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BUILT TO LAST:

The Benefits and the Construction of

Uí Néill Dynastic Identity in

Early Medieval Ireland

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Summary of Contents

This project examines the benefits and the construction of ‘Dynastic Frameworks’ in Early Medieval Ireland. It does so by using the Uí Néill, a powerful Irish political group, as a case study for understanding the role of the ‘Dynastic Framework’ in Irish society and politics. Many contemporary sources are used in order to provide an accurate analysis of the contemporary function of ‘Dynastic Frameworks’. The relationship between literature and the formation of ‘Dynastic Frameworks’ is a major theme of this project, as a result texts from Armagh and Iona, major ecclesiastical institutions, are scrutinised in order to understand the degree of separation between ‘secular’ and ‘ecclesiastical’ politics, if any actually existed. The degree to which the construction of Irish ‘Dynastic Frameworks’ may have been informed by a wider literary trend of group identity formation literature on the continent is also examined, with some parallels being found among the origins legends of certain ‘Dynastic Frameworks’. In order to prove that these ‘Dynastic Frameworks’ provided tangible benefits and that their construction and their politics were, to some degree at least, informed by contemporary literature, this project provides an analysis of references to the Uí Néill within two separate Irish annals over the course of the Seventh century. By analysing references to the internal and external dynastic politics during this period this project hopes to prove the assertion that Irish ‘Dynastic Frameworks’ such as the Uí Néill were large political groups, that while not centralised, were very important to the establishment of long term political power. The politics of these ‘Dynastic Frameworks’ was informed by the intertwined nature of secular and ecclesiastical politics, as a result much of the literature from this period serves the purpose of constructing and solidifying these powerful Irish ‘Dynastic Frameworks’.

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This thesis is the product of years of difficult, consistent research on a topic that has long fascinated me. Over the course of those years there have been obstacles more numerous than I can count both within my research and my personal life. I could not have come this far without the tireless assistance of my colleagues or the endless love and support of my friends and family.

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On a personal note I cannot express in words how grateful I am to everyone that has been there for me as a person undertaking a difficult task. My wonderful parents who have loved and supported me my entire life, and who have built me up to be able to keep my head down and work until the task was done. Without their love and support during the difficult times I do not think that I would have been able to finish this research. To my fantastic friends, they have at various times been a safe harbour in a storm. Over the last four years each of them has at some point kept me sane and allowed me to lift my head up out of my work from time to time and breathe easier. To my partner Annie, you have not shied away from getting involved in the dirty business of offering to read my work and you have helped me have faith and confidence in my work where previously I hardly dared to. Your support, love and understanding calmed me down when I began to spiral deep into the rabbit hole of my work and I am beyond grateful for it. Lastly, to Muireann, my dear sister. You may never be able to read this, but your smile never once failed to make me smile in turn.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this is entirely my own work and that it has not been submitted as an exercise for the award of a degree at this or any University.

Signed: Neil Gordon

Date: 02/08/2021

Chapter 1:

Introduction

Who Were the Uí Néill and Why Should We Question Their History?

The Uí Néill were the most dominant political power in Early Medieval Ireland from the earliest historical period until the tenth century.¹ They were allegedly founded by one man, Niall Noígíallach, (Niall of the Nine Hostages).² The number of Niall's sons can sometimes vary, however the most notable were Conall Err Breg, Conall Gulban, Éogan Cairpre, Láegaire, Fiachra, Maine and Énna.³ The historicity of Niall is doubtful, given that his obituary lies outside of the historical period proper.⁴ The Uí Néill exercised control over much of Ulster and the Midlands of Ireland.⁵ The fact that neither he, nor his supposed heir, Loíguire, are mentioned in Patrick's *Confessio* or *Epistola* at the very least suggests that they were not as powerful at this stage as later hagiographers would make them out to be.⁶ Ultimately, however, Niall's historicity is a moot point: whether he existed or not, both he and those who claimed to be his descendants would go on to have a major impact on Irish society and politics for the

¹ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400-800', in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, 1: Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford 2005) 182-234: 201, & T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge 2007) 441. For lists of Uí Néill dominance in king-lists see also the genealogical tract *Ríg Erenn* in M.A. O'Brien (ed.), *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin 1962; repr. 1976) 124-128. I consider the beginning of the decline of the Uí Néill after the period of Mael Sechnaill, c. 1022, though the rise of the Dál gCais and Brian Borámha before that signalled the beginning of their decline.

² See the following for some extracts concerning John Carey, 'Echtra mac nEchach: The Adventures of the sons of Eochaid Mugmedón', in John T. Koch & John Carey (eds), *The Celtic Heroic Age. Literary Sources for ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales* (Aberystwyth 1995; repr. 2003) 203-08. *Orgain Néill Noígíallaig*, O'Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum*, 122.

³ O'Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum*, 133.

⁴ *The Annals of Ulster*, in Sean Mac Airt & Gearóid Mac Niocaill (ed. & transl.), *The Annals of Ulster (to AD. 1131)* (Dublin 1983) 34-35.

⁵ Eoin MacNeill, 'Colonisation under the early kings of Tara' in *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 16 (1935) 101-124. & Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400-800', 201. & Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 441.

⁶ Loíguire is, of course, the main antagonist of Muirchú's *Vita Sancti Patricii*. Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii* I 15 (4), in Ludwig Bieler (ed. & transl.), *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh, Scriptorum Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin 1979) 84-85.

next six centuries and beyond. The impact of the Uí Néill can best be seen through the various septa (Uí Néill branch families) that ruled distinct areas or *tuatha*. Their dominance was made easy for them as they had two definite power blocs in both the North and the South of Ireland.⁷

The earliest reference to these distinct power blocs may be seen in *AU*, 563 AD:

*Bellum Mona Daire Lothair for Cruithniu re nUib Neill in Tuaisceirt. Baetan mac Cinn co ndib Cruithnibh nod-fich fri Cruithniu. Genus Eugain ocus Conaill mercede conducti inna Lee ocus Airde Eolargg/ 'The battle of Moin Daire Lothair was won over the Cruithin by the "Uí Néill of the North". Báetán mac Cenn with two [branches] of the Cruithin (?) fight it against the Cruithin. Cenél nEógain and Cenél Conaill were hired being given the Lee and Ard Eolarg as recompense.'*⁸

Evidence for the Uí Néill being a consequential political dynasty can be seen through many literary sources, however, given the dating of these sources it may be argued that Uí Néill was a term conceived at a later period, once these power blocs had coalesced.⁹ Nevertheless, the

⁷ For an analysis of the lands of the Southern Uí Néill see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 15-35. For the Northern Uí Néill see Brian Lacey, *Cenél Conaill and the Donegal kingdoms* (Dublin 2006). For the decline of these power blocs see F.J. Byrne, 'Ireland before the battle of Clontarf', in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, 1: Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford 2005) 852-860: 857-861. See also; Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin, '*Nebulae discutuntur?* The emergence of Clann Cholmáin, sixth-eighth centuries', in Alfred P. Smyth (ed.), *Senchas: Studies in Early and Medieval Irish Archaeology, History and Literature in Honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin 2000) 83-97. Though caution is advised regarding the conclusions.

⁸ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, 82-83.

⁹ There is a litany of primary sources that concern themselves with the Uí Néill, *Baile in Scáil*, *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*, *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin*, *Vita Sancti Patricii*, *Collectanea*, *Vita Sancti Columbae* are examples of sources used in this thesis where the Uí Néill, or the descendants of Niall Noígíallach play a major role. *BiS* & *BCC* for instance were composed at a later period, therefore they cannot be taken as evidence for the initial period of Uí Néill expansion. The usage of Uí Néill in the previous fn. entry is the earliest annalistic reference to the Uí Néill and is promising in and of itself, however, caution must be applied in so far as *AU* is also subject to issues of dating, please see, Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland. Introduction to the Sources* (London 1972) 118. Alfred Smyth, 'The Earliest Irish Annals: Their First Contemporary Entries, and the Earliest Centres of Recording', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 72 C 1 (1972) 1-48: 4-18. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 443-44. Daniel P. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals: Their Genesis, Evolution and History* (Dublin 2008), 9 & 159-163. Nicholas Evans, *The present and the past in medieval Irish chronicles* (Woodbridge 2010) 171-88.

distinction between North and South serves as a valuable point of departure from which to examine the political situation within the larger Uí Néill Dynastic Framework.

The Northern & Southern Uí Néill

The chief political powers of the Northern Uí Néill were the Cenél nEógain and the Cenél Conaill, who were based in modern-day Tyrone and Donegal respectively.¹⁰ The Grianán of Aileach was an important site for both of the Northern Uí Néill septs, and for quite some time control of Aileach was paramount to being recognised as the most powerful among the Uí Néill of the North.¹¹ It must be acknowledged, however, that Aileach was not always a site of great prominence for the Northern Uí Néill; indeed, there are even doubts among some scholars about whether Grianán of Aileach was of any political importance at all in the early stage of Uí Néill power when the Cenél Conaill were in the ascendancy.¹² It has been suggested that the importance of Aileach to the Northern Uí Néill really only emerges after the battle of Cloítech in 789 AD, when the Cenél nEógain were pushing southwards into the lands of the Cenél Conaill, and that they established the Grianán of Aileach on an already existing fort in

¹⁰ Lacey, *Cenél Conaill*, 29-48. See also; T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford 1993) 130 fn. 113.

¹¹ James Hogan, 'The Irish Law of Kingship, with special reference to Ailech and Cenél Eoghain', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies* 40 (1931/32) 186-254: 201-02.

¹² This is contrast to the pre-historic significance of Tara, Emain Macha and Cruachu. John Carey, 'Tara and the Supernatural', in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin 2005) 32-48: 32. For discussion surrounding these other 'royal sites', see; Bernard Wailes, 'The Irish 'Royal Sites' in history and archaeology', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 3 (1982) 1-29. Michael Herrity, 'A Survey of the Royal Site of Cruacháin in Connacht: 1. Introduction, the Monuments and Topography', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 113 (1983) 121-42. Michael Herrity, 'A Survey of the Royal Site of Cruacháin in Connacht. II Prehistoric Monuments', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 114 (1984) 125-38. Michael Herrity, 'A Survey of the Royal Site of Cruacháin in Connacht: III. Ringforts and Ecclesiastical Sites', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117 (1987) 125-41. Michael Herrity, 'A Survey of the Royal Site of Cruacháin in Connacht. IV. Ancient Field Systems at Rathcroghan and Carnfree', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 118 (1988) 67-84. Conor Newman, *Tara: An Archaeological Survey* (Dublin 1997). Chris Lynn, *Archaeology and Myth* (Bray 2003). Barry Raftery, 'Iron Age Ireland', in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, 1: Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford 2005) 134-181: 169-171. Kevin Barton & Joe Fenwick, 'Geophysical Investigations at the Ancient Royal Site of Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon, Ireland', *Archaeological Prospection* 12.1 (2005) 3-18. Conor Newman, 'Re-Composing the Archaeological Landscape of Tara', in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin 2005) 361-409. Susan A. Johnston & Bernard Wailes (eds), *Dún Ailinne: Excavations at an Irish Royal Site, 1968-1975* (Philadelphia 2007). From within this volume the following are informative about the rank and prestige associated with Dún Ailinne. Ronald Hicks, 'Dún Ailinne's role in Folklore, Myth, and the Sacred Landscape', in *ibid* 183-194. Susan A. Johnston, 'The Larger Archaeological Context', in *ibid* 195-200.

order to make a statement about their political strength.¹³ Regardless of the importance of the site during this early period, Aileach would go on to become an important focal point for political power among the Northern Uí Néill, so much so that from 780 AD onwards the name given to the over-kingdom of the Northern Uí Néill was the Kingdom of Aileach, replacing the older names, *Fochla* or *In Tuaiscert*.¹⁴ Given the position of Aileach on the border between the Cenél Conaill and the Cenél nEógain, it is no great surprise that these two septs were more often than not embattled with one another. The Cenél Conaill, however, would never be able to challenge for political control in a meaningful way in the wake of the aforementioned battle of Cloítech in 789 AD. Antagonism between Northern septs is universally acknowledged among scholars, and is borne out by an examination of the annalistic sources.¹⁵ A short selection of annalistic records of the battles between the two are sufficient to illustrate the nature of their relationship.

AU 727 AD –

Bellum Droma Fornocht inter genus Conaill ocus Eugain ubi Flann mac Aurtuile ocus Snedgus Dergg nepos Mrachidi iugulati sunt/ ‘Battle of Druim Fornocht between Cenél Conaill and Cenél Eógain where Flann son of Aurthuile and Snédgus Derg, descendant of Mrachide, were killed’.¹⁶

AU 732 AD –

Bellum inter genus Conaill | ocus Eugain in quo filius Fergaile, Aid, .i. Aedh, de Flathbertacho filio Loingsich mac Aengusa mac Domnaill mac Aedha mac

¹³ Brian Lacey, ‘The Grianán of Aileach: A Note on its Identification’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 131 (2001) 145-149: 148. See also Andrew Tierney, ‘A Note on the Identification of Aileach’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 133 (2003) 182-86.

¹⁴ Lacey, ‘The Grianán of Aileach’, 148. & Hogan, ‘The Irish Law of Kingship’, 201.

¹⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland, 572-73*. We will see this contention between neighbouring septs borne out even more fully in Chapter 4: *The Uí Néill Framework in the Seventh Century*.

¹⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, 180-181. Lacey, ‘The Grianán of Aileach’, 145-49.

Ainmireach triumphauit, hús ducibus cassis a dicione eius Flann Gohan filius Conghaile mac Fergussa, Flaithgus mac Duib Dibergg./ ‘A battle between Cenél Conaill and Cenél Eógain in which Aed son of Fergal triumphed over Flaithbertach son of Loignsech son of Aengus son of Domnall son of Aed son of Ainmire of whose force these leaders were killed, Flann Gohan son of Congal son of Fergus, Flaithgus son of Dub Diberg.’¹⁷

AU 787 AD –

Bellum inter genus Conaill ocus Eogain in quo uictor fuit Mael Duin mac Aedha Alddain, ocus Domnall mac Aedha Muindeirg in fugham uersus est/ ‘A battle between Cenél Conaill and Cenél Eógain, in which Mael Duin son of Aed Allán was victor, and Domnal son of Aed Muinderg was put to flight.’¹⁸

Meanwhile, to the South, , the most powerful septs were the Clann Chólmain Máir and the Sí nÁedo Sláine, both of which were based around the regnal site of Tara.¹⁹ Mirroring the domestic politics of the Northern Uí Néill, these two powerful Southern Uí Néill septs contested militarily and politically to secure dominance in the local region of Míde. Though there are fewer records of battles between the two septs, there are still notable entries that detail their hostility towards one another.²⁰

AU 766 AD –

¹⁷ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, 184-85.

