3 m. N. of Newcastle, Co. Down, in tl. of Carnacavill, J 37 34. There are the remains of a church, the stump of a Round Tower and early cross-slabs: *An archaeological survey of Northern Ireland: county Down* (Belfast 1966), no. 949, pp 306–7. He gave his name to Slieve Donard in place of the ancient Sliab Slánga.

THE CULT OF BRIGIT

The cult of Brigit was far more complex than that of Damnat, and correspondingly probably subject to more change. The early texts in her hagiographical 'dossier'—ranging from the seventh to the early ninth century—contain different perceptions of her natural clientèle. At one end of the spectrum, she was a pan-Irish saint, enjoying local support in all the provinces of the island; at the other end, she was the saint of her own people, the Fothairt, a people settled mainly in Leinster but with outposts elsewhere. The Fothairt were never, in the historical period, a leading power even in Leinster, let alone anywhere else; indeed, their particular pride was that Brigit belonged to them.¹¹ Even within Leinster different texts emphasized different themes: the Life by Cogitosus (c. 675) was written by a champion of her principal church, Kildare;¹² there, so the Life claimed, she lay enshrined, alongside her episcopal helper, Bishop Conlaíd (or Conláed). On the other hand, the *Vita Prima*, which powerful arguments would date earlier than Cogitosus, is more interested in Brigit's relationship with the people of her father, Dubthach, the branches of the Fothairt settled on the north-western frontier of Leinster.¹³ The same is true of the ninth-century vernacular Life, *Bethu Brigitte*, which is related to, but not dependent on, the *Vita Prima*; both probably drew on a lost Life of the mid-seventh century.¹⁴ These local affiliations were to be enduring: Brigit has remained the patron saint of Kildare, but her cult also continued to be vigorous around Croghan Hill, Co. Offaly, which is mentioned in *Bethu Brigitte* and was close to the home of her father, Dubthach.¹⁵

One of the most interesting aspects of the hagiography of Brigit is, therefore, its variety, rooted in particular places and directed to different audiences. Cogitosus' Life was addressed initially to the bishop and other educated clerics within the double monastery of Kildare and then to their equivalents in the other major churches; to meet the expectations of such a readership it had to be, and is, a polished piece of writing. The *Vita Prima* probably envisaged a wider readership and was appropriately written in a simpler style reminiscent of the Gospels:¹⁶ particular narratives begin

¹¹ CGH 80.

¹² Cogitosus, *Vita S. Brigidae*, *Acta Sanctorum*, 1 February, 135–41, trans. Seán Connolly and J.-M. Picard, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117 (1987), 11–27.

¹³ *Vita Prima S. Brigidae*, ed. John Colgan as *Vita Tertia, Trias Thaumaturga* (Louvain 1647), 527–42; ed. Bollandists, *Acta sanctorum*, 1 February, 119–35; trans. Seán Connolly, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 119 (1989), 14–49. Richard Sharpe, 'Vitae S. Brigidae: the oldest texts', *Peritia* 1 (1982), 81–106, argues for the priority of the *Vita Prima* as against Kim McCone, 'Brigit in the seventh century: a saint with three lives?', *Peritia* 1 (1982), 107–45. David Howlett, 'Vita I sanctae Brigidae', *Peritia* 12 (1998), 1–23, argues that the *Vita Prima* is a scholarly composition by Ailerán.

¹⁴ Donncha Ó hAodha (ed.), *Bethu Brigitte* (Dublin 1978), xvii–xx.

¹⁵ *Bethu Brigitte*, ed. Ó hAodha, §17, l. 165; CGH 82 (126a5–6); Lord Killanin and M.V. Duignan, *The Shell guide to Ireland* (2nd edn, London 1967), 194. Dubthach's land lay in Tuath dá Maige: *Bethu Brigitte*, §6, ll 44–5.

¹⁶ Sharpe, 'Vitae S. Brigidae', 90.

with such phrases as 'Alia autem die' or 'Factum est autem quod...'.¹⁷ Again, Cogitosus' Life includes a startling claim to archiepiscopal status for Kildare, thus challenging the other major churches of Ireland;¹⁸ the *Vita Prima* avoids the controversies of high ecclesiastical politics.

For Cogitosus, therefore, the other saint of Kildare, Conlaíd, was important as the first archbishop; yet, again, a different aspect of his character is implied by the Genealogies of the Saints, according to which he was 'Conláed the devout, son of Cormac' and belonged to the Dál Messin Corp.¹⁹ 'Devout', *cráibdech*, is a term bestowed on persons of acknowledged sanctity; the Dál Messin Corp, in the days of the genealogists, was a second-ranking political force around the modern town of Wicklow, although in Conlaíd's time they may well have been one of the leading powers of Leinster.²⁰ Their saints, as Edel Bhreathnach has shown, formed a large cohort, especially from one lineage, the Uí Nastair.²¹ Conlaíd was also remembered in the Genealogies of the Saints as Brigit's craftsman, *cerd*, where an element of conscious stylization is implicit in the statement that there were 'three chief craftsmen of Ireland, namely Tassach for Patrick and Conláed for Brigit and Daig for Ciarán, and these three were bishops'.²² One might have supposed that Conlaíd enjoyed a merely satellite cult, dependent on that of Brigit, but, again, its complexity suggests that there was more to it than that; the Conlaíd of importance for the interests of Kildare, Archbishop Conlaíd, was only one of his personae.

In their hagiography the three principal saints of Ireland had, as befitted their diverse origins, markedly different roles. As the *Amra Choluim Chille* shows, Columba, the saint of royal blood, was identified from the start with his kindred, the Uí Néill, the leading royal dynasty of Ireland;²³ their position of eminence had, in his lifetime, recently been gained by violent conquest.²⁴ It was easier for his influence and later his cult to transcend his kindred in Britain rather than in his native Ireland. Patrick was the outsider, the British missionary, who could be made into the voice of Christianity in judgement upon kings. Because he acquired this authority, he—and thus his principal church, Armagh—was, by the late seventh century, embroiled in dynastic politics. Brigit, however, stood apart from kings, not just because she was a woman, but because, as a former slave-girl, she could speak for those who suffered at the hands of the powerful. The most direct comparison is between

¹⁷ 'One day' or 'It happened, however, that...'.
¹⁸ Cogitosus, *Vita S. Brigidae*, prologue; T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge 2000), 416, 427–9.

¹⁹ CGSH §252.
²⁰ F.J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973), 138 (on the Uí Garrchon, their principal dynasty).

²¹ Edel Bhreathnach, 'The genealogies of Leinster as a source for local cults', in John Carey, Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain (eds), *Studies in Irish hagiography: saints and scholars* (Dublin 2001), 250–67: 257–9.
²² CGSH §82.1.

²³ *Amra Choluim Chille*, ed. in Whitley Stokes, 'The Bodleian Amra Choluimb Chille', *RC* 20 (1899), 30–55, 132–83, 248–87, 400–37, at §6.

²⁴ A.P. Smyth, 'The Húi Néill and the Leinstermen in the Annals of Ulster, 431–516 A.D.', *ÉC* 14 (1) (1974), 137–42.

the hagiographies of Patrick and Brigit, partly because the texts themselves may have influenced each other in the seventh century, partly because they brought Patrick and Brigit into a direct personal relationship. At least one major ecclesiastical figure of the mid-seventh century, Ultán of Ardraccan, Co. Meath, appears to have been interested in the hagiography of Brigit as well as of Patrick;²⁵ according to the Middle Irish saints' genealogies, Brigit's mother, Broicsech, belonged to his people, Dál Conchobuir.²⁶

The differences appear in the character of the miracles the saints are said to perform.²⁷ Patrick (that is, in his late-seventh-century guise; the original Patrick was very different) is the saint who defeats the *magi*, the druids, of the pagan king; he is also the saint who by his blessings and curses decrees the fates of dynasties; the habitat of this Patrick is thus as much the royal household as the church. Brigit, on the other hand, never dictates the course of dynastic politics. Her power is expressed in 'helping miracles': healings, feeding the hungry and rescuing the weak from violence. The contrast can be seen most directly in the different treatments of a single theme: the conflict between two branches of the Uí Néill, Cenél Coirpri and the descendants of Conall Cremthainne, for control of the midlands. In Tírechán's *Collectanea*, Patrick intervenes directly: he curses Coirpre and mingles with his curse a prophecy of the decline of his lineage; he then goes on to bless Conall Cremthainne and so grants him hegemony over his brothers.²⁸ Tírechán was here playing the tune of a contemporary king of Tara, Fínsnechtae Fledach, who ruled between 675 and 695. The *Vita Prima* has Brigit intervene in the same quarrel, but she does so in order to save the rivals from each other, not to give one of them the victory.²⁹ Her concern is to avert violence, not to legitimize anyone's triumph.

