

**The Mac Lochlainn High-Kingship in  
Late Pre-Norman Ireland**

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## Introduction – Ireland after Clontarf: The Redefinition of a Kingship

After the battle of Clontarf, the former high-king, Maelsechnaill of Clann Cholmain<sup>1</sup>, returned to power upon the death of Brian mac Cennétig. He held the kingship without major challenge while the descendants of Brian fought amongst themselves. Despite having few powerful enemies, he was relatively elderly, and died in 1022. With his death, the last of the kings of Ireland in the first millennium, A.D., died, and an era of great change began. The monopoly which the northern and southern Uí Néill branches had held on the high-kingship for centuries was no more, and the kings of each province began to vie for the power that came with that position.

It is the experience of the author that there is not only a shortage of recent works discussing the period of time covered in the present paper, but also an unfortunate lack of interest in this period of Irish history in larger, more general works. Since John Ryan and James Hogan produced detailed works on this period over a half-century ago, there have been few studies on the subject, which has unfortunately led to difficulty in obtaining information about the period just before the Norman invasion. Gaps in many of the important annals (Ulster, Inisfallen, Loch Cé, and occasionally in Mac Carthaig's Book) can only have inhibited research on this period, as well. The present study, therefore, has two primary goals. The first, and arguably the foremost, is to shed light on the complex political and ecclesiastical situation

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<sup>1</sup> *ob.* AFM, AU 1022. Note also that “Maelsechlainn” and “Maelsechnaill” are interchangeable names.

in Ireland and, specifically, within the Cenél nEogain during the era of Mac Lochlainn power in the region. The second is to provide a basis for later, more detailed studies of the same kind on late pre-Norman Ireland in general.

It is certainly an exaggeration to suggest that no one has yet produced scholarly works on this period. On the contrary, several recent scholars, among them Dr. Donnchad Ó Corráin, Dr. Ailbhe Séamus Mac Shamhráin, Dr. Francis J. Byrne, and the author's own mentor, Dr. Katharine Simms, as well as those mentioned before, have produced exceptional works covering various topics of the period. Unfortunately, however, it seems that late pre-Norman Ireland has not recently been treated as either a topic for a broad, general history. The present paper endeavours to remedy that oversight in a fashion that will not so much collate the works of others but will instead use primary sources (annalistic and otherwise) and a broad cross-section of secondary sources to synthesize a coherent history of the Mac Lochlainn dynasty.

## Chapter 1 - Domnall Mac Lochlainn, *ri Ailig to ardri Erenn* (1083-1121)

In the late eleventh century, after over a hundred years of relative obscurity, the Cenél nEogain rose to prominence in Ireland. Domnall Mac Lochlainn, the son of Ardgar, came to power in Cenél nEogain in 1083<sup>2</sup>, and found before him a political climate that was ripe for expansion of the power of the north. His nearby political rivals had been effectively erased by that time, and the high-king, Toirdelbach Ua Briain, was aging. The real power of the Ua Conchobair line was not to rise for another half-century, and Leinster's power had been broken after the sudden death of Diarmait Mac Máel na mBó. Meath, which had produced powerful kings in the early eleventh century, had been decimated by constant successful military campaigns by the Uí Briain and by their Leinster neighbors, and had not produced a truly powerful king in the half-century since Maelsechnaill.

Domnall Mac Lochlainn's power was not born of any peaceful process. In fact, his familial namesake, Lochlainn Mac Maelsechnaill, had been murdered by his own brother and a faction of his people.<sup>3</sup> The Mac Lochlainn line rose at a time when the power of the traditional northern Uí Néill line had been harried both by the power of the Uí Bríain and by internal disputes over succession. The northern Uí Néill had not produced a powerful candidate for the high-kingship since before Brian mac Cennétig, and though Flaithbertach Ua Néill had put pressure on Donnchada mac Briain in the early eleventh century, his son, Aed, died in 1033. Flaithbertach died but three

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<sup>2</sup> AU 1083§6, implied by AI 1083§3, which is written in a later hand in the margin. See Mac Airt, p. 236, note g.

<sup>3</sup> AFM, AU 1023

years later, in 1036, with no powerful heir remaining to the Uí Néill branch of the descendants of Áed Findliath. After that, the kingship of Aileach was apparently in some question. According to James Hogan's king-lists<sup>4</sup>, the king that immediately followed Flaithbertach Ua Néill was Niall Mac Maelsechnaill, a distant relative.<sup>5</sup> It is this transfer of power away from the descendants of Niall Glúndub that would eventually allow Domnall and Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn to come to power in Ulster and Ireland in general.

In 879, Áed Findliath, son of Niall Caille<sup>6</sup> and high-king of Ireland, died. His cousin, Murchad, and then Murchad's son, Flaithbertach, ruled Aileach for a time, and then the kingship passed back to Domnall, Aed's son, in about 896. The first entry about him is in AU 889, when he leads a raid on Dal nAraide. He and his brother, Niall Glúndub, prepared to battle against each other, but were separated by the desires of the people not to have another internal struggle.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately for Domnall's family, his son and heir, Flann, died in 906. A few years after, Domnall appears to have either been forced out of the kingship or taken up a religious vocation, and died in 913. His brother took the kingship, and eventually won the high-kingship of Ireland. After he died, power passed briefly back to two sons of Domnall: first Flaithbertach and then Fergal. The descendants of Flann, however, were passed over in favor of Muirchertach, a son of Niall Glúndub. Of the next

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<sup>4</sup> Hogan, 1932, as used in Byrne, 2001, 284. A genealogy is presented in Appendix B in which the kings of Aileach are indicated.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix A for a simplified genealogical chart beginning with Áed Findliath and ending with Conchobar Mac Lochlainn.

<sup>6</sup> Niall Mac Áed, high-king and supporter of abbots Eógan Mainistrech and Forindán, was posthumously given the name "Caille" because he drowned in the Calann river. See AU 846§3.

<sup>7</sup> AU 903.

eight kings, six were descendants of Niall Glúndub, while the remaining two<sup>8</sup> came from the descendants of Domnall's other children. It was not until Niall mac Mael Sechnaill took the kingship after Flaithbertach Ua Néill died that the descendants of Flann produced a king of Aileach.

Niall ruled until his death in 1061, and was succeeded by his nephew Ardgar, who was the son of his brother, Lochlainn. Lochlainn himself had been killed by an unnamed contingent of the Cenél nEogain in 1023<sup>9</sup>, but Ardgar Mac Lochlainn appears to have been more palatable to the people than his father was. He began to consolidate the power of the north, and even pressured Connacht in 1062, but died in 1064, before he could effectively wield his influence over any other parts of the country. He was succeeded by a minor warlord, Áed Ua hUalgairg, who died in 1067. He was, in turn, followed by at least two of Niall Mac Maelsechnaill's sons. The first was Domnall<sup>10</sup>, who was murdered by his brother, Aed.

Around 1078, the Cenél nEogain were in such dire straits for rulers that they seem to have invited Conchobar Ua Briain, one of the high-king's cousins and his sworn enemy, to be the king of one of their larger provinces, Tulach Óg. Conchobar was not to pose much of a threat to Toirdelbach, however, as he died within the year. Throughout his career, Toirdelbach Ua Briain had not placed a great deal of importance on the north, possibly due to the fact that it had been relatively dormant politically since Domnall Ua Néill was high-king in 980. He took no special action then, presumably overjoyed at the Cenél nEogain disposing of one of his most hated enemies. After the

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<sup>8</sup> Or three: two of the sons of Conchobar, son of Domnall, appear to have reigned concurrently. All three of his sons died in one year.

<sup>9</sup> AU, AI 1023§4 (each). Note also that AI has him as "*rí Inse Eogain*." Tig. states that he was killed by his brother, Niall, and by the Ciannachta.

<sup>10</sup> AU 1068 names him Domnall "*na mbocht*", or Domnall "of the poor."

death of Conchobar Ua Briain, his brother, Cennetig Ua Briain, took the kingship, which he appears to have held until his death in 1084.<sup>11</sup>

In 1083, Domnall Mac Lochlainn, the son of Ardgar Mac Lochlainn, emerged as a powerful claimant to the kingship of Cenél nEogain. Aed died early in the year, and was succeeded by his brother, Donnchad Ua Maelsechnaill. Shortly thereafter, Domnall Mac Lochlainn (or Domnall Ua Lochlainn, as he is sometimes distinguished in the annals), took the kingship.<sup>12</sup> He promptly established himself as an active king by conducting a raid on Conaill Muirthemne. He was successful in his endeavor, and he gave rewards to those who aided him, an event recorded by the Annals of Ulster, and a decision which could only have helped to give him a reputation for being a benevolent ruler.

It did not take him long to prove that he was powerful enough and secure enough in his position that the Cenél nEogain could begin to seriously and effectively press outside their nominal borders for the first time in over two decades. Far from being intimidated by the pressure from Toirdelbach Ua Briain in the south, he instead looked eastward to Ulaid, and when its king, Donnsléibe, took his army out of the province briefly, he fell on Ulaid and raided it.<sup>13</sup> If nothing else, this raid shows the speed with which Domnall Mac Lochlainn consolidated his power over Cenél nEogain to the extent that he could conduct effective raids on other lands.

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<sup>11</sup> James Hogan's "The Ua Briain Kingship in Telach Óc" is a wonderfully detailed overview of the history of the kingdom and its importance to the Airgialla and the Cenél nEogain. His discussion of the exiled Uí Briain and their place in Ulster are invaluable.

<sup>12</sup> If we assume that the annal entries in AU are being kept virtually contemporaneously at this point, we can use the order of the entries as a pseudochronology of the year itself. In AU 1083§2, Áed dies. In AU 1083§5, "Donnchad Ua Mael Sechnaill, king of Aileach," kills the king of Cenél Enna. Finally, in AU 1083§6, Domnall Mac Lochlainn takes the kingship and conducts a raid. Therefore, Aed most likely died early in the year, Donnchad reigned for a few months at the most, and was deposed by Domnall sometime toward the end of the year. Domnall had to have enough time to organize his raid, return, and reward the Fernmag, so it is likely that he was king for at least a couple of months in 1083.

<sup>13</sup> AU 1084§4, LC 1084.

In 1086, the reigning high king, Toirdelbach Ua Briain, died after a long illness. His son, Muirchertach, took the high-kingship, apparently in furtherance of his father's plan for a dynasty that would resemble that of the Uí Néill in the previous millennium. Muirchertach set out to consolidate his own power, pressing Leinster for the same allegiances it had given his father. Munster was split among Toirdelbach's three sons, Tadhg, Diarmait, and Muirchertach. However, within a year, Tadhg had died of an illness and Diarmait had been banished by Muirchertach,<sup>14</sup> who went from a position of supreme vulnerability to one of sudden solidity. Fortunately for him, Domnall Mac Lochlainn appears to have spent virtually all of his time consolidating his power in the north. His next foray into the south of Ireland came two years after the death of Toirdelbach Ua Briain, in 1088, when he took hostages from Connaught and ravaged the north of Munster, but by then, Muirchertach was firmly ensconced in the kingship of Munster.

By 1090, Domnall Mac Lochlainn had made it clear that he was more threatening than the previous kings of Cenél nEogain. In a somewhat startling reaction to this, Muirchertach Ua Briain called a royal conference at which he and Flann Ua Mael Sechnaill, king of Meath, handed the hostages of their respective provinces over to Domnall Mac Lochlainn.<sup>15</sup> This at first seems as though Muirchertach Ua Briain had already acknowledged Domnall Mac Lochlainn as his superior, but on further analysis, this is probably not actually the case. Mac Lochlainn could have played the part of spoiler to a war that was being fought between Meath, under Ua Mael Sechnaill, and Munster, under Ua Briain. Muirchertach Ua Briain already had concerns

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<sup>14</sup> AI, AU 1086.

<sup>15</sup> AU 1090§1; Ó Corráin, 1972, 144. Unfortunately, whether by pointed denial or otherwise, AI does not mention this event. Ó Corráin suggests that Muirchertach Ua Briain's aim in this was to placate Domnall Mac Lochlainn, and Mac Lochlainn indeed kept the Cenél nEogain out of the dispute.



about the presence of a powerful Ua Conchobair king on his northern border, and he certainly did not want Flann to obtain another powerful ally. Similarly, Flann could only have been nervous about the Cenél nEogain king on to his north who, if he allied with Ua Briain in the south, could trap him. It appears that Mac Lochlainn accepted what can only be viewed as dual bribes, and remained neutral altogether. By the end of the next year, Muirchertach Ua Briain had taken the kingship of Leinster after the death of its king.<sup>16</sup>

After the submission, there was relative peace between the north and the south, and Domnall was able to exercise his power over his own lands, bringing the Ulaid to heel once more, killing their king, Donn Sléibe, in a battle at Belach Goirt.<sup>17</sup> This deed is actually recorded in the *Clann Ollaman Uaisle Emna*: “The host of Eógán of Aileach boasted in perpetuity of their violent deed against Donn Sléibe.”<sup>18</sup> Because the genealogical poem was written for Eochaid Mac Donn Sléibe almost a century later, this must have been perceived as a major victory by the Cenél nEogain. Two years later, Domnall returned Cenél Conaill to his side by blinding their king, Aed Ua Canannán, and was once again in control of the entire north. Though he did not at the time appear to challenge Muirchertach Ua Briain directly for the high-kingship, already, there was political maneuvering and gamesmanship occurring between the two sides. Material which can only be classified as legal propaganda<sup>19</sup> rose up at various times in an attempt to enhance the claims of one or the other king. Domnall Mac Lochlainn, perhaps because of

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<sup>16</sup> AU 1089§3 says that he was killed by his own people. AI 1089§2, on the other hand, names Muirchertach Ua Briain as the one who killed him. O Corráin seems to agree with AU in this case (O Corráin, 1972, 143).

<sup>17</sup> AU 1091§3.

<sup>18</sup> Byrne, 1964, 79-80.

<sup>19</sup> This intriguing topic will be discussed at much greater length in Chapter 6. It is of interest now because there appear to have been competing bodies of propaganda literature at this time, each seeking to make the case for its own chosen king.

his Uí Néill descent, was the subject of much of the material that remains to historians, especially an interesting anomaly regarding his heritage.

The ancestral line of the Mac Lochlainns is, itself, a matter for discussion. Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn claimed descent from Domnall Mac Lochlainn and, through him, to the great Uí Néill kings of the eighth century. It is virtually impossible that this is false; however, when one traces the ancestry of the Mac Lochlainns further back, one discovers that there is a break in the family of the Uí Néill where one branch fades into relative obscurity and the other produces Niall Glúndub and his son, Muirchertach, and his grandson, Domnall. This was mentioned in passing above, and resulted in one family being far more famed and reputable than the other. Because of this, there is some uncertainty surrounding the descent of the twelfth century Mac Lochlainns. Domnall Mac Lochlainn's claim to the high-kingship would certainly have been bolstered by being descended from such recent high-kings, and it seems as though this was an image he fostered.