¹⁸ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, 242-43.

¹⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 15-36. See also, Edel Bhreathnach, ‘The Medieval Kingdom of Brega’, in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin 2005) 410-422.

²⁰ As in fn. 15, this contention will be fully borne out in Chapter 4: *The Uí Néill Framework in the Seventh Century*.

Bellum iter Midi ocus Bregu ubi ceciderunt Mael Imhai mac Tothail ocus Donngal mac Doreit/ ‘A battle between Míde and Brega, in which Mael Uma son of Tuathal and Donngal son of Doiret fell’.²¹

The reason for less open warfare between the Southern Uí Néill septs is likely due to internal power struggles, e.g.

AU 737 AD –

Congressio inuicem inter nepotes Aedho Slane ubi Conaing mac Amalghaidh Cernachum uicit, ocus Cathal mac Aedho cecidit./ ‘An encounter between the descendants of Aed Sláine themselves, in which Conaing son of Amalgaid defeated Cernach, and Cathal son of Aed fell.’²²

AU 786 AD –

Bellum Liac Find .i. Tuileain. Donnchad uictor fuit, iter Donnchad ocus genus Aedha Slane in quo ceciderunt Fiachrai mac Cathail ocus Fogartach mac Cumuscaigh rex Locha Gabor, ocus .ii. nepotes Conaing, id est Conaing ocus Diarmait/ ‘The battle of Lia Finn i.e. Tuilén, Donnchad was victor, between Donnchad and the descendants of Ael Sláine, in which fell Fiachra son of Cathal and Fócartach son of Cumuscach, king of Loch Gabor, and two grandsons of Conaing i.e. Conaing and Diarmait.’²³

²¹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, 220-21.

²² Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, 190-91.

²³ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, 232-33.

It is also likely that the more vulnerable position of the Southern septs when compared with their Northern cousins resulted in less open warfare.²⁴ The position of the Southern Uí Néill in the region surrounding Tara was less secure than that enjoyed by the Northern Uí Néill in Ulster. The lands of the Southern Uí Néill were open to raiding and warfare from political groups in Munster, Connacht and Leinster, though it was really only Munster and Leinster who threatened them during this time period.²⁵ In 721 AD Cathal mac Finguine, king of Munster led an incursion into Brega. The scale of the subsequent strife among the Uí Néill can be measured by the fact that the Annals of Inisfallen, assert that Cathal took tribute from the Uí Néill and that the king of Tara recognised Cathal's position as his overlord and king of Ireland.²⁶

721 AD-

Indred Breg la Cathal mac Finguine, rí Muman; ocus is iar sein dorónsat síd ocus Fergal mac Maíl Dúin, rí Temrach, ocus giallais Fergal do Chathul/‘The harrying of Brega by Cathal son of Finguine, King of Mumu, and after that he and Fergal son of Maél Dúin, king of Temair, made peace; and Fergal submitted to Cathal’.²⁷

This period where Munster was in the ascendancy was noteworthy, but unusual: the principal belligerents during this period were the Laigin, the people who inhabited modern-

²⁴ Newman, ‘Re-Composing the Archaeological Landscape’, 359-409. Provides insight into the landscape of Tara and what avenues of approach required fortification. My intention in discussing ‘vulnerable positions’, is more concerned with the relatively vulnerable position of the Southern Uí Néill compared to their Northern brethren, who, in the North-West, were bordered on two fronts by the sea.

²⁵ The genealogical relationship between the Uí Néill and the Connachta, however fabricated, demonstrates a degree of Uí Néill dominance, and thus safety from raiding, that is borne out by the annalistic record. O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 133.

²⁶ Cathal’s raid and occupation of Brega was so thorough that he notably appears in *BCC*, which is otherwise very pro-Uí Néill. See, Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* 62, 84 & 319.

²⁷ Seán Mac Airt (ed. & transl.), *The Annals of Inisfallen* (Dublin 1953; repr. 1988) 104-105.

day Leinster and who fought against the Uí Néill repeatedly. There are many instances in the annals that provide the historical context for this enmity, ranging from pre-historical, and therefore unreliable, records, to historical accounts of the devastating warfare between the two Dynastic Frameworks.²⁸ An examination of hostilities and rivalry between the Laigin and Uí Néill is beyond the scope of this thesis but is nonetheless pertinent. The following excerpts will suffice to provide context:

AU 516 AD –

Bellum Droma Derge for Failghi. Fiacha uictor erat. Deinde Campus Midhe a Lagenis sublatus est./ ‘The battle of Druim Derg against Failge. Fiacha was victor. Thereafter the plain of Mide was taken away from the Laigin’²⁹

AI 530 AD –

Bellum Atha Siche re Murchertach for Laigniu, ocus cath Cinn Eich re Macc Erce./ ‘The battle of Áth Sige [gained] by Muirchertach against the Laigin, and the battle of Cenn Eich [gained] by Mac Erce.’³⁰

AI 601 AD –

Guin Aeda meicc Ainmrech la Laigniu/ ‘The slaying of Aed, son of Ainmire, by the Laigin.’³¹

AU 628 AD –

Uastatio Lagen la Domnal. ‘The devastation of Laigin by Domnall’³²

²⁸ Of particular interest in this regard is the tale, *Orgain Denna Ríg* which provides an origin story for the Laigin, that at various instances may be taken as context for generational enmity between themselves and the Uí Néill. *Orgain Denna Ríg*, in David Greene (ed. & transl.), *Fingal Rónán and Other Stories*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 16 (Dublin 1993). This context of enmity will be discussed later in the thesis, fn. 452.

²⁹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, 62-3.

³⁰ Mac Airt, *The Annals of Inisfallen*, 68-9.

³¹ Mac Airt, *The Annals of Inisfallen*, 80-1.

³² Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, 114-15.

Thus far then, we have established the two power blocs that existed within the Uí Néill, as well as a brief overview of their external politics.³³ The four septs mentioned, the Cenél Conaill, Cenél nEógain, Síl nÁedo Sláine and Clann Chólmáin Máir were pre-eminent within the Uí Néill, and most meaningful political achievements by an Uí Néill sept can be attributed to one of them.³⁴ To fully appreciate and understand the Uí Néill and their impact on Irish history and society, however, it is necessary to engage with the origins of the Uí Néill, obscure as they are.

The origins of the Uí Néill are obtuse. They seem to explode onto the historical landscape as a fully-formed political power, dominating Ulster and Leinster, almost immediately.³⁵ This conundrum lies at the heart of reconstructing the political landscape of early medieval Ireland. The Uí Néill had an immeasurable effect on the Irish political sphere, influencing many of the traditions and tales that even today are intrinsically linked with the concept of Irish kingship and high-kingship. Most notable of all is the association between Tara and the kingship of Ireland.³⁶ Some historians have argued that the Hill of Tara may have been associated with the kingship of Ireland before the Uí Néill.³⁷ Nevertheless, the Uí Néill are indisputably responsible for expanding upon any existing legends to the extent that most texts or tales concerning the kingship of Tara in some way acknowledge an Uí Néill domination of the title.³⁸

³³ The internal and external politics of the Uí Néill and their septs are the subject of Chapter 4: ‘The Uí Néill Framework in the Seventh Century’ and will be elaborated upon more fully there.

³⁴ Edel Bhreathnach, ‘*Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*: Edition’, in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin 2005) 73-94.

³⁵ See, F.J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973; repr. Dublin 2001) 48-108. & Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 441-68. & Mac Shamhráin, ‘*Nebulae discutuntur?*’, 83-97. & Alfred Smyth, ‘The Húi Néill and the Leinstermen in the Annals of Ulster’, *Études Celtique* 14 (1974) 121-43. & Patrick Gleeson, ‘Luigne Breg and the origins of the Uí Néill’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture and History* 117C (2017) 65-99.

³⁶ Carey, ‘Tara and the Supernatural’, 35. Charles Doherty, ‘Kingship in Early Ireland’, in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin 2005) 3-31: 11.

³⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 473-76. Doherty, ‘Kingship in Early Ireland’, 11-13.

³⁸ Of the texts mentioned in fn. 9, see especially *VSP*, *Collectanea*, *BiS* & *BCC*.

Indeed, one of the earliest texts that we have from this period, Muirchú's *Vita Sancti Patricii* (*VSP*), goes so far as to refer to the pagan antagonist, Lóegaire mac Néill, as:

Loiguire nomine filius Neill, origo stirpis regiae huius pene insolae/'by name Loíguire son of Niall, a scion of the family that held the kingship of almost the entire island'.³⁹

As well as contributing to, and perhaps even manufacturing, the mythos of Tara, the Uí Néill also maintained their position of political supremacy in Ireland for the better part of four centuries, acting as the dominant powers in modern-day Ulster and Leinster between 600-1000 AD.⁴⁰ The most famous, apt and iconic description of the origins of the Uí Néill is an observation by the American scholar, John V. Kelleher, who likens the Uí Néill to cuttlefish, that 'emerged from a dark cloud of their own making.'⁴¹

Dynastic Frameworks: Why Use that Term?

It has been necessary to develop a new terminology through this thesis, the following will explain why and what that new terminology entails. The Uí Néill were arguably the most politically powerful Dynastic Framework between 600-1000 AD.⁴² There were, however, multiple groups from all over the island that are worthy of being recognised as what will be referred to below as 'Dynastic Frameworks', e.g., the Ulaid, the Laigin, and the Eóganacht.

³⁹ Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii* I 10 (9), (Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, 74-75).

⁴⁰ Byrne, 'Ireland before the battle of Clontarf', 857-59. This is also evident in Uí Néill dominated king-lists such as *BiS* & *BCC*, and even further evidenced through noteworthy Uí Néill kings who had some legitimate claim to the title of *Rex Scottorum* such as Domnall mac Áedo, see fn. 354.

⁴¹ John V. Kelleher, 'Early Irish History and Pseudo-History', *Studia Hibernica* 1 (1963) 113-127: 125. Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400-800', 201. & Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 505.

⁴² The precise power of the Uí Néill may wax and wane depending on various factors concerning the overall 'Dynastic Framework' that will be discussed in this thesis, e.g. competency of rulers, military disasters and foreign incursions. The position that the Uí Néill were among the most powerful group in early medieval Ireland is, however, commonly held. See, Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 441 & Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400-800', 201.

The identity of these groups has been the subject of debate amongst historians for some time. MacNeill was among the first to grapple with the issue of terminology by offering a consideration of words used in relation to these dynasties. He formed the view that *tuath* was too often translated as ‘tribe’ when in fact *tuath* covered a range of political entities across an extended period of history.⁴³ His suggestion; which proved influential in shaping later thinking on the matter; is that the term *moccu* was employed as an archaic eponym, and was eventually replaced by terms such as *Uí*.⁴⁴ An example of the archaism of *moccu* can be found in a list of the relatives and disciples of Columba, e.g. et *Chonri Moccu Cein... ToCummi Mocu Cein*.⁴⁵

Building upon MacNeill’s proposal that the decline of *moccu* signalled a change in Irish society, Byrne postulated that terms such as *moccu*, meaning ‘belonging to the gens/family of’, were a feature of archaic Old Irish that had died out by the historical period.⁴⁶ He suggested that this change in Irish society occurred between the seventh and tenth centuries, and that a ‘tribal’ society was transformed by ‘dynastic polities’. He suggested that the *-acht* suffix present in Connachta and Eóganachta was a feature of the late ‘tribal’ period and the early ‘dynastic’ period.⁴⁷ This would explain why there are some, but not many new dynasties established utilising the suffix *-acht*, e.g. the Eóganachta, who, according to this logic, would have their origins at the beginning of this shift away from ‘tribal’ towards ‘dynastic’, but before it had fully taken root. It would also explain why it is not a common feature among septs, who instead primarily claimed descent from a common ancestor in their etymology. For instance,

⁴³ John MacNeill, ‘Early Irish population-groups: their nomenclature, classification, and chronology’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 29 C 7 (1911/1912) 88.

⁴⁴ Eoin MacNeill, ‘Mocu, maccu’, *Ériu* 3 (1907) 42–49. Mac Neill, ‘Early Irish population-groups’, 71–72.

⁴⁵ Whitley Stokes & John Strachan (eds), *Thesaurus Paleohibernicus: A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses Scholia Prose and Verse*, 2 (Cambridge 1901 & 1903) 281. See also, Bart Jaski, *Early Irish kingship and succession* (Dublin 2000; repr. 2013) 201.

⁴⁶ The reference can be viewed at the website *dil.ie* (online at dil.ie/31187), accessed 01.10.2020. eDil, s.v. maccu, moccu; F.J. Byrne, ‘Tribes and tribalism in Early Ireland’, *Ériu* 22 (1971) 128–166: 153. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 116–117.

⁴⁷ Byrne, ‘Tribes and tribalism’, 152.

we see that the Uí Néill largely use terms that denote descent from a specific ancestor, Síl nÁedo Sláine, Clann Cholmáin, Cenél Conaill, etc.⁴⁸

What Byrne intended to establish was that *tuath* referred to a ‘people’, rather than a ‘district’.⁴⁹ Byrne’s hypothesis, that there was a change in Irish society from ‘tribal’ to ‘dynastic’, has been influential, and is present throughout modern scholarship.⁵⁰ He argued that groups such as the Uí Néill and Eóganacht could be seen as distinct from the Ulaid and the Laigin because their identity was, in etymological terms, more focused on descent from a common ancestor.⁵¹ The premise of this argument is that, from an etymological perspective, the name ‘Uí Néill’—meaning grandsons/descendants of Niall— and the name ‘Eóganacht’ (which is evocative of their ancestor Eógan Már), bring to the fore the idea of their common ancestry in a way not represented by the names ‘Ulaid/Laigin’.⁵² It is undeniable that groups such as the Uí Néill and the Eóganacht elaborate on the genealogical tradition of their respective dynasties and reference their claim to a shared kinship through the construction of their names.