²⁵ As indicated by the Rheims Prologue, ed. in Mario Esposito, 'Notes on Latin Learning in Ireland', *Hermathena* 24 [no. 49] (1935), 125–6; reprinted in his *Latin learning in mediaeval Ireland*, ed. Michael Lapidge (London 1988), chap. 7:

Adfore digneris precibus, pia uirgo, benignis,
Brigita, supplicibus prospera posce tuis.
Si mihi uita comes fuerit, haec certa tenebis,
Laudum te cumulis enituisse meis.
Non minus Ultano nostrae praeconia laudis
Praestabunt populis, o sacra uirgo, piis.
Ille fuit praesul magnus, uirtutibus aptus.

'May you deign to give your support, merciful virgin, with kindly prayers—
Brigit, request good fortune for your suppliants.
If life be granted to me, take it as certain
that you will shine forth in the great mass of my praises.
No less than those of Ultan will the declarations of our praise
be set before devout peoples, O holy virgin.
He was a great bishop, equipped with virtues.'

²⁶ *CGSH* §2.1.

²⁷ Clare Stancliffe, 'The miracle stories in seventh-century Irish saints' lives', in Jacques Fontaine and J.N. Hillgarth (eds.), *Le septième siècle: changements et continuités* (London 1992), 87–111.

²⁸ Tírechán, *Collectanea*, in Ludwig Bieler (ed.), *The Patrician texts from the Book of Armagh*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin 1979), 122–62: 132, §§9, 10.

²⁹ *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, c. 65, trans. Connolly, c. 64.

The mode of action is as different as the objective: Patrick acts as an Irish Samuel, taking kingship from Coirpre and his descendants, confronting proud kings in their own halls and places of assembly. Brigit, on the other hand, is sought out by the rival brothers, approached on the open road, and she saves each of them from the other. Whereas Patrick deals in the ambitions of kings, Brigit reacts to their fears. When Conall Cremthainne's childless queen sought Brigit's prayers so that she might have a child, Brigit communicated with her only through a nun. The latter asked Brigit:³⁰

'Why is it you don't ask the Lord for the queen to have a son, whereas you often ask him on behalf of the wives of the common folk?'

And Brigit said, 'Because all the common folk are servants and they all call upon their Father, but the sons of kings are serpents and sons of blood and sons of death apart from a few who are chosen by God. But since the queen entreats us, go and tell her, "There will be offspring but it will be offspring that sheds blood and will be an accursed stock and will hold sway for many years."' And so it was.

The southern Uí Néill, rulers of the midlands, recipients of Patrick's blessing, were the 'accursed stock' so roundly condemned by Brigit. Yet Brigit's attitude was not expressed in the language of political rivalries: although a Leinster saint might be expected to defend the interests of the province against its principal enemies—and from the tenth century Brigit was given precisely this role³¹—here she condemns the most powerful kings of the day from the standpoint of the common people, not just of Leinster but of all Ireland. When she did go to Tailtiu, the site of the great royal assembly presided over by the king of Tara, she went to give her aid to a synod hearing a false accusation of seduction brought against one of Patrick's bishops, Brón.³² Her concern was not to favour one branch of a dynasty against another or even one entire dynasty against another: in that sense, she was not willing to meddle in the affairs of princes.

For Brigit's actions, the determining model was more often the New rather than the Old Testament. As befitted a 'second Mary', her interventions were more reminiscent of the marriage-feast of Cana than of the prophet Samuel confronting King Saul.³³ Most of her miracles were humble affairs for people of low rank and poor circumstances. Unlike Patrick, she had a concern for animals, dogs and wolves;³⁴ so too did Columba, but significantly his concern was for a bird that had been driven by the wind from his native kingdom, ruled by his kinsmen, Cenél Conaill.³⁵ Whether or not there is any historical

³⁰ *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, §64, trans. Connolly, §62.

³¹ Pádraig Ó Riain (ed.), *Cath Almaine* (Dublin 1978), §10.

³² *Bethu Brigte*, ed. Ó hAodha, §40; *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, §39.

³³ Brigit as 'alaMaire': *CGH* 80; cf. *Thes.*, vol. 2, 343, 349, Broccán's Hymn, ll 64, 98, 106.

³⁴ *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, §109, trans. Connolly, §107; Patrick determines the fortunes of fisheries rather than showing any concern for fish: Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §§9, 46.

³⁵ Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, 2.48; compare the boar of 2.26 and the white horse of 3.23.

truth in the claim that she was a slave by birth—something which cannot be known—she was certainly presented by the *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigitte* as a saint for the poor. Nor was she a saint only for the Irish: the cult reflected in the Welsh place name Llansanffraid is already suggested by a story in both the *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigitte*, according to which two blind Britons came to her guided by a young leper belonging to her own people, the Fothairt. They complained, ‘You have healed the infirm of your own people and you neglect the healing of foreigners. But at least heal our boy who is of your own people’.³⁶ In response to their plea, Brigit healed both the boy of his leprosy and the Britons of their blindness: as Christ began with the Jews but extended his teaching and his miracles to Samaritans and Gentiles, so Brigit might begin with the Fothairt but she came to be a saint even for the Britons.

In the *Vita Prima* and *Bethu Brigitte*, Brigit first began to transcend her father’s people, the Fothairt, precisely because she was a slave-child, the daughter of a slavewoman. Dubthach’s patrimony is said by *Bethu Brigitte* to have been ‘in the two plains of the Uí Fhailgi’, a reference to *Tuath dá Maige* ‘the People of the Two Plains’.³⁷ The area inhabited by this people is approximately indicated by the medieval ecclesiastical deanery of Tothmoy; it included Cróchan Breg hÉile (Croghan Hill) and some of the lands of the Fothairt Airbrech, to the east of Croghan Hill, which extended up to, but did not include, the church of another nun, Rígnach (Cell Ríгнаige, Kilrainy).³⁸ Although the genealogies distinguish Brigit’s own paternal lineage within the Fothairt—the Uí Bresail, from the Fothairt Airbrech (see Fig. 1)—the latter were neighbours, and branches related to the Uí Bresail lived among the Fothairt Airbrech.³⁹ The Uí Fhailgi were one of the leading royal dynasties of Leinster: they, therefore, were the overlords, and the various neighbouring Fothairt were their clients.⁴⁰

All these lands lay immediately on the Leinster side of the frontier with Mide, one of the territories of the Uí Néill. Moreover, in spite of the political dividing-line, ecclesiastically there were strong links between Brigit’s homeland and Mag Tulach, the adjacent client kingdom within Mide. It was there, according to Tírechán and *Bethu Brigitte*, that Brigit was veiled as a nun;⁴¹ moreover, one of her episcopal allies, Mac Caille, who participated in her veiling, was associated both with Croghan Hill, within

³⁶ *Bethu Brigitte*, ed. Ó hAodha, §27; cf. *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, §25, trans. Connolly, §26.

³⁷ *Bethu Brigitte*, ed. Ó hAodha, §6.

³⁸ H.S. Sweetman and G.F. Handcock, *Calendar of documents relating to Ireland, 1172–1307* (5 vols, London 1875–86), vol. 5, 247 (Totemoy); Cell Ríгнаige (Kylriny, Kilrainy) is there included within the neighbouring deanery of Carbery (Carbury), but *CGSH* §81 shows that it had been included within the territory of the Fothairt Airbrech. The genitive ‘Airbrech’ is correctly explained in *CGH* 82 as ‘air-bri .i. fri Bri Éle anair’.

