when polygyny was acceptable there is nothing remarkable about this, and it is only when one meets such feats of fertility as the thirty-three sons credited to Cathaír Már, allegedly ancestor . . . of the ruling dynasty of the Laigin, that cautious scepticism may yield to incredulity. But it is worth raising the question, even if it is unanswerable, whether all these links with Niall are not perhaps fictitious; whether, indeed, although some recent writers have accepted his existence, and seen in him the first king of Tara of his line, he ever existed at all, and if he did, whether he ever ruled in Tara" (1972, 12).

Whether or not Níall Noígíallach actually existed and sired fourteen sons, more or less, the claim that each of these managed to found dynasties of at least local importance surely stretches credulity, and this disbelief is encouraged by serious discrepancies in the sources regarding the number of sons ascribed to genealogical linchpins like him and Catháer.

For instance, the opening of *Esnada Tige Buchet* gives the latter a full complement of thirty-two sons in two manuscripts as against a mere twelve in the third, while only seven appear on the subsequent list naming them. Leinster genealogies variously grant him thirty-three or thirty sons, but claim that only ten of these left issue, the groups claiming descent from each then being enumerated (*Corp. Gen.*, 42-3, 44-5). This looks like a rationalization reflecting a reduction in the number of groups felt worthy of mention in the pedigree (cf. Ó Corráin, 1978, 33-4), and nicely illustrates the constraints to which a written genealogical record of some depth is liable. In an essentially oral tradition the ancestors of lines that later became extinct or insignificant might easily fall victim to total 'structural amnesia' as in the Ghanaian example above, but in a literate milieu less forthright discarding methods may be appropriate in order to ease conflicts with a tangible older record.

This process may, of course, also operate the other way round, Byrne giving the following documented example of Níall's unorthodox acquisition of a fifteenth son: "typical of the manner in which genealogies were manipulated to accord to changed political circumstances is the fact that some authorities treat the Ua Dublaige dynasty of Fir Thulach Mide as a branch of their Ua Máelshechlainn overlords, while another traces their descent from a totally fictitious eponym Fer Tulach son of Níall Noígiallach" (1973, 143). Similar accretion by a process similar to "the adoption and full genealogical assimilation of clients" observable, for instance, in the southern Sudan (Lewis in Goody, 1968, 273) may, of course, also have applied at earlier stages in the development of the Uí Néill pedigree, and might account for the discrepancy between the mere eight sons named in *Timna Néill* "Níall's Testament" (*Corp. Gen.*, 131-2) and the fourteen usually ascribed to him (e.g. ibid., 133). However, the smaller number may well reflect a similar narrowing of focus upon the main lineages to that in the Leinster record, the so-called *secht fini Temra* or "seven Tara lineages" (with an at least theoretical claim on the kingship?) being listed virtually identically as eight elsewhere (ibid., 358 = *LL*.318b47-9, but note the absence of Fíachu and the resolution of Crimthann [= Conall Cremthainne] into the eponymous Áed Sláine and Colmán descended from him). There is also mention of a still more select "four Tara lineages" (ibid., 17), presumably the Cenél Conaill, Cenél nÉogain, Síl nÁedo Sláine and Clann Cholmáin dominant in the historical period.

The use of genealogy to make political statements is as characteristic of the supremely literary Bible as it is of truly oral cultures. Goody, for examples, states

that "like the Bedouin Arabs and the Hebrews of the Old Testament, the Tiv people of Nigeria give long genealogies of their forebears, which in this case stretch some twelve generations in depth back to an eponymous founding ancestor. Neither these genealogies, nor the biblical lists of the descendants of Adam, were remembered purely as feats of memory. They served as mnemonics for systems of social relations. When on his deathbed Jacob delivered prophecies about the future of his twelve sons, he spoke of them as the twelve tribes of Israel. It would seem from the account in Genesis that the genealogical tables here refer to contemporary groups rather than to dead individuals; the tables presumably serve to regulate social relations among the twelve tribes of Israel in a manner similar to that which has been well analysed in Evans-Pritchard's work (1940) on the Nuer of the southern Sudan and Fortes' (1945) account of the Tallensi of northern Ghana" (ibid., 31-2).
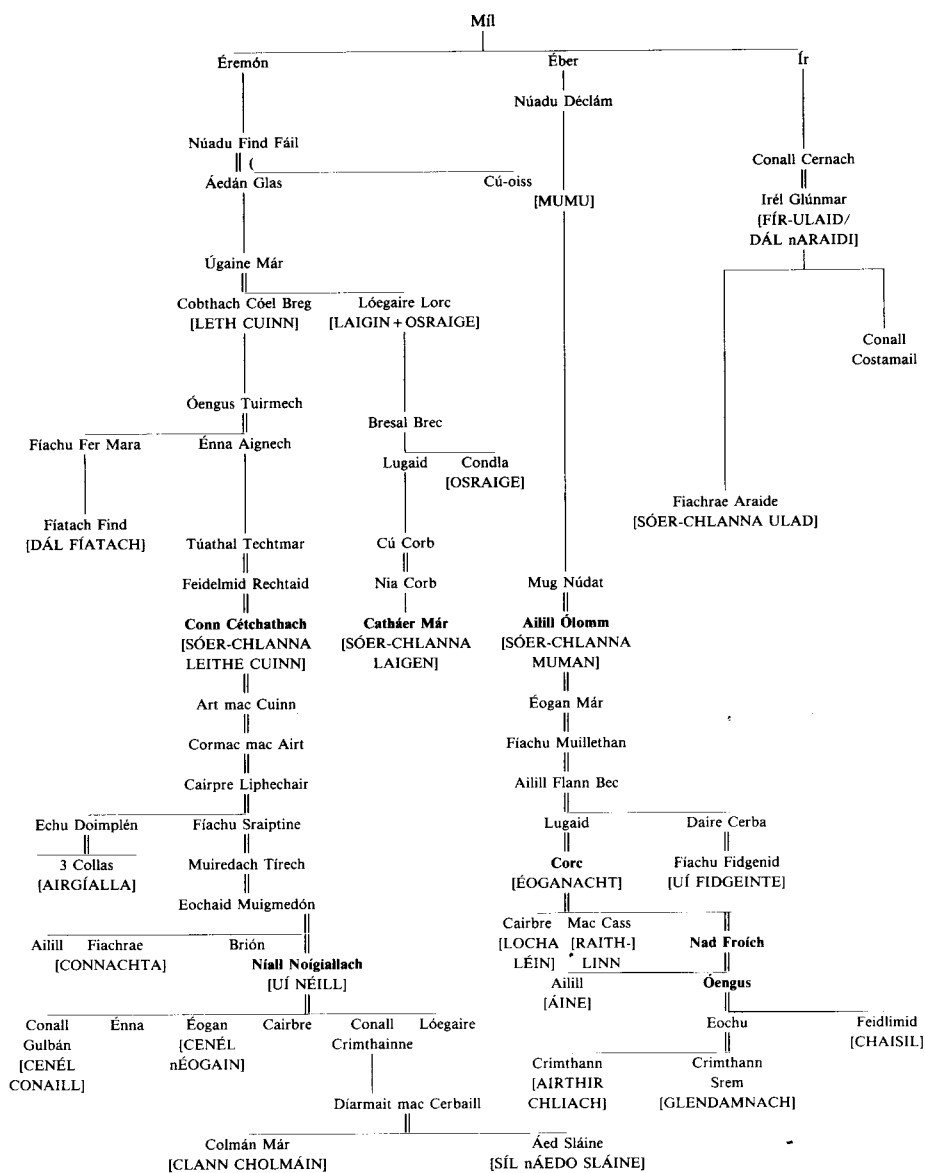
As has already been pointed out (ch. 2, 2), both the *timnae* or "testament" genre, whereby a father assigns his sons their various fortunes, and the two main methods of representing genealogical relationships in the monastically compiled early Irish corpus conform to, and may well have been modelled upon, familiar biblical patterns. It thus appears that in this fundamental area, as in so many other departments of early Irish literature discussed in previous chapters, modes of thought and presentation with likely enough pagan oral roots were fitted by assimilation to biblical and other ecclesiastical norms for a role in an emergent syncretistic literary *senchus* firmly under the Church's control (cf. the end of ch. 3, 13).