One of the reasons why Byrne’s argument has been difficult to engage with is his suggestion that the reason the Uí Néill are so significant is their rise to power is ‘an important step away from the ancient tribal polity’.⁵³ A major reason this has been such a difficult argument to unpack is because of the word ‘tribal’. Eoin MacNeill staunchly opposed the usage of the term ‘tribe’ in relation to early medieval Ireland, claiming it to be an inaccurate representation of

⁴⁸ O’Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum*, 133-80.

⁴⁹ Byrne, ‘Tribes and tribalism’, 162. See also; Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 138-39. See also, Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape AD 400-1000* (Cork 2021) 29-30. For a discussion of the manner in which territories were conceived of in the early medieval period.

⁵⁰ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200* (New York 1995; repr. New York 2017) 64 & T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge 2007) 97.

⁵¹ Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, 71.

⁵² O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 1, 133 & 195. Compare and contrast the naming conventions of the Laigin, the Uí Néill and the Eóganacht. The Laigin do not derive their etymology from a named ancestor but from *Láignib tucsat la Labraid Loignsech*/ ‘The spears that Labraid Loignsech made’. In contrast the Uí Néill and Eóganacht are explicitly drawn from the name of their ancestor.

⁵³ Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, 71.

the society present in Ireland at that time, and suggesting it carried negative, colonial connotations.⁵⁴ It has been difficult, since then, to use the word tribal without invoking any of the colonial associations of the word. Scholars of Irish history at the turn of the 20th century saw the term ‘tribal’ as ill-defined, arguing that its use would ‘absolve the serious historian from further consideration of the people so described’.⁵⁵ It became the subject of debate again in 1954 when Binchy reintroduced the word, and contended that early medieval Irish society mirrored the definition of ‘tribal’, viz. ‘a primary aggregate of people in a primitive or barbarous condition under a headman or chief’.⁵⁶ Binchy’s contention provoked Byrne’s *Tribes and Tribalism*, which successfully addressed the problematic nature of the term as well as its inadequacies as an accurate translation of the word *tuath*.⁵⁷ Byrne proposes that early medieval Irish society took a definitive step away from ‘tribal’ polities concerned with people, towards ‘dynastic’ polities defined by association with territory.⁵⁸ The difference in Mac Neill and Byrne’s respective positions is nuanced: MacNeill read an observable change in the naming conventions of Irish political groups as indicative that those groups that are not ‘dynastic’ were simply more archaic, and likely declining political powers in the sphere of Irish politics.⁵⁹ Whereas Byrne argued that the linguistic shift coincided with some degree of social change, a decline in ‘tribal feeling’.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Byrne, ‘Tribes and tribalism’, 128. MacNeill’s criticism of ‘tribal’ was that ‘some have used it in so loose a sense as to make it meaningless; and second, because others have used it with the deliberate intent to create the impression that the structure of society in Ireland.... finds its modern parallel among the Australian or Central African aborigines’, F.J. Byrne, ‘MacNeill the Historian’ in F.X. Martin & F.J. Byrne (eds), *The Scholar Revolutionary: Eoin MacNeill, 1867-1945, and the Making of the New Ireland* (Shannon 1973) 15-37: 27.

⁵⁵ Byrne, ‘MacNeill the Historian’, 25.

⁵⁶ D.A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship*, The O’Donnell lectures for 1967-8 (Oxford 1970) 8.

⁵⁷ F.J. Byrne, ‘Tribes and tribalism’, 128-166. (Given the fact that Byrne rebuked Binchy’s definition of ‘tribal’ we may be certain his usage of the term in *Kings and High-Kings* was less dismissive of the political structure of early medieval Ireland).

⁵⁸ Byrne, ‘Tribes and tribalism’, 162.

⁵⁹ See MacNeill, ‘Early Irish population-groups’, 59-114.

⁶⁰ Byrne, ‘Tribes and Tribalism’, 164.

Mindful of such issues, the term ‘tribal’ will be used only with reference to MacNeill and Byrne’s classification of an older, non-dynastically based group.⁶¹ To be sure, early medieval Irish society was certainly structured hierarchically and therefore many of the terms used in this thesis will refer to a specific rank or type of political group that existed in the early medieval period.

Such arguments aside, there is, however, no evidence of any real distinction between the ‘tribal’ Ulaid/Laigin and the ‘dynastic’ Uí Néill/Eoganacht with regards to their structure and framework.⁶² Charles-Edwards is sceptical of MacNeill’s chronological divisions, and Byrne’s thesis of societal change.⁶³ He furthermore makes the interesting point that the relationship Columba has with the Uí Néill can be treated on the same level as Comgall’s with the Cruithin, thereby providing evidence from ecclesiastical figures that these ‘tribal’ and ‘dynastic’ entities functioned in the same manner.⁶⁴ With regard to deriving historical meaning or distinction from the naming conventions of different early Irish groups there is a very limited scope. Whereas it is accurate to identify the Ulaid/Laigin as older groups, it would be inaccurate to contend this signalled a significant political change from ‘tribal’ to ‘dynastic’. Although these older ‘tribal’ entities declined and many became subordinate to the newer ‘dynastic’ powers, there is no evidence to suggest that a ‘tribal’ system of governance was supplanted by a ‘dynastic’ one.⁶⁵

⁶¹ MacNeill, ‘Early Irish population-groups’, 71-72. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, 71.

⁶² See, Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Irish Regnal Succession: A Reappraisal’, *Studia Hibernica* 11 (1971) 7-39. Wherein he demonstrates that the system of succession is similar between the Uí Néill at Aileach and the Laigin. See also Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*, 201-02.

⁶³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 111-134. Esp. 123. It should be mentioned however, that one gets the impression that much of Charles-Edwards’ discussion concerning *gens*, *genus* and *parentela* in *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* has been inspired by Byrne’s conclusions and is operating under the assumption there was some relatively major change in Irish society coinciding with the rise of more ‘dynastic’ powers. See, Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 147-65. Furthermore, I strongly disagree with Byrne’s conclusion that these ‘dynastic polities’ saw a major change in Irish society. I also caution that Charles-Edwards treads the line of believing the ahistorical and at times crosses it, with sections putting rather too much stock in the historicity of the Uí Néill claim to be descended from the Connachta, esp. 160-63. This may be because of his false dating of *Amhra Choluimb Cille*, which he could not have known was false given Bisagni’s edition was only recently released.

⁶⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 145.

⁶⁵ Byrne’s argument that the ‘tribal’ polity was more of a ‘people than a district’, as opposed to the ‘Dynastic’ which was more concerned with territory, Byrne, ‘Tribes and Tribalism’, 162, leaves a lot to be desired, especially

By the historical period in Ireland these ‘tribal’ groups operated and behaved in the same way as the more ‘dynastic’ Uí Néill/Eoganacht, it is therefore likely and feasible that the societal role and processes of a Dynastic Framework, to be outlined in this thesis, were also present in the more archaic ‘tribal’ political entities.⁶⁶

Regardless of etymological distinction, by the early historic period these political powers were all predicated upon some form of kinship and common relation. From the early 7th century there does not seem to be any material difference in function between these ‘dynastic’ groups and the older ‘tribal’ groups as identified by Byrne.⁶⁷ This thesis will therefore treat both the older ‘tribal’ groups and the newer ‘dynastic’ groups as the same form of political entity. The term that will be used to refer to both types of political entity will be ‘Dynastic Framework’. In spite of the older naming conventions, groups that are referred to as ‘tribal’ and ‘dynastic’ both function as large frameworks composed of smaller dynasties. While it is useful to know that some of these groups may indeed be more archaic, as they relate to the historical period there is insufficient difference in political function between the Uí Néill, the Ulaid and the Laigin to draw any meaningful distinctions. To call them dynasties would be misleading, given the size and scope of the various genealogical relationships in evidence, and we have seen earlier why calling them ‘tribes’ can be problematic.⁶⁸ This, as well as a lack of consistent terminology in the wider field of study is why it has been necessary to develop appropriate terminology for the purposes of this thesis.

considering that these ‘tribal’ groups so often give their name to fixed territories, and ‘Dynastic’ groups are so fundamentally a ‘people’.

⁶⁶ Paul Byrne, ‘The Northern Boundary of Múscraige Tíre’, *Ériu* 64 (2014) 108-109. The survival of a ‘tribal’ group and their adoption of ‘dynastic’ motifs suggests there was no major systemic upheaval.

⁶⁷ See fn. 407, & see also Chapter 8: *Kinship and Dynastic Frameworks as Expressions of Political Alignment*.

⁶⁸ Byrne, ‘Tribes and tribalism’, 128.

The ‘Dynastic Framework’

The rough structure of a ‘Dynastic Framework’, as proposed and advocated here, refers to a large political entity predicated on kinship that encompasses many smaller political powers that are correspondingly predicated on kinship. The structure I have in mind is sketched out in Thomas Charles-Edwards’ characterisation of royal dynasties as ‘segmentary, in that they had a single stem but several branches’. He goes on to observe the ‘the unity of such dynasties was often fragile: while they needed to preserve some cohesion in the face of rivals, the kingship, or overkingship, was the object of contention between the branches.’⁶⁹ This is what I refer to as a Dynastic Framework. Thus, the Uí Néill, the Eóganacht and the Laigin are Dynastic Framework’s comprised of smaller groups, such as the Cenél Conaill, the Síl nÁedo Sláine, the Uí Bairrche and the Uí Dúnlainge, etc. These smaller groups; here referred to as ‘septs’; align broadly with Byrne’s definition of a *tuath* as a ‘people’ rather than a ‘district’.⁷⁰ As a basic structure of the Irish dynastic political sphere, the Dynastic Framework was the means and context in which disparate septs could be classified and identified as members of a larger, shared group.

There are also at times references in the annals and genealogies to smaller groups again within the septs. These shall be referred to as ‘families’, to reflect their relatively narrow genealogical range, and the fact that, as far as can be seen, there is no means through which these groups are subdivided. An example of such would be the Mac Lochlainn family who operated within the Northern Uí Néill, and in the twelfth century text *Circuit of Ireland by Muirchertach mac Néill*, are credited with taking control of the Northern septs.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 14. See Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*, 197-99.

⁷⁰ Byrne, ‘Tribes and tribalism’, 162.

⁷¹ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn and ‘the Circuit of Ireland’, in A.P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin 2000) 238-251: 243. See also, Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland’, in T.W. Moody (ed), *Nationality and the Pursuit of Independence* (Belfast 1978) 1-36: 31-32. See also, Lacey, *Cenél Conaill*, 167-81. However, Lacey somewhat places stock in Muirchertach’s historicity which I do not.

Muirchertach iaramh do thionól Conaill agus Eoghain, agus an Tuaiceirt archena co h-Oileach / 'Muirchertach afterwards assembled Cenél Conaill and Cenél nEógain, and the forces of the North generally at Aileach'.⁷²

Although outside the chronological boundaries of this thesis, the Mac Lochlainn family is included because they exemplify the phenomenon of 'families' growing in importance and eventually separating off from the main branch of the sept. Examples such as this reveal the cyclical nature of dynasties. The cycle is thus, a small group establishes itself and it grows larger over time (the Uí Néill), then, within that group there eventually emerge smaller splinters, these are the 'septs' of the early medieval period, Cenél Conaill, Síol nÁedo Sláine, etc.⁷³ These septs undergo further splintering into smaller families that grow in importance, even eclipsing that of their 'parent' sept, such as happened in the case of the Mac Lochlainn's eclipsing the importance of the Cenél Conaill and Cenél nEógain, subjugating them at Aileach (as outlined in the above annalistic reference). Indeed the *Circuit of Ireland by Muircheartach mac Néill* was likely patronised by the Mac Lochlainn in order to promote Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's descent from the same family within the Cenél nEógain that produced a number of renowned kings.⁷⁴

An aspect of Dynastic Frameworks is that they naturally increase in membership until the burgeoning weight of the many subsidiary groups renders the initial framework irrelevant. This occurs when 'families' emerge from septs as in the case of the Mac Lochlainn, Uí Mael Sechlainn and Ua Cannannáin who emerged from the Cenél nEógain, Clann Cholmáin and

⁷² Ó Corráin, 'Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn', 243.

⁷³ Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*, 199-200.

⁷⁴ Ó Corráin, 'Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn', 241.

Cenél Conaill respectively.⁷⁵ These ‘families’ appear in certain genealogies as groups that have segmented off from the main branch of the sept, but remain within the political boundaries of their parent sept.⁷⁶ A good example would be the *Genelach Cenúil Conaill* and the septs that are also descended from Conall Gulban in some way but are considered distinct from the sept of the Cenél Conaill, e.g., *Genelach Síl Lugdach meic Sétnai*, *Genelach Cenúil Duach* and *Genelach Cenúil Bóguine*.⁷⁷ It is worth noting, however, that they do not appear to upset the natural order of things in medieval Ireland when they become more prominent; and examples of similar sized ‘families’ taking control or seceding from an established sept can indeed be found in the early medieval period, although it is rare. The most noteworthy example from within the Uí Néill framework are the Máel Sechlainn and how they attempted to seize control of the lands of Clann Cholmáin for themselves.⁷⁸ The Uí Néill and Airgíalla are, by contemporary genealogies, believed to have descended from the Connachta and to have splintered off and become an independent political entity at an unknown moment in pre-history.⁷⁹ In this sense, the collapse of the Connachta mirrors the eventual collapse of the Uí Néill as septs it spawned became more powerful. The catch here is that this emergence from the Connachta occurs in prehistory and is unsubstantiated. A likely reason for this parallel is that during the period genealogies were composed, these same Dynastic Frameworks were

⁷⁵ O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 175 & 176 & 435. This occurs also at an earlier stage, see Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*, 199-200. However, these ‘families’ do not grow to eclipse the Dynastic Framework.

⁷⁶ Ó Corráin, ‘Irish Regnal Succession’, 7-39. Provides an overview of the kingship of Leinster and the many ‘segmentary’ conflicts which occurred. Bear in mind these are not equivalent to segmentation, and I would argue this is the result of a lack of clearly defined terminology for Dynastic Frameworks and their component parts that will be addressed through this thesis. It is more accurate to say these were conflicts between the families in a sept for control. Part of the difficulty with Ó Corráin’s conclusions is he considers the prominent families within septs as simply Uí Néill or Laigin, rather than a rung on the ladder of political hierarchy. They are therefore not ‘segmentary’ conflicts, but ‘succession’ conflicts, as more powerful claimants put forward their claim. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 111-134. Discusses the concept of segmentation and provides examples. Esp. 130-34.

⁷⁷ O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum*, 164.