³⁹ The Uí Chrummada and Uí Chuirc of *CGH* 84 (126a35).

⁴⁰ Hence the Uí Bresail, Brigit’s kindred, were said to be ‘la Huu Failge’: *CGH* 84 (126a28).

⁴¹ Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §16.3 (where the punctuation should be: ‘in campo Teloch, in qua sancta Brigita pallium cepit sub manibus Filii Caille. In Huisniuch Midi mansit iuxta Petram Coithrigi...’, ‘in Mag Teloch in which the holy Brigit received the veil from the hands of Mac Caille. In Uisnech of Mide he stayed near the Rock of Coithrige’); *Bethu Brigitte*, ed. Ó hAodha, §§17–18; *Vita Prima* ed. Colgan, §18, trans. Connolly, §20, is less specific, but makes it clear that it was in Mide.

Fig. 1 Genealogical chart of the Fothairt.

Leinster, and with Mag Tulach, within Mide.⁴² For Tírechán, writing in the late seventh century in praise of Patrick, Mag Tulach was one of Brigit's territories.⁴³ The later ruling kindred of Mag Tulach claimed to be descended from a late-sixth-century king of Leinster, Brandub mac Echach.⁴⁴ Even within Mide, therefore, Brigit's cult went with Leinster connections.

⁴² In *Bethu Brigte*, §17, Brigit finds him by Cróchan Breg Éle, and he leads Brigit and her companions across the boglands into Mag Tulach.

⁴³ Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §16.3.

⁴⁴ Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, 142.

The beginning of Brigit's life, according to the *Vita Prima*, was played out against the background of the jealousy felt by Dubthach's wife towards Broicsech, her husband's slavewoman and concubine.⁴⁵ The wife put pressure on Dubthach to sell Broicsech to someone from another country. In telling this story the *Vita Prima* uses the model of Abraham, Sarah and his Egyptian slavewoman, Hagar, adopting for its own use the words of Sarah, 'Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac' (Genesis 21: 10). Yet it reverses the implications of the Genesis story, for it includes a prophecy that the descendants of the wife will serve the offspring of the slavewoman. As Hagar was driven out into the desert, so Broicsech was sold to a poet from the lands of the Uí Néill. She was subsequently sold on to a druid, in whose household Brigit was born; he was to prove crucial for Brigit's early life.⁴⁶ This druid's paternal lineage was in Munster, in the northern Munster kingdom of Uaithne Tíre according to *Bethu Brigte*,⁴⁷ his mother's family came from Connaught,⁴⁸ while he himself was then resident in the north of Ireland. In this way Brigit made her first journey, from Leinster to the lands of the southern Uí Néill, then to the North, and on to Connaught and Munster. This journey has been seen as an assertion of ecclesiastical lordship, a theory supported by the statement made by the infant Brigit in Connaught, 'This will be mine; this will be mine'.⁴⁹ Yet there are clear differences between Brigit's journey and the circuit around northern Ireland made by Patrick according to Tírechán. Part of the journey was made by Brigit when she was still in her mother's womb; moreover, whereas Patrick's circuit went sunwise, *deisel*, Brigit's went widdershins, *tuathbiul*. Because of her association with a poet and a druid, her journeyings were more directly linked with the circuits of poets and other 'people of art' than with the circuits of kings. Brigit's journeys were hagiographical conventions that, in this instance, expressed connections and alliances more often than lordship. Later she was made to visit Armagh and Downpatrick, two pre-eminent Patrician sites.⁵⁰ This can hardly have been because the hagiographer wished to claim that they belonged to Brigit. It is much more likely that behind the visit to Armagh lay the fact that a branch of the Fothairt was settled nearby, the Fothairt Imchlár 'by Armagh'.⁵¹

Another difference between Brigit's first journey and Patrick's circuit is in the attitudes expressed to druids. Patrick consistently opposed and defeated druids, perceived as the embodiment of Irish paganism.⁵² The

⁴⁵ *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, §§1–3.

⁴⁶ *Vita Prima* ed. Colgan, §3, trans. Connolly, §5.

⁴⁷ *Bethu Brigte*, ed. Ó hAodha, §6.

⁴⁸ *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, §5, trans. Connolly, §7.

⁴⁹ *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, §9; trans. Connolly, §11; similarly *Bethu Brigte*, ed. Ó hAodha, §4; McCone, 'Brigit in the seventh century', 122–3.

⁵⁰ *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, §59 (Mag nInis), §60 (arx Ledglaisse = Dún Lethglaisse), §61 (Mag Mache), §62 (oppidum Mache), trans. Connolly, §§57, 58, 59, 60.

⁵¹ CGH 82, 126a8.

⁵² Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii*, 1.10, 15–17, in Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 62–122: 74–76, 84–90; Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §§8, 19, 39, 42.

druid of Munster parentage who bought Brigit's mother, Broicsech, is treated much more gently. The ambiguities are well brought out by an anecdote concerning their stay in the druid's Munster home, where Brigit had difficulty eating.⁵³

Observing this the druid carefully investigated the cause of the nausea, and when he discovered it, said, 'I am unclean, but this girl is filled with the Holy Spirit. She can't endure my food.' Thereupon he chose a white cow and set it aside for the girl, and a certain Christian woman, a very God-fearing virgin, used to milk the cow and the girl used to drink the cow's milk and not vomit it up as her stomach had been healed.

The druid, though unclean, was perceptive and concerned. He was also responsible for liberating both Brigit and her mother, and almost in the act of liberating his slaves he was himself liberated from paganism. By contrast, Brigit's father is less kindly treated: his slavewoman, having been sold, was eventually restored to him by the druid as a free woman; Dubthach then decided to sell Brigit into slavery, because of her habit of giving everything to the poor.⁵⁴ When that had been averted, he put her under pressure to accept marriage; and when she had avoided that outcome she left for the lands of the Uí Néill to take the veil. And yet the *Vita Prima* makes it quite clear that Brigit would greatly benefit the offspring of Dubthach and his wife, in the first place his branch of the Uí Bresail, but perhaps including the Fothairt as a whole.⁵⁵

None of the Lives explains how Brigit acquired what became her principal church, Kildare. This lay a short distance beyond Uí Fhailgi territory, and at a considerable distance from Brigit's home near Croghan Hill. Kildare remained, for several centuries, a double house: it had both bishops (later often replaced by abbots) and abbesses; the latter appear to have often been of the Fothairt, while the bishops or abbots sometimes came from the ruling families of Leinster. The abbess was the heir of Brigit; the close bond was emphasized by the story that her immediate successor, Dar Lugdach, died one year to the day after Brigit's own death; just as Columba's successor, Baíthéne, died a year to the day after Columba and thus came to have the same feast day as his predecessor, so too Dar Lugdach's feast day was 1 February.⁵⁶ Although Baíthéne was also Columba's close kinsman, there is no information about Dar Lugdach's descent, and she is not included in the lists of Fothairt saints.⁵⁷ Her cult was largely subsumed in that of Brigit—something not entirely true of Baíthéne.⁵⁸

⁵³ *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, §10, trans. Connolly, §11; cf. *Bethu Brigte*, ed. Ó hAodha, §5.

⁵⁴ *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, §16, trans. Connolly, §18.

⁵⁵ *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, §3, trans. Connolly, §3.

⁵⁶ *MT*, 1 February, 9 June; *Vita S. Baitheni*, §14, ed. Heist, *Vitae*, 382.

⁵⁷ *CGSH* §§2–7, 662.108–16.

⁵⁸ A partial exception is the important church of Abernethy in eastern Scotland, as shown by the notes in the Pictish king-lists: M.O. Anderson, *Kings and kingship in early Scotland*, 247, 262.