There are several ancient king-lists with which historians may trace back a particular regnal line almost to the "earliest times." In O'Brien's *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*,<sup>20</sup> Domnall's pedigree is thus: "Domnall m. Ardgair m. Lochlaind m. Muiredaich m. Domnaill m. Muirchertaich m. Néill Glúnduib m. Áeda Findléith." This genealogy is supported by a somewhat later entry in the Book of Lecan, which proceeds: "Concobar(da) m. Domnall m. Ardgail m. Lochlaind m. Muiridaig m. Domnaill m. Muirchertach m. Neill Glundub m. Aeda Findli."<sup>21</sup> In a rather interesting twist, the former Uí Néill dynasty is named "Clann Domnall" and is attached to the less-famous brother of Niall Glundub, one Domnall Dabhaill. The Book of Leinster, however,

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<sup>20</sup> O'Brien, 175-6. The designation "m." indicates "son of". The *Corpus* is taken from Rawlinson B. 502, a manuscript which has been consulted both in diplomatic and facsimile form.

runs thus: “Domnall m. Ardgair m. Lochlaind m. Máel-Shechnaill m. Máel-ruanaid m. Fhlaind m. Domnall m. Áeda Findléith.”<sup>22</sup> This appears to attach the history of the Mac Lochlainn family to the descendants of Flann mac Domnall Dabhaill, and in a poetic reference to Domnall Mac Lochlainn, it is made evident that the less famous branch is the one from which he must be descended.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to this effort to claim descent from the more recent Uí Néill high-kings, legal experts from the period (and most likely from the north) appear to have made it clear that their view of the high-kingship did not necessarily include total control of Ireland. They proposed that a high-king with opposition was one who even governed one province of Ireland, and, at any time, could take his troops safely through all of the other provinces and back to his own undefeated.<sup>24</sup> This is a far cry from controlling all of Ireland, and it seems tailored to the situation of the Mac Lochlainns, who were faced with powerful kings in at least one other province throughout their kingships.

On the Uí Briain side of matters, Muirchertach’s own legal experts appear to have crafted a specifically Uí Briain-friendly interpretation of the laws. The passage appears thus: “[a provincial king is king of Ireland without opposition] when the estuaries are under him, Dublin and Waterford and Limerick besides.”<sup>25</sup> Muirchertach Ua Briain held claim to those three cities at the time, so by this legal definition, he was not in fact the high-king with opposition, he was the “king of overkings,” the high-king of Ireland. Both his

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<sup>21</sup> Lecan, 145 g 35.

<sup>22</sup> LL, 56 Rb 28.

<sup>23</sup> Ó Corráin, 2001, 248-9. For a graphic on the descent of Domnall and the kings of Aileach in general, see Appendix B of the present paper. See also Ó Corráin’s conclusions in his 1971 paper on regnal succession and Ó Ceallaigh’s *Gleanings*, chapter 1.

<sup>24</sup> Simms, 1998, 34. She theorizes that the reference may even be post-Norman, dating to the mid-thirteenth century, in which case it has little relevance to the current discussion. Her first possibility, that it is of pre-Norman Ulster derivation, is the one taken for the purposes of the current argument.

and Domnall's legal redefinitions appear to be somewhat spurious, and do not represent any actual legal changes in the succession rules of the high-kingship. Rather, they seem to be simply a medieval version of political propaganda.<sup>26</sup>

Domnall Mac Lochlainn and Muirchertach Ua Briain's struggles with each other only increased over time. In 1093, Domnall crafted an alliance of the northern kings and marched southward, gaining the submissions of the Uí Mael Sechnaill king of Meath and Gofraidh Meránach of Dublin. He marched on Ua Briain and defeated him, but his alliance crumbled, and he returned to the north, unsatisfied. Ua Briain followed up his stroke of luck by banishing the kings of Dublin and Meath, finally solidifying his position there.

What followed could only have been the most frustrating years of Muirchertach Ua Briain's career. On at least seven separate occasions<sup>27</sup>, the *comarb* of Patrick, who at this period was generally the lay abbot of Armagh, intervened in what would have been major (possibly even decisive) battles between the two forces, and it is this, if nothing else, which forces one to question the totality of either man's claim to the high-kingship of Ireland. There were only two important battles between Ulster and Munster in the entire period between 1097 and Muirchertach Ua Briain's death in 1119. One, which occurred in 1103, was a result of Domnall's attack on Ulaid that year. Muirchertach Ua Briain appears to have seen a pretext for confrontation in Domnall's action, and marched north with a great alliance of the south. Muirchertach's army fought Mac Lochlainn's near Armagh for nearly a week,

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<sup>25</sup> Simms, 1998, 32-33.

<sup>26</sup> What they very much resemble is modern political "spin," that interesting redefinition of facts which arises every time there is an election or a referendum in a system where a body of people must be convinced of a particular view of reality.

and then the men of the south pulled back to rest and regroup. Domnall seized on this opportunity and outflanked the Leinstermen, defeating them soundly and destroying the army of the Dublin Norse. In an insult to Muirchertach Ua Briain, who was in Armagh giving a donation of gold, the Cenél nEogain made off with Muirchertach's royal tent and standard, and Muirchertach returned to the south, bloodied and humiliated.

The second battle was in 1114, after Muirchertach Ua Briain had been struck down by a nearly fatal illness and deposed by his brother, Diarmait. The year before this, Domnall had expelled the king of Cenél Conaill<sup>28</sup> and installed his own son and heir, Níall, as its king, in a demonstration of his power over Ulster and possibly to prepare his son for the kingship. Domnall gathered an alliance of Ulster, Connacht, Bréifne, and Meath, and they marched on Munster. Diarmait was forced to come to terms with them, and they returned home yet again.

Muirchertach Ua Briain retook the kingship in 1115, but he was never again the same. Attempts to reinstate himself as the high-king were largely ineffective, and his internal problems with his brother eventually spelled doom for his kingship. Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair had effectively revived Connacht, and when he was included in the invasion of Munster in 1114 by Mac Lochlainn, he sought his own political aggrandizement and betrayed him, coming to terms separately with Diarmait Ua Briain and pulling out of the invasion. Only Leinster remained subject to the Uí Briain, and when Muirchertach died in 1119, he was no longer even king of Munster.

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<sup>27</sup> AU 1097§6, 1099§7, 1102§8, 1105§3, 1107§8, 1109§5, 1113§7.

<sup>28</sup> The annals do not expressly name the king of Cenél Conaill at this time. Based on what appears to be a continuing theme, it is quite possible that a feud which had developed between Domnall and the Uí Canannáin came to a head, and he took it into his own hands to deprive them of the chance to confront him again.

After the death of Muirchertach Ua Briain, some historians grudgingly pass the title of high-king of Ireland on to Domnall Mac Lochlainn<sup>29</sup>, despite his apparently dominant role in Irish affairs after 1114. Some suggest that Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair was already the preeminent candidate for high-kingship, and that the two years between the death of Muirchertach and the death of Domnall were part of his own reign. This analysis does not, however, appear to address the situation in the north, nor does it truly take into account the submission of Toirdelbach to Domnall in 1114, and the place of Domnall as the most powerful king of Ireland at the time. Toirdelbach would be mired in dealing with Munster and Meath for almost two decades, and was never able to bring any force to bear on Domnall Mac Lochlainn. Domnall had the advantage over Toirdelbach in that he had not only his own territory, but others which were allied to him.

Domnall's position did begin to waver somewhat after the death of Muirchertach Ua Briain. In 1119, his son, Niall, was killed by the Cenél Moain, and this inaugurated a period of intense strife within Cenél nEogain that threatened to permanently remove them from the political arena. Two years after the murder of his son, Domnall Mac Lochlainn, king of Ireland, died in Derry. He was never able to gain a truly unchallenged high-kingship from his struggles, and the constant intervention of Armagh on his side can only leave historians with questions about whether or not he would have been able to defeat Muirchertach Ua Briain in outright war.

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<sup>29</sup> He is accorded this title in his obit. in AU, AI 1121.

## Chapter 2 – Domnall Mac Lochlainn and the Reform Movement in Armagh

Domnall Mac Lochlainn's power was not derived solely from his military exploits. As discussed in the last chapter, his reign was actually aided on several occasions by the peacemaking machinations of the various lay abbots of Armagh. It would, therefore, be both important and pertinent to address the complex interweavings of Armagh's influence into Irish politics, and eleventh- and twelfth-century Ulster, in particular. It would also be relevant to examine the influence of the reform movement on politics around Ireland and the manner in which the end of the domination of the lay abbacy by the Clann Sínaich anticipated a drastic change in the future of the Irish Church.

The status of Armagh by the late eleventh century was greatly enhanced from its status a couple of centuries before. Instead of vying for supremacy with the *familia* of Columba, it had obtained a position of greater influence and power, one which had been largely cemented by the actions of Brían mac Cennetig, who had actively sought the support of Armagh and had given little or no thought to any other faction. The sudden and catastrophic loss of recognition by those in power seemed to detract almost instantaneously from the power of the Columban *familia*, a situation which only worsened over the coming years as it experienced a number of lean years, coincident with the downfall of Meath as an important political force in Ireland.

Domnall Mac Lochlainn appears to have begun courting the approval of Armagh before he was under pressure from Muirchertach Ua Briain.

When Domnall mac Amalgada<sup>30</sup> became the *comarb* of Patrick after the death of his brother, Máel Ísú, in 1091, he immediately began to make his visitations upon the kings, seeking his traditional ecclesiastical tribute from them. In 1092, he approached Domnall Mac Lochlainn and was given all that he asked for.<sup>31</sup> Visitations were fairly common, but the speed with which he was ordained as abbot and set out upon his tribute-taking expeditions cannot have been normal.<sup>32</sup>

Two years later, Domnall mac Amalgada visited Munster and received not only the full donation of the province, but also additional contributions made voluntarily by Muirchertach Ua Briain.<sup>33</sup> It is apparent that there was a spirit of gamesmanship between Muirchertach Ua Briain and Domnall Mac Lochlainn regarding the influence that a friendly Armagh could bring to their respective kingships. This position appears to have been almost diametrically opposite to that of his predecessor, Máel Ísú, who pursued a traditionalist policy of friendship with the Cenél nEogain and routinely supported their Mac Lochlainn kings, and who does not appear to have interested himself in provincial politics.<sup>34</sup>

Whichever of the two kings Domnall mac Amalgada preferred, he had a vested interest in keeping each of them balanced against the other. Certainly, the obvious reason would be that the successor of Patrick enjoyed a fairly lucrative position as an eleventh- and twelfth-century king-maker. This

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<sup>30</sup> The contemporary annalists appear to have suffered some confusion surrounding his ancestry: AU 1091§6 names him “Domnall grandson of Amalgada,” or “Domnall m. m. Amhaldadha,” but AU 1092§6 names him “Domnall son of Amalgada,” or “Domnall m. Amhaldadha.” Since Domnall was Máel Ísú’s brother, and Máel Ísú was the son of Amalgada, the former reference is incorrect. See the genealogies given in Ó Fiaich, 124.

<sup>31</sup> AU 1092§6.

<sup>32</sup> Ó Fiaich, 93-4, AU 1091§5. Ó Fiaich perceives a note of alarm or affront on the part of the annalist, who could only have been accustomed to much slower proceedings.

<sup>33</sup> AU 1094§6.

<sup>34</sup> Ó Fiaich, 93.



position could only be maintained by never allowing one king or the other to achieve dominance over all of Ireland.

In 1097, the strength of this position was first tested when the armies of Muirchertach Ua Briain and Domnall Mac Lochlainn confronted each other in the north of Ireland, but Domnall mac Amalgada was able to restrain them and convinced them to make peace. Again, in 1099, Muirchertach marched against the north, and again, he was forced to make peace. Once again, in 1102, at a conference among Mac Lochlainn, Ua Briain, and mac Amalgada, led to a peace settlement for a year.<sup>35</sup> It is a testament to the power of Armagh and the *comarb's* diplomatic abilities that he was able to keep Domnall Mac Lochlainn and Muirchertach Ua Briain from each other's throats for so long. Muirchertach appears to have made no secret of his desires to crush the north, which was the one obstacle between himself and the kingship, and Domnall appears to have considered the kingship not only his by right, but also because he felt himself sufficiently powerful to defeat Ua Briain.

Domnall's mac Amalgada's political acumen may have been exhausted after these last arrangements, for in 1103, Muirchertach Ua Briain brought a great army north the following year, and camped on the plains of Armagh and made war on Domnall Mac Lochlainn. Muirchertach appears to have convinced Domnall Mac Amalgada to keep his nose out of their affairs in this instance, placating him with an offering of gold.<sup>36</sup> The *comarb* indeed did not

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<sup>35</sup> AU 1097§6, 1099§7 1102§8. See also Chapter 1 for more on these developments.

<sup>36</sup> Special offerings and gifts to Armagh were not out of the question. In Ryan, 167-8, there is direct evidence that Domnall mac Lochlainn donated a shrine to Bell of St. Patrick. It is of incredible quality and is not only a testament to the wealth which was at Mac Lochlainn's command, but also the esteem in which he held Armagh and the lengths to which he would go to sway Armagh to his side. The inscription, which is invaluable to dating the bell, reads: "OR DO DOMNHNALL U LACHLAIND LASIN DERNAD IN CLOCSA/OCUS DO DOMHNALL CHOMARBA PHATRAIC ICON DERNAD/OCUS DOD CHATHALAN U MAELCHALLAND DO MAER IN CHLUIC/OCUS DO CHONDULIG U INMAEN OCNA MACCAIB RO CUMTAIG", which is translated in Ryan as: "A prayer for Domnall Ua Lochlainn who caused this bell to be made/and for Domhnall, the successor of Patrick, with whom it was made/and for Cathalan Ua Maelchallain, the keeper of the bell/and for

make any recorded intrusion on their battle, leaving the two of them to their own devices. The result of the confrontation, however, could only have been somewhat unexpected by those in Armagh and elsewhere. Domnall's largely overmatched and outnumbered force outflanked Ua Briain's Leinster and Dublin allies and crushed them, driving Ua Briain back to the south in defeat and resetting the tenuous balance of power in Ireland.

Domnall Mac Amalgada spent the rest of his time as *comarb* attempting to preserve this balance. When Mac Lochlainn and Ua Briain made noises once more about going to war against each other, he journeyed to Dublin to conclude a peace accord between them, but fell ill en route and died outside of Dublin.<sup>37</sup> After his body was returned to Armagh, the annals record the appointment of one Cellach mac Aeda maic Máel Ísú (Domnall's great-nephew and yet another representative of the Clann Sínaich) about a month and a half later. With the appointment of Cellach, the face of the Irish Church was to change forever.