3. It has already been pointed out (ch. 3, 8) that the key socio-political distinction between inferior *aithech-thúatha* or "vassal peoples" and their betters was expressed genealogically by making the latter descend from Míl of Spain, whereas the former were ascribed to defeated Fir Bolg stock. So desirable was a Milesian pedigree that it was acquired by more and more groups as they sought to jettison their Fir Bolg status with its demeaning 'Canaanite' connotations (ch. 3, 8). Whether or not this led to a partial genealogical redefinition of the dichotomy between the tributary and non-tributary kingdoms of a province in terms of *fortúatha* "dependent kingdoms" and *sóer-chlanna* "free lineages", the basic situation in the early medieval period was that "the dominant tribe or dynasty of a province was normally itself split into several kingdoms. Under the developed dynastic polity of the Old Irish period kings who belonged to the same dynasty as the high king of a province acknowledged his suzerainty indeed by accepting *rath* or *tuarastal*, but paid no tribute. In the *Book of Rights* such kingdoms are termed *sáer-thuatha*, as opposed to tribute-paying *dáer-thuatha*. In the genealogies kingdoms not ruled by members of the dominant dynasty of a province are commonly called *fortuatha* 'extern tribes'. It is difficult to distinguish these from the *aithech-thuatha* or 'unfree tribes'. While the word *aithech-thuatha* could be a derogatory term for tributary kingdoms, its more precise definition seems to relate to population groups which had lost real political status and were mere rent-paying communities without a real king" (Byrne, 1973, 45-6). In this situation, which may be regarded as a political correlate of the social trichotomy between free client (*sóer-chéile*), base client (*dáer-chéile*) and unfree vassal (*aithech* etc.; cf. Scowcroft, 1988, 59-60), genealogical affiliation to the free lineages would obviously be very desirable as a token of promotion from tributary status, where the privileged could be induced to concede it.

Since convenient political maps of early medieval Ireland are readily available in the book by Byrne just cited, it will suffice here to refer briefly to the most important divisions. The overkingship of Mumu or Munster symbolised by Cashel and chiefly competed for by the main Éoganacht dynasties corresponded closely enough to the area of the present-day province. The same held good for Connacht with its royal site at Crúachu and major dynasties of the Uí Ailella, the Uí Fiachrach dominant in the seventh century and the Uí Briúin dominant in the eighth and ninth. However, the Ulaid or Ulstermen were confined to the present-day counties of Down and Antrim, and the Laigin or Leinstermen to the southern half of the present-day province roughly below Dublin's river Liffey. The two most powerful Leinster dynasties in the historical period were the southerly Uí Cheinnselaig and the northerly Uí Dúnlainge, the latter of whom dominated the provincial kingship from the mid-seventh century onwards. The rest of the country came under the Tara kingship of the Uí Néill, supported by their Airgíalla subjects in present-day county Armagh and areas to its immediate North and West. The Uí Néill themselves fell geographically into two main groups. The Cenél Conaill of mid-Donegal were dominant among the Northern Uí Néill in the seventh century until outstripped by the Cenél nÉogain's expansion from Inishowen in northeast Donegal into the present-day counties of Derry and Tyrone. Among the Southern Uí Néill, centred upon the present-day midland counties of Meath, Westmeath and Longford, the eastern Síl nÁedo Sláine virtually monopolised the Tara kingship in the second half of the seventh century but had been supplanted by the western Clann Cholmáin in alternation with the northern Cenél nÉogain by the middle of the eighth. Another major political and geographical division of Ireland recognised in texts is that between a southern Leth Moga or "Mug's half" supposedly named after Mug Núadat and comprising Munster plus the Laigin, and a northern Leth Cuinn or "Conn's half" consisting of Connacht, Uí Néill and Airgíalla, with or without the Ulaid, and said to take its name from Conn Cétchathach.

The political dimension may be made quite explicit in tracts indicating which groups converge (con(d):recat) at particular points in a genealogy or which groups are descended from whom. The table opposite gives a massively simplified scheme based upon extant genealogies but pared down to focus attention upon the nodes, relationships and individuals featuring at various points in the remainder of this chapter. A double vertical line indicates a father-son relationship and a horizontal line links brothers, but many such collateral offshoots have been ignored. Single vertical lines, by contrast, are non-specific as to the number of intervening generations involved, which may be as high as twenty or thirty in the heavily pruned top half intended to present a very broad political canvass above the sóer-chlanna watershed. Thereafter more detailed genealogies are provided only for earlier defining stages of the most important conglomerates of Leth Cuinn and Leth Moga, namely those centring on the Uí Néill and the Éoganacht respectively. The Laigin, Airgíalla, Connachta and so on could, of course, have been similarly treated.

The following passage is a good textual example geared to the major divisions: "at Conn Cétchathach, then, are divided the free lineages (sóer-chlanna) of Leth Cuinn, and they are dependent peoples (fortúatha) of the descendants of Conn (Síl Cuinn) apart from that. At Catháer Már son of Feidelmid are divided the free lineages of the Laigin, and they are dependent peoples apart from that. At Ailill Ólomm are divided the free lineages of Munster, and they are dependent peoples

Míl

Éremón   Éber   Ír

Núadu Déclám

Núadu Find Fáil   Conall Cernach

Áedán Glas   Cú-oiss   Irél Glúnmar
                        [MUMU]   [FÍR-ULAID/
                                             DÁL nARAIDI]

Úgaine Már

Cobthach Cóel Breg   Lóegaire Lorc   Conall
[LETH CUINN]   [LAIGIN + OSRAIGE]   Costamail

Óengus Tuirmech
                      Bresal Brec
Fíachu Fer Mara   Énna Aignech
                      Lugaid   Condla
                                [OSRAIGE]
                                                Fiachrae Araide
Fíatach Find   [SÓER-CHLANNA ULAD]
[DÁL FÍATACH]   Túathal Techtmar   Cú Corb

                 Feidelmid Rechtaid   Nia Corb

                 Conn Cétchathach   Catháer Már   Ailill Ólomm
                 [SÓER-CHLANNA   [SÓER-CHLANNA [SÓER-CHLANNA
                 LEITHE CUINN]   LAIGEN]   MUMAN]

                 Art mac Cuinn   Éogan Már

                 Cormac mac Airt   Fíachu Muillethan

                 Cairpre Liphechair   Ailill Flann Bec

Echu Doimplén   Fíachu Sraiptine   Lugaid   Daire Cerba

3 Collas   Muiredach Tírech   Corc   Fíachu Fidgenid
[AIRGÍALLA]   [ÉOGANACHT]   [UÍ FIDGEINTE]

                 Eochaid Muigmedón
                                          Cairbre   Mac Cass
Ailill   Fiachrae   Brión   [LOCHA   [RAITH-]   Nad Froích
[CONNACHTA]   Níall Noígiallach   LÉIN]   LINN
                     [UÍ NÉILL]   Ailill   Óengus
                                                    [ÁINE]
Conall   Énna   Éogan   Cairbre Conall   Lóegaire   Eochu   Feidlimid
Gulbán   [CENÉL   Crimthainne   [CHAISIL]
[CENÉL   nÉOGAIN]
CONAILL]   Crimthann   Crimthann
                                  Díarmait mac Cerbaill [AIRTHIR Srem
                                                    CHLIACH]   [GLENDAMNACH]
         Colmán Már   Áed Sláine
         [CLANN CHOLMÁIN]   [SÍL nÁEDO SLÁINE]

apart from that. Two sons of Úgaine: Cobthach Cóel Breg from whom comes Leth Cuinn and Láegaire from whom come the Laigin. At Núadu Argatlám the Munstermen join the lineages of Úgaine (*fri clannaib Úgaine*). Núadu Argatlám [apparently here confused with Núadu Find Fáil] had two sons: Glass and Cú-oiss. Glass from whom come the Síl Cuinn and Dál Ríata and Ulaid and Laigin and men of Ossory (*Osraige*); Cú-oiss from whom come the Munstermen, moreover . . . At Níall Noígíallach all of the Uí Néill join, i.e. Conall [= Cenél Conaill] and Colmán [= Clann Cholmáin] and Éogan [= Cenél nÉogain] and Áed Sláne [= Síl nÁedo Sláine] and Tethba and Cairbre [= Cenél Cairbri] and Cenél nÉnna and Láegaire [= Cenél Lóegairi]. At Eochaid Muigmedón the Northern and Southern Uí Néill join the Connachta. At Cairbre Liphechair the Airgíalla join the Uí Néill and Connachta. At Feidelmid Rechtaid the Fothairt and Déissi Temrach and Déissi Muman and Corcu Roída join the lineage (*clann*) of Conn. At Óengus Tuirmech of Tara [i.e. some nineteen generations before Feidelmid] the royalty of the Ulaid and Scotland and the Érainn join the Uí Néill and those (others) we have mentioned. At Úgaine Már [i.e. some ten generations before Óengus] the Laigin and Osraige and Leth Cuinn join" (*Corp. Gen.*, 137).

Viewed from an essentially Uí Néill standpoint, there is evidently a broad correlation here between genealogical proximity and the basic political relationships applying in the early Christian period. To begin with, the various Uí Néill dynasties are brought under the aegis of their eponymous ancestor Níall Noígíallach, their further linkage to the main Connacht lineages is then defined by Níall's father Eochaid, and the Airgíalla are given a somewhat more distant relationship to their Uí Néill overlords. Further out still at the defining node of Feidelmid Rechtaid various subordinate Fothairt and Déissi peoples are incorporated, the Dál Fíatach royal stock of the generally hostile Ulaid being grafted on well back to complete the main Leth Cuinn inventory. Turning then to Leth Moga, the genealogy brings in the Laigin and their Osraige neighbours at a considerable remove, and finally the main Munster rivals of the Uí Néill. Similar pecking orders are, of course, liable to be established within a province's main lineages, Ó Corráin remarking, for instance, of his tabular summary of the main Munster relationships that "this schema most probably represents, not the strictly historical ancestry of the various dynasties of the Eóganacht but the political affiliations amongst them as seen by an eighth-century genealogist" (1972, 175).