Kildare was also an important centre of scholarship, which helped to make it the most important church of northern Leinster;⁵⁹ moreover, Mag Lifi, the plain of the Liffey, on the western edge of which Kildare was situated, was the principal centre of power in the whole province of Leinster, and Kildare became the pre-eminent church of the province.⁶⁰ In Irish law a church of such importance conferred a status on its head equivalent to that of a bishop. This is what makes sense of a passage in *Bethu Brigte* claiming an episcopal *ordinatio* for Brigit, since the term *ordinatio* can be used for any action which confers higher rank upon an individual.⁶¹ The abbess of Kildare, the heir of Brigit, was thus far and away the most important woman in Ireland. Abbesses of Kildare were the only women whose obits were often recorded in the annals, more frequently commemorated even than queens of Tara.⁶²

In the late seventh century Kildare was especially open to influence from outside Ireland. In the period after it had embraced the Roman Easter (probably in the 630s) and before Armagh followed suit (probably in the 680s), Kildare had the opportunity to take the leadership of the Roman party within the Irish Church. Cogitosus's *Life of Brigit* was principally written to further this ambition. Its depiction of the shrines of Brigit and Conlaíd within the church of Kildare is the earliest evidence for the elevation and enshrinement of relics in Ireland.⁶³ This practice, already popular for more than a century in Francia, was also spreading in England in the late seventh century, as illustrated by the translation and enshrinement of Cuthbert's body in 697.⁶⁴ The exact date of Cogitosus's *Life* is uncertain, but his text appears to be the earliest evidence for the practice in either Ireland or Britain.⁶⁵ As in Cuthbert's case so also in Brigit's, this enhancement of the visible status of the saint had a background of ecclesiastical politics. Cogitosus's *Life* consists of a series of largely humble, down-to-earth miracle stories related to those in the last section of the *Vita Prima*, but these are framed by two major political statements. The passage on the two shrines comes at the end; at the beginning there is a preface in which it is asserted that Kildare is the see of an archbishop whose authority extends over the whole island. In Irish terms, this was a novel assertion, soon to be countered by Armagh's claim to such an island-wide archiepiscopal status in the *Book of the Angel* (*Liber Angeli*; see note 104). The model for such claims is likely to be the authority given to Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury, by Pope Vitalian: from 669 until 735 the archbishops of Canterbury were entitled

⁵⁹ Kenney, *Sources for the early history of Ireland*, no. 105 (on Banbán, *ob.* 685/686).

⁶⁰ See, for example, AU 875.1.

⁶¹ *Bethu Brigte*, ed. Ó hAodha, §19.

⁶² T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin and F.J. Byrne (eds.), *A new history of Ireland. Vol. 9: Maps, genealogies, lists* (Oxford 1984), 259–61.

⁶³ Cogitosus, *Vita S. Brigitae*, c. 32.

⁶⁴ The anonymous Lindisfarne *Life of St Cuthbert*, 4.14, Bede's *Prose Life*, c. 42, ed. Bertram Colgrave, *Two lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge 1940), 130–2, 290–5; Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.3, 19, 30.

⁶⁵ I have argued for a date between c. 675 and 686: Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 438–40.

'archbishops of the island of Britain'.⁶⁶ Kildare, therefore, was the quickest of all Irish churches to react to developments on the continent and in England. Yet its ambitions were never to be realized: Armagh, threatened by Kildare and by Northumbrian power, itself adopted the Roman Easter, whereupon the prestige of Patrick as the apostle of Ireland, to which the *Vita Prima* of Brigit is one of the earlier and more eloquent (because independent) witnesses, gave Armagh a decisive advantage.

Even in Cogitosus's *Life*, once the reader turns away from the grand statements at the beginning and the end, the humbler Brigit is easy to see in such anecdotes as that recounting a gift of pigs from southern Leinster.⁶⁷ The donor came himself to Kildare but asked that Brigit's men be sent to his distant farm to collect the pigs. When these men had reached the watershed dividing northern from southern Leinster, they were met by the pigs guided along the road by wolves that had come from Mag Fea to the south. According to the Middle Irish notes on Broccán's Hymn to Brigit, the man's farm was in the Fothairt territory at the south-east tip of Leinster, namely that called Fothairt Mara or Fothairt Maige Ítha; Mag Fea, mentioned by Cogitosus, was another Fothairt kingdom in south-central Leinster.⁶⁸ The background to the story, therefore, appears to be the right of a major church, attached to a particular dynastic group, to collect gifts from the people of that group's territories.⁶⁹ The pigs were just such gifts collected from the lands of the Fothairt. Elsewhere, wolves were usually symbols for the dedicated violence of 'the sons of death' deplored by Brigit;⁷⁰ that, 'out of the utmost respect for blessed Brigit' (Cogitosus, c. 19), these wolves rounded up and drove these pigs along the road demonstrated the power of the holy over non-human as well as human violence, the power of holiness to transform the world into a peaceful harmony lost when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

The cult of Brigit thus had at least four constituencies: she was the saint of the Fothairt, both those inside and outside Leinster, as their genealogies make plain; she was the saint of Kildare, the leading church of Leinster; because of this association and because the Fothairt were mostly situated in Leinster, she became the saint of an entire province; finally she was the saint of the weak throughout Ireland and even in Britain.

The relationship of Brigit to the Fothairt is doubly interesting, not only for an understanding of early Irish saints' cults, but also for an understanding

⁶⁶ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 428–9.

⁶⁷ Cogitosus, *Vita S. Brigitae*, c. 19.

⁶⁸ *Thes.*, vol. 2, 341–2 (Mag Feae is given in the text, Fotharta Tíre, understood as equivalent to Fothairt Maige Ítha/Fothairt Mara, in the notes); *Campus Feae*, Cogitosus, *Vita S. Brigitae*, c. 19. This south-eastern Mag nÍtha is to be distinguished from the plain of the same name in the north-west (as in, e.g., Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §47; VT2 1753; AU 733.3, 734.8); for the south-eastern Mag nÍtha see AU 664.6 (*Campus Ítho Fothart*); Plummer, *Vitae*, vol. 2, 300 (*Vita S. Máedóc*, §19); the identification in *Onom.* rests on a confusion between Uí Dega, a branch of Uí Chennselaig, and Uí Dega, a branch of Fothairt Maige Ítha.

⁶⁹ *Vita Prior S. Lugidi seu Moluae*, §35, ed. Heist, *Vitae*, 138.

⁷⁰ As in the term *fáelad*; *Vita Prima*, ed. Colgan, §§67, 69; Richard Sharpe, 'Hiberno-Latin laicus, Irish *láech* and the devil's men', *Ériu* 30 (1979), 75–92.

of how a scattered people could retain an identity. That even in Cogitosus's stylistically elevated text, one has a story about pigs from Fothairt Mara shepherded by wolves from Fothairt Fea indicates the importance of this relationship of saint to people. It is arguable that the Fothairt retained their identity precisely because of their saints' cults. There might be kings of Fothairt Fea, but there were saints of the Fothairt as a whole.⁷¹ This explains why their genealogies begin with a poem prophesying both Brigit and the migration of the Fothairt from the midlands into Leinster.⁷²

FINTAN OF CLONENAGH

Not all Fothairt saints' cults were as closely associated with the Fothairt as was that of Brigit. The next most important of their saints was Fintan moccu Echdach, the founder and patron saint of Clonenagh, situated in the territory of the Loígsi.⁷³ Although Fintan's eighth-century Life gave his father a different name (Cremthann, Crumthann) from the one in the genealogies (Gabríne or Gabrén), all were agreed that, by paternal descent, he was of the Fothairt.⁷⁴ Fintan belonged to the same generation of monastic founders as Columba of Iona and Cainnech of Aghaboe. His short Life, as one of its principal concerns, situates the saint in relation to these other monastic leaders of his generation. Thus, in his infancy, Columba of Iona is said by the Life to have prophesied Fintan's greatness.⁷⁵ This may be a reaction, in part, to the close friendship, attested in Adomnán's Life of Columba, between the founder of Iona and a saint who was not just in Loígsi territory (as was Clonenagh) but was also himself of the Loígsi, Bishop Colmán moccu Loígse, connected with a church a few miles to the east of Clonenagh.⁷⁶ St Cainnech of Aghaboe (only about eight miles to the south-west of Clonenagh, but in the neighbouring kingdom of Osraige) is likewise shown as an ally, yet he also appears as the leader of a delegation seeking to persuade Fintan to relax the severity of his rule.⁷⁷ The terms in which the manner of life at Clonenagh is described suggest that the arguments advanced by Cainnech may have closely resembled those put forward by Gildas a generation earlier against the more extreme ascetics of his day.⁷⁸ Similarly, the description of the mode of life at Clonenagh, although very brief, resembles that given by

⁷¹ CGH 82 (126a10 ff), 431 (LL 337b39 ff); AU 738.4 (Fergus mac Moínaigh and Dub dá Chrich mac aui Cellaigh maic Triein), 754.6.