Up until the time of Domnall mac Amalgada, Armagh's power was largely confined to the north. His successful visitation of Munster proved to Armagh that it had indeed solidified its position as preeminent ecclesiastical center in Ireland, and as such could begin working towards reforms that were desperately needed in the Irish Church. At the Synod of Cashel in 1102, the reformers determined to move away from the hereditary ecclesiastical families and institute a more continental, episcopal hierarchy. Their work was greatly aided when the bishop of Armagh, Caíncomrac Ua Baighill, died

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Condulig Ua hInmainen and his sons, who covered it." See also O'Ceallaigh, chapter 5, for more on the history of the bell and the Ua Maelchallain. A color image of the bell and its shrine are included in Appendix D, and are taken from Ó Floinn, 1994, 18-19.

<sup>37</sup> AU 1105§3. The annals do not record whether or not Domnall actually concluded the peace he set out to achieve, but the implication is that, due to the gravity of the death of the successor of Patrick, the two sides may have agreed independently to set aside their arms for a time.

in 1106. Cellach, who had already cemented his own position as *comarb* of Patrick, took on the episcopal orders, and retained his lay abbacy, thus reuniting the two branches of the ecclesiastical scene in Armagh and taking a bold step forward in reforming the Irish Church and preserving its status as the center of Irish ecclesiastical life.

Cellach continued the work of his predecessor, keeping Muirchertach Ua Briain and Domnall Mac Lochlainn apart as often as possible. It was not so much in his financial interests to keep them apart as it was in the interests of the reform movement. As Ó Fiaich states, “the reform movement in Ireland... had not only to change an existing structure, but also had to build anew. Not merely had the Church to be freed from lay control, not merely had a series of canonical and moral abuses to be checked, but a new system of diocesan organisation had to be created where none existed before... This transplanting was a gigantic task.” The political upheaval which would have accompanied any drastic change in the political landscape could upset any of the delicate changes which were occurring.

While he was keeping the two kings in check, Cellach attended the Synod of Rathbreasail, in which Ireland was divided up into territorial dioceses (and in which the territory of the Cenél Conaill was allotted to Mac Lochlainn’s home diocese of Derry). By the time Muirchertach Ua Briain and Domnall Mac Lochlainn had each died, Cellach was well-prepared to have his work continue posthumously. He appointed one Malachy, a reformer, his successor, spurning his own Clann Sínaich dynasty and furthering the cause of the reform even after his death in 1129.

Malachy was opposed by a Clann Sínaich candidate, Muirchertach mac Domnaill meic Amalgada, who rejected the reforms of Rathbreasail and

attempted to stymie the reform process.<sup>38</sup> Malachy at first refused to return to Armagh on the basis of his opposition, but by 1132, he agreed to return and take up his office. At this point in history, the paths of the Cenél nEogain and Malachy ran at cross purposes: Conchobar Mac Lochlainn, who was in possession of the kingship in 1132, was in favor of the Clann Sínaich representative, most likely because he had been required to deal with him over the past three years, and was loath to give up any political headway he had made. Malachy continued to play the part of the pious reformer, never once offering to fight Muirchertach with an army.

After Muirchertach died, Malachy had another chance to obtain his position. Niall, Cellach's brother, claimed the offices, and due to immense pressure from Cenél nEogain and the Clann Sínaich, he was installed as the *comarb* of Patrick. Unfortunately for the Clann Sínaich, their connections with the Cenél nEogain would fail them, and with the death of Conchobar Mac Lochlainn, they were left without a truly powerful ally. Malachy, in an adroit political maneuver, seems to have turned to the king of Airgialla, Donnchad Ua Cerbaill, as his sponsor, and used his power to vault himself into the position of *comarb*, driving out Niall.

The battle over reforms in the most powerful of Irish sees having been won, Malachy stepped down from the position, and appointed one Gilla Mac Liag, abbot of Derry, as his successor.<sup>39</sup> The aims of the reform movement were truly realized in 1152 at the Synod of Kells, where the continental system of Christianity was finally promulgated, and the older system finally put to

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<sup>38</sup> Ó Fiaich, 118-9 contains an incredibly effective and insightful interpretation of the situation of the Irish people and ecclesiastical community at the time. See also O'Dwyer, 7-8, for a brief summary of the reform movement.

<sup>39</sup> AFM 1136. Ó Fiaich gives this as 1137. As we shall see later, this is significant to the revival of the *familia* of Columba.

rest. Armagh was given its place at the head of the Irish Church, and its archbishop was awarded the primacy of all of Ireland.

The reform movement in Ireland was a momentous undertaking, at the very least. It involved not only changing an hereditary system which had been in place since time immemorial, but also rejecting the claims of any number of religious sites to be the most important in all of Ireland. What it did, interestingly, by confirming the primacy of the *comarb* of Patrick, was also confirm his primacy among the Irish saints in a diplomatically kind fashion. To convince any abbot of a monastery devoted to, for example, Colm Cille, that his own chosen saint was less than Patrick could only have given each churchman pause. The relative ease with which the reform movement spread throughout Ireland is a testament to the Irish ecclesiastical community's desire to join with a system that had been engineered over many years on the continent, so that they could in fact be part of a larger whole.

## Chapter 3 – Post-Domnall Cenél nEogain Politics and the Rise of Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn (1121-1149)

After the death of Domnall Mac Lochlainn, the identity of the successor to the kingship of Cenél nEogain was in some doubt. Niall Mac Lochlainn, Domnall's son and *ridomna Ailigh ocus Erenn* died at the hands of the Cenél Moain<sup>40</sup> on December 15, 1119.<sup>41</sup> Since Domnall himself died just fifteen months later, it is not unreasonable to suggest that he had barely selected a successor and had not even had time to solidify his successor's place after him before he died. Domnall did still have a mature son, Conchobar, and a brother, Magnus. Irish succession at the time appears to have been largely at the discretion of only the most powerful rulers: he would make the decision about whom he would appoint as his heir or, in the case of Toirdelbach Ua Briain (who does not seem to have made any formal decision on his heir), the province would be split up amongst his potential heirs, and the strongest of those would eventually come to dominate the others.<sup>42</sup> Domnall had obviously selected a specific candidate to succeed him as king of Aileach, but since he and his successor died within a year and a half of each other, the situation immediately devolved into the situation that many lines encountered: a power struggle that sent the province into temporary insignificance. After Domnall's death, Conchobar took the throne, but he never held the sway that Domnall had.

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<sup>40</sup> The Cenél Moain were ruled by the Ua Gailmredaig line, who, as we shall see later, had a further impact on the face of Cenél nEogain politics in the mid-twelfth century. AI 1120 states that Niall was killed by his own people. Technically, Niall was king of Cenél Conaill at the time, and was instead killed by a tribe from Tír nEogain.

<sup>41</sup> AU 1119§8, AI 1120§3, MIA 1119§1, LC 1119. Note that this was after the death of Muirchertach Ua Briain and (except in Mac Carthaig's Book) before Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair took the kingship of Ireland.

Conchobar was immediately beset by problems from multiple sides. Ulaid, ever on the watch for weakness in their western neighbors, raided Tír nEogain shortly after Domnall's death, but Conchobar was able to turn back the raid. In 1122<sup>43</sup>, Conchobar began to make his case for his legitimacy as the king of the north. He raided Fir Manach and Ulaid that year, and was victorious over both of them, but Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair had already established a measure of supremacy over the south of Ireland.

Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair had been king of Connacht since 1106, and his allegiance in the struggles between Muirchertach Ua Briain and Domnall Mac Lochlainn had never been anything but fluid. As shown by his betrayal of Mac Lochlainn in 1114, Toirdelbach was one of those who found personal gain in keeping the balance of power between the north and the south in place for as long as possible. His reasons could have been more simple than those of Armagh, however. Muirchertach Ua Briain and Domnall Mac Lochlainn were each aging, and Toirdelbach, who was still quite young<sup>44</sup>, probably saw in his youth a chance for greater power. When Muirchertach Ua Briain fell ill and his brother, Diarmait, usurped the kingship of Munster, a defeat of Munster by the north would have left Toirdelbach facing an overwhelmingly powerful Mac Lochlainn kingship. By betraying Domnall, he stymied the hopes of the north for the high-kingship and left the path open for himself later on. As it turned out, Muirchertach regained some measure of

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<sup>42</sup> For more on regnal succession in the period, see Ó Corráin, 1971, especially 33-34.

<sup>43</sup> AU 1122§4, AI 1122§9 show an interesting arrangement between two powerful kings. Mór, daughter of Domnall mac Lochlainn, was apparently also the wife of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair. This, of course, leads one to question the diplomatic arrangement between Ulster and Connacht immediately preceding Domnall's death. Domnall's own wife had been a daughter of Cennétig Ua Briain, one of the dissidents who came to rule Tulach Óg, which could only have led to further problems between Cenél nEogain and the Uí Briain. Despite his Mac Lochlainn wife, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair's son, Ruadrí, was his son by Sadb, the daughter of a minor chieftain of what is now Roscommon, as detailed in the *Prose Banshenchus in Lec.*, transcribed by Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin.

<sup>44</sup> AU 1088§6 is a retrospective birthdate, making him but 26 years old at the time of his betrayal of Mac Lochlainn.

power, but died too soon to exercise any of it. Domnall was also unable to cement his own high-kingship, and Toirdelbach took the position almost by default.

The ensuing years were a fall from prominence for the family of Mac Lochlainn. Conchobar Mac Lochlainn himself may have had difficulty holding on to the kingship of Cenél nEogain. According to some confusing entries in the annals, he may have given up power to his uncle and Domnall's brother, Magnus Mac Lochlainn.<sup>45</sup> This leads to several possibilities for how the situation in the north may have played out. Firstly, Domnall may have been unable to decide which of the two he would give power to, or may not have been able to implement any decision, and left the disposition of the kingship of Tír nEogain to the remaining claimants, *á la* Toirdelbach Ua Briain.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, and more likely, Conchobar may have been deposed by Magnus, as was not uncommon at the time. Whichever the case, Magnus did not remain in power for long. In 1128, Magnus was killed by a contingent of the Cenél Moain, led by Domnall Ua Gailmredaig, and his obituary in MIA lists him as "king of Oileach."<sup>47</sup>

When Conchobar regained the kingship of Cenél nEogain, he showed that he had the same high aspirations that his father had. He set about creating a grand alliance of Ulster, bringing the Ulaid and Cenél Conaill to his side, and in 1130, he invaded Connacht, intending to take advantage of

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<sup>45</sup> MIA 1126§8 and 9 chronicle some of Magnus's exploits. Unfortunately, they do not mention Conchobar mac Lochlainn or the political situation in the north at the time. MIA 1126§10 mentions a "Conchobar son of Ardghar mac Lochlainn," but Conchobar was Domnall's son, and therefore Ardgar's grandson. This may be a mistake on the part of the chronicler, who may have meant either Magnus (Ardgar's son) or perhaps "Conchobar grandson of Ardgar..." This just serves to highlight the confusion surrounding the kingship of Cenél nEogain at the time. There is another possibility, which is less likely: that Domnall and Magnus had another brother, Conchobar, who was king of Aileach for a time, but this is not supported by the contemporary king-list in LL.

<sup>46</sup> Ó Corráin, 1972, 142. Toirdelbach Ua Briain does not appear to have decreed any specific disposition of his kingdom after his death, since there is no entry in AU or AI listing any heir-designate of Munster.



Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair's difficulties. Unfortunately, the Cenél Conaill were defeated by the men of Connacht and the alliance crumbled, Conchobar was forced to come to terms with Toirdelbach, and he retreated to the north, unsatisfied. Though he continued to press Toirdelbach, at one point obtaining the submission of Toirdelbach's erstwhile northern ally, Tigernan Ua Ruairc of Breifne,<sup>48</sup> he was unsuccessful in ever defeating Connacht. Conchobar would make just one more expedition outside his own borders before being killed in 1136 by the men of Mag Itha.<sup>49</sup>

From there, the kingship of Aileach appears to have been in doubt for a brief period. By 1139, a grandson of Domnall, one Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, had taken the kingship. He was a son of Niall Mac Lochlainn, Domnall's onetime heir, and, for a time, it appeared that his rule would be as uninspiring as his uncle's. He is mentioned first in AFM 1136 as the slayer of one Gillamura ua hOgain, a member of a prominent Tulach Óg family, and is first named king of Aileach in AFM 1139 as the avenger of his uncle, Conchobar. Aside from those entries, however, he is not mentioned at all between 1139 and 1143.

In 1143, the feud between the Uí Gailmredaig and the Mac Lochlainns came to a head when Domnall Ua Gailmredaig expelled Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn from the kingship of Aileach. Cenél nEogain was ruled by Domnall for the next two years, and based on the lack of annal entries regarding him, it appears that he may have been considered a usurper by the

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<sup>47</sup> MIA 1128§1.

<sup>48</sup> Ó Corráin, 1972, 156.

<sup>49</sup> AFM 1136, MIA 1139§1. See also Simms, 1999, 152. Domnall Ua Gailmredaig's control of Mag Itha only contributed to the bitter feud between them and the Mac Lochlainn dynasty. AFM 1139 mentions, as described below, Muirchertach mac Lochlainn avenging himself on Mathghamhain Ua Dubhda for the death of Conchobar, providing another possibility. Unfortunately, as has been mentioned before, the more dependable annals (AU, AI, LC) have great gaps in this period, forcing researchers to use other, less reliably authored and dated, for their sources.

chroniclers and the people in general, and was constantly defending his position against internal and external attack. Whatever the case, Domnall Ua Gailmredaig did not further the cause of the Cenél nEogain and, in 1145, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn returned along with the Cenél Conaill to reinstate his own claims. He immediately allied with the Airgialla to drive Domnall Ua Gailmredaig out of the kingship, and by the end of the year, he had regained his former position as king of Cenél nEogain. The power of the Uí Gailmredaig was largely broken, and they did not trouble Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn again until the Battle of Mag Lugad in 1160.

With Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's defeat of the major internal dissident forces, he was able to put an end to the period of dynastic strife that had plagued the province since the untimely deaths of his father and grandfather. He was able to unite Cenél nEogain under a single ruler, and in 1147, he began his campaign to unify the north. Airgialla and the Cenél Conaill were already on his side, leaving only Ulaid to be pacified. He gathered his forces and, along with Donnchad Ua Cerbaill, king of Airgialla, marched on Ulaid. He defeated Cú Ulaid Ua Donn Sleibe, king of Ulaid, so completely that he was able to divide up Ulaid into four separate parts, each with its own kinglet, virtually dispossessing the primary Dal Fiatach dynasty.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, he was unable to maintain this situation, and within a year, Ulaid troubled him again.