The genealogical framework presented above is unusual in that the chief Munster stock is separated from the rest some generations after the Milesian invasion, whereas standard practice was to trace their descent from Míl's son Éber, that of the Ulster Dál nAraide from his son Ír, and that of the main lineages of Leth Cuinn and the Laigin from his son Éremón. For example, "at Érimón there converge (*cond:recat*) the three Connachta and the Southern Uí Néill and the Northern Uí Néill and the Airgíalla and the Dési and the Laigin and the Osraige and the Érainn and the Orbraige and the Fothairt and Dál Ríata and Dál Fíatach and the royalty of Scotland . . . At Éber there converge the seven Éoganachta and the Lemnaig of Scotland. At Ír there converge the descendants of Fergus and Conall and Celtchar . . " (*Corp. Gen.*, 358). The ambiguous position of the Laigin as geographically part of Leth Moga but genealogically affiliated to Éremón's predominantly Leth Cuinn line (cf. Scowcroft, 1988, 47) in this, the usual arrangement, neatly reflects their intermediate geographical and political position between two powerful

neighbours, Munster and the Uí Néill, against each of whom in turn they had to fight major battles in 735 and 738 A.D., for example (*AU*; cf. ch. 1, 7).

Scowcroft has made the point that the *Lebor Gabála*'s scheme of the pre-Christian Tara kings of Ireland shows a deliberately analogous pattern of hiving off "according to which the principal line of descent from Éremón to Loegaire mac Néill enjoys a sovereignty interrupted three times and shared in each of the four eras with a cadet branch from which descend the kings of a *cóiced*. Thus the descendants of Éremón and Éber (whence the kings of Munster) share the sovereignty until the *flaithius Ulad* (descendants of Ír mac Míled), which lasts for seven generations (or 100 years) between the reigns of Núadu Find Fáil (XXXI) and Úgaine Mór (LVI). Two of the latter's many children, Cobthach Coel Breg (LVIII) and Loegaire Lorc (LVII, whence the Laigin and Osraige), establish dynasties that share the sovereignty until a *cess* ('debility') that afflicts them between the reigns of Énna Aignech (LXXIII) and Eochu Feidlech (LXXXII). Thereafter, the descendants of Énna and his brother, Fiachu Fer Mara (whence the Ulidian kingdoms of medieval Ireland and Scotland), share the sovereignty until the slaying of Fiachu Findoilches (or Find-folaid, XCIII) by the provincial kings (*cóicedaig*). His son, Tuathal Techtmar (XCV), reconquers Ireland, and from him descend the Airgíalla, the Connachta, and the Uí Néill. The Airgíalla never control the kingship of Tara – surviving only as *tuatha* tributary to the Uí Néill – but tract V portrays it as shared by the descendants of Níall Noígíallach (CXIV) and of Fiachrae (whence the Connachta), sons of Eochu Muigmedón" (ibid., 46-7; see table and map, 48 and 50).

4. Both genealogical schemes given above are broadly similar apart from the position of the Munstermen, who were ascribed in the first to Éremón's line by making Cú-oiss the son of a Núadu descended from him rather than of Éber's great-great-grandson Núadu Déclám (*Corp. Gen.*, 251 = Rawl. 154b23-8) and by superimposing Glas son of Núadu Déclám (*Corp. Gen.*, 187 = Rawl. 147a26-7) upon the Laginian Aedán Glas son of Núadu Find Fáil (e.g. *Corp. Gen.*, 6 = Rawl. 116a50-2). However, the real significance of this divergence lies in its connection with two conflicting views of Ireland's political organization.

One of these sought to assert Munster's integrity by claiming equal spheres of influence for the Éoganacht and the Uí Néill in the halves of Conn and Mug respectively: *diuissa est Hibernia insola in duas partes eompares eter Conn Cétchathach et Éogan Már qui et Mug Núadat* "the island of Ireland was divided into two co-equal parts between Conn Cétchathach and Éogan Már, who was also Mug Núadat" (*Corp. Gen.*, 206). This eponymous partition was then traced right back to the two immigrant Milesian brothers Éber and Éremón, and corroborated by an equally fundamental genealogical separation of the Éoganacht from the Síl Cuinn. Furthermore, corresponding claims to ecclesiastical independence from the chief Uí Néill church of Armagh and her founder were based upon the allegedly pre-Patrician missions of certain southern saints, notably St. Ailbe of Munster's chief church Emly (cf. McCone, 1984b, 49-54; Sharpe, 1989). Finally, the recorded view of "others" that Éber was the eponym of Hibernia (*Corp. Gen.*, 186; ch. 3, 7) may be a vestige of Munster claims to overall hegemony. In this respect the entry of the southern-biased Annals of Inisfallen (*IF*) for 721 A.D. is worth noting for its unusual claim, at least in the context of the bulk of our extant materials, that "these are the five kings of the Munstermen who took (the kingship of) Ireland after the

faith (*íar cretim*), namely Óengus mac Nad Froích (+492, *AI*) and his son, i.e. Eochaid who ruled Ireland for seventeen years, and Cathal mac Finguine (+742, *AI*), and Feidlimid mac Crimthain (+847, *AI*) and Brían mac Cennétig (+1014, *AI*)". Finally, the Munster-biased tract *Do Bunad Imthechta Éoganachta* in the Laud genealogies insists upon the equal right of the kings of Cashel and Tara to "set a king over every kingdom (*túath*)" in Munster and Leth Cuinn respectively, but implies an honorific preeminence for Cashel by virtue of the asylum accorded by the Munster monarch Fíachu Muillethan to Cormac mac Airt after the latter's expulsion from the Tara kingship by the king of the Ulster Dál nAraidi. Indeed, it is claimed that Cormac, as an unmistakable gesture of submission, "gave him (Fíachu) hostages in return for a hosting of the Munstermen (*gíallais dó ar slógeth fer Muman*)", whereupon the forces of Leth Moga regained his throne for Cormac, who awarded Fíachu the Cíannachta lands in gratitude (Meyer, 1912, 314.6-16).

The influential alternative maintaining the Uí Néill king of Tara's supremacy in tandem with Armagh can be traced at least as far back as the seventh century. In Byrne's words, "Muirchú's *Life* of Patrick depicts fifth-century Tara as the Irish Babylon, a druidic centre which is a fitting stage-setting for his rhetorical narrative of the saint's confrontation with Lóeguire, that *rex quidam magnus, ferox, gentilisque imperator barbarorum regnans in Temoria, quae erat caput Scotorum* (a certain great, fierce, pagan emperor of the barbarians reigning in Tara, which was the capital of the Irish). He also asserts that Lóeguire's father Niall was 'founder of the royal line of almost all this island', (*origo stirpis regiae huius pene insulae*). Muirchú's contemporary Adomnán categorically states that Niall's great-grandson Diarmait mac Cerbaill was 'ordained by God ruler of all Ireland', (*totius Scotiae regnatorem a deo ordinatum*), and he tells of the warning given by Colum Cille to Diarmait's son Aed Sláine against embruing his hands in the blood of his kindred, lest he lose 'the prerogative fore-ordained to you by God of the monarchy of the kingdom of all Ireland' (*tibi a deo totius Euerniae regni praerogatiuam monarchiae praedestinatam*). Such high-flown language testifies to ambition rather than achievement. At this date neither the Ulaid nor the Laigin had acquiesced in subordinate status, and the kings of Cashel took little cognisance of northern affairs. Muirchú was writing in the interests of Armagh, perhaps to wean the Uí Néill from their attachment to the paruchia of their own saint Colum Cille, and certainly to link the mission of Patrick with their own ancestral figures. The primacy which Armagh won by the end of the seventh century was largely due to the success of this new alliance, but it would remain precarious until supported by a parallel secular institution. The prerogatives of the abbot of Armagh, as set out in the *Liber Angueli* were modelled on those of an as yet theoretical high-king of Ireland. As for Adomnán, he was himself a member of the Uí Néill dynasty of Cenél Conaill" (1973, 255).

The standard lists of *ríg Erenn* or "kings of Ireland" in the genealogies and *Lebor Gabála* are obviously intended to bolster these claims. To begin with, they represent the Tara kingship as a truly national monarchy held at one time or another by ancestors of all the major provincial dynasties in the manner described by Scowcroft earlier. This, however, leads up to claims of an Uí Néill monopoly or near-monopoly of it from the coming of Patrick in the fifth to the rise of Brían Bóruma in the late tenth century. These emerge clearly from the list of believing kings introduced with the words "and it is to be realised that no king of any descent but Níall's has held Ireland after Patrick's arrival with two exceptions, namely Báetán

and Brían reigned. But yet some do not count Báetán among the great kings'' (*Corp. Gen.*, 124). Presumably the less diffuse variant genealogy merging the Munstermen with the rest some generations after Míl's invading sons is likewise geared to the doctrine of a Tara high kingship of all Ireland in Éremon's line developed by Uí Néill propagandists.