⁷⁸ F. J. Byrne, ‘The trembling sod: Ireland in 1169’, in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *A New History of Ireland 2: Medieval Ireland 1169-1534* (Oxford 1993) 1-42: 8.

⁷⁹ O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 133.

becoming less relevant than their septs, and genealogists drew upon these changes for reference to represent the fall of an old order.

The hierarchical structure of a Dynastic Framework is thus, the Dynastic Framework contains a number of septs, which themselves contain a number of families.⁸⁰ Byrne's suggestion that a *tuath* was a 'people' rather than a 'district' will be valuable in ascertaining if there was any equivalence between Irish terms for political rank and the ranks proposed in the Dynastic Framework.⁸¹ Our understanding of a *tuath* is that it was an immutable political object, i.e. it was a basis for political power and could not be subdivided further. Conquest and the subsequent destruction of a *tuath* was not the norm, instead a *tuath* and their king were subjugated, we can see this implicit in the legal description of the rank of *Rí rí*g or *Rí buiden* being a king of three or four *tuatha* for instance: *Is e rí teora no cetheora tuath insin/* 'he is a king of three or four tuatha'.⁸² This is not to say that Lydon's conclusion concerning *tuatha* was accurate, namely that the king was unable to establish 'puppet kings subject to himself or impose his will on territories outside his ancestral *tuath*'.⁸³ This argument is at odds with the legacy of armed conflict and political manoeuvring evident throughout the source material.⁸⁴ The battles that litter the annals can be nothing other than manifestations of political will, even if they were solely to attain wealth. In performing raids on neighbouring political entities, the belligerents are effectively attempting to subjugate their neighbours. Nevertheless, given the

⁸⁰ See Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 139-41. It provides an attempt to extract some meaning from Adomnán's latinity. In my opinion, Charles-Edwards runs into a wall with *Cenél=Genus*. This results in his conclusion that *Cenél=Genus* only when the term *Cenél* is already used by the group. Hence, the *Cenél Conaill* are the *genus Conallis*. This then leaves the question of what the Uí Néill are? He concludes they too must be a *genus* but called under a different name as *Cenél* is not a composite part of their title in Irish. I would argue the terms *parentela* and *cognito* are not just used because *Cenél* is not present, but because the Uí Néill is a larger entity than the *genus Conallis*.

⁸¹ Byrne, 'Tribes and tribalism', 162.

⁸² D.A. Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* 6 Vols. (Dublin 1978) 568.17 & 582.32. See also, Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*, 197-98. Note that while groups are 'displaced' often they retain the names of the *tuath* they have conquered. The Uí Chonaing becoming the Ciannachta for instance.

⁸³ James F. Lydon, *The lordship of Ireland* (Dublin 1972) 15. See also Ó Corráin's rebuke of Lydon's remarks. Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', 10.

⁸⁴ Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', 10.

fact *Rí tuaithe* was the lowest rank of king, we may suggest an equivalence between a *Rí tuaithe* and leadership of a ‘family’. This argument has basis beyond the hierarchical structure of Dynastic Frameworks discussed in this thesis, as these families often leave their mark on the landscape of the *tuath*, e.g. the *Genelach Síil Lugdach* of Donegal are still present in the placename *Dún Luiche*.⁸⁵

We may be certain that the leader of a Dynastic Framework would have qualified as a *Rí ruireach* or even a *Rí cóicid*, as Dynastic Frameworks tended to be equivalent to provinces in scale, e.g. the Uí Néill across Ulster and Meath, the Eóganacht across Munster and the Laigin across Leinster.⁸⁶ Somewhat more tentatively, and building upon the relationship between *Rí tuaithe* and leadership of a ‘family’, and *Rí ruireach* and leadership of a Dynastic Framework, is the suggestion that *Rí ríog* was equivalent to leadership of the sept. It is important to bear in mind that while these terms speak to rank, it was not an exact science. A *Rí ríog* or a *Rí buiden* was defined as a king of three or four *tuatha* for instance: *Is e rí teora no cetheora tuath insin/* ‘he is a king of three or four tuatha’.⁸⁷ There was therefore a significant gap in power between a *Rí ríog* at the beginning of his career and a *Rí ríog* who had reached the summit and was approaching the rank of *Rí Ruireach*. When looking at the aforementioned *Genelach Cenúil Conaill* we can see three families, each assumedly lords of a distinct *tuath*. Given this, a king of the Cenél Conaill would have naturally qualified as a *Rí ríog*.

As mentioned earlier, this structure of a larger Dynastic Framework with septs underneath does not just apply to the Uí Néill and the Eóganacht. The older ‘tribal’ entities identified by Byrne also seem to operate in the historical period along the same structural lines. Groups such as the Laigin and the Ulaid were also comprised of smaller septs that vied for political power.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Brian Lacey, *Lug’s Forgotten Donegal Kingdom* (Dublin 2012) esp. 7-54. See also; Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*, 202.

⁸⁶ Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 1617.33 & 2307.34 & 568.26. See also; Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*, 206.

⁸⁷ Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 568.17.

⁸⁸ O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum*, 1-78.

Just like the Uí Néill and Eóganacht, it was the leaders of these powerful septs that could rise through the ranks and attain political supremacy over the larger Dynastic Framework. The reason why it seems appropriate to also refer to these entities as ‘Dynastic Frameworks’ is that, even though initially they appear to not have had common ancestry, they are a framework of septs jockeying for position within a larger political unit.⁸⁹

The Laigin best illustrate this, despite their possibly more archaic origins, as they functioned very similarly in terms of structure to the Uí Néill. This may be because they were the primary Uí Néill rivals in the early medieval period. The Laigin Dynastic Framework was comprised of the Uí Cheinselaig, the Uí Bairrche, the Uí Failgi, the Uí Muiredaig and many more.⁹⁰ This is all despite the fact that the Laigin are alleged by Byrne to be an older ‘tribal’ entity.⁹¹ Although the Laigin were most likely an older political group they still developed genealogies in which they constructed their descent from a mythical ancestor, Labraid Loingsech son of Ailill Áine:

Can ocus cid hua rōetatar Laigin ainmnigud? Nī ansae. Laigin quasi lagain id est a liginis nominantur .i. ōna lāignib tucsat la Labraid Longsech Mōen mac Ailella Áine/ ‘Where and why did the Laigin come to be called such? Not difficult, Laigin from spear, that is they are named after spears, i.e. from the spears borne by Labraid Longsech Mōen son of Ailill Áine’.⁹²

It is clear then that although these ‘tribal’ groups may have been older than the Uí Néill and Eóganacht, they were structured in much the same way as the ‘dynastic’ groups, at least in the

⁸⁹ Alfred P. Smyth, *Celtic Leinster: Towards an Historical Geography of Early Irish Civilisation AD 500-1600* (Dublin 1982) 41-83. Smyth provides a thorough and in-depth analysis of the geography and political organisation of the Laigin.

⁹⁰ O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 1-79.

⁹¹ Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, 71.

⁹² O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 1.

historical period.⁹³ As for the Ulaid, within their ranks they could count the Dál Fiatach and the Dál Riada as septs within their larger framework, even though eventually the Dál Riada would segment off from the larger Ulaid framework and eclipse their importance, particularly following the ‘Convention of Druim Ceat’.⁹⁴ The Ulaid Dynastic Framework after the eighth century would also adopt the Dál nÁraidi into their larger Dynastic Framework by means of Ír son of Míl Espáine and Conall Cernach.⁹⁵ This later incorporation of the Dál nÁraidi as the ‘Fír Ulaid’ is worthy of note, as there is fairly compelling evidence that the Dál nÁraidi belonged to the Cruithin. The exact origins of the Cruithin are unknown, but there may be a cultural link between them and the Picts of Northern Britain.⁹⁶ Despite their obscure origins, there does seem to be a degree of agreement among in early documents that the Dál nÁraidi were Cruithin, and therefore did not initially belong to the larger Ulaid Dynastic Framework that was to emerge in the wake of the Uí Néill and Eóganacht frameworks. O’Rahilly outlines three pieces of evidence that support the concept that the Dál nÁraidi were not initially part of the Ulaid, and may even have belonged to another framework of the Cruithin. AU 667 refers to *Bellum Fersti inter Ultu ocus Cruithne* / ‘The battle of Fersti between the Ulaid and the Cruithne’ while AU 789 notes *Caedes magna Ulad la Dál nÁraide* / ‘A great slaughter of the Ulaid by the Dál nÁraidi’.⁹⁷ Similarly, Muirchú in *VSP* refers to the region near Saul as *regiones Ulothorum* / ‘The territories of the Ulaid’ and proceeds to distinguish the land near Slemish as *regiones Cruidnenorum* / ‘The territory of the Cruithin’.⁹⁸ Lastly, the list of guarantors of the Law of Adamnán, which was drafted well into the historical period in Ireland

⁹³ Byrne argues law-tracts indicate a period of pre-history where society was more ‘tribal’. I remain unconvinced. Byrne, ‘Tribes and Tribalism’, 165.

⁹⁴ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 86-87 & Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 217-18 & 896-7.

⁹⁵ Thomas F. O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin 1946; repr. 2010) 349.

⁹⁶ O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History*, 341. Benjamin Hudson, *The Picts* (2014 Oxford) 44. Julianna Grigg, *The Picts re-imagined* (Leeds 2018) 3 & 65. See also, however, Katherine Forsyth, *Language in Pictland* (Utrecht 1997) for a discussion on the ‘Picts’ as a people with their own distinct language, therefore not interchangeably Irish with the Cruithin.

⁹⁷ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 138-39 & 246-47.

⁹⁸ Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii* II 4, (Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, 78-79 & 80-81).

(c. 698 AD). Fiachra Cossalach of the Dál nÁraidi is referred to as *Rí Cruithne*/'King of the Cruithni', and Bécc Boirchi of the Dál Fiatach is noted as *Rí Ulad*/ 'King of the Ulad'.⁹⁹ From the eighth century onward however, the Ulaid come to encompass the Dál nAraidi, who refer to themselves as the 'Fír Ulaid' (the 'true' Ulaid), at this point in time they seem to have become a sept within a larger Dynastic Framework. This demonstrates that the Ulaid eventually became a Dynastic Framework in the same vein as the Uí Néill, Laigin and Eoganacht.¹⁰⁰

It seems fair then to identify the Ulaid, the Laigin and the Eóganacht as political entities that operated on a similar scale to the Uí Néill, and with a similar structure. It should be noted, however, that these are but the main Dynastic Frameworks in early medieval Ireland, and that there existed also many smaller groups that over time became subservient or loyal to their overlords. There also exist older population groups within Munster, frequently made subservient to septs of the Éoganacht that held power there, e.g., the Ciarraige, the Corcu Óche, and the Múscraige. There is even some evidence that these 'older' groups in Munster may have, at one stage, attempted to band together against the Eoganacht.¹⁰¹ The allusion to this 'alliance' of these older groups may be found in the Laud genealogies and tribal histories, where we find:

*Asbert Cīarān fri Brēndān ocus fri Mac Ardae ara nderndais brāithirse fri
Corco Chē ocus frisna huili Mūsraigi./ 'Cīarān with Brēndān and with Mac
Ardae said that they should make an alliance (brotherhood) with the Corco
Oche and with all of the Músraige'.¹⁰²*

⁹⁹ O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History*, 346. See also, Máirín Ní Dhonnchada, 'The guarantor list of Cain Adomnán, 697', *Peritia* 1 (1982) 178-215: 180 & 201.

¹⁰⁰ O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum*, 322-23.

¹⁰¹ D. Blair Gibson, 'Celtic Democracy: Appreciating the Role played by Alliances and Elections in Celtic Political Systems', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 28 (2008) 40-62: 47.

¹⁰² Kuno Meyer, *The Laud Genealogies and Tribal Histories*, this text can be accessed online at <http://research.ucc.ie/celt/document/G105005#contact>, accessed 09/10/2020. (Reference found at p. 315).

This extract continues to outline many more of the older groups in Munster seemingly joining in this ‘brotherhood’. As a political structure, kinship and shared lineage were the bonding elements that held a Dynastic Framework together. This is very clear in the case of the supposed ‘West Munster Synod’, where their alliance/agreement is founded upon the establishment of *bráthirse* through an *aurthach*, an oath of warranty.¹⁰³ This *bráthirse* is established by saints, who act as representative figureheads for their respective septs, committing these septs to a bond of kinship that crosses ecclesiastical and secular boundaries.¹⁰⁴ Without common lineage there would be little to differentiate the Uí Néill septs from those that comprised the Ulaid, the Laigin or the Eoganacht. Kinship was therefore the means through which a larger political framework was established. The prominent role of kinship in early Irish law tracts makes it understandable why shared genealogical relationships became a corner-stone of Irish politics during the period.¹⁰⁵

Due to the heavy emphasis placed upon familial and dynastic relations in Irish society, the genesis of the Uí Néill can be seen as a declaration of shared identity. That is to say, when the annals record a defeat or victory by *nepotes Néill* we may understand that there was a conception of shared identity between the many individuals that qualified as *nepotes Néill* by birth.

Goals and Structure

This thesis will aim to offer a novel interpretation of the Uí Néill and their political organisation by deconstructing the dynasty they purport to be. It will propose that the Uí Néill comprised a Dynastic Framework, a constructed hierarchical identity that provided benefits for its members. It will therefore build upon MacNeill and Ó Corráin’s assessment of genealogical descent as

¹⁰³ Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to early Irish law* (Dundalk 1988; repr. 2009) 201.

¹⁰⁴ Elva Johnston, ‘The Saints of Kerry in the Early Middle Ages’, *Kerry History and Society: Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County* (2020) 1-17: 11.

¹⁰⁵ Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 12-16. & Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 532.28-30 & 18.20.

expressions of political affinity by arguing these expressions took place within a larger, hierarchical structure.¹⁰⁶ The Uí Néill, their origins and their political organisation has been the subject of many scholarly works.¹⁰⁷ The core argument of the thesis is that the Uí Néill was a sophisticated political entity, predicated upon complex genealogical relationships that served as vectors of political allegiance and provided tangible political benefits as well as enormous social impact across secular and ecclesiastical society.

This thesis is divided into nine chapters, the first being the preceding introduction. Chapter Two will provide an overview of existing scholarship and key advances, situating the research within the current scholarly canon. This thesis aims to advance our understanding of the Uí Néill and their political structure through an in-depth analysis of primary source material, specifically the annals, hagiographies, genealogies and legendary tales associated with them.¹⁰⁸ It will be beneficial to establish the necessity and precise contribution of this thesis to the scholarly canon.