⁷² CGH 80.

⁷³ Grid ref. S 38 95; the name appears as Cluain Ednech or Ednig. There was a Loígsi presence at Clonenagh according to their genealogies: CGH 93 (127b2).

⁷⁴ *Vita S. Fintani Cluana Ethnich*, §1, ed. Heist, *Vitae*, 145–6, where describing Fintan as 'genere maccu E[c]dagh' is tantamount to saying that he was of the Fothairt; for the date of the Life see Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives: an introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford 1991), 394; CGH 84 (126a30–1); CGSH §3.

⁷⁵ *Vita S. Fintani Cluana Ethnich*, §2.

⁷⁶ Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, 3.12; CGSH §145.

⁷⁷ *Vita S. Fintani Cluana Ethnich*, §§5, 14, 15.

⁷⁸ *Vita S. Fintani Cluana Ethnich*, §§4–5; Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and other documents*, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom (Chichester 1978), 80–1 (trans.), 143–4 (text).

Rhigyfarch in his *Life of St David*, probably using an earlier source: of the two marks of extreme asceticism in Rhigyfarch's account—renunciation of any use of the plough in agriculture and renunciation of any drink apart from water—the first and, by implication, also the second recur in the *Life of Fintan*.⁷⁹ Fintan's separation from the world is portrayed in the *Life* as virtually complete, and it is clear that this is the rhetorical stance of the hagiographer though it may also of course have been the aspiration of the saint. Born in the desert, Fintan was almost immediately handed over to a priest to be fostered and educated; the *Life* makes no mention of any royal participation when he founded his monastery; kings are mentioned only twice—wicked kings who plundered the home of the dead father of one of his monks and who attempted to prevent Fintan from releasing a captive.⁸⁰ The only appearance of the ordinary laity, once Fintan has been born, is as perpetrators and victims of homicide, as the subjects of miracles, as sinners who may yet be saved if their severed heads are buried in the cemetery at Clonenagh, or as possible candidates for the monastic life.⁸¹

The cult of Fintan was, therefore, a much more monastic affair than that of Brigit. It was also, at least on the surface, detached from the Fothairt. The annals show that the abbacy of Clonenagh was sometimes held in conjunction with the abbacy of Terryglas in the far north-west of Munster.⁸² This is explained by an element in the *Life*: Fintan's role as disciple of Colum ua Cremthannáin, patron saint of Terryglas and Inis Celtra, who was also the principal saint of the Uí Chremthannáin, a Leinster dynasty believed to have been settled around Dunamase, Co. Laois.⁸³ In the *Life of Fintan*, and also in the *Life of Colum* himself, the saint of Terryglas appears with three disciples, Cóemán of Enach Truim, Fintan maccu Echdach and Mo Chóeme of Terryglas, Colum's successor as abbot—four 'holy men, having one heart'.⁸⁴ These four are shown wandering together in search of 'the place of their resurrection'. First they come to Cluain Andobair, but that is predestined to be the church of Mo Báe maccu Alle.⁸⁵ Then they come to Cluain Ednech, where they stay for a year or more, but are unable to cope with 'the crowd of men and of their kinsmen coming to them from every direction' and so retire into the recesses of Slieve Bloom. There Colum heals a dumb boy, Sétne, who promptly tells each of the four saints where they will be resurrected. Colum then looks back from the mountain towards

⁷⁹ Rhigyfarch, *Vita S. Davidis*, in A.W. Wade-Evans (ed.), *Vitae sanctorum Britanniae et genealogiae* (Cardiff 1944), §§21–31; on this section of the *Life* see D.N. Dumville, *Saint David of Wales*, Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lecture (Cambridge 2001), 12–14; *Vita S. Fintani Cluana Ethnich*, §4 (the rejection of milk is presumably in favour of water).

⁸⁰ *Vita S. Fintani Cluana Ethnich*, §11, 20.

⁸¹ *Vita S. Fintani Cluana Ethnich*, §§8, 9, 14, 15, 17, 21.

⁸² AU 845.2; 903.1.

⁸³ CGH 55–6.

⁸⁴ *Vita S. Fintani Cluana Ethnich*, §3, ed. Heist, *Vitae*, 146; *Vita S. Columbae Tire dá Glas*, §13, ed. Heist, *Vitae*, 228; for Mo Chóeme see *MT*, 1 May. The topos about several men having one heart is derived from Acts 4:32 (similarly Jonas, *Vita S. Columbani*, 2.23, ed. Bruno Krusch, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum*, 281).

⁸⁵ Cf. CGSH §§128, 129, 132.

Cluain Ednech, which he sees being visited by angels, is distressed that he has left, and asks which of his disciples will return there. Fintan replies that whichever of his disciples is commanded by Colum to return, he will obey; and, of course, as they should already have known because of the boy Sétne's directions, Colum tells Fintan to go back to Clonenagh. The tie to the master, effectively foster-father, overrides the tie to the saint's kindred by blood.⁸⁶ The separation from the Fothairt is not quite complete: Fintan is shown as visiting *campus Ítha*, presumably the south-eastern territory of that name, the land of the Fothairt Maige Ítha in the barony of Forth, Co. Wexford.⁸⁷ As in Cogitosus' Life of Brigit, the Fothairt connection is a subterranean theme in the Life.

Another, more mysterious connection between saints' cults and the Fothairt is thrown up by the dossier of Rígnach. There may be several saints of this name, perhaps as many as four, but this is probably one occasion when application of what we might call Ó Riain's razor is definitely in order.⁸⁸ The reason is topography (see Map 2). We have a Rígnach of Cenél Maini (no. 1), a Rígnach of the Uí Loscáin (no. 2), and two others mentioned in the Martyrology of Tallaght and associated texts (nos 3 and 4).⁸⁹ Nothing much can be done with (3) and (4), but the essential point about Rígnach (1) and Rígnach (2) is that a church associated with Rígnach (1) lies only four miles from Clonard,⁹⁰ while Rígnach (2) is linked with Finnian of Clonard in the genealogies and in the saint's own Life. There is also the Fothairt connection. Rígnach (1) and Rígnach (2) between them manage to have churches in Fothairt Airbrech in the north-west of Leinster and Fothairt Mara (Fothairt Maige Ítha) in the south-east.⁹¹ Moreover, Rígnach (1)'s sisters, Cumman and Crón, have a church in Fothairt Fea in central Leinster.⁹² I suspect that Rígnach (1) and (2) are a single Rígnach and that, in some sense or other, not apparently genealogical, she was a Fothairt saint.

This Rígnach may be contrasted with Fintan. His genealogical connection with the Fothairt was unquestioned, but his main church lay outside Fothairt territory, in the lands of the Loígsi, and his *Vita* places much more weight on

⁸⁶ Compare the story told in §11, where Sinchell wishes to convert his father and his foster-father, both living evil lives, to penitence; Fintan foretells that his father will die unrepentant and go to hell, but his foster-father will repent and go to heaven.

⁸⁷ *Vita S. Fintani Cluana Ethnich*, §17; cf. §12. The gifts of food which, in §7, came from southern Leinster to the monastery may also have come from the Fothairt Maige Ítha, since they look as though they may have been gifts from the saint's own people (as in *Vita Prior S. Lugidi seu Moluae*, §35).

⁸⁸ CGSH §708.133–8 lists six.