Unexceptionable though Byrne's comments above are as a statement of Armagh's ambitions and incipient rise to power, doubts may be entertained as to how fully she had established herself even as the main Uí Néill church by the late seventh century (Herbert, 1988, 52-5), and her broadly conceded primacy of Ireland was certainly still a century or more in the future at that time (McCone, 1984 and 1982, 136-44). This seems to have gained acceptance in the southern half with the help of a roughly late eighth-century change in Armagh strategy ''from the simple claims to episcopal and other major churches made in the *Book of the Angel* in the mid-seventh century to a more flexible policy allowing some such churches virtual independence in their own spheres of influence in return for at least a nominal acknowledgement of Armagh and Patrick's primacy in Ireland as a whole'' (McCone, 1984b, 52). There are two particularly good examples of such status being delegated by Patrick as *primus inter pares*. The first is the rider appended at the end of the Book of the Angel whereby Patrick (on behalf of Armagh) grants Brigit (representing Kildare) control over her federation of churches (*paruchia*) in Leinster in return for their cession to Armagh elsewhere (Bieler, 1979, 190-1; McCone, 1982, 107 and 144). The second is inserted at par. 29 of Ailbe of Emly's Salamanca Life (Heist, 1965, 125) and depicts the Munster saint meeting Patrick in king Óengus mac Nad Froích's company at Cashel and being made father of ''all the men of the Munstermen'' by Armagh's founder (McCone, 1984b, 52-3). It seems likely that a similar primacy of honour falling well short of real control eventually came to be accorded the Tara kingship even in Munster ideology, whence the overwhelming consensus on this basic point in the extant texts.

It thus emerges that even in the more remote prehistoric sections underpinning this ''elaborate origin-legend embracing all the tribes and dynasties of the country'' (Ó Corráin, 1978, 35) the genealogical record and associated king-lists were firmly geared to current political considerations, both ecclesiastical and secular.

5. This framework was taking shape ''as early as the seventh century'' and may be said to reflect the centripetal nation-moulding efforts ''of a mandarin class of monastic and secular scholars whose privileged position in society allowed them to transcend all local and tribal boundaries'' (ibid.). However, such trends towards homogenization were to some extent counterbalanced by more local political biases and the tyranny of change itself, factors inevitably conducive to a measure of diversity. Indeed, a cursory glance at *Corp. Gen.* will show that even highly edited tracts (Ó Corráin, 1978, 32-3) are characterised by discrepancies, some apparently trivial and others highly significant, both within a single manuscript or between different manuscript versions. The handful of instances already discussed, including the occasional mention in a text of alternative views, need not be multiplied here, and there is no reason to ascribe this variation to the vagaries of secular oral tradition.

The fact is that the senior personnel of monasteries great and small was prone to be connected by mutually beneficial ties of birth, geographical proximity or both with major and minor dynasties (cf. McCone, 1984b, 56-7). As Ó Corráin points out

with appropriate examples, "the church establishment of the eighth and ninth cen-
turies and before was rich, comfortable and powerful. By now, clerical and lay
society had become so intermeshed that any attempt to distinguish the traditional
categories of church and state does some violence to the evidence . . . Already,
Armagh and the Uí Néill kings were working in tandem, each it would seem content
to boost the pretensions of the other. In Leinster, the monastic town of Kildare can
quite properly be regarded as a dynastic capital in the ninth century, though of
course its connections with the Uí Dúnlainge dynasty . . . were intimate even in the
seventh century, when Cogitosus, the biographer of the foundress, describes Kildare
as a great and metropolitan *civitas* where the treasures of kings were kept . . . In
the case of Emly, . . . two, if not three of its abbots, held the kingship of Munster
in the ninth century. A Munster king-list, edited at Emly, stresses the participation
in the kingship of Munster of the dynastic stock which dominated its area and
supplied many of its abbots (Meyer, 1913, 478-9, 482). A general principle can be
stated in regard to abbatial succession though as we shall see some modifications
will be required: the great hereditary clerical families were usually discard segments
of royal lineages, pushed out of the political struggle and forced to reprise them-
selves in the church. Once established there, they proved extremely tenacious and
were displaced by later royal segments or by new and expansive dynasties only with
the greatest difficulty" (1981, 327-8).

The socio-political or even family concerns shared by the monastic keepers of a
genealogy and the secular dynasty to which it referred (ibid., 329-31) doubtless
helped to promote local interests as well as the intermeshing of lay and ecclesiastical,
kingly and saintly pedigrees in individual compilations reflecting a very practical
comuaim n-ecalsa fri túaith or "joining of church with kingdom" (ch. 1, 11). This
interpenetration is confirmed by general statements to the effect that the same basic
genealogical rules apply equally to both estates, e.g. "all, both saints and kings (*eter
nóebu ⁊ rígu*), whose genealogy is not traced to Conn are *fortúatha*" (*Corp. Gen.*,
358 = *LL.* 318c5) or "Níall Noígíallach, Catháer Már son of Feidlimid, Fíachra
Araide [Ulaid, Dál nAraidi], Ailill Ólomm, these are the four noble pillars to which
are traced the genealogies of the high kings (*ard-ríg*) and noble people (*deg-dóene*)
and superior saints (*úasal-nóeb*) of Ireland and all the well born (*so-chenélach*) of
Ireland" (ibid., = 318b29-31). Obviously both lay and ecclesiastical political issues
can be expected to figure in the different intertwined branches of a monastically
based *senchus* or 'tradition' consisting of the "literary and highly conventionalised
products of specialist learned classes, retainers of the contemporary holders of
power, who were at pains to legitimise all change by giving it the sanction of
immemorial custom and who ruthlessly reshaped the past to justify the present" (Ó
Corráin, 1978, 12).

6. As far as the basic means of articulating these is concerned, "it has become
increasingly clear that saints' Lives, like other branches of early Irish tradition such
as sagas and genealogies, are first and foremost documents of their own time of
composition, social and political propaganda that makes use of traditional materials
in a kind of code" (McCone, 1984, 306). Primary importance consequently attaches
to "the contemporary aims of the composition in question, however historically
remote the figures and events it purports to describe were supposed to be. The key
to such interpretation of saints' Lives and similar material is to realize that a

particular saint essentially represents his main foundation and prominent laymen, particularly kings, the dynasties tracing descent from them in this narrative code, which makes it possible to cast the driest of political claims in the form of a good story about people'' (ibid.).

This principle is, of course, well illustrated by the brief examples near the end of section 4 above, where the spheres of influence agreed by Armagh with Kildare and Emly are justified by stories of Patrick's friendly personal dealings with Brigit and Ailbe. Similarly the record in the Book of Armagh's *Additamenta* of Áed of Sletty's seventh-century submission of his Leinster church, linked to the Uí Cheinnselaig and founded by Fíacc, to Armagh during Ségéne's abbacy (par. 16; ch. 4, 3) is directly preceded by a justificatory tale rather obviously produced for the occasion despite being set in the fifth century (pars. 13-4; Bieler, 1979, 176-7). This individualises the new relationship between the two monasteries and projects it right back to the alleged beginnings of Christianity in Leinster by telling of Fíacc's ordination as bishop by Patrick, who then marks out and consecrates the Sletty site for him on land granted out of gratitude for baptism at Patrick's hands by king Crimthann son of Énna Cennsalach, eponymous ancestor of the Uí Cheinnselaig.

Further typical hagiographical personalizations of inter-church relations include some striking Airgíalla examples: ''their Lives and genealogies indicate for Tigernach of Clones and Éogan of Ardstraw (a mere thirty miles further north) remarkable, not to say highly suspicious, similarities in background and early careers . . . This parallellism between Tigernach and Éogan is made quite explicit time and again in the latter's Life, whereas there is no mention of Éogan in the life of Tigernach. Nevertheless, the same basic framework can be observed in both . . . The most probable explanation of these clearly deliberate parallels and associations in our two Lives is that the churches of Clones and Ardstraw had discovered a considerable measure of common ground politically, at least by the time that the core of Éogan's Life came to be written . . . At all events, both Lives stress the Leinster orientation of their subjects and, by implication, their churches, and completely ignore Patrick in a manner suggesting that neither Clones nor Ardstraw contemplated submission to Armagh's claims at the time of composition. Indeed, resistance to Armagh pressure would provide motive enough for an alliance that may also have included the church of Coleraine in Dál nAraide territory just beyond the north-eastern fringe of Airgíalla, to judge from the claim in Éogan's Life (chap. 2) that Cairbre, 'subsequently bishop and founder of the monastery of Coleraine', was a 'fellow disciple' at Candida Casa with Tigernach and Éogan, whose abduction to and subsequent release from Gaul he shared'' (McCone, 1984, 307-8).