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<sup>50</sup> MIA 1145-7§3, AFM 1147. Also Ó Corráin, 1972, 159. Note that the division of defeated, yet still potentially troublesome kingdoms had happened before under previous kings (Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair made a career out of dividing Meath up, as is discussed in the following chapter). This suggests that the Irish kings were moving away from chiefdom-level governance and towards a more feudalistic style of rule, in which they saw themselves as having rights not only to tribute but also over land that was not expressly theirs, which they could then reward helpful "vassals" with. This would seem to refute many older claims that the Irish did not have a "proper" system of government in place at the time of the Norman invasion and would never have been able to rule themselves: they were evolving a system similar to many early medieval feudalistic governments. Note also that AFM 1148 mentions the division into four in a different year from the invasion, and suggests that Donnchad Ua Cerbaill abandoned Mac Lochlainn due to his ferocity.

In 1148, Mac Lochlainn finally expelled Domnall Ua Gailmredaig to Connacht, removing his final rival for the kingship of the north, and becoming the first truly powerful king in Ulster since his grandfather's death in 1121. In an attempt to pacify Ulaid that year, he installed Donnchad Ua Cerbaill as its king.<sup>51</sup> Donnchad was deposed the following year, and Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn responded by making war on Ulaid until Cú Ulaid Ua Donn Sleibe was forced to submit to him and offer him hostages. For the next few years, Ulaid would be relatively dormant, and by 1149, all of the northern kingdoms were either allied to Cenél nEogain or had been subjugated by them.

This development was to have great ramifications in the future of Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's political career. The resulting pacification of Ulaid allowed Mac Lochlainn to look further afield and court new allies in the south. Tigernan Ua Ruairc, who had once followed his uncle against Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair, gave him hostages at Lugmad. Mac Lochlainn journeyed south to Dublin, where he was greeted by the brash king of Leinster, Diarmait Mac Murchada. The two of them concluded a solemn alliance, and Diarmait put both Leinster and Dublin at Mac Lochlainn's disposal.<sup>52</sup>

It is this period more than any that laid the actual foundation for Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's rise to an unchallenged high-kingship, arguably the first since before Clontarf. By allying with Tigernán Ua Ruairc,

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<sup>51</sup> AFM 1148, after mentioning the partition into four, also describes another invasion that year in which Mac Lochlainn "expelled Cuuladh [*sic*] Ua Duinnsleibhe from Ulidia, and placed Donnchadh [presumably, Ua Cerbaill] in his place." As mentioned above, it is probable that the Four Masters have misplaced the partitioning invasion. As for Donnchad Ua Cerbaill's kingship of Ulaid, he is not mentioned in the *Clann Ollaman Uaisle Emna*, and for good reason, since he would have been viewed as a usurper, and was the king of another province. He is described as holding "the kingship of Ulaidh" in MIA 1167. There is little to no information on anything that may have occurred while he was the nominal king of Ulaid.

Mac Lochlainn deprived Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair of one of his most powerful allies and opened Connacht's northern border to direct assault through Bréifne. By obtaining the submission of Leinster, he had also effectively immobilized Meath in what could only be considered a military vise, trapped as it was by Ulster, Leinster, and Bréifne. Munster had not yet recovered from Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair's crushing military campaigns in the early twelfth century, and was not quite prepared to challenge anyone else for the dominant position in Ireland. Now thoroughly established and allied with powerful rulers of other provinces, the grandson of Domnall Mac Lochlainn could proceed to take an honor that Domnall was never able to claim outright: the high-kingship of all Ireland.

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<sup>52</sup> AFM 1149.

## Chapter 4 – Allies and Enemies: Donnchad Ua Cerbaill, Diarmait Mac Murchada, and Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair

Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's power was not built on a military campaign in which he conquered the whole of Ireland. On the contrary, he never led a hostile army into several of the island's most powerful kingdoms. What Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn achieved that his predecessor, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair, had experienced difficulty with was forming solid, dependable alliances. Both Donnchad Ua Cerbaill and Diarmait Mac Murchada, kings of Airgialla and Leinster, respectively, kept their allegiances to Muirchertach, which allowed him the freedom he needed to deter any serious challenges to his kingship.

Donnchad Ua Cerbaill<sup>53</sup> was a member of a relatively recent ruling dynasty of the Airgialla. The Airgialla had lost a great deal of its political independence when they lost the battle of Leth Cam to the Cenél nEogain in 827. The Uí Chremthainn, who were the ruling dynasty of the northern Airgialla, were pushed somewhat southward and, over the following centuries, set up their rule in present-day Monaghan, subjecting the tribes there before them. The eleventh- and twelfth-century outgrowth of this line was the Ua Cerbaill dynasty, which took advantage of some of the confusion of Meath to push southwards even to the Boyne.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, by the time of the rise of the Mac Lochlainns to power in the north, the Airgialla had established themselves as one of the more powerful minor kingdoms. The historical dominance which the Cenél nEogain had

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<sup>53</sup> His pedigree is listed in Lec 79 r c as follows: “Doncad m. Concaisil m. Domnaíll m. Mathgamna m. Laidgna m. Cerbaill...” His father, Cú Chaísil, is given an obit in AU 1123§4.

<sup>54</sup> Byrne, 2001, 124-5. For further elaboration on the Battle of Leth Cam, see *ibid*, 211-229.

held over them continued largely unabated even throughout the periods of political confusion that followed the truncation of the primary Uí Néill dynastic line in 1036 with the death of Flaithbertach Ua Néill. When Domnall Mac Lochlainn came to power, the Airgialla formed a very small, but very important part of his sphere of influence, as we have seen. The diocese of Armagh proved one of his most faithful and convincing allies, and though the Airgialla's military contribution to Domnall Mac Lochlainn's quest for the high-kingship was virtually nonexistent, Armagh's efforts in holding off Muirchertach Ua Briain probably saved Domnall Mac Lochlainn several times.

Donnchad Ua Cerbaill came to power in Airgialla some time after the death of the king of Fernmag, Cúmide ua Crichain, in 1131.<sup>55</sup> In 1133, he and the Airgialla conducted a raid on the men of Meath, pushing as far as Drogheda. They were attacked there, and managed to defeat the men of Dublin and Meath. Two years later, Tigernan Ua Ruairc (whose vacillation as far as alliances are concerned has already been noted) made peace with Donnchad against Meath. The next year, Donnchad's nominal overlord, Conchobar Mac Lochlainn, was killed, and the Airgialla in general appear to have been nonparticipants in the struggles between Breifne and Meath that covered the next two years.

In 1138, the Airgialla actually supported the cause of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair against Murchadh Ua Maelsechnaill of Meath.<sup>56</sup> It is not completely clear exactly why they marched alongside a king who was not an Uí Néill, however, being allied with Tigernan Ua Ruairc, it is not unlikely that

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<sup>55</sup> AFM 1131. Donnchad Ua Cerbaill is first referred to as "king of Fearnmhagh" in an account of a raid in AFM 1133. MIA records this raid in 1136§1. The error may be attributable to the fact that MIA is missing the year 1133 and the entry was incorrectly transplanted.

<sup>56</sup> AFM 1138. Airgiallan rulers seem to have seldom supported kings who were not Uí Néill.

Donnchad Ua Cerbaill was honoring his agreement with Ua Ruairc (and pursuing an anti-Meath political agenda), rather than out of any specific affiliation with Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair.<sup>57</sup> Toirdelbach's expedition came to naught, however: Murchadh Ua Maelsechlainn had wisely allied with the ruler of Leinster and the Dublin Norse, one Diarmait Mac Murchada, whose career will be discussed later. Together, Ua Maelsechlainn and Mac Murchada managed to come to terms with Ua Conchobair, and the two sides exchanged hostages. Whatever agreement was reached does not appear to have provided for Ua Conchobair's allies, and the men of Meath conducted slash-and-burn raids against the Uí Briuin of Breifne and the Airgialla, destroying their crops.<sup>58</sup>

The following year, as we have seen, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn began to reassert the power of the Cenél nEogain in the north. His inability to hold and, after his exile, immediately retake his position, has been discussed above. From the time when Mac Lochlainn dethroned Ua Gailmredaig and allied with Ua Cerbaill to break the power of the Cenél Moain, Ua Cerbaill and Mac Lochlainn were virtually inseparable in a political sense. Ua Cerbaill, as we have seen, accompanied him on raids into Ulaid in 1147 and 1149. In the later years of Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's kingship, we shall see that Donnchad Ua Cerbaill played a major role in many of his campaigns, possibly a larger role than any ruler of Airgialla had ever taken on before.

Diarmait Mac Murchada's rise to power was substantially more violent than Donnchad's. The Uí Chennselaig had produced consecutive rulers of

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<sup>57</sup> Note also Tig 1155, which implies that Donnchad and Tigernan were half-brothers on their mother's side.

<sup>58</sup> Also AFM 1138. Note that there is no evidence of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair coming to the aid of either of his allies. Depredations of this sort are not very often recorded in the annals: destruction of enemy property could only have been punitive at this stage, as the raiders are not recorded as having carried off any spoils of any sort.

Leinster since Diarmait mac Mael na mBó soundly defeated the Uí Dúnlainge, but in 1127, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair made war on Leinster and deposed the Uí Chennselaig claimant to the throne, installing his son, Conchobar, instead.<sup>59</sup> Leinster and Dublin joined forces later in 1127 and revolted against Conchobar Ua Conchobair, Toirdelbach's son and their nominal lord, and deposed him.

Toirdelbach responded by handing the kingship of Leinster to Domnall mac Fáeláin of the Uí Dunlainge, the head of the rival dynasty. Domnall spent his short career attempting to destroy the power of the Uí Chennselaig, but between 1130 and 1135, Conchobar Mac Lochlainn, Conchobar Ua Briain, and the Uí Maelsechlainn rulers of Meath kept Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair from doing anything but defending his own territory. Within that time, Leinster was out from under the watchful eye of Toirdelbach, and they revolted, deposing Domnall mac Fáeláin. In his place, it appears that the people of Leinster installed Maelsechlainn mac Diarmait Mac Murchada of the Uí Chennselaig.<sup>60</sup> Maelsechlainn's kingship was not a long or quiet one. He was attacked in 1131 by Conchobar Ua Briain, who took hostages from him.

In 1132, Maelsechlainn was slain, and the kingship passed to his nephew, Diarmait Mac Murchada. We are quite fortunate to have a

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<sup>59</sup> Ó Corráin, 1972, 154. See also Byrne, 2001, 163 and 288-90. See Ó Cróinín, 283-284, for a concise and accurate appraisal of Uí Conchobair politics in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. To summarize the developments, a certain faction of the people of Connacht were of the opinion that Toirdelbach's younger son, Ruadrí, was better suited to rule Connacht than was either Toirdelbach himself or his chosen heir, Conchobar. Toirdelbach was blocked from executing Ruadrí by the church, it seems, and was unable to stabilize the internal situation with any amount of success. He attempted to remove his son from the political equation by handing him over to Tigernan Ua Ruairc (doubtless as a sort of gentle imprisonment), but due to the petitions of the church, he was released in 1143 (see AFM 1143). When Tadhg Ua Conchobair died in 1144, and Conchobar Ua Conchobair was killed the next year, Toirdelbach was forced to take on Ruadrí as his heir.

<sup>60</sup> See Ó Corráin, 1971, 26-27. Maelsechlainn's inheritance of the position of kingship is somewhat in doubt, and it is entirely possible that he and Diarmait Mac Murchada opposed each other's claims.



contemporary description of Diarmait: he is described by Giraldus

Cambrensis in the *Expugnatio Hibernia*:

“Diarmait was tall and well built, a brave and warlike man among his people, whose voice was hoarse as a result of constantly having been in the din of battle. He preferred to be feared by all rather than loved... He was inimical towards his own people and hated by others. ‘All men’s hands were against him, and he was hostile to all men.’”<sup>61</sup>

Diarmait wasted no time in establishing himself as a powerful force in Leinster. In 1134, he marched against Osraige and established himself as its titular overlord. When Cormac Mac Carthaig claimed the kingship of Osraige in 1136, Mac Murchada supported Mac Carthaig’s rival, Ua Briain, against him, in order to keep the balance of power in Munster. Unfortunately for that tenuous balance, Toirdelbach mac Diarmait Ua Briain had Cormac murdered in 1138, and took the kingship of Munster.

In 1138, as we have seen above, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair and his allies in Breifne and Airgialla invaded Meath, a conflict in which Diarmait Mac Murchada aligned himself against Toirdelbach. The conflict was settled without violence, but Toirdelbach returned two years later and expelled Murchadh Ua Maelsechlainn while Diarmait Mac Murchada was distracted both by keeping the Uí Briain at bay and by pacifying the Uí Dunlainge of northern Leinster. The next several years can be summed up as a confusing array of shifting alliances and submissions and invasions. Meath bore the brunt of this rapidly accelerating situation, and was partitioned not once, but twice, within the next five years, and Murchadh ua Maelsechlainn was expelled twice and dispossessed once.

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<sup>61</sup> Giraldus Cambrensis, 41.

Diarmait Mac Murchada had unfortunately been so preoccupied with his internal struggles against the Uí Dunlainge that he was forced to deliver up hostages to Toirdelbach in 1143. Toirdelbach Ua Conchobar installed his chosen heir, the ill-fated Conchobar, as the king of Meath that year, but early the next year, the people of Meath revolted and murdered him in an attempt to return Murchadh to the throne. Toirdelbach, who had now lost two sons in two years, appears to have determined that he could not hold on to Meath without the assistance of others, and in 1144 he invaded Meath once more, splitting it up into three, giving the western part to one Donnchad mac Muirchertaig Ua Maelsechnaill<sup>62</sup>, and dividing the eastern half between Tigernan Ua Ruairc and Diarmait Mac Murchada, whose help he required in maintaining Meath. After the conference of Terryglass with Ua Briain later that year, however, he took back the half he had given to Tigernan and Diarmait and returned it to Murchad Ua Maelsechlainn, and gave the other half to Donnchad's mac Muirchertach Ua Maelsechlainn.

Toirdelbach's efforts to better consolidate his power, however, were stymied by the fact that his sudden dispossession of Tigernan Ua Ruairc and Diarmait Mac Murchada caused them to renounce their alliances with Toirdelbach and chart their own political courses. Ua Briain himself violated the lifetime peace accords reached at Terryglass within the year, and Toirdelbach was once again beset on all sides by his enemies. By this time, however, the death knell for Toirdelbach's reign was sounding, and Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn had finally taken firm hold of the kingship of Cenél nEogain.

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<sup>62</sup> AFM 1144.