⁸⁹ Rígnach (1): CGSH §81; Rígnach (2): CGH 44; *Vita S. Finniani*, §22, ed. Heist, *Vitae*, 102, discussed by Bhreathnach, 'Genealogies of Leinster', 253–4 and 264; Rígnach ingen Feradaig (3): *MT*, 18 December; Rígnach ingen Colcháin (4): in a verse attached to *MT*, 3 September (p. 116).

⁹⁰ Cell Ríгнаige i Fothartaib Airbrech, CGSH §§81, 166, is marked by an old graveyard at grid ref. N 662 399; Paul Walsh, 'Place names in *Vita Finniani*', *ZCP* 10 (1915), 73–7: 76–7.

⁹¹ Cell Ríгнаige hi Fothartaib Mara, CGH 44 (121a17 ff) may well be Kilrane, next to Rosslare Harbour, grid ref. T 12 11; the local attribution is to Ruan, presumably for Ruadhán, but his Life suggests no connection with south-eastern Leinster.

⁹² Cell Ingen nAeda 'i fail Irchuilind i Fothartaib Fea', CGSH §81.

Map 2 The Fothairt: sites associated with Brigit and Rígnach

his relationship with his teacher, Colum of Terryglas, than on any links with the Fothairt. The latter are present in the Life, but only in a subterranean fashion. Rígnach was not claimed by the Fothairt, but the topographical links could hardly be stronger: if one includes her sisters, they are with three different and geographically separate branches.

ST PATRICK AND THE UÍ ERCÁIN

One might imagine that the cult of Patrick would not make much headway within the domain, territorial and genealogical, of Brigit, but that is not entirely true. One branch of the Fothairt, called Uí Ercáin (see Fig. 1)

were settled immediately to the north of Maistiú or Mullaghmast, namely the royal centre of the Uí Dúnlainge in Tírechán and of the Uí Muiredaig branch of Uí Dúnlainge from the eighth century.⁹³ The Uí Ercáin can be situated in the parish of Narraghmore by a combination of small items of evidence from the genealogies of the saints, the Tripartite Life, and the *Notulae* in the Book of Armagh. In the Tripartite Life they were the subject of a short narrative which proceeds in time-honoured Patrician fashion, by divide and rule.⁹⁴ The victims were a branch of the Loígsi settled around what became Moone, just to the south-east of Maistiú, while the favoured sons of Patrick were the Uí Ercáin.⁹⁵ At first reading the story seems to be a comic interlude in Patrick's hard journeying around Ireland; and perhaps it was entertaining for early Irish readers. But the results are attested by good charter evidence.

The first evidence comes in the *Notulae* in the Book of Armagh, which are interpretable only because they often correspond closely with the Tripartite Life. Tírechán's Patrick had made only a cursory dash across Leinster, ordaining Auxilius of Killashee (Cell Ausaili), Iserninus, Mac Táil of Old Kilcullen, and Fiacc of Sleaty en route.⁹⁶ By the time the *Notulae* were written, the cult of Patrick had much more detailed claims on the landscape of North Leinster;⁹⁷ but when we get to the Tripartite Life the Patrician tide has begun to recede again. The one claim that remains in the south-western part of Mag Lifi, within the territories of the Uí Muiredaig, is the claim to the Uí Ercáin.

It all turns on naughty pranks by the small boys of the Loígsi, digging pits in the road, filling them with water, and then covering them up as traps for Patrick. After a vigorous exchange between Patrick and the boys, they get more than they bargained for—one of Patrick's formidable curses, which for good measure is repeated at the end of the passage.⁹⁸

⁹³ Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §12.

⁹⁴ VT2 2195–2218.

⁹⁵ The text seems to use a singular *ā*-stem form *Laíches*, acc./dat. *Laígis*, for a branch of the Loígsi (compare Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, 3.12, *mocu Loigse*). The nom. plural, however, seems to be *Loichsi/Loigsi*, as in *secht Loichsi Lagen*, CGH 87 (126b15–16), and the gen. pl. *Laichse/Laichsi*, as in AU 917.3 (with a restored internal vowel in *Laichise* AU 903.3), *Loichsi*, CGH 87, suggesting an *i*-stem inflection in the plural. To judge by the examples from Adomnán, the forms in *-g-* are original, and those in *-ch-* result from juxtaposition with *-s-* in syncopated forms. I have normalized to nom. sg. *Loíges* and nom. pl. *Loigsi*. Since there were traditionally seven Loígsi, each one of the seven was a *Loíges* (*Laiches*) in the singular.

⁹⁶ Tírechán, *Collectanea*, §51.

⁹⁷ *Notulae*, 28–44, in Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 180–3: 181–2.

⁹⁸ VT2 2215–18. The point of the exchange seems to depend on the law of *tellach* and can be clarified by comparison with a story told in the laws, about Nin (or Ninne), in which Nin is told by the occupant of the land where he has unyoked his horses to remove them forthwith, since unyoking constitutes a claim to the land (CIH 907.36–908.6). The passage in the Tripartite Life makes no explicit reference to unyoking: the boys tell Patrick and his companions to move their horses (presumably so that they will fall into the traps); but Patrick also replies by saying 'For God's sake, shift your horses'. It seems rather more likely that Patrick is replying to the boys rather than passing on their order to his companions (if it were the latter, the next sentence would be better translated 'but it [sc. going on] did them [the horses] no harm'). Since a principal point of this interchange seems to be the way in which Moone will be given to Colum Cille (to judge by the gloss in the *E* copy of the text), Patrick would appear to

As for the Loíges, however, namely the kindred of the boys who did that evil deed, there will be neither king nor bishop from them till Doomsday. It would be an external ruler who would govern them; he will not protect them from oppression and legal prosecution till Doomsday.

Bríg daughter of Fergna, however, who belonged to the Uí Ercáin, informed Patrick about the difficulties and opposition that lay ahead; in return she received for her people a blessing that was the counterpart of the curse put upon the Loíges maic Fhind.⁹⁹ What is interesting about this passage is that it required detailed knowledge of the political geography of the southern part of Co. Kildare before any reader could appreciate its significance. The crucial point is the topography, namely that the Uí Ercáin, a branch of the Fothairt, were just to the north of Maistiú and a branch of the Loígisi, the other 'chief *forsluinniud* of Leinster', just to the south-east.¹⁰⁰ Yet Maistiú itself is not mentioned. What we are led to understand is that, in order to found Moone, the Uí Muiredaig kings granted to the *familia Columbae* the lands of an adjacent and thoroughly servile client people; these Loígisi were not in a political position to make their own grants. The Uí Ercáin of Narragh, however, were supposed to have followed Patrick freely from the beginning and to have enjoyed the position of favoured free clients: the king of the Uí Muiredaig might consume one haunch of some well-fed bullock in his royal house at Maistiú, but the king of the Uí Ercáin would eat the other.¹⁰¹ He was not just a table-companion of his overlord but enjoyed an equality in the feast. The attachment of Narragh to the Uí Muiredaig kingdom is still reflected in the inclusion of the parish in the deanery of Omorthy,¹⁰² but its relative independence, as well as its attachment to St Patrick, is attested in early charters of the new Norman lord of Narragh, a quite distinct fief from that of Omurethy.¹⁰³

be making a prophecy about the ownership of the land. The boys are literally commanding Patrick's people to move their horses on, so that they fall into the traps, but a possible further meaning is that they are rejecting Patrick's possession of the land (as Christian missionary and as saint); hence Patrick replies that they will lose control over their land, because outsiders will come in, and in particular because Moone will belong to Columba.

⁹⁹ The free kindreds of the Loígisi, according to their genealogical tract (CGH 87–95), did not include any Loíges maic Fhind; their ecclesiastical allegiance was primarily to St Ibar, CGH 90 (127a20–5). Cf. *Betha Adamnáin: the Irish Life of Adamnán*, ed. Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain, ITS 54 (London 1988), 14–17 (on §10, which they take to refer to the same branch of the Loígisi, but under the name Laighes Telchae Bregmann).