This hypothesis is corroborated by references in Tírechán indicative of rivalry and disagreement between Armagh and the aforementioned churches (ibid., 308-9). On the other hand, in addition to a hint in Tírechán, both the Tripartite Life of Patrick and Mac Cairthinn's acephalous Salamanca Life stress the latter's subordination to Patrick at the foundation of Clogher, thus creating a ''balance of probability that Clogher, unlike Clones and Ardstraw, was counted a Patrician church, i.e. connected with Armagh from at least the later seventh century when Muirchú wrote'' (ibid., 310). The respective fortunes of pro-Armagh Clogher and anti-Armagh Clones may well have swung with the pendulum of the local Uí Chremthainn dynasty's fluctuating relations with Armagh and her Uí Néill backers (ibid., 311-3).

At any rate, the following episodes seem to use past monastic and dynastic founders in a typically coded reference to a roughly contemporary tense situation in which Clogher apparently succeeded in maintaining its status as the dynasty's chief church despite at least one attempt to thrust Clones to the fore: "in the Life of Mac Cairthinn the saint is told by Patrick to establish his church 'in the plain before the royal seat of Airgíalla' . . . The Uí Chremthainn ancestor king Echu . . . is hostile to Mac Cairthinn but the saint's power eventually brings about his submission, rather as Patrick overcomes the reluctant Lóegaire of Tara in Muirchú's narrative. When Tigernach arrives in Airgíalla in chapter twelve of his Life, the same king Echu, who is his maternal grandfather according to the beginning of the Life, offers him the seat and dignity of bishop Mac Cairthinn . . . and promises to expel the said bishop in his favour. The virtuous Tigernach rejects this in horror and withdraws in the direction of a distant mountain, where he stays for a long time in a church . . . that he founded" (ibid., 313-4). Also noteworthy is the Clones-biased Life's implication, most likely disingenuous, that Mac Cairthinn and hence Clogher were in the debt of Tigernach and hence Clones for not acceding to this plan.

Tigernach's Leinster connections mentioned above are accentuated in his Life to the extent that it is "quite deferential to Kildare, in marked contrast to the attitude it shows towards Armagh, and makes considerable claims for Brigit and her church. Brigit herself is made a decisive influence on Tigernach's career, being responsible for his baptism, ordination as bishop and mission to Airgíalla. When one saint performs such services as these, especially episcopal ordination, for another in saints' Lives, the explanation usually seems to be that the text in question is claiming the beneficiary's foundation or foundations for the benefactor's *paruchia*, a procedure particularly apparent in Tírechán's work on Patrick. Accordingly it looks as if Clones is here acknowledging a degree of subordination to Kildare" (ibid., 321).

The question as to why this should be so brings us back to the case of Sletty alluded to near the beginning of this section: "situated as it was on the middle Barrow, Sletty was close to the northern limits of Uí Cheinnselaig territory and not far from the large area to the North controlled by their powerful dynastic rivals the Uí Dúnlainge and their main church of Kildare. Since this was precisely the period when Kildare was vigorously pressing primatial claims with Cogitosus as her mouthpiece, Sletty's submission to Armagh and incorporation into her *paruchia* was surely aimed at bolstering her position against strong pressure from her northern neighbour Kildare and her backers. Accordingly the principle behind the 'Sletty syndrome' seems simply to be: if a powerful church nearby is threatening your independence, protect yourself by submission to a powerful church further away whose control is likely to be less pervasive and irksome. This, I take it, is precisely what Clones did, Armagh being the powerful neighbour and Kildare the more distant power in a kind of mirror image of the Sletty situation" (ibid., 323; cf. ch. 4, 3).

This section may be fittingly concluded with an example of Muirchú's use of biblical allusion (ch. 2, 3) to implant a congenial political message subversive of what, from Armagh's standpoint, must have been the rather unappealing surface implications of his account of Patrick's burial: "when, however, the angel came to him he gave him (Patrick) advice concerning burial: 'let two untamed oxen be chosen and let them proceed whither they will, bearing your body on a cart, and wherever they stop, a church will be built in honour of your body. And as the angel

had said, two unsteady bullocks were chosen and draw the cart (*plaustrum*) with the holy body placed on their shoulders at a steady pace (*stabili.. gestamine*), and from a place called Clogher, from the east of Findabair (in Co. Down?, see Hogan, 1910, 420, 1.7) selection from Conall's cattle distinguished the oxen. And they went forth directed by God's will to Dún Lethglaisse (Downpatrick), where Patrick is buried" (II, 11 in Bieler, 1979, 120-1). Muirchú finishes by telling how two battles over the saint's remains between the Airthir of Armagh, a division of the Airgíalla, and the Ulaid, in whose territory Downpatrick was, were miraculously thwarted and peace restored (II, 13-4). These were probably identified with the "storming of Downpatrick (*expugnatio Dúin Leithglaisse*)" ascribed to the years 496 and 498 A.D. in *AU* shortly after Patrick's own death, traditionally dated to 493, although Muirchú may have been seeking to defuse more recent tensions.

Muirchú obviously modelled the episode of the cart drawn by cattle on the Old Testament account of the Philistine priests' recommendation for finding out whether or not God was responsible for the woes piled upon them after capturing the ark of the covenant from the Israelites: "now, therefore, set to and make a new cart (*plaustrum*) and yoke two milch kine, upon which no yoke hath been put, to the cart and shut up their calves at home. And ye shall take the ark of the Lord and lay it on the cart . . . and send it away, that it may go. And if it go up by the way of their own territories to Beth-she-mesh, He hath done us this great evil. But if not, at least we shall know that his hand hath not touched us but it hath happened by chance" (1 Sam./Kgs. 6:7-9). "Therefore, they did so . . . And the kine went straight on the way that leadeth to Beth-she-mesh and walked in unison (*itinere uno*), lowing as they went, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left . . . And the cart came into the field of Joshua, a Beth-shemite, and stood there. Moreover, there was a great stone there . . . And the Levites took down the ark of the Lord . . . and put it on the great stone" (ibid.:10-15).

In view of the importance of a founder's relics as a means of bolstering a monastery's status in early medieval Ireland, Muirchú's apparently ready acquiescence in Armagh's embarrassing deficiency in this area is rather surprising at first sight (cf. McCone, 1982, 136-8). Although there is some amelioration in the claim that Patrick was on his way to his beloved Armagh to die until ordered by God's angel to return to Saul in return for certain privileges, Muirchú nevertheless clearly implies that Patrick's burial in Downpatrick was in accordance with God's will and that it is wrong for the Airthir to seek to recover his body by force. However, it does not necessarily follow that this was a permanent dispensation. Indeed, since the Bible informs us that the ark, far from remaining in Bethshemish forever, was eventually brought back to its proper home Jerusalem in the reign of king David (2 Sam./Kgs. 6), there is an obvious presumption that Muirchú deliberately echoed the biblical episode of the ark's journey to Bethshemesh as a means of suggesting that Patrick's remains were likewise ultimately destined by God to return to Armagh in accordance with the saint's original wish.

Decoded in this way, at first sight naive hagiographical narratives about alleged persons and events in the missionary period and its immediate aftermath often prove to be precise and subtly nuanced justificatory treatises on contemporary, in this instance roughly seventh- and eighth-century, issues and power struggles. As further examples below will show, the indisputably monastic authors of Irish saints' Lives in Latin were as acutely alive to secular as to ecclesiastical politics, and it is no

surprise to discover similar aptitudes and concerns informing their endeavours in the field of vernacular saga.

7. Needless to say, a good deal more than mere attractive presentation was involved in cases like this. Although able to endow a narrative with political backbone, genealogical information alone can hardly go beyond the basic relationships expressible in terms of collateral affinity, matrimonial connection, generational distance, sibling seniority or lack of offspring. The addition of even brief snatches of narrative detail can put badly needed flesh on these bones and significantly enhance a genealogy's articulatory potential through a wider range of relationships and extra nuances of attitude or behaviour. It is thus no surprise to find the relevant genealogical set-up introducing a saga like *Cath Maige Mucrama* or to find quite substantial narratives inserted in genealogies at suitable points, for instance the brief account of Creidne and her sons (ch. 9, 3) and the longer tale of the three Collas in the Rawlinson B. 502 collection (*Corp. Gen.*, 154 and 147-52) or the whole of *Scéla Éogain ⁊ Chormaic* and *Do Bunad Imthechta Éoganachta* amidst the Laud genealogies (Meyer, 1912, 309-12 and 312-4).

The marginality of Creidne and her sons, ancestors of the Conaille Muirthemne, whose expulsion from their patrimony, conflict and eventual accommodation with their father, Conall Costamail, led to the latter's prophecy that the new lands granted to them would be theirs forever despite the destruction and forced migration of other Ulaid, has been explained as follows by Ó Corráin: "Conaillne Muirthemne, whose royal line apears in the annals towards the end of the seventh century, were a people settled in the Louth region. They are regarded by the genealogists and historians (probably rightly) as a kingdom which formed an integral part of the historic overkingdom of the Ulaid (Ulster). By the eighth century, however, they were of Ulaid but not in it, for the Ulaid had lost heavily to the expanding Uí Néill and the Conaillne came to form a buffer state between the Uí Néill, Airgíalla and Ulaid. The text explains why and how this situation came about. Origin-legends and ancestral aetiologies of these kinds occur at nodal points in the historical record – points of departure, replacement, conquest" (1985, 83).