Diarmait Mac Murchada could only have recognized his position as being somewhat precarious. He was confronted by a newly revitalized Ua Briain line on his southwest, the destabilization of Meath in the north meant that any Uí Dunlainge claimant could conceivably win support there to bring to bear against him, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair's unpredictability faced him in the west. Tigernan Ua Ruairc, ever the opportunist, had been taking bites out of Meath since Toirdelbach's dispossession and, in 1149, he made submission to Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, finally abandoning his former master. After Mac Lochlainn obtained the submissions of Ua Cerbaill and Ua Ruairc, he marched through Meath, then south to Dublin, where Diarmait Mac Murchada handed over the hostages of Leinster to him without any resistance. Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair, whose internal problems and lack of allies were causing him unnumbered difficulties, finally agreed to submit to Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn in 1150.<sup>63</sup>

From this point onward, it is clear that Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn was by far the preeminent king in Ireland. Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair could hardly claim the kingship of Connacht, let alone the title of high-king. The Uí Briain in the south were certainly powerful, but they had been unsuccessful in pressing their cause outside their own borders. Leinster had already given its submission to Mac Lochlainn, and the north was relatively pacified. Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair never fully recovered from this, and, as we shall see, spent the rest of his time as king of Connacht without successfully reasserting his claims to the kingship of Ireland.

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<sup>63</sup> AFM 1150.

## Chapter 5 – The Early MacLochlainn High-Kingship (1150-1156)

With his major allies in place, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn was in position to begin his campaign for the high-kingship of Ireland. Obtaining the submission of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair allowed him to begin articulating his plans for the future of Ireland. Within the next six years, Mac Lochlainn was able to overcome all major obstacles to his kingship through adroit political maneuvering and multiple beneficial alliances.

After the submission of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair in 1150, the general consensus of the rulers in Ireland seems to have been that Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn was the most powerful king.<sup>64</sup> Muirchertach set about to divide up the much-troubled Meath once and for all<sup>65</sup> among Ua Conchobair, Ua Cerbaill, and Ua Ruairc. His intention, of course, was twofold: to pacify a potentially difficult territory, like Muirchertach Ua Briain and Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair before him, by dividing it up and fragmenting its political landscape, and also to reward his allies for their contributions to his campaign. Toirdelbach attempted this practice during his high-kingship with virtually no success; he was far too often changing his alliances and, every time he did so, a different partition ensued.

The one major rival to Mac Lochlainn remaining in the country, Toirdelbach Ua Briain, attempted to spoil Muirchertach's plans by invading southeastern Meath in late 1150, marching all the way to Sláine, but Mac Lochlainn's allies, Ua Cerbaill and Ua Ruairc, met him there and blocked his

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<sup>64</sup> AFM 1150: "*Mhuircirtach mac Néill hUi Lochlainn... righ Ereann.*" By obtaining the submission of the prior high-king, he, much like his grandfather Domnall, had catapulted himself into a position of much greater prominence than would seem possible.

<sup>65</sup> Apparently against the wishes of Armagh, as AFM 1150 indicates. Armagh might have taken exception to a complete disinheritance of the long-established line of the Uí Maelsechnaill.

army. While he was thus distracted, Ua Conchobair took this opportunity to fall on Munster, conducting one of his first successful raids on the province in years. Toirdelbach Ua Briain advanced unperturbed, however, and received the submission of the always volatile Dublin Norse. After that, he returned to Meath, where he was confronted by Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, who had come to the aid of his allies. The two of them appear to have made a year's peace with the aid of the Dublin Norse<sup>66</sup>, and they separated with minimal casualties.

As soon as the peace expired the following year, however, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair took advantage of the recent Uí Briain dynastic strife, in which Toirdelbach Ua Briain had been deposed by his brother, Tadc, to attack Munster. He defeated Tadc and conquered the greater part of Munster, leaving Toirdelbach Ua Briain as lord of West Munster and setting up Cormac Mac Carthaig as the lord of the balance of the province. After the invasion, Toirdelbach Ua Briain ventured out on a raid to Desmumu, when he encountered a massive army made up of the combined forces of Connacht, Bréifne, Meath, and Leinster, with all of their kings.

The battle that ensued at Móin Mór is recorded in the *Annals of the Four Masters* and *Mac Carthaig's Book* (where it represents the largest single entry) as being one of the bloodiest and most horrific battles ever fought on the soil of Ireland. AFM suggests that seven thousand men of Munster alone were killed, along with dozens of individual chieftains. AFM also tells that, of the

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<sup>66</sup> AFM 1150. This is derived from a note which reads thus: "...and the foreigners made a year's peace between Leath-Chuinn and Leath-Mhogha." Leth Cuinn is the ancient name for the people who produced the dynasty of the Uí Néill, and Leth Moga is the name for those who produced the Eoghanacht of Munster. See Byrne, 2001, 9. Some confusion over this may arise from the fact that, at least in a genealogical sense, the Uí Briain line was not a part of the Eoghanacht, not having been descended from Conall Corc, and therefore was not part of the original Leth Moga hegemony. False genealogical links, such as those which will be discussed in the following chapter, were forged as propaganda for the Dál gCais in the tenth century.

three battalions that Toirdelbach Ua Briain commanded which entered the battle, one barely survived, and the others were destroyed utterly. Of the higher nobility, Toirdelbach Ua Briain's nephew, Muirchertach, and Lughaidh, the son of his cousin, Domnall Ua Briain, were slain, along with Toirdelbach's troublesome brother, Tadhg Ua Briain. The power of the Uí Briain was broken in this encounter. They did not recover their influence for many years after the battle, and were not again of recorded political interest to Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn. Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair banished Toirdelbach Ua Briain and assumed the kingship of Munster for a time after that, but before the year was finished, he was summoned to Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's camp in Corann, near the lands of the Cenél Conaill, and there he submitted to him, giving him the hostages of Connacht.

It seems important here to address the traditional view of many historians on the dates of succession in the Irish high-kingship. It appears to have been agreed upon that the new high-king reigns both in name and in duties only after the death of the previous high-king. While this definition may hold true for earlier kings, those inaugurated before Brian mac Cennétig, it certainly does not hold true afterwards. Brian himself is widely acknowledged to have wrested the high-kingship from Maelsechlainn around 1007, and Maelsechlainn took it back after Brian's death at Clontarf in 1014. If this is the case, one must wonder why the reign of Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn is traditionally dated from 1156, when it is obvious that even Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair saw the necessity of submitting to him, and indeed why Muirchertach's grandfather, Domnall, is not included in several of the standard lists of the high-kings of Ireland at all.

This view appears to be influenced by the traditional ideas of kingship based on continental and Norman succession, rather than on the actual history of Ireland. The high-kingship is not an entity like that of the kingship of England at the same period in time, nor does it resemble the succession of kingly systems where one line had been the established royal family, and the inheritance was based on the death or abdication of the previous king within that one line. The high-kingship of Ireland was decided on a much more egalitarian basis where the best-qualified provincial king took the position. In that case, if the current high-king had fallen out of that preeminence, it is likely that a new, more powerful provincial king would rise up to take his place regardless of how long the high-king had left to reign, as we shall see.

Domnall Mac Lochlainn obtained the submission of Muirchertach Ua Briain in 1090, but even later than that, the illness which struck down Ua Briain caused him to be dispossessed of his own province. Muirchertach was a shadow of his former self afterwards, and Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair had not yet come to any major prominence. The only real candidate for the kingship of Ireland was Domnall Mac Lochlainn, who never suffered any major military defeat to either of the two, and who had obtained Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair's submission earlier in the year. Domnall Mac Lochlainn is often given a grudging two years between the death of Muirchertach Ua Briain and his own death, which does not seem to reflect at all the actual state of Irish royal politics at the time.

Similarly, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's kingship is almost invariably dated from the death of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair in 1156. As we have seen above, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair's position as king of all Ireland was in jeopardy as early as 1130. He made great strides by allying with Tigernan Ua

Ruairc and Diarmait Mac Murchada, but alienated them soon after, and was faced not only with a reunited north, but also a revitalized Munster. It is clear that the situation in Ireland was so far outside his control by about 1145 that, though he might still have held the title of high-king in name, he was not in any position to enforce his claims. Between 1145 and 1150, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn was building his own power, and by 1150, he had become so strong that Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair felt it necessary to submit to him to keep him from taking Connacht as well. The difference between Muirchertach Ua Briain's submission, which appears simply to have been a delaying tactic, and Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair's submission, is that Ua Conchobair appears to have actually acted on his submission to Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, not only following him in various punitive expeditions, but also submitting again after what can only be considered the greatest military victory of his career. While he may certainly have re-established himself as a powerful force in Ireland, he did not ever effectively challenge the supremacy of Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn again, and at best was the greatest of Mac Lochlainn's vassals. It is therefore not illogical to state that, by the evidence given in the annals, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's high-kingship actually began in 1150, rather than 1156. Until the death of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair, though, it would be appropriate to describe Mac Lochlainn as the "high-king with opposition."<sup>67</sup>

After the defeat of the Uí Briain, the political climate in Ireland cooled slightly. Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair and Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn made peace in 1152 "under the Staff of Jesus and the relics of Colum-Cille."<sup>68</sup> In this

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<sup>67</sup> AFM 1156 gives this designation to Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair: "*rí Connacht, Midhe, Breifne, Mumhan, agus Ereann uileco freasabhra,*" translated by O'Donovan as "King of Connaught, Meath, Breifne, and Munster, and of all Ireland with opposition." Again, based on the political considerations involved, it would seem appropriate to at least term Mac Lochlainn the high-king with opposition.

<sup>68</sup> AFM 1152. The Staff of Jesus was the crozier that St. Patrick supposedly obtained from a hermit on his trip to Rome to receive his ordination. The staff was supposedly an heirloom passed down from an



year, Mac Lochlainn and Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair agreed on partitions of both Munster and Meath. Munster was to be split into two parts: the eastern part would be ruled by Cormac Mac Carthaig, the west would be ruled by Toirdelbach Ua Briain. Meath was finally returned to Murchadh Ua Maelsechlainn, at least in part. He was allowed to return and rule half of it, while his son, Maelsechlainn, was given the other half. With the situations in Meath and Munster relatively settled, Ua Conchobair and Mac Lochlainn turned on Tigernan Ua Ruairc, each having his own reasons for disliking him. They razed his fortresses and took the kingship from him, and in one of the most storied abductions in the history of Ireland, Diarmait Mac Murchada spirited away Derbhforgaill, daughter of Murchadh Ua Maelsechlainn and Tigernan Ua Ruairc's wife.<sup>69</sup> Though there seems to be no valid reason for this given in the annals, the abduction had few immediate political ramifications, though it may have belied a change in Meath's preferred alliances by supporting Mac Murchada over Ua Ruairc. It is possible that Derbhforgaill's father and brother (the latter of whom advised her to leave with Mac Murchada) feared for her safety after the incursions by Mac Lochlainn and Ua Conchobair and convinced her to flee to safety.

Whichever the case, Tigernan Ua Ruairc was deprived of the kingship of Bréifne, and Mac Lochlainn had theoretically constructed a viable network of allies who allowed him to hold the high-kingship. In 1153, however, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair entertained notions of a return to dominance, taking back Derbhforgaill from Diarmait Mac Murchada. He expelled

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ancestor who had gotten it directly from Christ himself. The actual relic was often used to put a special gravity on settlements and legal contracts. The staff was destroyed in 1538 by an anti-Catholic mob in Dublin, recorded under AU 1538 as follows: "The image of Mary of the town of Ath-truim and the Holy Cross of Baile-Ui-Bogain and the Staff of Jesus were burned by the Saxons this year." The *Bachall Isu* is first referred to in AU 1073§2.

<sup>69</sup> AFM 1152. Ua Ruairc's throne was taken by Gilla Braide ua Ruairc.

Toirdelbach Ua Briain from Munster and made his own partition, giving half to Tadc Ua Briain and the other half to Diarmait mac Cormac Mac Carthaig. He mustered his army, throwing a temporary bridge across the Shannon at Athlone, and marched against Mac Lochlainn, who had gathered his followers in support of Toirdelbach Ua Briain, and the two armies met near Portlick in what is now County Westmeath.<sup>70</sup> He was soundly defeated by Mac Lochlainn, who apparently split his army and dealt with each threat individually, defeating first the Uí Briain threat, then a force from Leinster (likely a force from the often-rebellious northern tribes), and finally regrouping and attacking the men of Connacht. At Fordruim, the army of Connacht was ambushed by Mac Lochlainn and soundly defeated. Toirdelbach's grandson, Muirchertach, was killed there, and Tadc Ua Briain was taken prisoner and blinded. Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn took the submission of Maelsechlainn mac Murchadh Ua Maelsechlainn, to whom he not only gave the entire kingship of Meath, but also put him in charge of the northern tribes of Leinster, Uí Faelain and Uí Failghe, who had been giving Diarmait Mac Murchada so much trouble. Mac Lochlainn apparently realized a political error in offending Tigernan Ua Ruairc and gave Bréifne and Conmaicne back to him, and Derbforgaill was returned to Tigernan by Ua Maelsechlainn. Toirdelbach Ua Briain retook his half of Munster, and the temporary bridge at Athlone was destroyed by Ua Maelsechlainn.

The following year, Ua Conchobair again challenged Mac Lochlainn by mounting a major naval expedition which sailed northeast around Ireland, circumventing the barrier created by Mac Lochlainn's allies, and raided the

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<sup>70</sup> AFM 1153. Whether or not Tigernan Ua Ruairc fought on the side of Ua Conchobair is in doubt. Also, AFM has Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair's army in Westmeath, then crossing at Athlone, then back in Westmeath once more.

very center of his power in Inis nEogain and the coastline of Tír nEogain. Mac Lochlainn responded by hiring Viking mercenaries from the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. The mercenary forces sailed to relieve the Cenél nEogain and encountered Toirdelbach's naval forces off the coast of Inis nEogain and they fell together in one of the greatest naval battles of the twelfth century. Both fleets were bloodied afterwards, but the mercenaries had the worst of it, and their fleet was broken. Since there are no accounts of any further sea raids that year, one may infer that Ua Conchobair's naval forces were sufficiently damaged that they could no longer effectively raid the north. Mac Lochlainn responded by attacking Connacht on land, ravaging the province, then showed his gratitude to the Norse by exchanging a gift of 1500 cows for their submission to him.

Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair continued to press Mac Lochlainn, however. When Maelsechlainn Ua Maelsechlainn was treacherously poisoned in 1155, Mac Lochlainn installed Donnchad mac Domnaill Ua Maelsechlainn as his successor. Toirdelbach moved to block his kingship, throwing yet another bridge over the Shannon at Athlone, but after some mild predation, the bridge was burned by the men of Meath and he was forced to retreat. Donnchad unfortunately offended a faction of his people, who deposed him and appointed his brother, Diarmait, in his place. The following year, Toirdelbach made his greatest attempt yet to regain his position. He obtained the submission of Ua Briain, mediated a settlement that brought him the support of Leinster, and came to a peace agreement with Bréifne and the still-reeling Meath. With his grand alliance in place, he hoped to attack and finally defeat Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn. Toirdelbach, though, was sixty-eight, and when he died in the summer of 1156, his death

caused the alliance to crumble and the province of Connacht to fade briefly into relative political unimportance.

Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn had weathered the challenges of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair without allowing any break in his internal political situation. Except for the minor raiding incursions in 1154, he never allowed any invasions of his own territory, and no hostile army ever came into the north against him. Through adroit political maneuvering, he managed to keep the situation in Meath largely under control, and though he made an error in allowing the situation regarding Tigernan Ua Ruairc to be exacerbated by Diarmait Mac Murchada, he was still able to retain overall control of the situation in Ireland. For the next several years, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn would be the first unchallenged king of Ireland since before Brian mac Cennetig.

## Chapter 6 – The Case for a King: Medieval propaganda in literature and law

The early and middle twelfth century in Ireland was tumultuous, to say the least. The reins of power changed hands four separate times within about forty years, as Muirchertach Ua Briain, Domnall Mac Lochlainn, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, and finally Ruadhri Ua Conchobair claimed the high-kingship. With so many different high-kings, and in such an obviously vital and active political climate, it is not surprising that aspirants to the high-kingship would have found ways to augment their military and political maneuverings. Propaganda, often in the form of poetry and legal commentary, took on a great deal of importance to both the aspiring rulers and to their followers.

The most relevant of these propaganda pieces is one known as “The Circuit of Ireland by Muirchertach mac Néill.” To give some background on the poem, which has been thoroughly analyzed by both the eminent John O’Donovan and, more recently, by Donnchad Ó Corráin, it discusses a ritualistic trek made around the island by a member of the northern Uí Néill who aspires to the high-kingship. The king in question seems to be one Muirchertach mac Niall (named in the old patronymic style), who lived in the early and middle tenth century A.D. He was king of Ulster, according to AU, from the death of his father, Niall, in 919, until February 26, 943, when he was killed by the Vikings. He is not listed in Byrne among the high-kings of Ireland.<sup>71</sup> He led several expeditions against the Vikings of Dublin, and specifically encountered Gothfrith and his sons on several occasions. He was

the father of the next high-king of Ireland to come from the northern Uí Néill, Domnall ua Néill.

John O'Donovan makes a case for the poem as a contemporary work that was composed about the year 941 by Cormacan, a close companion of Muirchertach mac Néill, who supposedly died in 946, according to the heading of the poem.<sup>72</sup> This, however, cannot be the case. As a contemporary, and ostensibly one who went on this circuit with Muirchertach, it would be very hard to believe that he would mistake the names of kings who were reigning at that time. Regardless, there are other valid reasons for discarding the notion that it is a tenth-century work. Ó Corráin gave special attention to this matter in the *Festschrift* for Francis John Byrne by saying that "*Circuit* cannot belong linguistically to the middle of the tenth century: the language and style are no earlier than the twelfth."<sup>73</sup> This presents a rather attractive possibility that Ó Corráin explored in his article: due to its linguistic "age," the poem is in fact about another Muirchertach, son of Niall. Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's father, Niall Mac Lochlainn, was the overlord of the Cénel Conaill until his premature death in 1129, as discussed above. If it was composed in this period, therefore, it must have some value to the resident dynasty and therefore can be examined for possible use as contemporary propaganda.

If one assumes, therefore, that Muirchertach mac Néill represents Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, the poem may now be examined for more direct links to the political scene in Ireland in the mid-twelfth century. Firstly, the poem tells of Muirchertach mac Néill leading a hosting from Aileach, the ancestral "capital" of the Cenél nEogain, which does little more than confirm

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<sup>71</sup> Byrne, 2001, 276. He is credited as the *rigdomna Erenn* in the genealogies later on.

<sup>72</sup> O'Donovan, 1841, 25. O'Donovan's translation of the poem is quoted and referred to throughout.

that the narrative is an heroic poem about the dynasts of the Uí Neill. When Muirchertach mac Néill leaves on his circuit, however, multiple parallels arise between the people he encounters on his hostage-taking expedition and the political figures present in Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's century.

The first stop mac Néill makes is Ulaid. There, he takes hostage one Loingseach of Liné, who O'Donovan claims is a chieftain of Mag Line.<sup>74</sup> In the historical record, there is a Loingsech, king of Dál nAraide, whose obituary is chronicled in AU 932§4. What is interesting about this is that a contemporary chronicler writing about a journey made in 941 would not be likely to misdate a neighboring king's death by nine years, especially if he was, as AFM 946 states, a retainer to Muirchertach mac Néill's father, Niall Glúndub.

Shortly thereafter, Muirchertach mac Néill takes captive the king of Ulaid, whose fort is at Dun Eochaid, and brings him on his circuit with him. This has an interesting parallel with later events: Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's chief foe in Ulster was Ulaid, and both Dál nAraide and the southern Ulaid gave him no end of trouble. Also, the mention of the night spent at Magh Rath and the fact that Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn fought one of his most important battles against the Ulaid there is not likely to be entirely coincidental. By having the ancestors of the two major kingly lines of Ulaid taken under his ancestor's power, he establishes a prior claim to them, a theory that shall be discussed below.

Mac Néill then moves southward, skirting Meath<sup>75</sup>, and arrives in Dublin. There, he takes prisoner one Sitric, who, in context, represents the

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<sup>73</sup> Ó Corráin, 2001, 239.

<sup>74</sup> O'Donovan, 1841, 30. Ó Corráin, 2001, 241 discusses Loingseach's purpose to the narrative as well as his historicity.

<sup>75</sup> At the end of the poem, there is an interesting little passage that discusses the possession of Magh Breagh by mac Néill: this is likely a simple reference to the traditional use of Tara as a high-king's capital. It is also possible, however, that it is a reference to the several divisions of Meath that

king of Dublin. While Dublin had not been in existence for very long (at least, relatively), by the time the poem is set in, it had by then developed into a powerful enough entity to merit a military leader, if not a king. O'Donovan noted, and Ó Corráin notes, that no Sitric was king of Dublin in the tenth century.<sup>76</sup> Ó Corráin names an Olaf Gothfridson as king until 939, and then an Olaf Cuarán until 941. There was, however, a most famous Sitric, later on: Brian mac Cennetig's famous foe, Sitric Silkenbeard. While it is somewhat impossible that a tenth-century king took an eleventh-century monarch captive, it is an obvious literary device used in constructing a period propaganda piece. His character's significance to the argument for preordained dominance will be discussed later, as well.

In his discussion on the state of Dublin at the time, Ó Corráin attempts to make sense of the debate surrounding Dublin-area agricultural development in the tenth century. He disagrees with an argument that suggests that, since Dublin was relatively new, it was unlikely that they had been able to provide the bacon and wheat from their stores that was taken by mac Néill as tribute and that it may have been imported, if it could have been given at all.<sup>77</sup> This would indeed seem to be a rather hasty conclusion: Dublin had been in existence for several decades at this point, and to assume that agrarianism had not pushed outward into the fertile valleys would be counterintuitive. It is more likely that farms existed there long before the Vikings came, and that, if nothing else, they imitated the farmers who preceded them. Unfortunately, several historians have taken *Circuit* on as proof of the existence of highly developed agriculture in the tenth century

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Muirchertach mac Lochlainn carried out during his kingship, which essentially made him the nominal overlord and sponsor of Meath.

<sup>76</sup> O'Donovan, 1841, 34; Ó Corráin, 2001, 242-3. Ó Corráin's chronology of the rulers of Dublin also implies that they might not even have had a stable leader at that point.



Liffey valley. The questions about its validity as a contemporary source at least detract from using it as proof, if they do not debunk it altogether. It makes sense, then, that the historians who proclaim that agrarianism was highly developed near Dublin at the time have the right idea, but have perhaps arrived at it by the wrong means.

After his time in Dublin, Muirchertach mac Néill moves to Leinster and places the king, Lorcan, in chains, and carries him away with them as well.<sup>78</sup> After the death of Donnchad mac Diarmaita (Donnchad Máel na mBó) in 1006, the kingship of Leinster fell into confusion, and a brief interlude before Diarmait mac Máel na mBó took the throne saw the rise of a family who claimed descent from one Lorcán in the past. Máel Mórda mac Lorcáin and his brother, Tadhg, each held the kingship of Leinster between Diarmait and his father, and were in control of Leinster during their alliance with the Dublin Norse before and during Clontarf in 1014. There is an occurrence of a Lorcan in the history of the Leinster kingship in the mid-ninth century but his reign was short and did not coincide with any circuit Muirchertach mac Néill made, so it can certainly be inferred that the Lorcan mentioned is actually the progenitor of the minor Uí Lorcán family. The symbolism of the fetter on the hostage king may be that it represents a deterrent for all the enemies of Mac Lochlainn's allies and of Ireland in general.

In Munster, Muirchertach mac Néill receives his strongest resistance. He enters Ossory relatively easily, receiving hostages and meeting no enemy forces. He passes through part of Munster "with cheerfulness and with willingness, / *By the Desies and the good men of Munster.*"<sup>79</sup> It is the O'Briens

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<sup>77</sup> O Corráin, 2001, 200.

<sup>78</sup> O'Donovan, 1841, 37-9. Note for the discussion of the Uí Chennselaig and Uí Lorcain/Uí Faelain Ó Corráin, 1971, 17ff.

<sup>79</sup> O'Donovan, 1841, 41. Emphasis his.

who cause him his greatest difficulty. They swarm around Cashel and give battle to him, causing him to sweep them from his path in a bloody victory. A certain Callaghan, the king of Munster, pleads with his men to let them pass, to let them rule, and offers himself up as a hostage in a decidedly honorable gesture. What is intriguing is that, according to O'Donovan, "he is the ancestor of the families of Mac Carthy and O'Callaghan."<sup>80</sup> The Callaghan recorded is one Cellachán Caisil, whose obit is recorded in AU 954, and who is the great-grandfather of Carrthach, the nominal forebear of the Mac Carthaig line. The honorable action of a Mac Carthaig ancestor and the defeat of the men of Cashel indicate a bias on the author's part for one family over the other, and certainly form the stuff of propaganda literature.

Finally, Muirchertach makes his way into Connacht, where he encounters his last major foe, Conchobar mac Taidc, its king. Unlike the others, however, Conchobar submits to him readily, and goes with him in captivity to Aileach. There is no historical importance to this passage in the discussion of Muirchertach mac Néill: Conchobar mac Tadhg was king of Connacht from 966 to 973, almost two dozen years after Muirchertach died. Once again, the problem with contemporaneity arises, and the notion of a tenth-century author may, at this point, be effectively and finally dismissed.

Analysis of this section is rather less complicated than previous ones, if only because there is so little information to be gained from it. Given the fact that this is almost certainly a propaganda poem for Mac Lochlainn, the passage on Connacht would seem to be a rather pithy commentary on the actions of another king, but there are two possible reasons for this passage's existence. One is that this part of the poem was written as a piece that would

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<sup>80</sup> O'Donovan, 1841, 45, note on line 115.

urge the king of Connacht to make a submission to Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, the other is that he had previously made such a submission and this merely commemorated his good sense in doing so.

Regardless of which is correct, the concept of ancestral submission guaranteeing the right to present submission is once again expressed by the poet's creative use of dynastic history. Conchobar mac Taidc was, in fact, an ancestor of the Uí Conchobair line of rulers of Connacht, whose final royal descendants, Toirdelbach and Ruadri, were two of the last high-kings of Ireland. By showing Conchobair giving himself freely as a hostage in the past, the author seems to hope that the current Ua Conchobair, whether Toirdelbach or Ruadhri, will make the same inspired decision.

In his final leg of the journey, mac Néill passes through Breifne with a victory (a slight warning to Mac Lochlainn's erstwhile ally, Tigernan Ua Ruairc), and is welcomed openly into the lands of the Cénel Conaill, which was a steadfast ally of the Cénel nEogain in the mid-twelfth century. He returns home to Aileach with great joy and feasting and is proclaimed the high-king by his jubilant companions. A long set of accolades follows, and the poem seems to conclude with some sort of cheer for Muirchertach (mac Néill or Mac Lochlainn).

Since it has been shown that the poem cannot be, as O'Donovan suggested, a contemporary poem dating back to the tenth century, Ó Corráin's argument that it is linguistically twelfth-century must take precedence. From this argument, one may infer that, if it is about any representative of the Uí Néill of the twelfth century, it is certain to be about the one Muirchertach in their line who was in any position of power at the time. Knowing this, a very slim period of time in which the poem might have

been composed may be deduced. Mac Lochlainn reigned in Cenél nEogain between about 1139 and 1143, and 1145 and 1166. The first of these periods may be discarded, as Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn was still trying to consolidate his power over the north, and was in no position to embark on a royal circuit of Ireland. Mac Lochlainn's unchallenged high-kingship begins after 1156, and therefore any date after that is somewhat less likely to be correct; at that point he would have had little need to claim any ancestral dominance over anyone, since he was in fact ruling in his own capacity. This leaves a period between 1145 and 1156 when the poem most probably might have been composed. For the first two years or so, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn was in the midst of his final struggles with Domnall Ua Gailmredaig, and until his expulsion in 1147, Muirchertach's kingship of Cenél nEogain was still in question. Muirchertach first received important submissions in 1149, when Diarmait Mac Murchada and Tigernan Ua Ruairc submitted to him, so the poem probably dates from some time between then and 1156. More interesting is the description of the bloody battle with the Uí Briain and the peaceable nature of the Mac Carthaigs. As was discussed above, the battle of Móin Mór was the effective end of the power of the Uí Briain in the twelfth century, and an account of a bloody battle between where they are defeated, followed immediately by a submission from the ruler of Connaught, looks rather suspect. It seems likely, therefore, that the poem in question was written around 1152, after the battle of Móin Mór, but before Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair regained any substantial amount of his former political sway.

The most important aspect of the poem is that which puts forth a concept of ancestral dominance. The poet presents the case to the audience that submissions need not be given to the current, living representative of the

family to be valid, that if Muirchertach mac Néill, the illustrious ancestor of Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, received these submissions, then the provinces and rulers of Mac Lochlainn's era submitting to Mac Lochlainn is a foregone conclusion, and need not be seriously questioned. Also, by mac Néill taking into custody the ancestors of his contemporaries (or greatest cultural representatives), the poet establishes a strong and continuous theme of Uí Néill dominance that stretches far back, reducing all important representatives of the ruling lines to little more than names.

The propaganda of *Circuit* is not the exception in twelfth-century Irish literature, but appears to be the rule. Two other tracts, *Cert Cech Ríg co Réil* ("The Rights Due to Every King"), and *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* ("The War of the Gael with the Foreigners"), are propaganda tracts for the Uí Néill and the Uí Briain, respectively. The first, *Cert Cech Ríg Co Reil*, is less a legal document than a praise poem. It details what an Uí Néill king can expect to receive from other kings, but is much more far-reaching in scope. Other provincial kingdoms are mentioned in it, and their own tributes are detailed by the poet, as though they were always subject to an Uí Néill lord. The poet gives advice to the king of the Uí Néill that all of Ireland is his to have. The poem itself was ostensibly addressed to Aed Oirdnide, high-king of Ireland, who died in 819, though the language is of the late tenth to twelfth centuries. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, which dates from the early twelfth century,<sup>81</sup> is another tract which praises its chosen dynasty and supports that dynasty's claim to the high-kingship. The tract, the subject of which has survived admirably, and with great popularity, to this day, is about the war against the Vikings and the struggles of the Dál gCais to defend Ireland. The tract

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<sup>81</sup> Ó Corráin, 1978, 31. Todd notes that the tract was copied into LL between 1148 and 1166.

characterizes them as “brutal and ferocious tyrants, plunderers of the church and enslavers of the Irish”<sup>82</sup> It has been persuasively argued that the Vikings at that point were nothing of the kind, and that many of those pseudohistorians who wrote such things were either creating or adding to propaganda.