¹⁰⁰ For Uí Ercáin in the area of Narragh see CGSH §670.56, where the church of Moenóc is Glass Éille i nUib Ercán = Glassely tl., par. of Narraghmore, bar. of Narragh and Reban East (CGSH Index of places), S 74 97 and 75 97. For the Fothairt and the Loígisi as the two chief *forsluinne* of Leinster see CGH 79 (125a51).

¹⁰¹ VT2 2210–11.

¹⁰² Sweetman and Handcock, *Calendar of documents relating to Ireland, 1172–1307*, v. 242–4.

¹⁰³ Narragh (Norrach) was granted to Robert fitz Richard: G.H. Orpen (ed. and trans.), *The song of Dermot and the earl* (Oxford 1892; reprinted Felinfach 1994), or ed. and trans. Evelyn Mullaly as *The deeds of the Normans in Ireland: la geste des engleis en Yrlande* (Dublin 2002), 3122–5; but Walter de Ridlesford was granted 'twenty fiefs in Omurethy' (*Dermot and the*

We tend to think of the cults of Patrick and Brigit as if they were rival power-blocks. Some of the evidence does indeed encourage us to take just such a view, such as the so-called treaty between Armagh and Kildare in the *Liber Angeli*, in which Patrick is made to say, 'O my Brigit, your *paruchia* will be reckoned to belong to your *monarchia* in your province.'¹⁰⁴ Yet perhaps this is a very partial view of the totality of these cults: there is no evidence that the allegiance of the Uí Ercáin to Patrick entailed a detachment from the Fothairt and thus from their own particular saint. The very story in which the Patrician allegiance of the Uí Ercáin is grounded turns on the role of Bríg daughter of Fergna son of Cobthach, perhaps a local echo of the great Brigit of Kildare.¹⁰⁵ While the *Notulae* suggest that another saint of the Uí Ercáin, a brother of Bríg, Fínán of Tech nAirther, was being linked to the apostle of the Irish, any such claim failed to find a place in the Tripartite Life.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps the Uí Ercáin could combine an allegiance to the saints of their own branch of the Fothairt, such as Fínán and Bríg, an allegiance to the saints of the Fothairt as a whole, Brigit and Fintan of Clonenagh,¹⁰⁷ and an allegiance to the premier saint of the Irish, Patrick. Perhaps, indeed, it was part of their relatively independent position that they could thus combine different saints' cults, whereas the unfortunate Loígsi of Moone, descendants of those extraordinarily wicked small boys, were tied to Columba.

This brief consideration of the relationship of the Fothairt to their saints' cults has suggested a situation of some complexity. In *Bethu Brigte* the connection between Brigit and the Fothairt is explicit; and yet, as the treatment of her father, Dubthach, makes clear, the Life is far from being tied to the interests of the Fothairt. Brigit is quite as much the daughter of her slave mother—and thus a champion of the oppressed in general—as she is the daughter of her Fothairt father. In Cogitosus' Life the connection with the Fothairt is only implicit—the reader has to be familiar with early

earl, 3096). As Orpen pointed out in his notes to the *Song*, the relationship of Narragh to Patrick is attested by a charter in J.T. Gilbert (ed.), *Chartularies of St. Mary's Abbey, Dublin*, Rolls series (2 vols, London 1884), vol. 1, 67 (no. 49), and another in J.T. Gilbert (ed.), *Register of the abbey of St. Thomas, Dublin*, Rolls series (London 1889), 228 (no. 273).

¹⁰⁴ *Liber Angeli* (The Book of the Angel), in Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 184–91, §32: Inter sanctum Patricium Hibernensium Brigitamque columnas amicitia caritatis inerat tanta, ut unum cor consiliumque haberent unum. Christus per illum illamque uirtutes multas peregit. Vir ergo sanctus Christianae uirgini ait: 'O mea Brigita, paruchia tua in prouincia tua apud reputabitur monarchiam tuam, in parte autem orientali et occidentali dominatu in meo erit'. 'Between the holy Patrick and Brigit, pillars of the Irish, there was such an alliance of charity that they were of one heart and one mind. Christ worked many miracles through him and through her. Therefore the holy man said to the Christian virgin: "O my Brigit, your jurisdiction will be reckoned to belong in your province to your sole authority, but in the eastern and western part (of the island) it will belong within my domination".'

¹⁰⁵ If the genealogies are anything to go by (see the genealogical table), Bríg was not a possible coeval of St Patrick: her importance was simply as a prominent saint of the Uí Ercáin.

¹⁰⁶ *Notulae*, no. 37, ed. Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 181.

¹⁰⁷ The father of Bríg, Fergna son of Cobthach, also appears in the *Vita S. Fintani Cluanae Ethnich*, §21, ed. Heist, *Vitae*, 152.

Irish political geography to recognize it—and the same is true of the Life of Fintan of Clonenagh. The situation of the Uí Ercáin shows a combination of local cults (Bríg and her brother Finán) and an inclusion within the *familia* of Patrick; and yet this is without any implication that an adherence to Brigit was being rejected. Instead, the contrast was between the Uí Ercáin's free adherence to Patrick and the servile subjection of a branch of the Loígisi to Columba. A cult might be affected as much by the political standing of a dynasty as it was by any rivalries between the great churches.

THE *VITA S. CAINNECHI* AND THE *FAMILIA* OF ST COLUMBA

The theory which portrays the saint's Life as advancing the political interests of his principal church has had some notable successes. A good example is the work on the Life of Adomnán by Pádraig Ó Riain and Máire Herbert.¹⁰⁸ Herbert's discussion of the Life of Cainnech, which she would date to the aftermath of the killing of Follamon mac Con Congalt, king of Mide, in 766, is in the same vein.¹⁰⁹ What she shows is the way in which the Life borrows from Adomnán's Life of Columba but adapts the borrowed text so as to exalt Cainnech in relation to Columba. The adaptation and its implications are clear: a story which, in Adomnán's Life of Columba, expressed an alliance between the two saints and thus their *familiae* now conveyed a criticism of the great saint of the Uí Néill. What is not so certain is the immediate context of this criticism—and therefore the date proposed for the Life. The date stems from the theory that Donnchad mac Domnaill, of Cland Cholmáin Máir and later to be king of Tara, was responsible for Follamon's killing; and that Donnchad, like his father, was allied with the *familia Columbae*, whereas the Life of Cainnech shows the saint as interceding for Follamon's ancestor, Colmán Becc, son of Diarmait mac Cerbaill. The difficulty is that the annals do not say who killed Follamon; Herbert's argument that Donnchad succeeded Follamon as king of Mide and should therefore have been guilty of his killing is of uncertain value, since it is far from clear that their kingships were of the same kind.¹¹⁰

The theory is in any case unnecessary, since there were more general and long-lasting pressures driving the two *familiae* apart. There were two principal centres of the cult of Cainnech: the kingdom in which he was said to have been born, Ciannacht Glinne Geimin, around Dungiven in Co. Londonderry, and Osraige, where his main church, Aghaboe, was

¹⁰⁸ *Betha Adamnáin*, ed. Herbert and Ó Riain; Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry* (Oxford 1988), 151–79.

¹⁰⁹ Máire Herbert, 'The *Vita Columbae* and Irish hagiography: a study of *Vita Cainnechi*', in Carey, Herbert and Ó Riain, *Studies in Irish hagiography*, 31–40.

¹¹⁰ Follamon is described as *rex Midi* in the entry on his death in AU 766.2 (*ri Midhi* in the annals of Tigernach); the list of kings of Uisnech, *LL*, vol. 1, 197, does not include him; I have argued in *Early Christian Ireland*, 479–80, that Follamon was a deputy king of Mide for Domnall mac Murchada, Donnchad's father. Follamon supported Donnchad in 765 (AU 765.5).

situated.¹¹¹ The Ciannacht Glinne Geimin were part of 'the North', *ind Fhochlae*, which up to 734 was usually dominated by Columba's kinsmen, Cenél Conaill; after 734 the North was normally under the hegemony of Cenél nÉogain, who also became from the 730s the principal royal patrons of Armagh.¹¹² Moreover, as Herbert rightly observes, one role which the Life gives Cainnech is as a saint of the borderlands between Mide and Munster; and Donnchad mac Domnaill was the Uí Néill king who, much more than his predecessors, imposed his authority on the monasteries of his southern borders and went on to attack northern Munster.¹¹³ The implication of the most critical story about Columba and Baíthéne in the Life of Cainnech was that they were prepared to initiate violence in a way incompatible with sanctity. The association between St Columba and his own kindred, Cenél Conaill, and the leading dynasty of the southern Uí Néill, Cland Cholmáin, thus had a doubly unfavourable effect on relations between the *familiae* of Columba and of Cainnech. A corollary is that the Life of St Cainnech cannot be dated so closely as Herbert proposes.