The Irish annals are an invaluable resource and will play an important role in the development of this thesis, however, they are not without bias, and considerations of institutional agendas will need to be taken into account when utilising them. This analysis of the Irish annals as a source is the focus of Chapter Three. There is agreement between scholars that some Irish churches had a particularly close relationship with kinship and dynasty. Whether we call them, ‘local’ or ‘lesser’ churches, those churches that were likely patronised and run by local dynastic powers demonstrate that one cannot discount a degree of agenda in

¹⁰⁶ See; MacNeill, ‘Early Irish population-groups’, 93. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘The early Irish genealogical tradition’, *Peritia* 12 (1998) 178-208: 182. David Thornton, *Kings Chronologies and Genealogies: Studies in the Political History of Early Medieval Ireland and Wales* (Oxford 2003; repr. 2012) 23. This will, however, be discussed in more detail later.

¹⁰⁷ F.J. Byrne, *The Rise of the Uí Néill and the high-kingship of Ireland* (Dublin 1970). T.M. Charles-Edwards, ‘The Uí Néill 695-743: The Rise and Fall of Dynasties’, *Peritia* 16 (2002) 396-418. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 441-68.

¹⁰⁸ The literature to be discussed is *Baile in Scáil*, *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*, *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin*, *Vita Sancti Patricii*, *Collectanea*, *Vita Sancti Columbae* & *Orgain Denna Ríg*.

the creation of their assets that benefit the ruling party.¹⁰⁹ Much of the critical reading of the annals will concern their role in informing politics. It will become clear that, due to the close relationship with the church that created them, and due to the intertwined nature of dynastic and ecclesiastical politics; the Irish annals are inevitably subject to perspectives and editorialising that are favourable to specific groups. It will become clear that the annals need to be subjected to more rigorous consideration of authorial agenda. They are maintained either by a single monastic institution, or in some instance, by a larger *paruchia*, with *AU* believed to have been passed through many monasteries associated with a single *paruchia*.¹¹⁰ The annals were therefore an asset of ecclesiastical institutions and may, at times, have been subject to the political agenda of their ecclesiastical institution. A description that bears repeating here, and also resembles the consideration of annals as ‘assets’ was proposed by Ó Corráin in relation to contemporary literature. ‘The sort of literature under discussion here was not usually produced in a vacuum nor by accident nor as a result of personal whim. Professional servitors of power—like civil servants—compose in specific circumstances for specific purposes and use the common (and limited) range of building blocks readily available in their culture.’¹¹¹ This is not as drastic as an overt attempt to rewrite the annals, but rather it means the inclusion of prose and poetry that, at times, eulogises certain individuals, moves the annals away from a straightforward faithful account of history, to one that is inevitably coloured by numerous social factors.

Following this consideration of the sources and an explanation of the critical lens through which the annals will be interpreted, it will be fruitful to provide, in Chapter Four, a thorough

¹⁰⁹ We will see this elaborated more fully throughout the thesis, for now see; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Dál Cais-Church and Dynasty’, *Ériu* 24 (1973) 52-63. Richard Sharpe, ‘Some problems concerning the Organization of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland’, *Peritia* 3 (1984) 230-70. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Historical need and literary narrative’, in D. Ellis Evans (ed.), *Proceedings of the seventh international congress of Celtic studies* (Oxford 1986) 142, esp. fn. 3; Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 280.

¹¹⁰ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 147. Evans, *The present and the past*. T.M. Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland* (Liverpool 2006).

¹¹¹ Ó Corráin, ‘Historical need’, 143.

examination of Uí Néill history within a set time-frame. The annals provide a detailed history of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework, and by examining how the Uí Néill functioned politically in a case-study of the seventh century it shall be possible to determine beyond a doubt that the larger Dynastic Framework was a political system of no small consequence even at that very early period. It was necessary for the purposes of brevity to limit this case study to the seventh century; however, there is more than sufficient evidence, and events of political significance, during this period to prove the function and political reality of the Dynastic Framework. It will be argued that the Dynastic Framework, as a hierarchical political entity, is not conjecture and as such will allow for an examination of primary source material through that lens. It will also demonstrate that these political frameworks were the primary vehicles for accumulating political clout in this specific period.

Although the annals provide an insight into the history and political function of the Dynastic Framework, they are far from the only sources of consequence with regards to the Uí Néill. Chapter Five will widen the scope of analysis by examining the construction of political narratives associated with the Uí Néill by drawing upon ecclesiastical accounts written from the perspectives of Armagh and Iona, e.g. *VSP* and *Vita Sancti Columbae*, as well as accounts that appear to be more ‘secular’ in origin, i.e. the primary character is not an ecclesiastic e.g. *Baile Chuind Chétchathaig (BCC)* and *Baile in Scáil (BiS)*. Given that these texts are more narrative than the annals, it will be easier to examine the degree to which they were infused with political intent, and how these political implications can elucidate the structure of the Dynastic Framework.

The role of Irish churches in the creation of these political narratives cannot be overstated. Chapter Six will propose that they were not a separate entity from the Dynastic Frameworks of early medieval Ireland, but a ‘scholarly’ wing for these frameworks.¹¹² Ecclesiastical

¹¹² See fn. 111.

institutions in early medieval Ireland played a crucial role in the construction of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. When referring to the ‘construction’ of the Uí Neill this thesis does not mean to imply that these political groups did not have their origins in genuine genealogical descent. These frameworks may have their root in genuine biological relationship, however much that is debated.¹¹³ This thesis instead argues that the narratives attributed to the Uí Néill, the means through which they achieved power and influence and how they incorporated disparate groups under their umbrella result in a fundamentally imposed and constructed political institution, as opposed to a naturally occurring one.¹¹⁴

By this point, it will hopefully be clear that the Uí Néill were a consequential political structure, even at an early stage, and that this structure was the result of social factors rather than genetic descent.¹¹⁵ To exemplify this further Chapter Seven will investigate the role that kinship plays as a basis for forming political and societal groups. Although it may be constructed, kinship, or alleged kinship, was the basis for this group, and therefore an understanding of the role of kinship in early medieval Ireland is important. The manner in which ancestry was used as a tool of political expression in early medieval Ireland, and how

¹¹³ Lacey, *Cenél Conaill*, 145-66..

¹¹⁴ This perspective is built upon the conclusions of MacNeill, Ó Corráin and Thornton as outlined in fn 106.

¹¹⁵ It is, at this point, worth mentioning a promising study, Brian McEvoy, Katherine Simms & Daniel G. Bradley, ‘Genetic Investigation of the Patrilineal Kinship Structure of Early Medieval Ireland’, *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 136 (2008) 415-22. Wherein it is argued that the Uí Néill shared a founder figure based on an interesting study of Y Chromosomes shared by those with a specific surname, and this was distinct from Munster where there is no such evidence. Thus it is argued the Uí Néill were genuinely founded by an ancestor and the Eóganacht a constructed federation. I hesitate to criticise as I have little expertise in genetic analysis, but aspects of the conclusion concern me, ‘However, it is possible that greater migration to Munster relative to the Northwest over the past 1,000 years (associated with Norman and English conquest) may dilute such a signature in the Munster geographic sample.’ *Ibid*, 420, seems to be categorically wrong as Munster in no way would have had more migration than Ulster, especially during the period of surrender and regrant, and the Ulster plantation which was famously more effective than its Munster counterpart. Secondly, while I agree the data may suggest a common ancestor for the Uí Néill, I would be cautious in proposing that it meant the Eóganacht and Uí Néill were ‘perhaps lead by different means and this may reflect wider differences in organisation of wider Irish tribal societies’. *Ibid*, 421. Shared genetic material is not a means to argue for specific form of government, or against one in the case of the Eóganacht. I find this topic intriguing and I hope further research may be done to elucidate the subject. With regards to this thesis, however, the narratives and ultimate construction of the larger Dynastic Framework was a matter of social factors as opposed to genuine biological relationship. Whether the Uí Néill originated as a genuine dynasty is therefore not relevant to the manner in which the larger political entity functioned.

that is particularly applicable to the study of the Uí Néill and other Dynastic Frameworks, will further increase our understanding of the Dynastic Framework as a constructed entity.

Chapter Eight will examine the possibility that Dynastic Framework provided a plethora of benefits to its members. We know that it provided hierarchy and stability, and this seems to have been important in cultivating and maintaining long term political power. The Framework was also a focus of political narratives which elevated its prestige, and this was certainly the case with regards the Uí Néill. The role of the kingship of Tara in particular appears to have proven to be a very pivotal political narrative, long outlasting the period of Uí Néill dominance. The thesis will then conclude with an overview of the key advances in knowledge provided by this thesis accompanied with closing remarks.

It is necessary to question exactly the construction of a Dynastic Framework like the Uí Néill as well as the benefits entailed in membership which contributed to its enduring political and social impact in Ireland. By the end of this thesis it will be clear that the Dynastic Framework was beneficial in terms of the power and influence it accumulated for the largest sept within it, and that the emergence of a unifying and hierarchical Dynastic Framework owed its origins and a great deal of its political sway, clout and claims to the construction of narratives, primarily by clergymen. The intertwined nature of secular and ecclesiastical politics found common ground in the larger Dynastic Framework, and the increased power of certain monastic sites that backed powerful or local Dynastic Frameworks. It would therefore be foolish, in future research, to discount any institutional agenda that may have infiltrated annalistic resources. These Dynastic Frameworks were more than solely secular or ecclesiastical, instead they were a wide-ranging, multi-faceted expression of all these aspects of social identification put together, and that is partly why they were so powerful, influential and wide-spread throughout Irish society at this time. This is not, however, the first research to

engage with the Uí Néill as a political entity. We shall need to examine and consider both the arguments of other scholars, as well as an in-depth consideration of the sources used.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review

The relevant primary source material involved in constructing the Dynastic Framework will be examined in this chapter, as well as the contexts in which the concept of Dynastic Frameworks are considered in modern historiography. It is necessary to understand the range of primary sources and how each provides an insight into the construction of the Dynastic Framework before outlining the evolution of modern historiography associated with early Irish political powers. With regards to the primary source material, in-depth analysis of the content will be found throughout the thesis, not in this chapter. The following is an attempt to identify the primary sources that are most relevant to the thesis, as well as brief analysis of their historiographical use to answering the core research question, how was the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework created, and how was it so successful.

Literature Review: Primary Sources

In order to develop a fuller understanding and appreciation of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework and the manner in which it functioned, it will be necessary to draw heavily from a wide variety of primary sources.¹¹⁶ This thesis has been greatly aided by a critical reading of two annalistic texts, the *Annals of Ulster (AU)* and the *Annals of Inisfallen (AI)*. *AU* is believed to have been derived from the so-called *Chronicle of Ireland (CI)*, a no longer extant text that served as a source for different Irish annals.¹¹⁷ It is somewhat more difficult to ascertain the true history of

¹¹⁶ This thesis draws upon a varied range of sources, but these are likely not representative of the literature produced during this period, see; Richard Sharpe, 'Books from Ireland, Fifth to Ninth Centuries', *Peritia* 21 (2010) 1-55.

¹¹⁷ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 138-47. Evans has provided thorough and in-depth research of the relationship between *AU*, *CI* and the 'Clonmacnoise Group' of Annals, specifically after 912 AD. See, Nicholas Evans, *The present and the past in medieval Irish chronicles* (Woodbridge 2010). For an 'edition' of *CI* (No extant copy of *CI* exists), See Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland* (Liverpool 2006). For an opposing position to

AI; drawing from an exemplar, the bulk of the chronicle was composed after 1065 AD, but we cannot rule out the possibility that a local annal was also included in the compilation period.¹¹⁸ Historians differ on the origins of the annals. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín suggests they began as the product of annotations to Easter tables that eventually evolved into annals by using the format of chronicles.¹¹⁹ This interpretation argues for a degree of Irish innovation: while adopting the format of European chronicles, a large amount of information relayed in the annals originated in Ireland. Daniel McCarthy, on the other hand, argues that the Irish annals were based on old forms of chronicles that made their way to Ireland, such as the Chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine, as well as the (lost) *Rufinus Chronicle*. His argument attributes the construction of Irish chronicles more to a direct copying and continuation of a set of chronicles begun abroad.¹²⁰ These theories for the origins of the Irish annals demonstrate that their origins lie in a mixture of Irish and European influences.

Here the edition of *AU* by Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill is used, as is Mac Airt's edition of *AI*.¹²¹ The critical apparatus provided by Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill is excellent, and the diligent application of genealogical references provides guidance on identifying the many significant political figures encountered in the text.¹²² Both editions draw upon manuscripts now in Trinity College Dublin and the Bodleian Library in Oxford. *AI* is found in Rawlinson

the *Chronicle of Ireland* theory, see Daniel P. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals: Their Genesis, Evolution and History* (Dublin 2008).

¹¹⁸ Alfred P. Smyth, 'The Earliest Irish Annals: their first contemporary entries', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 72 C 1 (1972) 1-48: 31. Kathryn Grabowski & David Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals of Medieval Ireland and Wales: The Clonmacnoise Group* (Suffolk 1984) 1-107, esp. 56-66. Evans provides an alternative to this more accepted theory surrounding events from 431 to the 660s, Evans, *The present and the past*, 13.

¹¹⁹ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, 'Early Irish Annals from Easter Tables: A Case Restated', *Peritia* 2 (1983) 74-86.

¹²⁰ For *Rufinus* see, Daniel McCarthy, 'The Original Compilation of the *Annals of Ulster*', *Studia Celtica* 38 (2004) 69-95: 84. For further information on the annals see, Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*. & Evans, *The present and the past*. & Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*. & McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*.

¹²¹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*. & Mac Airt, *The Annals of Inisfallen*. The edition of *AU* has been singled out for praise by, McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*, 2.

¹²² These editions of *AU* & *AI* work well with a copy of O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum*. See, however, Caoimhín Breatnach, 'The Annals of Ulster: verse, sources and editions', in Caoimhín Breatnach and Meidhbhín Ní Úrdail (eds), *Aon don éigse: essays marking Osborn Bergin's centenary lecture on bardic poetry (1912)* (Dublin 2015) 221-238, where the editorial process is reviewed for both McCarthy's edition and Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill's.