Ancestral dominance is a theme that was almost a given part of pre-Norman Irish literature, especially as it related to the kingships of the various provinces and, specifically, which line was ruling those provinces at the time. The Uí Néill and Mac Lochlainn praise poems and legal tracts are not the only ones remaining of Ulster propaganda literature. *Clann Ollaman Uaisle Emna*, translated by Francis John Byrne, is an enumeration of the sixty-odd kings of of Ulaid and their particular exploits, written while Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn was king of Cenél nEogain and the ill-fated Eochaid Mac Duínn Sleibe was king of Ulaid. Of course, the poem is less complimentary to the Cenél nEogain and the Uí Néill than it is to the Ulaid, and it is apparent that the poet had no great love for his neighbors to the west. In particular, he finds the treatment of Donn Sleibe mac Eochaid odious, and mocks the Cenél nEogain for their glee over their “violent deed.”<sup>83</sup> The poet also claims that, since the Ulaid once ruled great parts of Ireland and, indeed, ruled all of it, that they were deserving of the position once more, and that they would once again rise to their former prominence.

Claims of ancestral dominance is not confined solely to medieval Irish literature. More often than not, they are used by a particular dynasty or political body to further a claim that is not always logically consistent with

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<sup>82</sup> Ó Corráin, 1978, 31-32.

<sup>83</sup> Byrn, 1964, 79-80. Note also that this is the same Donn Sleibe who Domnall mac Lochlainn defeated in battle and had blinded/murdered.

the actual state of affairs.<sup>84</sup> Simply stating that one's ancestors ruled a particular land or people merely serves to give a sense of some sort of legitimacy to the eventual conquest of the people in question. It would seem unlikely, therefore, that the poems were written for anyone other than the people who were ruled by the family the poem was about, since it is almost unimaginable that any one poem would convince the king of an opposing province to suddenly surrender to anyone. While Muirchertach certainly made good on the praise poems' boasts, his tale is more likely than not the exception, rather than the rule.

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<sup>84</sup> Modern examples might include Germany's pre-World War II claim to Alsace-Lorraine, the conflicting claims to Tibet and Kashmir, and, of course, the conflicting claims to Northern Ireland.

## Chapter 7 – Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn and Flaithbertach Ua

### Brolcháin: A Renaissance for the *Familia* of Colm Cille

Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's kingship was not solely about military matters. Much like his grandfather, he was embroiled in ecclesiastical matters which, in the end, would have a great impact on the fate of his kingship. During the time he was king, there was a resurgence of popularity and support for the much-embattled *familia* of Colm Cille, and a certain amount of resistance to the reforms that had occurred in the administration of Armagh and the *familia* of Patrick. Muirchertach's own choice to give primacy to the *familia* of Colm Cille was partially the result of his association with Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin, the head of the monastery of Derry and *comarb* of Colm Cille.

Until the middle of the twelfth century, Kells was the nominal center of the *familia* of Colm Cille. Unfortunately for the monastic settlement there, Meath was not the safest of provinces in the early twelfth century, as its political situation had gone directly downhill since the death of Mael Sechnaill in 1022. As was discussed in the second chapter, Armagh had already obtained a position of ecclesiastical dominance by that time, and though Mael Sechnaill had attempted to reverse the situation somewhat during his reign, he failed. The situation at Kells declined as successive abbots of Kells were forced to deal with the ever-worsening political situation. The *familia* of Colm Cille was in disarray, losing contact with Iona after the end of the eleventh century, and even going to war against the *familia* of Patrick on the instigation of a son of Loingsech Ua Mael Sechnaill.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Herbert, 90-1.



The political situation in Meath, as discussed in the fifth chapter, was anything but stable. During the reign of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair, the abbacy of Kells was held largely by members of the Uí Clucáin family, and they were unable to influence the political changes which dominated Meath at the time. A set of charters in the Book of Kells, which will be discussed more closely in the following chapter, shows how Kells itself was deprived of its hereditary patrons, the Uí Mael Sechnaill, and turned to Tigernan Ua Ruairc of Breifne for its political aid.<sup>86</sup> Ua Ruairc was not the most stable of patrons, however, and his continuous shifting of alliances, specifically regarding his share of the defeated Meath, only served to further weaken the position of Kells. It was raided and destroyed in 1135, again in 1143, and in 1144, it was burned three separate times.<sup>87</sup> There is no way in which Kells, or any *comarb* of Colm Cille there, could have hoped to retain its primacy in the *familia* while it was so vulnerable. Partially in response to this, the city of Derry in the north took over the role of the center of the Columban *familia*.

There were ample reasons for Derry to take over this position of prominence in the Irish Church. The Gilla mac Liag who succeeded the reformer, Malachy, as *comarb* of Patrick in Armagh was previously the abbot of the monastery of Derry. Under Domnall Mac Lochlainn, the reform movement had touched on Derry as well, and it (temporarily) became an episcopal see which would theoretically have controlled the area to the north and west of Armagh, comprising Cenél nEogain and Cenél Conaill.<sup>88</sup> By the middle of the twelfth century, however, there was no bishop in Derry, and the abbot of Derry, one Máel Ísú Ua Branáin, was its ecclesiastical leader. With

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<sup>86</sup> Herbert, 106. See also Chapter 5 of the present paper for a general recounting of the troubles of Meath.

<sup>87</sup> AFM 1135, 1143, 1144.

<sup>88</sup> Herbert, 110-111.

his death in 1150, and the contemporaneous rise of Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn to become the most powerful king in all of Ireland, his successor, Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin, found himself in a position of stability which had eluded previous heads of the various monasteries devoted to Colm Cille.

Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin was the first member of the *familia* of Columba in many years to claim the position of *comarb* of Colm Cille without being the abbot of Kells. His actions represented a change in the idea of succession, one that was neither directly connected to the old hereditary system or to the newer system of the reformers. Rather, the new *comarb* drew his power from the position of the reigning king of the province and was dependent on that power rather than that of any familial predecessors, but he also kept his position of dominance, as though he were indeed a bishop or high-ranking ecclesiast. This could only have presented a situation to Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn in which he discerned power and influence to be gained by controlling a lay abbot who had no connections to the powerful ecclesiastical families that had dominated the Irish Church for centuries and who did not come from a position of power like those from Armagh.

Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin's first meeting with Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn occurred in 1150, when AFM records that he went on a visitation of Cenél nEogain.<sup>89</sup> After that, he asserted his claims to other areas in the north of Ireland and was largely successful in obtaining his dues. Herbert notes that this was uncommon in the extreme for any of the successors of Colm Cille in the past two centuries to press their claims anywhere at all in Ireland, and it pointed directly to a revival of the Columban *familia* in the Irish Church. In 1152, when peace was (briefly) concluded between Muirchertach

Mac Lochlainn and Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair, it was done so under the Staff of Jesus and relics of Colm Cille.<sup>90</sup>

Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin certainly benefited from Mac Lochlainn's political power. In the synod at Brí Mac Thaidg in 1158, due to Mac Lochlainn's overwhelming power and his obvious support for Flaithbertach, he was awarded the *de facto* status of a full bishop, and was given dominion over all of the churches of Colm Cille.<sup>91</sup> With this newfound power, he finally had the chance to bring the *familia* of Colm Cille once again to prominence and bring it into alignment with the reform guidelines set up at the Synods of Rathbresail in 1111 and Kells in 1152. Gilla Mac Liag, archbishop of Armagh, seemed to be trying to bring the *familia* of Colm Cille into the forefront of the reform movement, and by granting Flaithbertach this measure of power, he had taken great strides toward this goal.

By 1161, Flaithbertach's ecclesiastical power had grown almost to match that of his patron, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn. In an interestingly political decision, Flaithbertach declared the churches in Meath and Leinster which fell under his jurisdiction as *comarb* of Colm Cille to be freed from any material secular imposition.<sup>92</sup> This decision could only have been made (and enforced) if Flaithbertach was on good terms with Mac Lochlainn, and the events of the following year proved that, if nothing else. Mac Lochlainn's "capital" was at Derry, which was, of course, the center of the *familia* of Columba. In 1162, Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin proposed that the old

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<sup>89</sup> John O' Donovan's note "y" quotes Colgan's *Triadas Thaumaturgica* as stating that Ua Brolcháin received tithes "a Murchertacho Hua Lochluinn Rege Hiberniae", implying both that they two of them met and that Muirchertach had already claimed the title of high-king.

<sup>90</sup> AFM 1152.

<sup>91</sup> AU 1158; Herbert, 116. Including an abbot as a bishop was not unprecedented: the struggles between the bishop and lay abbot of Armagh in the early ninth century have been mentioned before, and their offices sometimes coincided and they were offered the same respect, regardless of title.

ecclesiastical settlement be enclosed and kept separate from the secular inhabitation that was growing rapidly. Mac Lochlainn agreed, and the two of them set about reorganizing the city. Flaithbertach appears to have had to move several secular buildings to make way for his planned construction, and there is no record of Mac Lochlainn objecting to any of Flaithbertach's decisions.

In 1164, Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin and the *familia* of Columba were at a high point. Flaithbertach was being courted by the long-silent community of Iona, which appears to have made one final attempt to regain its former standing in the Columban ecclesiastical community, but because of pressures placed on him by the archbishop of Armagh (who likely wanted to keep an eye on him) and Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn (who likely wanted to keep him under his thumb), he did not accept, and remained in Derry, building it up into a grand ecclesiastical center.

Flaithbertach's aims were not to be reached, however. In 1165, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn attempted to put down a revolt in Ulaid by imprisoning its king. Despite his political misgivings, he gave in to Donnchad Ua Cerbaill and Armagh and let Eochaid mac Duinn Sleibe go under numerous safeties and assurances.<sup>93</sup> The next year, however, Eochaid was taken prisoner once more and, according to the annals, was blinded by Mac Lochlainn. With this one act, which will be discussed in much greater detail below, Mac Lochlainn lost almost all of his allies and a great deal of respect in his own territory and throughout Ireland. This would be his

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<sup>92</sup> AFM 1161; Herbert 119. Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin also visited Osraige this year to obtain his dues. After little more than a decade, the sphere of influence of the *familia* of Columba had expanded from a few tiny islands of power dotted around Ireland to one that rivaled Armagh's.

<sup>93</sup> Not the least of which were the *Bachall Ísú* and the "Gospel of Martin," one of the holy relics of the *familia* of Colm Cille. See AU 1166 for the list of relics and dignitaries by which the peace was guaranteed.

eventual downfall, and he took with him the rising prestige of the *familia* of Columba, prestige which was dependent on his own power. The projects in Derry came to a grinding halt, and when the monasteries and *dubreicles* were burned late in 1166, it appears that Flaithbertach gave up his dream of an Ireland in which the *familia* of Colm Cille was at least equal to that of Patrick. Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin did not survive long after the Norman invasion destroyed the majority of his efforts in the south. He died in 1175, and with him died the last great gasp of the Columban ecclesiastical tradition.

## Chapter 8 – Catastrophic Betrayal: The Fall of the Mac Lochlainn High-Kingship (1156-1166)

With the death of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn was left without a truly strong rival in Ireland. He was allied to the kings of Leinster, Meath, and Airgialla, and the Uí Briain had been so devastated in the battle of Móin Mór that they were unable to regain control of Munster from the Mac Carthaig family, let alone challenge Mac Lochlainn. Connacht was still a threat, ruled as it was by Toirdelbach's least-favored son, Ruadhri, but it would be years before Ruadhri had rebuilt Connacht's prestige enough that he could directly challenge Mac Lochlainn. Tigernan Ua Ruairc, the king of Breifné, was not powerful enough to face down Mac Lochlainn and his allies, and so was forced to remain quiet. Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn was truly an unchallenged king of Ireland, a king of overkings.

In 1157, Cú Uladh Ua Candelbain, king of Laeghaire, was murdered by Domnall Ua Maelsechnaill, the king of Meath, in violation of dozens of sureties and promises made by clergy, kings, and Mac Lochlainn himself. Donnchad Ua Cerbaill and Tigernan Ua Ruairc, whose sureties were also violated, invaded Meath and ravaged it. At a synod at Mellifont later that year, Domnall Ua Maelsechnaill was excommunicated, and his brother, Diarmait, was raised to the kingship of Meath in his place.<sup>94</sup> The most important historical event at that synod, however, was the issuing of the Charter of Newry for the establishment of a new Cistercian abbey by

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<sup>94</sup> AFM 1157. The significance of breaking sureties could not have been more apparent to Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, who officiated at the synod as the king of Ireland. He is described (somewhat retrospectively, it seems) in AFM as the high-king with opposition.

Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, who showed his support for the reform movement within the Irish Church.<sup>95</sup>

Later that year, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn went on a royal circuit of Ireland, reminiscent of that which appeared in the poem discussed in Chapter 5.<sup>96</sup> He attempted to show his power in Ireland by dividing Munster yet again between the Uí Briain and the Mac Carthaig families, but Ruadri Ua Conchobair saw an opening and raided the north while Mac Lochlainn was occupied with Munster. For the next couple of years, Ruadri Ua Conchobair was able to outmaneuver Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, obtaining submissions from Munster, Meath, and the lands of the Uí Dunlainge in Leinster.

Despite Ruadri Ua Conchobair's machinations, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn remained the preeminent ruler in Ireland. In 1158, the Cenél Conaill rebelled against Mac Lochlainn. The year before, Cú Uladh Ua Duinn Sleibe, king of Ulaid, died, and was replaced by his son, Áed. Áed accompanied Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn on his invasion of Cenél Conaill, during which the forces of the Ulaid were attacked by the Cenél Conaill, and Áed was killed. Áed's brother, Eochaid, succeeded to the throne in the wake of this raid, and the Cenél Conaill were pacified.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> The Charter of Newry and related matters will be discussed in Appendix A.

<sup>96</sup> Donnchad Ó Corráin theorizes that the poem itself was actually written in commemoration of the circuit which Muirchertach made. Unfortunately, there seems to be no way of proving the argument one way or the other. See Ó Corráin, 2001, 246-7.