Another such nodal point, which hives the subject Airgíalla off from the main Uí Néill and Connachta stock in conjunction with the conquest of Ulaid territory foretold by Conall above, is covered by the story of the three Collas, sons of Eochu Doimplén and each the defining ancestor of a major Airgíalla people. This tells how they committed the heinous crime of *fin-gal* "kin-slaying" against their paternal uncle, the king of Tara Fíachu Sraiptine (son of Cairbre Liphechair son of Cormac mac Airt etc.), out of jealousy at the burgeoning prospects of Fíachu's son and eventual successor Muiredach Tírech (father of Eochaid Muigmedón father of Níall Noígíallach). This is the politically crucial factor invalidating any claim upon the Tara kingship by themselves or their descendants: *conid hí in fingal sin ro:scar flaithius nÉrenn fri clainn Echach Dompliúin .i. frisna Collaib* "so that that kin-slaying is what separated the sovereignty of Ireland from the descendants of Eochu Doimplén, namely the Collas" (*Corp. Gen.*, 147, 142a23-4; cf. St. Colum Cille's warning to Áed Sláine in 4 above). Fíachu, by contrast, secures the royal future of his ultimately Uí Néill descendants by choosing defeat for himself and the kingship for his progeny (*maidm fair féin ⁊ ríge dia chlannaib*, 142a48) in response to his druid's prediction: "I can (secure) victory for you, but this follows from it. If

you are victorious, you will perform kin-slaying upon your brother's sons and will yourself be king and there will never be a king descended from you. If, however, you are defeated, it will be from you that the sovereignty of Ireland will stem and there will never be a king of Ireland from the three Collas''. After their dastardly deed the Collas flee to Scotland but later return and make their peace with Muiredach, who eventually awards them sword land (*tír claidib*, 142b15) to be duly conquered from the hostile Ulaid.

This narrative, then, grants the Airgíalla their lands through the good graces of a Tara monarch in the direct line of ascent from the Uí Néill, while depriving them of any claim upon that kingship because of a previous delinquency. In this way the main ingredients of the contemporary Uí Néill ideal of a cooperative but subordinate Airgíalla are clearly enunciated in conformity with the basically identical but necessarily vaguer implications of the bare genealogical scheme.

The point at which the Connachta are eclipsed by the Uí Néill as claimants to the Tara kingship is marked genealogically by Muiredach Tírech's son Eochaid Muigmedón and narratively by the adventure or *echtrae* of his sons summarised earlier (ch. 8, 2). This tells how Níall Noígíallach overcame the disadvantages of illegitimacy, youth and expulsion to surpass his older half-brothers Ailill, Fíachrae and Brión, eponymous ancestors of the main Connacht dynasties, in various tests aimed at determining who should succeed Eochaid as king of Tara. The first of these involving a druid's prediction of the boys' futures on the basis of the implements they carried from a burning smithy is also given at the appropriate point in the Rawlinson genealogies (*Corp. Gen.*, 131). The crucial successive encounters of the brothers with the woman of sovereignty in *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin* show just how meticulous the narrative code's attention to detail could be. By sleeping with the initially hideous woman after his half-brothers had refused, Níall is guaranteed a virtual monopoly of the Tara sovereignty for himself and his descendants, but the tradition that two descendants of Fíachra, namely Nath Í and Ailill Molt, were also kings of Tara, is neatly acknowledged by having him give the hag a perfunctory kiss.

The motif of a youngest son getting the better of his older brothers is too widespread in folklore (cf. the Grimms' 'Golden bird' in ch. 5, 3 end) for influence from the biblical stories concerning Jephthah of Gilead and king David's anointing (ch. 8, 8) to be confidently posited here, although the possibility can hardly be discounted. At all events, there seems little doubt that monastic propagandists for the Uí Néill would have at least appreciated the welcome implications of the similarity with David especially, in view of his status as an ideal pre-Christian ruler over a united kingdom.

8. A recurrent synchronism in Patrician hagiography brings the saint into contact with the sons of the apical or defining ancestor of dynasties important at the time of writing. Presumably this pattern's appeal resided in the fact that "this was as far back as contact with Christianity could be pushed without denying it the respectable antiquity of origins in the pre-Christian period, and the second generation also had the advantage of allowing pointed contrasts in attitude towards the new faith and in political fortunes to be drawn between rival brothers, themselves often 'defining' ancestors of further groups within the major dynasty'' (McCone, 1984b, 36).

For example, the very end of Tírechán's seventh-century memoire claims that

Patrick "ordained Fíacc the Fair in Sletty and baptized the sons of Dúnlang, and arose via Belut Gabráin and founded a church in Roigne Martorthige and he baptised the sons of Nad Fróech in the land of Munster on Cothrige's rock in Cashel" (51, 4; Bieler, 1979, 162-3). Dúnlang was, of course, the eponym of the northern Leinster Uí Dúnlainge who dominated the provincial kingship and abbacy from the early seventh century, while Nad Fróech was the defining ancestor of the most central Éoganacht branches of Áine, Airther Cliach, Glendamain and Cashel. In both instances Armagh was apparently hoping to wean these important dynasties away from their major churches, Armagh's rivals Kildare and Emly respectively. A similar situation more in tune with contemporaneous political realities occurs in the *Additamenta* passage about the foundation of Sletty already discussed (6 above), which represents Patrick as having baptised Crimthann son of Énna Cennsalach, eponymous ancestor of the southern Leinster Uí Cheinnselaig (14, 3; ibid., 176-7).

A more elaborately structured encounter of this kind takes place in Tírechán's work between Patrick and three of Níall Noígíallach's sons from whom significant Southern Uí Néill lines claimed descent (McCone, ibid., 54-5; Bieler, 1979, 132). At Tailtiu, site of the great Uí Néill *óenach* or "fair" (*agon regale*), the saint encounters the eponym of the Cenél Cairbri, who seem to have lost their position as the eastern Síl nÁedo Sláine's chief west midland rivals in the course of the seventh century (cf. Byrne, 1973, 84). This Cairbre proves to be an incorrigibly hostile pagan, who earns Patrick's curse for trying to kill him: "your seed shall serve the seed of your brothers and there shall be no king of your seed forever" (par. 9).

The second meeting on the site of Donaghpatrick (a few miles due west of Slane on the river Blackwater between Navan and Kells) is with the virtuous Conall, who "received him with great joy, and he baptised him and established his throne forever and said to him: 'the seed of your brothers will serve your seed forever, and you must render alms to my heirs after me forever, and your sons and (the sons) of your sons (must render) to my sons in the faith a perpetual due'. And he measured a church of sixty feet with his own feet for Patrick's God, and Patrick said: 'if this church be lessened, your reign shall not be long and secure'" (par. 10). This, of course, is Conall Cremthainne, ancestor of the Síl nÁedo Sláine, who virtually monopolised the Tara kingship during the second half of the seventh century. Since this dominance must have had an air of permanence when Tírechán and Muirchú wrote, Armagh had an obvious interest in-establishing good and financially advantageous relations with this line while denigrating its main southern rivals.

Níall's third son, king Lóegaire of Tara, occupies an intermediate position in Tírechán "because he made a pact with him (Patrick) that he would not be killed in his kingdom, but could not become a believer" (par. 12). Muirchú's narrative, of course, centres upon a prolonged conflict between Patrick and Lóegaire, who is hostile to the saint and tries to kill him but is eventually forced rather against his will to accept the faith (I 15-21; Bieler, ibid., 84-99). At the end of this "holy Patrick said to the king: 'since you have resisted my teaching and have been an obstacle to me, although the days of your reign shall be extended, yet shall there be no king of your seed forever'". Lóegaire's fate, then, is intermediate between those of Cairbre and Conall in line with his behaviour, whether as a friendly but recalcitrant pagan in Tírechán or as a murderous adversary turned reluctant convert in Muirchú. Reference has already been made to the significance of the struggle in Muirchú's narrative between the paschal fire lit by Patrick at Fertae Fer Feec (I 14,2), "i.e.

Slane or near it'' (Hogan, 1910, 414), and the pagan fire of Lóegaire and his men at Tara as a symbol of the new religion's imminent triumph over the old (ch. 8, 10). The association of the victorious Christian fire with what was to become the monastery of Slane is not only comparable with the triumphant contrast in *Félire Óengusso*'s prologue (165-204) between prosperous monasteries and desolate nearby royal forts but can also be taken to connote the imminent eclipse of Lóegaire's lineage, the Cenél Lóegairi centred around Trim a few miles due east Tara, by Síl nÁedo Sláine, from whose territory around Donaghpatrick and Slane a little to the north of Tara Patrick's paschal beacon emanates. Needless to say, Tírechán and Muirchú's essentially identical message, conveyed somewhat differently by each of them, accurately reflected the current political situation.