B. 503, and *AU* in MS. 1282 and Rawlinson B. 489.¹²³ The annals in question provide extensive historical information concerning political powers in early medieval Ireland; examining how these powers interacted with one another has been pivotal in the development of the central concept, the Dynastic Framework. By keeping track of interactions between early medieval Irish political powers it is possible to observe much of the historical events as occurring within the context of a larger hierarchical political organisation. The annals, therefore, provide necessary context through which to interpret the impact of Dynastic Frameworks on early medieval Ireland. The annals, as we shall see, played an important role in informing the politics of the Dynastic Framework in a manner that was conducive to their political longevity.¹²⁴

It is worth highlighting at this point that the manner in which the annals have been approached in this thesis marks a departure from the current historiographical norm. The following dissertation's approach to the annals is innovative in the value it places upon poetic and prose inclusions. This approach differs drastically from most secondary material concerned with the annals.¹²⁵ Currently, there is a tendency in the study of the annals to exclude poetry and (some) narrative prose material from translations, usually due to them being perceived as later additions. This editorialising of primary source material has ramifications on the wider field of study, as these additions, if correctly dated and identified, can prove informative for later historians. It is, therefore, not beneficial to exclude poetry and prose from the scholarly discussion concerning the annals. Furthermore, this thesis will demonstrate that poetry and prose were an important facet of the Irish annals, not to be discarded by modern translations. It will argue that the literary elements of the annals are an aspect of the genre, and as such the politics associated with individual pieces of poetry and prose in the Irish annals are inextricable from the annalistic corpus.¹²⁶ Emphasising that poetic and prose additions were an aspect of

¹²³ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*, ix. & Mac Airt, *The Annals of Inisfallen*, vii.

¹²⁴ See Chapter 3: 'The Role of the Irish Annals in Informing Politics'.

¹²⁵ See Sub-Headings *Prose in the early Irish Annals* & *Poetry in the early Irish Annals*.

¹²⁶ See Chapter 3: 'The Role of the Irish Annals in Informing Politics'.

the genre is a subject that is understudied and is an innovative part of this dissertation. By stressing the value of this aspect of the annals, this thesis will provide a novel perspective.

Genealogical sources are also of central importance. For the purposes of this thesis, O'Brien's *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* (CGH) is used because it provides access to the oldest collections of early Irish genealogical materials, combining, as it does, the genealogical material in Rawlinson B. 502 and the Book of Leinster.¹²⁷ It is not an exhaustive genealogical compilation, but then neither do the Uí Néill have an exhaustive genealogical corpus associated with them.¹²⁸ The genealogies, and particularly relevant to this thesis, the *Síl Cuind* genealogy, can provide a clear outline of the structure of a Dynastic Framework that is reflected in an analysis of the annals. The creation and function of the Dynastic Framework owed much to the web of genealogical relationships it cultivated. The genealogies are fundamentally important to our understanding of the Dynastic Framework and how it grew in power and influence, as well as informing us as to the political conflicts that could rage within them. The relevant scholarship that has emerged regarding the genealogies will be discussed later in this chapter.¹²⁹ The genealogies are crucial to a proper understanding of the structure of the Dynastic Framework, which makes them a crucial primary source in investigating politics in early medieval Ireland.

In addition to the annals and genealogies, there are narrative texts that have historical significance and are frequently referenced in the thesis. Muirchú's *Vita Sancti Patricii* (VSP), Tírechán's 'Collectanea' and the *Liber Angeli* are drawn from Bieler's 1979 *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*: Bieler's edition is rich in critical apparatus and historical

¹²⁷ O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, x.

¹²⁸ A guide to the larger genealogical corpus, as well as printed editions, is present in Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium*, 3 vols (Turnhout 2017) i, 989-1032.

¹²⁹ See Sub-Heading, *The Nature of Genealogies*.

background.¹³⁰ Anderson and Anderson's 1991 edition of Adomnán's *Vita Sancti Columbae* (VSC) is used on account of its detailed critical commentaries, while Sharpe's 1995 edition of the same text is also consulted as there are a number of notes made by Sharpe that are worthy of inclusion.¹³¹ Anderson and Anderson's edition of VSC is very helpful due to the critical apparatus that covers topics from the background of the text to the manuscript tradition.¹³² For poetry from Iona both the work of Clancy and Markus, as well as Bisagni, have provided not only transcriptions and translations of various poems, but also a great deal of critical commentary.¹³³ Of particular importance in Bisagni's 2019 edition is the case he presents for the dating of *Amrae Choluimb Chille* (ACC).¹³⁴ A critical reading of each of these texts will demonstrate strong connection to the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework throughout, and can be used to elucidate the means by which the myths and legends associated with certain ancestors came to be preserved. These texts are furthermore strongly associated with specific Irish churches, e.g. Armagh and Iona, and they are crucial resources to proving the degree to which dynastic politics permeated every sphere of Irish society. The longevity of the Dynastic Framework concept is simpler to understand when we can see it stretch across multiple societal spheres, at times providing commonality for powerful individuals from the ecclesiastical and secular sphere.

There are, in addition, several old Irish tales concerning the concepts of kingship and the history of respective Dynastic Frameworks, namely, *Baile Chuind Chétchathaig* (BCC), *Baile in Scáil* (BiS) and *Orguin Denna Ríg* (ODR). For BCC, Edel Bhreathnach in 2005 provided an

¹³⁰ Ludwig Bieler (ed. & transl.), *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin 1979). (Beyond an excellent transcription and translation Bieler has provided a great deal of critical apparatus on each of his texts. See 1-57.)

¹³¹ Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, in Alan Orr Anderson & Majorie Ogilvie Anderson (ed. & transl.), *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (Oxford 1991). Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, in Richard Sharpe (ed. & transl.), *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* (Harmondsworth 1995).

¹³² Anderson & Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, xv-lxxiv.

¹³³ Thomas Owen Clancy & Gilbert Márkus, *Iona: the earliest poetry of a Celtic monastery* (Edinburgh 1995). & Jacopo Bisagni, *Amrae Choluimb Cille: A critical edition* (Dublin 2019).

¹³⁴ Bisagni, *Amrae Choluimb Chille*, 1-260.

edition complete with scholarly analysis that has proven very useful.¹³⁵ Kevin Murray's 2004 edition of *BiS* contains both a transcription and translation, as well as important critical commentary and a glossary.¹³⁶ Murray further provides a great deal of background information on the text, its date, stemma, literary context and themes, in brief but useful detail.¹³⁷ Greene's 1993 edition of *ODR* is drawn from Rawl. B 502, where it is contained in a collection of several Old Irish tales. As a result, although there is critical apparatus provided, it is, by necessity, not on the same level as Murray's edition of *BiS*, which is entirely devoted to a single text.¹³⁸ These Old Irish tales are more explicitly concerned with relating the history of the Dynastic Framework than any of the narrative texts mentioned previously. They usefully allow for an interpretation of internal politics within the Dynastic Framework at the time of composition. Law texts, though used occasionally throughout this thesis, are not the primary focus of the argument; I have used D.A. Binchy's monumental 1978 *Corpus Iuris Hibernici (CIH)*.¹³⁹

Literature Review: The Dynastic Framework

The Dynastic Framework outlined in this thesis is an attempt to encapsulate the socio-political forces that bound together the highest echelon of political power in early medieval Irish society. In historiography this subject has been complicated by conflicting perspectives rooted, ultimately, in Ireland's colonised past. The following is an analysis of the evolution of the scholarly consensus concerning the topic of dynastic polities, termed Dynastic Frameworks in this thesis, as it relates in particular to the different segments of the Uí Néill. To appreciate the

¹³⁵ Edel Bhreathnach, 'Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig: Edition', in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin 2005).

¹³⁶ *Baile in Scáil*, in Kevin Murray (ed. & transl.), *Baile in Scáil 'The Phantom's Frenzy'*, Irish Texts Society 58 (Dublin 2004), 68-180.

¹³⁷ Murray (ed. & transl.), *Baile in Scáil*, 1-32.

¹³⁸ *Orgain Denna Ríg*, in David Greene (ed. & transl.), *Fingal Rónáin and Other Stories*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 16 (Dublin 1993) 16-26.

¹³⁹ D.A. Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin 1978). For secondary sources see, Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to early Irish law* (Dundalk 1988; repr. 2009). & Neil McLeod, *Early Irish Contract Law* (Sydney 1995). & Liam Breatnach, *A Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dundalk 2005).

novel contribution of this thesis it will be necessary to chart the evolution of modern historical thinking on two subjects, one concerned with the evolution of thought regarding political powers, and the other addressing the changing views in scholarship pertaining to genealogies. We shall see that an appreciation for the complexity of these political powers has emerged over the past century, but until very recently, too much credence has been given to their supposed consanguineous relationship. While the topic of the origins of these Dynastic Frameworks has been discussed before, the question of why these ‘dynasties’ were so robust and enduring has not received adequate attention. Through these sections combined, this thesis will demonstrate that the current scholarship requires a thorough reassessment of the political functioning and hierarchical structures of the Dynastic Frameworks of early medieval Ireland.

It would not be an exaggeration of his historiographical impact to say that the modern study of early medieval Ireland began with Eoin MacNeill.¹⁴⁰ His thoughts on the subject of early medieval Ireland were ground-breaking at the time and derived from his expertise in linguistics, critical reading of early Irish texts and engagement directly with the manuscripts.¹⁴¹ MacNeill’s expertise with documentary material, such as manuscripts, is evidenced by his role in founding the Irish Manuscript Commission.¹⁴² It ought to be noted, however, that MacNeill was also involved in the establishment of the Irish Volunteers and was a staunch Nationalist during the period in which Ireland was fighting for independence. His scholarship, which often lauded early Irish society and culture, stood in contrast to colonialist presumptions about the primitive nature of early Irish society and was, therefore, as pertinent and politically charged in the time

¹⁴⁰ Elva Johnston, ‘Eoin Mac Neill’s Early Medieval Ireland: A Politics for Scholarship or a Politics of Scholarship?’, in Chris Jones, Conor Kostick and Klaus Oschema (eds), *Making the Medieval Relevant: How Medieval Studies Contribute to our understanding of the present* (Berlin 2019) 211-224: 211.

¹⁴¹ Eoin MacNeill, ‘The Vita Tripartita of St Patrick’, *Ériu* 11 (1932) 1-41. R. I. Best & Eóin MacNeill, *The annals of Inisfallen: reproduced in facsimile from the original manuscript (Rawlinson B 503) in the Bodleian Library* (Dublin 1933). Demonstrate his expertise with manuscripts neatly.

¹⁴² Deirdre McMahon & Michael Kennedy, *Reconstructing Ireland’s Past: A History of the Irish Manuscripts Commission* (Dublin 2009) 1–20.

he was writing as it was to the *literati* of early medieval Ireland.¹⁴³ MacNeill was one of the first modern historians to begin to write about the different identities in early medieval Ireland, and of the politics associated with said identities.¹⁴⁴

MacNeill's 1907 article in *Ériu*, 'Mocu, Maccu', was foundational. In it he identified the use of the term *mocu* in early sources was indicative of social as well as linguistic archaism.¹⁴⁵ He elaborated on this crucial discovery in his 1911/1912 Royal Irish Academy paper on 'Early Irish Population Groups: Their Nomenclature, Classification and Chronology',¹⁴⁶ in which he observed that the linguistic evidence enabled historians to distinguish between Irish political groups chronologically based on the terminology used to denote them.¹⁴⁷ This proposal of MacNeill's was to prove very influential in shaping later thought as it would provide the impetus for F.J. Byrne's later assertion of a distinction between two types of governance, one 'tribal' and one 'dynastic'.¹⁴⁸ This thesis, however, challenges any such suggestion that this linguistic shift coincided with a major change in the political organisation of early medieval Ireland.¹⁴⁹ By challenging the idea that this linguistic shift represented societal change, this dissertation is contributing to a better understanding of this early medieval period. This will be investigated in more detail shortly when discussing F.J. Byrne's contributions to the scholarship. Mac Neill's argument, however, does allow us to identify a distinction between Irish Dynastic Frameworks based upon their relative archaism, which is further considered here. With regards to the subject of early medieval Irish politics, however, MacNeill's work is outdated, this is most evident when it comes to discussing more conventional 'dynasties', such

¹⁴³ Johnston, 'Eoin Mac Neill's Early Medieval Ireland', 215-224. See Mac Neill's counterpart, Goddard Henry Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans, 1169-1333*, Vol. 1-2 (Oxford 1911), (Oxford 1920) Vol. 3-4; repr. in a single volume (Dublin 2005).

¹⁴⁴ Conor Mulvagh & Emer Purcell *Eoin MacNeill: the pen and the sword* (Cork 2022).

¹⁴⁵ MacNeill, "Mocu, maccu", 42-49.

¹⁴⁶ MacNeill, 'Early Irish population-groups', 59-114.

¹⁴⁷ MacNeill, 'Early Irish population-groups', 64.

¹⁴⁸ MacNeill, "Mocu, maccu", 42-49. & F.J. Byrne, 'Tribes and tribalism in Early Ireland', *Ériu* 22 (1971) 128-166: 153.

¹⁴⁹ See Sub-Heading, *Dynastic Frameworks: Why Use that Term?*.

as the Uí Néill, MacNeill put too much stock in their historicity.¹⁵⁰ An element of MacNeill's work that remains forward-thinking, however, was his reluctance to engage with specifically terming political powers such as the Connachta.¹⁵¹ In doing this he sidestepped the pitfalls associated in using terms such as 'tribal' when referring to early medieval Irish political powers.¹⁵² This is indicative of a problem in Irish historiography generally, i.e., that these political powers were seen as simply 'dynasties'. This thesis will demonstrate that although genealogical relation can be important to these political powers, the Dynastic Framework as a whole was more than common descent, it was a sophisticated political organisation that used alleged kin relations to bind disparate powers together. This is a major contribution to the scholarly canon, we will see that although recent historiography has questioned the historicity of these 'dynasties', the level of organisation and the synthetic nature of the Dynastic Framework that is proposed by this dissertation is novel.

The work of John V. Kelleher is also worthy of mention at this point. Kelleher's 1963 *Studia Hibernica* article, 'Early Irish History and Pseudo-History' was an optimistic summary of the potential for new and exciting studies in early Ireland at that time and contains the iconic statement concerning Uí Néill origins.¹⁵³ Kelleher's remark about the Uí Néill as 'cuttlefish', that they 'emerged from a dark cloud of their own making', was as striking then as it is today, however, he accused the Uí Néill of a malicious alteration of history, where in fact it is certainly a more nuanced and complicated affair.¹⁵⁴ According to Kelleher, the annals were rewritten to serve as Uí Néill propaganda, which is by far too drastic an accusation, and is recognised as such in his conclusion, where he states 'what I have offered in this paper is not to be taken as

¹⁵⁰ Mac Neill, *Phases*, 129-31.