CONCLUSIONS

This exploration of the differences between cults began with the contrast between a local cult, such as that of Damnat, with a correspondingly simple constituency in the region of Sliab Betha, and the complex cult of Brigit. The cult of Brigit could also be contrasted, however, with that of another major Fothairt saint, Fintan of Clonenagh; and Fintan's cult, in turn, appeared to be very different from that of Rígnach. The case of the Uí Ercáin suggested that the status of a particular constituency of a cult could have a crucial impact: the king of the Uí Ercáin was presented as a free client of the king of Leinster, while a branch of the Loígisi, Loíges maic Fhind, was declared, via a Patrician curse, to be subject to a kingship both harsh and alien. The freedom of the Uí Ercáin had as a corollary their liberty to maintain various cults, all the way from a local saint, Bríg daughter of Fergna mac Cobthaig, to St Patrick himself. The lack of freedom of the Loíges maic Fhind entailed not simply subjection to an alien ruler and the oppression of *rechtaire* and alien *brithem*, but also subjection to Columba. The suggestion was that the two neighbouring cults were quite different in nature and in worth.

If one looks at pre-Viking Irish hagiography as a whole, one striking characteristic is that it could be a vehicle for criticism of the Uí Néill; such criticism is even present in Adomnán's Life of Columba, though not on the

¹¹¹ *Vita S. Cainnechi*, §§2–3 (where Vallis Pellis = Glenn Geimin), 12, 14, 46, 54, ed. Heist, *Vitae*, 182, 185, 194, 196; VT2 1863–4.

¹¹² Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, 63–4; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Uí Néill 695–743: the rise and fall of dynasties', *Peritia* 16 (2002), 396–418.

¹¹³ Kathleen Hughes, 'The cult of St Finnian of Clonard from the eighth to the eleventh century', *Irish Historical Studies* 9 (1954–5), 17–18 [reprinted in her collected papers, *Church and society in Ireland A.D. 400–1200*, ed. D.N. Dumville (London 1987), no. 3], on Clonard and Donnchad mac Domnaill; AU 775.5: 776.11.

scale found in the *Vita Prima* of Brigit.¹¹⁴ But criticism of the Uí Néill was primarily a striking instance of a wider criticism—of royal violence and even more generally of the violence of the lay world. This is most familiar to us in the Prologue to the *Félire Óengusso*, but it was a notable feature of several Lives of saints in the Slieve Bloom area, in the borderlands between the southern Uí Néill, Leinster and Munster, an area packed with major monasteries.¹¹⁵ Such a hostile attitude to lay violence explains how damaging was the criticism of Columba and Baíthéne in the Life of Cainnech; but it was a criticism which could be explained through long-term political pressures on the *familia* of Cainnech. It was unnecessary to suppose any initiative taken by the hagiographer or his patrons in order to attack the contemporary abbot of Iona, Suibne, for his close alliance with Donnchad mac Domnaill. Even Áed mac Bricc, himself an Uí Néill saint although his mother was of Múscraige Tíre, was shown in his Life both as a peace-maker between Munster and the Uí Néill and also as a holy man to whom kings were habitually hostile.¹¹⁶ The gulf between the ideals of the early Irish Church and political violence endured into the Viking era, in spite of the many links, through genealogy, joint promulgations of Laws, and patronage, between individual churches and royal dynasties. This may be one fundamental reason why there were no early Irish *Historiae* along the lines of Gregory of Tours or even Bede. Perhaps a detailed portrayal of contemporary royal violence was not acceptable to an Irish ecclesiastical readership, even though a portrayal through saga of the violence of the past, preferably the remote and pagan past, was entirely acceptable.

APPENDIX: VT2 2195–218

When Patrick was going into Western Life, the boys of the Loígisi were making pits of water in the path in front of him and traps across them. 'For God's sake,' said the little boys, 'shift your horses'. 'Shift indeed,' said Patrick, 'for God's sake your horses.' But he did them no harm. And he cursed the Loíges (that is, Loíges maic Fhind, where Móen Choluim [Moone] is today); and Patrick said that there would be neither king nor bishop from them, and an external ruler would be over them till Doomsday.

However, Bríg daughter of Fergna son of Cobthach of the Uí Ercáin went and told Patrick about the hostility that was facing him. Patrick blessed her and her father and her kinsmen and all the Uí Ercáin, and Patrick said that they would never be without persons of high rank, both laymen and clerics, till Doomsday. And then Patrick dismounted on the hill which, at that time,

¹¹⁴ Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, 1.11–12, 14.

¹¹⁵ *Fél.*2, prologue, stanzas 149–225; the following examples in Heist, *Vitae: Vita Lugidi I*, §§41, 44, 54; *Vita S. Finani*, §§21, 25, 26, 29; *Vita S. Ruadani*, §12; *Vita Aidi Killariensis*, §§8–9, 24, 26, 29, 31, 34, 37–8; *Vita S. Cainnechi*, §§32, 41, 45; *Vita S. Fintani seu Munnu*, §§16, 20, 25, 26; *Vita S. Colmani Elo*, §§5, 8, 17, 32, 36, 44.

¹¹⁶ *Vita Aidi Killariensis*, §38, ed. Heist, *Vitae*, 178.

was called Bile of the sons of Crúach; today, however, its name is Forrach Pátraic. And Patrick said that there would never be an external king or *rechtaire* over them till Doomsday. And as for the bullock that would be divided up by the king of Leinster in his royal house, one haunch would go to the king and the other to the king of the Uí Ercáin. They have Patrick's measure of grain; they have Patrick's perch (*forrach*); they have high-ranking laymen and clerics; they enjoy prosperity and long life. They have had eight rulers up to the reign of Conchobor mac Donnchada in Tara. From the time of Patrick they have retained their own *brithem* in their territory. As for the Loígse, however, namely the kindred of the boys who did that evil deed, there will be neither king nor bishop from them till Doomsday. It would be an external ruler who would govern them; he will not protect them from oppression and legal prosecution till Doomsday.

ABBREVIATIONS

AU	Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (eds), <i>The annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131), Part 1, Text and translation</i> (Dublin 1983).
CGH	M.A. O'Brien (ed.), <i>Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae</i> , vol. 1 (Dublin 1962).
CGSH	Pádraig Ó Riain (ed.), <i>Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae</i> (Dublin 1985).
Fél.2	Whitley Stokes (ed.), <i>Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé: the martyrology of Oengus the Culdee</i> . Henry Bradshaw Society 29 (London 1905; reprinted Dublin 1984).
MD	J.H. Todd and William Reeves (eds) and John O'Donovan (trans.), <i>The martyrology of Donegal: a calendar of the saints of Ireland</i> (Dublin 1864).
MG	Whitley Stokes (ed.), <i>Féilire Huí Gormáin: the martyrology of Gorman</i> . Henry Bradshaw Society 9 (London 1895).
MT	R.I. Best and H.J. Lawlor (eds), <i>The martyrology of Tallaght</i> . Henry Bradshaw Society 68 (London 1931).
Onom.	Edmund Hogan, <i>Onomasticon Goedelicum Locorum et Tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae: an index, with identifications, to the Gaelic names of places and tribes</i> (Dublin 1910).
Thes.	Whitley Stokes and John Strachan (eds), <i>Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus</i> (2 vols, Cambridge 1901–3; reprinted Dublin 1975).
VT2	Kathleen Mulchrone (ed.), <i>Bethu Phátraic: the tripartite Life of Patrick</i> (Dublin 1939).