Ancestral sibling rivalry was an obvious means of representing emnities between sub-sections of a broader lineage, and is duly used by the First Life of Brigit, compiled in the eighth century from seventh-century sources (cf. ch. 8, 3), to express the early hostility between Cenél Cairbri and Síl nÁedo Sláine already identified: "on that day Conall son of Níall came to holy Brigit as she walked on the road and said to her: 'O holy virgin Brigit, bless me diligently, lest my brother Cairbre, who hates me, kill me'. And Brigit said, 'I shall bless you. Let your group go in front, and we shall follow them. For it is not fitting for us to walk with them'. And when they were all climbing up the hill, one of Brigit's virgins said: 'Alack, Brigit, what shall we do? Behold, Cairbre is coming after us, and now those two brothers will kill each other'. Brigit said, 'not so shall our God act for us'. And when Cairbre had arrived, he said: 'O holy Brigit, bless me, since I fear my brother Conall in these places'. Then the two brothers passed over the hill at the same time, and did not recognise each other. God blinded their eyes, lest they recognise each other, on account of Saint Brigit. And Brigit blessed them, and Conall and Cairbre exchanged kisses without recognising each other. Each went off on his way, and all magnified God's name and Brigit in this miracle" (par. 62; Bollandus, 1658, 127).

The decline of Cenél Cairbri in the west midlands was matched by the rise there of Clann Cholmáin, whose alleged descent from an older brother of Áed Sláine's named Colmán Már presumably betokens their original status as allies or even a cadet branch of that eastern midland dynasty. However, the Cenél Cairbri's erstwhile role as major western rivals of Síl nÁedo Sláine soon devolved upon Clann Cholmáin, who by the middle of the eighth century had blocked Síl nÁedo Sláine off from an effective claim to the Tara kingship. This inevitably shifted the sibling rivalry motif to this part of the Southern Uí Néill genealogy, so that it was now the sons of Díarmait mac Cerbaill and their offspring rather than those of Níall Noígíallach himself who were at each other's throats. *Aided Díarmata* provides a nice example: "once Díarmait was in Tara feasting. Mugain daughter of Corcrad mac Duach of the Éoganacht Chaissil was beside him, i.e. the mother of Áed son of Díarmait, pregnant then with Áed Sláine. They then went out onto the green to refresh themselves in the company that was at the carousal. While they were there they saw Díarmait's grandson coming towards them on the green, namely Suibne son of Colmán, and a hundred horse was his company . . . As Suibne arrived at the assembly the woman's, namely Mugain's, womb screamed so that it was heard throughout the assembly. 'What is this, woman?' said Díarmait, 'is it upon the lad that your attention is?' 'You are not the prophet (*fáid*),' said Becc mac Dé. 'There is a prophet with you'. 'You find out, then,' said Díarmait, 'since you are a prophet'.

'I know, indeed,' said Becc. 'The son who is in the woman's womb, it is he who will kill yon lad'. That was true. Áed Sláine killed Suibne. He left a son, namely Conall mac Suibni, and it is he who killed Áed Sláine in turn . . . So that is the first kin-slaying (*fin-gal*) between Clann Cholmáin and Síl nÁedo Sláine, namely Áed Sláine's killing of his nephew, namely Suibne mac Colmáin, and Conall's killing of him then'' (O'Grady, 1892, 74-5).

Two interesting narratives validate key dynastic relationships in seventh-century Munster by means of a mother's vision establishing a pecking order among her off-spring. In one of these, from a text concerning Conall Corc and the Corco Loígde, Corc of Cashel's wife Oíbfind dreamed she was a bird hatching chicks in a nest. Three flew to south Munster and one to the centre, while a bird came after them from the West and the fifth chick remained in the nest. A druid interprets this as a prophecy that she will bear five sons, Mac Caiss, Mac Brócc (and Mac Iair) being the trio that flew south, Daig the one in the middle, Cairbre Lúachra the later sixth and Nad Froích the one who stayed home (Meyer, Anecdota, 1910, 59.20-29). An equivalent version involving a litter of four pups bathed in wine (Nad Froích), ale (Mac Cas), fresh milk (Mac Brócc), and water (Mac Iair) respectively, plus an intrusive and vicious fifth bathed in blood (Cairbre Cruithnechán) has been trans-lated earlier (ch. 5, 11).

Ó Corráin has remarked of "this text, which dates from the seventh century" that "apart from being an aetiology of the different branches of the Eóganacht, it is a legitimist document setting out the pre-eminent political claims of the Eóganacht Chaisil. Nad Froích, ancestor of the Eóganacht Chaisil (and of other sub-segments who also held the kingship) and Mac Cass, ancestor of Eóganacht Raithlind, are associated with wine and ale, the drinks of sovereignty. Their descendants, therefore, will hold the kingship, though those of Nad Froích will be pre-eminent. Mac Iair and Mac Brócc are associated with milk and water, evidently the symbols of the religious life, and from them descend the two leading hereditary ecclesiastical lineages of the Eóganacht, who ruled the great monastery of Cork . . . Eóganacht Locha Léin, the descendants of Cairpre Cruithnechán, are bloody interlopers, half-brothers only, and the descendants of a racially inferior Pictish woman . . . In fact, there was a fierce dynastic struggle in progress in the seventh century between the Eóganacht Locha Léin, on the one hand, and the other branches of the Eóganacht, on the other, and the text is a bitter and partisan expression of the views of the enemies of Eóganacht Locha Léin'' (1985, 80).

The above narratives should give some indication of just how carefully genealogical relations, geographical locations, other attributes and symbols are combined by their monastic authors in order to convey with precision the desired political message, be it secular, ecclesiastical or both. Furthermore, intricate though they may be, such coded political statements by no means invariably constitute the sole or even central message of a narrative. Even in the frequent enough cases where they are palpably present, they quite often amount to only one level of discourse, however important, intermeshed with others geared to the sort of social, moral and religious concerns identified in previous chapters.
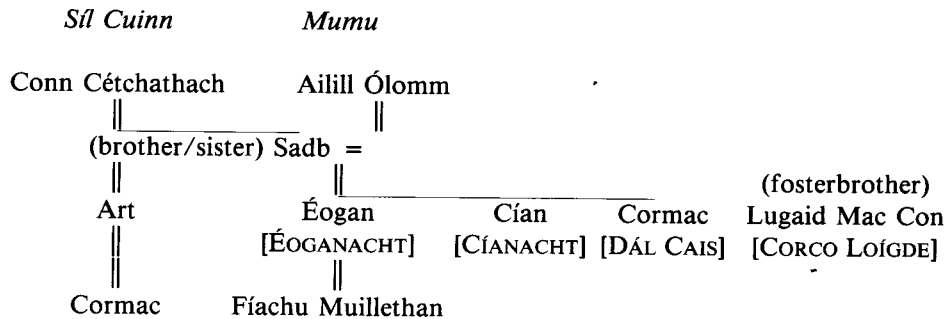
9. A marked tendency of monastic *senchus* already adumbrated in the foregoing was to create synchronisms and other parallelisms between corresponding nodes in different major genealogical lines. For example, bringing the sons of the apical

ancestors of major dynasties into contact with Saint Patrick (8 above) not only established explicit synchronisms at this level but also implied that Níall, Dúnlang, Énna Cennsalach and Nad Froích were coevals just before the arrival of Christianity. Due allowance must, of course, be made for local variation. For example, the synchronism of Níall of Tara with Nad Froích of Cashel implied by seventh-century Armagh and Uí Néill propagandists differs slightly from the early Munster text about Conall Corc referred to above, which makes Níall as eponymous ancestor of all the Uí Néill a contemporary of Corc, the defining forebear of the whole Éoganacht (Meyer, Anecdota, 1910, 58.19-20), rather than Nad Froích, ancestor of the central dynasties only. Nevertheless, the same basic type of parallelism is envisaged in both cases.

Bearing in mind that Níall and the eponyms of the chief Connacht dynasties were actually counted as half-brother and full brothers respectively, these synchronisms deliberately link the founders of the main dynasties of Leth Cuinn, the Laigin and Munster. Moreover, a similar link was established between the kings from whom the sóer-chlanna or free lineages of each of these great political entitites were supposed to be descended, namely Conn Cétchathach, Catháer Már and Ailill Ólomm.

A genealogical account of the peaceful coexistence of Catháer in Tara and Conn in Kells has already been translated as part of a discussion of how in *Esnada Tige Buchet* the now feeble old king Catháer's inability to check his sons' selfish excesses drives Buchet the hospitaller and his fosterling, Catháer's daughter Eithne Tháebfata, into the arms of Cormac mac Airt at Kells, a development deliberately juxtaposed with Cormac's permanent acquisition of the site of Tara through generosity towards Odrán (ch. 6, 11; cf. ch. 3, 3 and 11). Here a synchronism is established between Catháer's sons and Cormac, the implication being that Conn's son Art rather than Conn himself was Catháer's contemporary in this parable of the Laginian loss of Tara to the Uí Néill.