¹⁵¹ Mac Neill, *Phases*, 130. 'The Connacht power, after the time of Niall, was regarded as comprising three chief divisions—the kingdom of Connacht, the Airgialla, and the territory of the descendants of Niall (Uí Néill).'

¹⁵² Byrne, 'MacNeill the Historian', 25.

¹⁵³ Kelleher, 'Early Irish history', 113-27.

¹⁵⁴ See fn. 41 & Kelleher, 'Early Irish history', 124-27.

fact. It is theory and hypothesis'.¹⁵⁵ Kelleher's work is a notable evolution in scholarship, however, because of his theory that the Uí Néill were, to some degree, not a legitimate dynasty, but that their genealogical record was tampered with and their origins obscured.¹⁵⁶ This scepticism around the veracity of Uí Néill genealogies is Kelleher's most enduring impact on scholarly thought even though it was a point of view that few, if any, scholars would share to the same degree today.

The next major development regarding the evolution of the concept of the Dynastic Framework can be attributed to both D.A. Binchy and F.J. Byrne. Both scholars engaged in a debate concerning the applicability of the term 'tribal' in an Irish context that ultimately resulted in Byrne proposing 'tribal' and 'dynastic' as distinct forms of governance. This development is directly related to MacNeill's 'Mocu, Maccu' article as Byrne draws upon MacNeill's argument to bolster his proposal. In the interim, the understanding of Irish political entities had not changed a great deal, insofar as they were considered simple dynasties. The next major reconsideration of the function of early Irish political powers may be attributed to D. A. Binchy, whose lecture *Secular Institutions* was preserved in *Early Irish Society* (1954).¹⁵⁷ The most notable contribution Binchy made from this lecture was that the main characteristics of Irish society were 'Tribal, rural, hierarchical, and familiar (using this word in its oldest sense, to mean a society in which the family, not the individual, is the unit)'.¹⁵⁸ Binchy would follow up on this with another published lecture *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship* in 1970.¹⁵⁹ In this Binchy further asserted that Irish society was tribal by definition; however this was short lived as it was quickly addressed by Byrne's 1971 *Ériu* article 'Tribes and Tribalism in early Ireland'. Byrne largely disagreed with Binchy's perspective that early medieval Irish society was

¹⁵⁵ Kelleher, 'Early Irish history', 127.

¹⁵⁶ Kelleher, 'Early Irish history', 124-25. Charles Fanning (ed.), *Selected Writings of John V. Kelleher on Ireland and Irish America* (Carbondale 2002).

¹⁵⁷ D. A. Binchy, *Secular Institutions*, in Myles Dillon (ed.), *Early Irish Society* (1954) 52-65.

¹⁵⁸ Binchy, *Secular Institutions*, 54.

¹⁵⁹ Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship*. See also, fn. 56.

‘tribal’, though with a caveat. For Byrne a ‘tribal’ Irish society may have existed, but he believed it to be a relic of the ancient past. Byrne expanded upon MacNeill’s conclusions in ‘Mocu, Maccu’ and proposed two distinct forms of political organisation, ‘tribal’ and ‘dynastic’, of which ‘tribal’ indicated antiquity.¹⁶⁰ MacNeill had provided linguistic evidence that the Irish language was changing during this period, Byrne, however, made a jump by equating this linguistic change with a societal one. The argument that will be advanced in this thesis challenges Byrne’s theory.¹⁶¹

Although Byrne identifies a linguistic shift during the period when the Uí Néill and Eóganacht come to power c. 600-900 AD, there is no evidence that it implied a radical societal change or an equally radical change in governance on the island.¹⁶² Indeed, there is an important concept named ‘segmentation’, that often occurs within Dynastic Frameworks, that provides an alternative explanation to Byrne’s theory of large-scale societal change.¹⁶³ Through segmentation, smaller, local septs that existed within his so called ‘tribal’ polities were less archaic and thus had newer naming conventions. When these septs increased in power and eventually segmented off from the ‘tribal’ polity, their modernity was reflected by their newer, ‘dynastic’ naming conventions. This does not, however, imply any major change from ‘tribal’ to ‘dynastic’ systems of governance. It will be argued in this dissertation that by the earliest historical period there was no difference in function between the ‘tribal’ Laigin or Ulaid and the ‘dynastic’ Uí Néill or Eóganacht. This thesis will, therefore, argue that the case for a different system of governance from pre-history needs to be re-examined.¹⁶⁴ It will demonstrate

¹⁶⁰ See fn. 46.

¹⁶¹ See Sub-Heading: *Dynastic Frameworks: Why Use that Term?*.

¹⁶² The dating is found in Byrne, ‘Tribes and Tribalism’, 162.

¹⁶³ See fn. 76.

¹⁶⁴ An overreliance upon literature can lead to assumptions about the *Realpolitik* of early medieval Ireland. Byrne concludes that a change in social norms coincided with an un(proven) change on the political stage. In Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, 10, a poor conclusion is criticised that emerges from the same problem. Lydon has built an assumption of Irish society from law tracts, and concludes that customs preventing ‘puppet kings or neighbouring kingdoms’ had passed away by the 8th century. Ó Corráin outlines why this is foolish, and even demonstrably incorrect. Byrne’s conclusion seems intuitive at first; however, there is no evidence to suggest that

that there was no dramatic break in the forms and function of governance in early medieval Ireland. In place of the so called ‘tribal’ and ‘dynastic’ society proposed by Byrne, it will innovatively argue the case for the existence of a sophisticated hierarchical political entity called the Dynastic Framework.

It must also be mentioned that this thesis agrees with Byrne in rejecting Binchy’s usage of the term ‘tribal’. The term is problematic, especially in the context of this thesis, which seeks to establish the existence of a different and sophisticated hierarchical political entity in the form of the Dynastic Framework. The word ‘tribal’ is frequently used as an atonym for ‘civilisation’; this is particularly the case as it has also been used patronisingly in the past in order to denigrate colonised societies.¹⁶⁵ Byrne’s ‘Tribes and Tribalism’, however, is well known, as is his identification of ancient polities with the term ‘tribal’. For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, the term ‘tribal’ may be used, but should only be interpreted as indicating antiquity. Byrne would go on to write his *Irish Kings and High Kings* in 1973, which has been highly influential from the 1970s until now, and cements this concept of ‘tribal’ and ‘dynastic’ more thoroughly.¹⁶⁶

Writing around the same time as Byrne, but on a slightly different aspect of these political powers was Smyth, who composed two *Études Celtiques* articles on ‘The Húi Néill and the Leinstermen in the Annals of Ulster’ (1974) and ‘Huí Failgi relations with the Huí Néill in the century after the loss of the plain of Mide’ (1975). Both articles provide an important analysis of early Uí Néill history and their methods of conquest.¹⁶⁷ These articles were to provide the basis for his 1982 *Celtic Leinster: Towards a Historical Geography of early Irish civilization*,

there was a significant departure, societally or politically, in terms of organisation in early medieval Ireland, that coincided with this more ‘dynastic’ naming scheme.

¹⁶⁵ See fn. 54.

¹⁶⁶ F.J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973; repr. Dublin 2001).

¹⁶⁷ Alfred P. Smyth, ‘Huí Failgi relations with the Huí Néill in the century after the loss of the plain of Mide’, *Études Celtique* 14.2 (1975) 503-23. Smyth, ‘The Húi Néill and the Leinstermen’, 121-43.

A.D. 500-1600.¹⁶⁸ Smyth's monograph on Leinster was subjected to criticism, which was primarily centred around his use of primary source material.¹⁶⁹ The criticism is rather harsh, however, considering the accomplishments of Smyth's research and the focus it brought onto the local aspect of early Irish politics. Smyth's analysis of Leinster's geography was tightly focused upon locality, and it thus provided a worthy insight into the function of the larger Laigin Dynastic Framework. By examining the interactions between the southern Uí Néill and political powers in Leinster, Smyth's work provides a novel interpretation of the manner in which the Uí Néill functioned. With regards to the evolution of thought concerning the larger Dynastic Framework Smyth's contributions are twofold. Firstly, his intense focus upon locality in his aforementioned *Études Celtiques* articles and *Celtic Leinster* has proven instructive in proposing the concept of the Dynastic Framework which is a core contribution of this thesis. The larger superstructure of the Dynastic Framework is hierarchical in nature, understanding the hierarchy necessitates a consideration of the various ranks that existed within it. Smyth's local analysis has been helpful in identifying the smaller entities that consistently comprised larger Dynastic Frameworks. Secondly, Smyth's most important contribution to the thesis is directly concerned with genealogies and the manner in which genealogical fabrication paved the way for understanding the function of the larger Dynastic Framework. In order to keep this section focused upon the evolution of scholarly thought regarding the Dynastic Framework, this second aspect of Smyth's work will be discussed in the following section on The Nature of Genealogies.

The work of Gearóid Mac Niocaill, in particular his 1972 text *Ireland Before the Vikings*, should be discussed briefly.¹⁷⁰ Mac Niocaill provides an outline of early Irish political history until c. 800 AD. His overview of early Irish political powers is impressive, particularly with

¹⁶⁸ Smyth, *Celtic Leinster*.

¹⁶⁹ K.W. Nicholls, 'The Land of the Leinstermen', *Peritia* 3 (1984) 535-58.

¹⁷⁰ Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *Ireland Before the Vikings* (Dublin 1972).

regards to the scope of history he addresses. It is relevant here due to the analysis he performs of Uí Néill political history.¹⁷¹ This thesis examines the Dynastic Framework by means of a seventh century case study, Mac Niocaill's work is, therefore, a precursor to this case study. However, due to the larger chronological range Mac Niocaill engages with, his work is, by necessity, less detailed. Furthermore, Mac Niocaill investigates numerous different political powers from across Ireland during this period, meaning his survey of Irish political history is further diluted. This thesis hopes to build upon Mac Niocaill's analysis and advance our scholarly understanding of the Uí Néill by focusing on a single century and restricting analysis to only the Uí Néill. This thesis' analysis of the Uí Néill, being focused entirely on the seventh century and unconcerned with rival powers, allows for a more thorough investigation of their function as a larger Dynastic Framework. The thesis will thus advance Mac Niocaill's work by providing a more focused field of study. With regards to advancing our understanding of the Dynastic Framework Mac Niocaill's history of early Ireland has helped scholars to better appreciate and easier understand the cause and effect nature of politics in this period. Mac Niocaill does not, however, greatly challenge the conception of the Uí Néill as a genuine dynasty and generally regards them to be consanguineous.¹⁷²

We should also discuss Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, whose 1995 *Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200* provides an overview of various aspects of early Irish society.¹⁷³ Ó Cróinín's text usefully consolidates much of the scholarly consensus regarding early medieval Irish political powers. For instance, Ó Cróinín includes MacNeill and Byrne's points regarding a 'tribal' and 'dynastic' split in the earliest Irish population groups.¹⁷⁴ He would later contribute a chapter

¹⁷¹ Mac Niocaill, *Ireland Before the Vikings*, 107-45.

¹⁷² There is a caveat on this point, however. Despite not engaging with the topic in depth, Mac Niocaill provides a small illuminating section regarding his own thoughts on the matter. 'But it is worth raising the question, even if it is unanswerable, whether all these links with the Uí Néill are not perhaps fictitious; whether, indeed, although some recent writers have accepted his existence, and seen in him the first king of Tara of his line, he ever existed at all, and if he did, whether he ever ruled.' Mac Niocaill, *Ireland Before the Vikings*, 12.

¹⁷³ Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*.

¹⁷⁴ Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 64-67.

entitled 'Ireland, 400-800' to the 2005 *A New History of Ireland I: Prehistoric and Early Ireland*.¹⁷⁵ Similar to his earlier book this chapter engages with early Irish political powers between 400-800 AD, and the Uí Néill figure prominently. In this work Ó Cróinín is more sceptical with regards to the historicity of the Uí Néill and veracity of their earliest genealogical tradition.¹⁷⁶ An aspect of Dynastic Frameworks which Ó Cróinín correctly identifies is the manner in which later 'propagandists' would often project anachronistic political claims onto ancestral figures.¹⁷⁷ This thesis similarly discusses the role of literature in the promotion and preservation of Dynastic Frameworks. Where it innovates upon Ó Cróinín's work is in rejecting terms such as propagandists or the idea that such promotion and preservation was an active process. This can too often be interpreted as cynical rewriting of history, as is the case with Kellehers work. Instead it argues for a subtle process that was a consequence of the Dynastic Framework's importance across various spheres of Irish politics. The thesis will argue that Dynastic Frameworks such as the Uí Néill were a unifying factor across secular and ecclesiastical spheres; in doing so it will argue this promotion and preservation of Dynastic Frameworks through literature was a consequence of the Dynastic Framework's importance in both spheres.

Thomas Charles-Edwards' work is the next significant advance in the study of these Dynastic Frameworks. It must be acknowledged, however, that he has at times been influenced by Byrne's 'tribal' and 'dynastic' theory. This is most prevalent in his earlier work, e.g. his 1993 monograph *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, where Byrne's suggestion of 'tribal' and 'dynastic' polities leads him to propose an overly complex analysis of Latin terminology.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400-800', 182-234.

¹⁷⁶ Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400-800', 201, 202 & 208. Despite this Ó Cróinín argues that the term Uí Néill is anachronistic for the fifth century since, 'by that date the dynasty hardly comprised much more than the sons of Niall himself', hence providing some credence to the veracity of their genealogical tradition. Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400-800', 204.

¹⁷⁷ Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 77.

¹⁷⁸ See fn. 63.