<sup>97</sup> It is interesting to note that the Mac Lochlainns appear to have had a bitter feud with the powerful Ua Cannanain family of Cenél Conaill. Domnall and Muirchertach each encountered problems with them at various times during their careers, see for example AU1103§2. AFM 1156 indicates that one Ruadhri Ua Canannain was king of Cenél Conaill, and in AFM 1160, the obit of "the Aithchleireach Ua Canannain, lord of Cinel-Conaill," is recorded. This implies that the Uí Canannain were lords of Cenél Conaill during the revolt against Mac Lochlainn and, as such, provide further evidence for a deep-seated feud between the two families. This designation would seem to indicate a relatively minor kingdom. See Ó Corráin, 1972, 168.

In 1159, the intemperate actions of Diarmait Mac Murchada returned to haunt Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, as Tigernan Ua Ruairc and Ruadri Ua Conchobair made a peace agreement against Ulster and its allies, possibly in revenge for the humiliation Tigernan suffered at the hands of Mac Murchada and Mac Lochlainn in 1152. This alliance weakened, but did not destroy, Mac Lochlainn: when Ruadri and Tigernan made war on him that year, he turned them back with a decisive victory at Ardee<sup>98</sup>, and the power of Connacht was once again broken, if only for a short time. Mac Lochlainn took his revenge later in the year, ravaging Breifné and Connacht. Ruadri Ua Conchobair attempted to conclude a peace agreement with Mac Lochlainn in 1160, but came away empty-handed. When Mac Lochlainn attacked Ua Ruairc later in the year, Ua Conchobair came to his aid, and the armies separated without battle.<sup>99</sup>

Mac Lochlainn, in an attempt to cut off his opposition at the source, gave Tigernan Ua Ruairc's portion of Meath to Ruadri Ua Conchobair, with whom he made peace in 1161. That year is occasionally described as the high point of Mac Lochlainn's kingship. He was no longer beset by troubles from Connacht, the Ulaid were relatively peaceful, and he was able to bring Dublin to submit to him the following year. In 1160, he had finally disposed of his old rival, Domnall Ua Gailmredaig, who had violated oaths he was under, and had again defeated the Uí Gailmredaig at the Battle of Magh Lugad.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> AFM 1159, Ó Corráin, 1972, 164.

<sup>99</sup> AFM says that "God separated them," which might mean that the separation was mediated by a churchman.

<sup>100</sup> AFM, AU 1160. The Ua Gailmredaig who led his people against Mac Lochlainn was likely a vengeful relative of Domnall Ua Gailmredaig. In that battle, as well, one Muirchertach Ua Néill was killed in a "friendly-fire" incident by one Lochlainn Mac Lochlainn, who was then killed in revenge. Lochlainn Mac Lochlainn does not appear at any other point in the annals.



There was no other king in Ireland who could make the claim to the high-kingship and, therefore, he was once again a high-king without opposition.

For a time, at least, Ruadri Ua Conchobair was an ally of Mac Lochlainn. When Mac Lochlainn attacked the Dublin Norse in 1162, Ua Chobair, along with Muirchertach's more usual allies, sent an army to aid in the siege of Dublin, of which Mac Lochlainn left his allies in Meath and Leinster in charge.<sup>101</sup> His position was so solid at this point that in 1163, he sent his own son, Niall, on a royal circuit of Ireland, much like his own six years before. Niall, however, was stymied in Connacht, and his party was attacked. He himself was taken prisoner, but was returned to Aileach.<sup>102</sup>

Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's success was not to last, however, because his old foes in Ulaid and elsewhere were determined to remove him from the kingship. He was able to easily defeat the Ulaid in 1165 with the help of Donnchad Ua Cerbaill, and he expelled their king, one Eochaid mac Duinn Sleibe. Eochaid attempted to regain his kingship in 1166, but was captured by Donnchad Ua Cerbaill, and imprisoned. Ua Cerbaill and the archbishop of Armagh campaigned for his release and, finally, were able to get Mac Lochlainn to agree to it. Under the agreement, Eochaid could regain his kingship if he gave up land, hostages, and goods, and the agreement was assured by Donnchad Ua Cerbaill, Gilla Mac Liag, and probably Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin, under the *Bachall Ísú* and the "Gospel of Martin," one of the sacred relics of Colm Cille.

For some unknown reason, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn took Eochaid mac Duinn Sleibe prisoner around Easter, 1166, and had him blinded,

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<sup>101</sup> AFM 1162. I find this to be intriguingly like an arrangement between a king and his vassals: Mac Lochlainn did not finish the siege, but rather left trusted allies to do so, with the apparent expectation that they would give him his due afterwards.

<sup>102</sup> AFM 1163. Conchobar Ua Ceallaigh and the Uí Maine are named as his prisoners.

violating the terms of the agreement and disgracing himself to the people of Ireland and his allies. It was the last act of his kingship. After this, all of his allies (with the notable and somewhat dubious exception of Diarmait Mac Murchada) turned against him, and joined the opportunistic Ruadri Ua Conchobair in his cause to avenge the betrayed Eochaid. Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, who had been the unopposed king of Ireland but three years before, was killed, along with thirteen of the Cenél nEogain of Tulach Óg, in a minor battle in northern County Armagh.<sup>103</sup> Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn was laid to rest in Armagh, against the wishes of the Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin and the *familia* of Colm Cille,<sup>104</sup> and with his death, the power of the Cenél nEogain once again faded.

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<sup>103</sup> AU, AFM, AI, MIA 1166. The manuscript of AI has an incredibly detailed capital preceding his obituary.

<sup>104</sup> See AU 1166. Devlin, 102, suggests that despite AU's claim that the community of Derry was fasting against his Christian burial, it is much more likely that they desired to have his remains interred in his home parish of Derry.

## Conclusion – Ireland on the Brink

With the death of Mac Lochlainn, the tenuous balance which had been forged in Ireland absolutely fell apart. Donnchad Ua Cerbaill, Diarmait Ua Maelsechnaill, and all the rulers of Ireland save Diarmait Mac Murchada turned against the Cenél nEogain. Ruadri Ua Conchobair forged the dissidents into an alliance of his own, and as soon as the major threat, Mac Lochlainn, had been disposed of, he turned once again to Leinster. On August 1, 1166, as is recorded in the Book of Leinster, Diarmait Mac Murchada was exiled from Ireland.<sup>105</sup> His kingdom had been partitioned between his brother, Murchad Mac Murchada, and the king of Osraige, and he could no longer exploit any powerful opposition to Ua Conchobair, who had ruthlessly crushed any internal opposition to his rule.<sup>106</sup>

With this, Diarmait traveled to England, where he was received by the Normans and was granted aid. Ruadri Ua Conchobair had fully consolidated the power of his kingship in a great conference near Athboy in 1167, where nearly all of the kings of Ireland, including Áed Ua Néill, the rival claimant to the kingship of Cenél nEogain, acknowledged Ruadri's high-kingship. Ruadri divided Cenél nEogain between Áed and Niall Mac Lochlainn, Muirchertach's son.<sup>107</sup> Niall did not last long as the lord of half of Cenél nEogain, and his brother, Conchobar Mac Lochlainn, succeeded him in 1169.

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<sup>105</sup> LL p. 275. The text reads as follows: "[A] Muiri, is mor in gnim dorinhgned i h-Erind indiu (idon, [1] K alainn Auguist): idon, Diarmait, mac Dondch[adh]a Mic Murchadha, ri Lagen ocus Gall, do innarba[dh] do Fheraib hErend dar muir. Uch! Uch! a Choimdiu, cid dogen?" which is translated as "[O] Mary, great is the deed that has been done in Ireland to-day (namely, [on Monday] the Kalends [1st] of August): to wit, Diarmait, son of Dodchadh Mac Murchadha, king of the Lagenians and Foreigners, to be expelled by the Men of Ireland. Alas! alas! O God, what shall I do?"

<sup>106</sup> Ó Corráin, 1972, 167.

<sup>107</sup> Ó Corráin, 1972, 168; AFM 1167.

He apparently retook the kingship of all of Cenél nEogain through a deal which may have been brokered by Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin when the latter acknowledged Ruadri Ua Conchobair as his high-king in 1168. The Mac Lochlainns, however, were never able to regain any of their former glory, and they slowly faded from political life.

Ruadri Ua Conchobair, as Ó Corráin states, was virtually invulnerable to internal conflict and, as such, “had acquired a predominance which, on the surface at least, resembled that of European monarchs.”<sup>108</sup> He was the ultimate evolution of a process which had begun with the death of Maelsechnaill in 1022, the change of the Irish high-kingship from a position of nominal importance and questionable authority to one which commanded attention and obedience. Despite the antiquated impression that the Irish were unruly and unrulable at that point in their history, the historical facts point directly to a nascent feudalism that was evolving into a relatively familiar European model, if from an entirely unfamiliar historical basis.<sup>109</sup>

In 1167, Diarmait Mac Murchada returned to Ireland, concealing himself over the winter at Ferns, awaiting his aid from Henry II. When it came in 1169, he launched an attack to regain Leinster, in which he succeeded. Diarmait’s allies, however, perceived a weakness in their Irish foes, and continued to press the high-king. Diarmait Mac Murchada, who could not possibly have foreseen the far-reaching consequences of his alliance, died in 1171, the last of Mac Lochlainn’s great allies.<sup>110</sup> Through the machinations of the Anglo-Norman monarchy, the pope, Adrian IV, famous for the much-debated *Laudabiliter*, and several dissident Irish lords, Ireland’s young monarchy was overwhelmed by the invaders from without and the political

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<sup>108</sup> Ó Corráin, 1972, 168.

<sup>109</sup> See also Ó Corráin, 1978, 32-33.

and ecclesiastical dissent from within. Ruadhrí Ua Conchobair died in 1198,<sup>111</sup> the last of Ireland's unchallenged high kings and the final vestige of the pinnacle of a nascent Irish feudalism.

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<sup>110</sup> Donnchad Ua Cerbaill was killed in 1168, while drunk, by a servant. See AU 1168.

<sup>111</sup> AI 1198§2.

## Appendix A – Charters in Twelfth-Century Ireland

One of the more recent developments in Ireland in the twelfth-century was the popularity of physical legal documents that indicated such things as property ownership and deeding. Written documents were used as legal proofs in Ireland since the seventh century, but it was not terribly common until the later eleventh century.<sup>112</sup> The twelfth-century Irish maintained not only their peculiar vernacular charter form, but also adopted the standard Latin charter used in much of Europe. Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn and his contemporaries made greater use of charters than any of their predecessors, and, by doing so, they began to change the basic legal concepts of the king's position as provincial land-owner.

The most famous charter issued by an Irish king, and indeed the oldest Latin charter in Ireland, is the Charter of Newry<sup>113</sup>, issued by Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, possibly at the Synod of Mellifont in 1157.<sup>114</sup> In it, Mac Lochlainn (who is named the “King of all Ireland”) and several other kings and lords grant lands for the establishment of a new Cistercian monastery at Newry. He grants the land directly to the monks in return for nothing but their prayers, using the familiar language of twelfth-century charters. In addition, Mac Lochlainn takes the monks of Newry under his own protection

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<sup>112</sup> Davies, 109.

<sup>113</sup> O'Donovan, 1832, 102-3 will be used throughout.

<sup>114</sup> Neither Flanagan nor O'Donovan state this outright, but the issuing of the charter at the Synod of Mellifont would make sense for the following reasons: firstly, the charter mentions fellow kings who were consenting the kings of Ulaid, Airgiolla, and Omeath. AFM 1157 states that three kings (Áed Ua hEochada, Donnchad Ua Cerbaill, and Diarmait Ua Maelsechnaill) were present at the Synod of Mellifont, largely for the excommunication of Donnchad Ua Maelsechnaill. Secondly, AFM records that “seventeen bishops, together with the [Papal] Legate and the successor of Patrick” were there. In all, five bishops (including Gilla Mac Liag, the bishop of Armagh) signed the charter. Thirdly, granting lands for a Cistercian abbey while attending a synod at a Cistercian center would be a political victory for Mac Lochlainn. Finally, the presence of the Legate, who was ostensibly in Ireland to oversee the reformation of the Irish Church, could only have put pressure on those present to show

against any incursions by any of his foes. He does not specify any particular services that he will render to them in an hour of need, but he implies that he is at their disposal.

Finally, and most interestingly of all, he grants the kings who rule Airgialla and the lands of the Airthir special license to grant lands, if they so wish. This clause at the end typifies an evolving relationship between the powerful high-king (or even a powerful provincial king) and the kings of smaller, less powerful polities within the larger dominions. Donnchad Ua Cerbaill was not a weak king, by any means, but Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn was his acknowledged superior, and what appears to have been a vassal relationship evolved between the two of them.

Another Latin charter, and the oldest charter of which the original is still in existence, was issued by Diarmait Mac Murchada between 1162 and 1165. According to Flanagan, it is also the oldest charter that is written in a non-Insular hand, belying a move towards further continentalization on the parts of the kings of Ireland.<sup>115</sup> It is given in favor of an abbot of Osraige, Felix, who was a member of the Benedictines. This charter is not a specific land-grant, but instead confirms an earlier grant which one of his lords, Diarmait Ua Riain, made to the abbot and his community, which would later become that of Kilkenny. The grant is validated by Mac Murchada's statement that he gave them under his own license to the abbot. The language of this charter once again validates the growing feudalistic relationship between powerful kings and their subordinate lords.<sup>116</sup>

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their desire to become more orthodox, and granting additional lands to the Cistercians, who were a continental monastic group and who had been in greater contact with newer Roman ideas.

<sup>115</sup> Flanagan, 115.

<sup>116</sup> Diarmait Mac Murchada was often involved in Church politics: Mac Shamhrain states that the appointment of his brother-in-law, Lorcán, to the archbishopric of Dublin is often viewed as something he campaigned for.

Charters in the Latin tradition were not common within Ireland before the twelfth century, and indeed, the older style of charters that were given in the vernacular was continued through the reign of Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn and beyond. Several Irish charters have been preserved in the Book of Kells, one of which was granted by Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn to the community at Ardraccan. In it, Mac Lochlainn and the king of Meath, Diarmait Ua Maelsechnaill, convinced the king of Laeghaire, Áed mac Cú Uladh Ua Candelbain, to give up his right to a feasting at Ardraccan in exchange for three ounces of gold. Apparently, the charter was given in order to bring the situation in line with a general exception (alluded to in *Cert Cech Rig Co Reil*) given to all churches and religious communities from being subjected to the demands of the provincial kings. Mac Lochlainn, the *comarb* of Patrick, Diarmait Ua Maelsechnaill, and the bishop of Meath were among the guarantors of this agreement.

In all, the charter was gaining a great deal of acceptance in Ireland in the twelfth century. The legal and property systems were becoming more carefully articulated as Ireland became more feudalistic, and individual kings could be more certain of their authorities to make various grants and rulings. Had the Norman invasion not come, it is quite possible that the Irish would have developed advanced chanceries and a formal system of chartering and document-keeping.