The saga *Cath Maige Mucrama* begins by establishing the following set of relationships and synchronisms, destined to prove crucial in the subsequent narrative, between leading figures in Leth Cuinn and Leth Moga:

```
  Síl Cuinn          Mumu

Conn Cétchathach    Ailill Ólomm              ·
      ‖_____‖
   (brother/sister) Sadb  =
      ‖               ‖                                    (fosterbrother)
     Art            Éogan      Cían      Cormac      Lugaid Mac Con
      ‖          [ÉOGANACHT]  [CÍANACHT] [DÁL CAIS]  [CORCO LOÍGDE]
      ‖               ‖                                      ·
   Cormac        Fíachu Muillethan
```

The main sequences of offence and retribution in this tale are built around a quarrel between Éogan son of Ailill, eponymous ancestor of the Éoganacht, and his hitherto beloved fosterbrother, Lugaid Mac Con of the Corco Loígde in southwest Cork with their non-Milesian pedigree. Lugaid was defeated in battle and forced into a Scottish exile, but eventually returned at the head of large forces to take vengeance upon his persecutors. The allied kings of Munster and Tara, Éogan and

Art respectively, were slain in battle, Lugaid replacing the latter as king of Ireland until displaced by Art's son Cormac. Finally, Lugaid went to tend his fosterfather Ailill Ólomm, but was killed at his instigation in revenge for the battle of Mag Mucrama "in which fell Art son of Conn and Ailill's seven sons with the slaughter of the men of Ireland around them" (par. 76).

The genealogical correlation of Leth Cuinn's Art and Cormac with Leth Moga's Éogan and Fíachu is given significant narrative reinforcement in parallel but separate incidents the night before battle against Mac Con. In the first Éogan visits the blind druid Díl maccu Chrecga of Osraige, who realises that the king is doomed and offers him his own daughter Moncha's favours for the night as a means of begetting a son. Éogan is then killed the day after Fíachu's conception (pars. 39-41). Due allowance being made for different *dramatis personae*, a virtually identical set of circumstances characterises Art's last night before dying in battle, the host and mate this time being the smith Olc Acha of Connacht and his daughter Achtan (pars. 44-7). However, only Fíachu's actual birth is described (pars. 42-3; ch. 8, 5). *Scéla Eogain ⁊ Cormaic* begins with essentially the same parallel narrative, but after briefly narrating Fíachu's conception and birth (pars. 1-3) proceeds to give a much fuller account of Cormac's birth and fosterage as well as his conception (pars. 4-15; ch. 8, 6). In *Genemuin Chormaic*, on the other hand, this is recounted without any attempt to draw a parallel with Fíachu.

To comparative grounds for regarding the latter as the oldest extant version of Cormac's birth-tale (ch. 9, 7) can be added genealogical considerations elucidated by Ó Corráin, who points out that the "ties of *pietas*, loyalty and mutual support" resulting from it constituted "a model for the relationship which should exist between the descendants of ancestors bound by the tie of fosterage" (1986, 148). Cormac's fosterer Lugnae Fer Trí and finder Grec mac Arod in *Genemuin Chormaic* are ancestors of the Luigni, Corco Fer Tri and Grecraige, dwindling north Connacht septs that apparently "disappeared from the political map in the eighth century" and probably "were in decline long before" (ibid., 149). By that stage the Uí Néill and their allies would have had little reason to continue to emphasise such an undistinguished and politically unprofitable liaison, and in the later *Scéla Eogain ⁊ Cormaic* "we find that some interesting changes have been made. Now the connection of Lugna and with Connacht is far more tenuous and that section of the text dealing with that aspect of Cormac's birth is dramatically foreshortened. Lugna becomes a hunter who merely happens on the boy as he ran with the wolves. He fostered him for a year until his mother came to hear about it and took her son away. She brought him to the north, to Fíachnae Cassán who welcomed him and fostered him, and it is from the north that Cormac set out for Tara" (ibid., 151).

The political significance of this shift resides in the fact that "Fíachnae Cassán is none other than Fíachrae Cassán, ancestor of Ind Airthir, the group of Airgíalla dynastic families who controlled Armagh and the kingdom in which it lay" (ibid.). The political instability that made the Armagh abbacy so contentious in the late eighth and early ninth centuries (cf. McCone, 1984, 316-9) may well have suggested that "the Uí Néill needed to be reminded of their special relationship with the Airgíalla and with Armagh" with the result that "Armagh rose to the occasion ans produced two superb pieces of political propaganda: the tale of the three Collas and the text under discussion" (Ó Corráin, ibid.). The latter implies that "because their ancestor fostered Cormac and his father Art, Airgíalla and especially Ind Airthir are

entitled to a 'favoured nation' status and to the special care and consideration of the Uí Néill. He it was, too, who first put the royal purple about the youth, a symbolic way of saying that Ind Airthir and Armagh were the first to recognise the *imperium* of the Uí Néill'' (ibid., 152).

This, of course, is a fine example of the clerical manipulation of ostensibly secular 'tradition' for political ends. Furthermore, the establishment of narrative as well as chronological correlations between figures like Éogan and Art, Fíachu and Cormac shows how intimately saga can interact with plain genealogy and *vice versa*. Since such narrative diptychs were presumably generated to match and emphasise key structures in the broad genealogical and chronological record elaborated in the monasteries, they too must be regarded as the primarily literary products of the cloister. As usual, one can only admire the skill and sensitivity with which the various strands were interwoven with each other and the whole in the vast web of socially, politically and religiously oriented *senchus* that early Christian Ireland's *literati* so painstakingly and creatively compiled and cultivated to explain their and their fellow countrymen's role in the world.

Epilogue

The foregoing chapters have explored the decisive contribution of clerical attitudes and other contemporary factors to an early Christian Irish literature that might be described as for the monastery, of the monastery, by the monastery. These concerns were often secular rather than ecclesiastical, material rather than spiritual, local rather than national, but that merely reflects the Church's central role in the body politic from at least the early seventh century onwards.

Notwithstanding the wide range of issues great and small with which they deal, most medieval Irish texts seem to be explicitly or implicitly anchored in an ideological and historical continuum stretching back from the present, via the various invasions and migrations supposed to have affected Ireland and her rulers' ancestors, to the flood and thence to the creation of the world. This scheme daringly represented Patrick's fifth-century mission to Ireland as a small-scale reenactment of Christ's appearance in the world to bring the Old Testament law and prophets, including history, to fulfilment in the New. Historical typology could then accommodate the pagan past to the Christian present by viewing it as an Irish 'Old Testament' perfected rather than abrogated by the national apostle's Christian dispensation. In this way all Irish legal, genealogical and mytho-historical *senchus*, whether set in the pre- or post-Patrician era, could embody a broadly identical set of contemporary values and customs represented as essentially immutable but in fact adjusted and readjusted to the Church's ongoing interaction with current social and political realities.

Allegory and typology allowed 'homeostatic' traditional modes of mythical thought to operate beneath a veneer of historical dynamism and progressive revelation, thus enabling early Christian Irish secular and religious preoccupations to be projected back into a pre-Christian past conceived primarily as a model of and for the present. Keenly asserted ecclesiastical control over its revelation facilitated the endowment of convenient innovations with the prestige of antiquity by slipping them into a pre-Patrician *senchus* consciously cast in an Old Testament mould, and serviceable pagan elements were doubtless also absorbed into the new hybrid construct with varying degrees of modification.

So thoroughgoing was the operation of this ideological mixer that the modern scholar is hard put to separate pagan and Christian ingredients out of the resultant

blend. Attention to the two-way assimilatory process involved, and the purpose behind it, not only seems more profitable than an obsession with often unverifiable origins, but also provides an antidote to naive nativist tendencies to take clerical representations of the pre-Christian Irish past at face value. Indeed, an appreciation of the way in which early Irish *senchus* was forged is an absolute prerequisite for any useful attempt to identify some of the myriad old, borrowed and new elements that went into its make-up. With all due reservations about its far less efficient applicability to culture and semantics than to linguistic forms, judicious and maximally exhaustive use of the comparative method remains the best means of establishing the presumption of a given feature's prehistoric provenance.

However, conclusions arrived at via this route must be balanced against the availability of plausible sources for direct borrowing. At all events, research of this type needs to be carried out with more sophistication and less wishful thinking than have commonly been brought to bear upon it hitherto. Even so, the results will often be far from certain, and should not be allowed to detract from study of the actually attested construct in its own terms.

Far from being mere clumsy and unimaginative redactors of oral traditions, early Christian Ireland's monastic moulders and transmitters of *senchus* combined literary creativity with intellectual rigour to such an extent in their pursuit of a coherent 'native Christian' mytho-history of their island and race that they have had little difficulty in duping many a modern scholar inclined to patronise their efforts. Instead of cocking a snook, we should take our hats off to them.

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