However, Charles-Edwards' adherence to Byrne's 'tribal' and 'dynastic' theory is only an issue in his earlier work, as his later work provides significant developments in our understanding of early medieval Irish powers. His interrogations and analysis of early Irish sources and their contexts in 'The Uí Néill 695-743: The Rise and Fall of Dynasties' (2002) *Chronicle of Ireland* (2006), and *Early Christian Ireland* (2007) are clearly also pertinent to this work, as is his methodology.¹⁷⁹ A strong feature of his work is his focus on the Uí Néill themselves, and in particular his interest in Tírechán's *Collectanea*, which sheds light on the political situation of the Uí Néill during Tírechán's life.¹⁸⁰ The scope of Charles-Edwards' work is broad, covering law tracts, annals and hagiographies.¹⁸¹ His work on the *Chronicle of Ireland* is a particularly useful theoretical exercise, but his excision of poetry that is so often deemed extraneous is challenged in this thesis, where the case is made that poetry and prose represent an important dimension of the annals.¹⁸² Nevertheless, much of Charles-Edwards' research is closely related to the goals of this thesis, as evidenced by an observation in his *Early Christian Ireland*:

'Royal dynasties were segmentary, in that they had a single stem but several branches. The unity of such dynasties was often fragile; while they needed to preserve some cohesion in the face of rivals, the kingship, or over kingship, was the object of contention between the branches. To mitigate the divisive effects of competition for supremacy, it was standard practice to attempt to advance the interests of several branches, not just the one in current possession of the over kingship. One way to achieve this end was to allow that the head of a

¹⁷⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*. & T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*. (Oxford 1993). & Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*. & Charles-Edwards, 'The Uí Néill 695-743', 396-418.

¹⁸⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 8-54 & 441-468. This tour of Uí Néill lands follows the footsteps of Patrick in the *Collectanea*.

¹⁸¹ *Bechbretha*, in Thomas Charles-Edwards & Fergus Kelly (ed. & transl.), *Bechbretha*, Early Irish Law Series 1 (Dublin 1983). Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*.

¹⁸² Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, 2.

subordinate brand of a dynasty might be a king, even if only a client king. The pressure was thus to multiply minor kingships in order to maintain internal dynastic support for the major kings.’¹⁸³

Charles-Edwards’ statement is a largely accurate assessment of the function and organisation of Dynastic Frameworks in early medieval Ireland. This thesis supports his hypothesis with a more closely defined, novel and consistently-applied lexicon, the absence of which has been an issue heretofore. This thesis has outlined and will proceed to demonstrate the value of three terms to conceptualise the political organisation of a dynasty in early medieval Ireland, viz. (i) Dynastic Framework, (ii) Sept and (iii) Family, leading to a clearer understanding of these Dynastic Frameworks.¹⁸⁴ Where Charles-Edwards’ assessment of royal dynasties falls short is in a lack of specialised terminology and, at the same time, how trusting it is of the veracity of these genealogical relationships. In the above quotation Charles-Edwards is discussing ‘royal dynasties’, which is likely equivalent to the Dynastic Frameworks proposed by this thesis, and it is envisaged as ‘a single stem’. This thesis proposes that the Dynastic Frameworks were not a ‘single stem’, but a fabricated genealogical backdrop that provided benefits and assisted in prolonging the longevity of their component septs.

The work of Bart Jaski is contemporary to Charles-Edwards and has contributed greatly to our understanding of kingship. Jaski’s 2000 monograph *Early Irish Kingship and Succession*, provides an analysis of early Irish succession and the function of the king in society.¹⁸⁵ Where Jaski’s work most directly contributes to the evolution of scholarly thought regarding the Dynastic Framework is his analysis of the process of segmentation. Jaski engages extensively with the function of a king in Irish society, as part of this he elaborates upon expansion and

¹⁸³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 14.

¹⁸⁴ See Sub-Heading, *The ‘Dynastic Framework’*.

¹⁸⁵ Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*.

segmentation as natural processes affecting early Irish dynastic kingship.¹⁸⁶ Within this dissertation the lack of segmentation within the Uí Néill is considered indicative of benefits within the larger Dynastic Framework. It will be made clear that in instances where segmentation ought to have occurred, but did not, it can be attributed to political benefits associated with the larger Dynastic Framework.

A scholar who also deserves mentioning is Brian Lacey. Lacey's scholarly interests are focused intensely on the activities of the Uí Néill in a small area, namely Co. Donegal. Lacey's work, especially his 2006 book *Cenél Conaill and the Donegal Kingdoms AD 500-800*, focuses on the relationship between the various families within the Cenél Conaill and the locality around Donegal. His work has been the subject of criticism and thus has not been as widely accepted as Charles-Edwards', but the local aspect of his scholarship is particularly deserving of praise.¹⁸⁷ He has been criticised for indulging in 'informed speculation' on the basis that there is insufficient data surviving. Nevertheless, although his broader assessment of the Uí Néill involves 'informed speculation', Lacey does approach the Uí Néill from the perspective that the larger Dynastic Framework was, to a certain extent, a sham.¹⁸⁸ This is a particularly important step forward in understanding Dynastic Frameworks, as it brings the focus onto the smaller elements that comprise it, similar to Smyth. Understanding the history of the various septs and families that comprise the larger Dynastic Framework on a local level assists in understanding its hierarchical nature. To build towards any complete understanding of the Uí Néill it is important to develop a thorough literature regarding the smaller component septs and families that operate on a local level throughout Ireland, which is Lacey's principal and most important contribution to the discussion. In this thesis we will engage with the politics of the

¹⁸⁶ Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*, 191-228.

¹⁸⁷ Colmán Etchingham, rev. of 'Cenél Conaill and the Donegal Kingdoms AD 500-800', *Irish Historical Studies* 36.141 (2008) 100-02.

¹⁸⁸ Lacey, *Cenél Conaill*, 30.

Dynastic Framework with specific reference to how these septs and families interacted with one another.

The most recent contribution to the scholarly understanding of Dynastic Frameworks and the Uí Néill was by Patrick Gleeson in his 2017 Royal Irish Academy paper, 'Luigne Breg and the Origins of the Uí Néill'.¹⁸⁹ Gleeson's work is indicative of the current scholarly opinion regarding the function of the Uí Néill. For Gleeson it is important that the Uí Néill are recognised as more than a dynasty. He argues that 'the use of the title Uí Néill by non-'Uí Néill' groups need not imply actual kinship or biological affiliation.'¹⁹⁰ Gleeson believes, similar to this thesis, that the origins of the Uí Néill lie in sixth-seventh century geopolitics related through the language of kinship. He also praises Lacey's focus on locality and emulates it with a case study concerned with the Luigne Breg. This thesis is, therefore, a natural step forward in our understanding of early medieval Irish political powers, building upon Gleeson's contribution. It aims to investigate the construction of these Dynastic Frameworks by analysing literature and inter-sept conflict. Gleeson provides a good summary of the origins and nature of the Uí Néill; however, there needs to be more detailed and systematic analysis of precisely how septs and families operated within and benefitted from the larger Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. That is what is offered by this dissertation.

It should be clear that the evolution of scholarly thought concerning the Dynastic Frameworks of early medieval Ireland is in need of further consideration. From MacNeill until Charles-Edwards there was too much credence allotted to the genealogical relationship of the larger Dynastic Framework. Since Lacey, this has changed somewhat, and Gleeson's article is indicative that the larger field of study requires an investigation of the Uí Néill, and Dynastic Frameworks in general, in precisely the manner that this thesis will do. Byrne's theory of

¹⁸⁹ Gleeson, 'Luigne Breg', 65-99.

¹⁹⁰ Gleeson, 'Luigne Breg', 88.

‘tribal’ and ‘dynastic’ needs to be addressed. It might be said to add an additional layer of obfuscation to our understanding of early medieval Ireland. If, as will be demonstrated, there is no difference between the political organisation or function of the ‘tribal’ Laigin and the ‘dynastic’ Uí Néill, then we can remove an artificially imposed division of history between ‘tribal’ and ‘dynastic’. If it is purely a linguistic division, then surely some form of linguistic differentiation between phases of language is more applicable. There appears to be a growing acceptance among scholars that the genealogical relationships, especially those of the larger Dynastic Frameworks, were in large part fabricated, something that will be further evidenced shortly. This is not to say that there were no genealogical relationships, but ultimately, the larger Uí Néill Dynastic Framework was a synthetic construct. This will become clearer in the following section where it will be demonstrated how genealogical relationships were primarily expressions of political loyalty. Proving the existence of a sophisticated, hierarchical, political power that was predicated upon alleged ancestry will necessitate a reconsideration of early Irish politics.

Literature Review: The Nature of Genealogies

As alluded to earlier, another aspect of the evolution of scholarly thought associated with the Dynastic Framework is a nuanced understanding of genealogies and their role in Irish politics. The scholarly literature concerning genealogies is clear that they are expressions of political affiliation, and cautions against reading genealogies directly as representations of kin-relations. This is not a novel interpretation: one of the first individuals to propose this was Eoin MacNeill. In ‘Early Irish Population Groups: Their Nomenclature, Classification and Chronology’, MacNeill argued that genealogies ‘must be taken as often expressing political status rather than racial origin’.¹⁹¹ MacNeill’s assertion is, therefore, critically important to the way we interpret

¹⁹¹ MacNeill, ‘Early Irish population-groups’, 93.

the political powers of early medieval Ireland. These Dynastic Frameworks are genealogically related in name only; their alleged ancestry, which stretches back into Ireland's prehistory, is synthetic and, therefore, so are the bonds that tie them together. This raises questions concerning the legitimacy of the larger political entities that are derived from this genealogical corpus. The concept of the Dynastic Framework as a synthetic political organisation, predicated upon these false genealogies, as we shall see, is based upon a litany of scholarship that has considered these larger genealogical bonds to be fabricated. It is, therefore, the natural step forward from where the existing scholarship has concluded.

We see the concept of genealogies as a means to achieve political goals noted also in the work of Kelleher. Kelleher's principal contribution to our understanding of genealogies was his 1968 article for the *Irish Historical Studies* on 'The Pre-Norman Irish Genealogies'.¹⁹² In that article Kelleher provided a study of pre-Norman genealogies; containing specific material on the Uí Néill, it is particularly informative in so far as it outlines the paucity of Uí Néill genealogical material. He outlines instances where he believes the genealogical record was subject to fabrication for the benefit of the Uí Néill.¹⁹³ Where his work suffers is that it contains some of the same issues outlined in the previous section regarding Kelleher's 'Early Irish History and Pseudo-History' i.e., it supposes a rewriting of texts that borders on conspiratorial.¹⁹⁴ This aspect of his work has not aged well and this thesis addresses it by proposing that the Dynastic Framework was relevant across multiple political spheres. This means that those responsible for the composition and preservation of these texts were part of a larger societal institution that had an impact on the literature produced. It is, therefore, not an active conspiracy to rewrite texts for the benefit of certain dynasties, but a by-product of scholarly institutions existing within the matrix of a Dynastic Framework.

¹⁹² John V. Kelleher, 'The Pre-Norman Irish Genealogies', *Irish Historical Studies* 16 (1968) 138-53.

¹⁹³ Kelleher, 'The Pre-Norman Irish Genealogies', 146-47.

¹⁹⁴ Kelleher, 'The Pre-Norman Irish Genealogies', 145-47.

Following on from Kelleher was Smyth, whose relevant works were outlined in the earlier section concerning the evolution of scholarly thought concerning the Dynastic Framework.¹⁹⁵ Smyth was also informative with regards to scholarly understanding of genealogies. Smyth presented evidence, especially in ‘The Húi Néill and the Leinstermen in the Annals of Ulster’ and ‘Huí Failgi relations with the Huí Néill in the century after the loss of the plain of Mide’. that some of the Southern Uí Néill’s clients were originally members of a separate Dynastic Framework, i.e. the Laigin, but after conquest they were adopted into the Uí Néill via fictitious genealogies.¹⁹⁶ Smyth thus provides a blueprint for the Uí Néill method of conquest, where local *tuatha* were adopted into a larger genealogical superstructure. This is an important development, as it highlights that the Uí Néill were not a genuine consanguineous dynasty as understood by MacNeill and Byrne, but a more sophisticated political entity masquerading as a dynasty. To paraphrase MacNeill, the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework was an expression of political status.¹⁹⁷ The work of Smyth has, therefore, proven influential in the creation of this thesis and understanding how the Dynastic Framework operated in early medieval Ireland. Smyth’s work proposes that the method of Uí Néill conquest was some form of assimilation into the wider Dynastic Framework. This could have been accomplished by replacing leaders with members of an Uí Néill sept, or perhaps it was as simple as establishing clients and altering their genealogies. Smyth proposed that the Uí Néill, and by extension other Irish political powers, assimilated new territory rather than undertaking an outright conquest. Smyth’s proposal gains weight when one considers the immutability of a *tuath*, as well as other instances in which Dynastic Frameworks absorb their clients into the larger genealogical framework. This dissertation seeks to innovate on Smyth’s work by providing further context of the means

¹⁹⁵ Smyth, ‘Huí Failgi relations with the Huí Néill’, 503-23. Smyth, ‘The Húi Néill and the Leinstermen’, 121-43. Smyth, *Celtic Leinster*.

¹⁹⁶ Smyth, ‘The Húi Néill and the Leinstermen’, 140.

¹⁹⁷ Mac Neill, *ibid*.

through which this assimilation could take place, i.e. that the assimilation of pre-existing *tuatha* was a function of the Dynastic Framework in early medieval Ireland.

Smyth's work on the political aspects of genealogical claims can hardly be discussed, however, without reference to Donnchadh Ó Corráin. Ó Corráin was the scholar most experienced with the genealogies and he left an extensive corpus of work on the role of genealogies in Irish society. Similar to Smyth, Ó Corráin's work on the role of genealogy in early medieval Ireland has informed how the Uí Néill used genealogy to construct frameworks of political power.¹⁹⁸ Ó Corráin's *Ireland before the Normans* (1972) provides an outline of the structure of Dynastic Frameworks as complex and subject to continuous change.¹⁹⁹ His description of the Dynastic Framework as a vehicle for the relation of political claims, and the degree to which such claims could be appropriated by later rivals, furthers our understanding of the Dynastic Framework as a sophisticated political organisation. Furthermore, his work on the conception of Irish identity and what segments of Irish society were responsible for the larger conception of Irish *natio*, has been helpful when considering the scope and scale of contemporary political claims, e.g. kingship of Tara and the kingship of Ireland.²⁰⁰

Another theme of Ó Corráin's scholarship that is relevant to this thesis is his elaboration, across multiple texts, of the intertwined nature of ecclesiastical and secular politics, most evident in his 1973 contribution to *Ériu*, 'Dál Cais-Church and Dynasty'.²⁰¹ The lines between ecclesiastical and secular powers being blurred is a major theme of this thesis. Where it diverts from Ó Corráin's scholarship is in taking a step backwards and considering the Dynastic Framework as a larger binding agent. Ó Corráin's work was a product of its time, and though

¹⁹⁸ Ó Corráin, 'Early Irish genealogical tradition', 178-208.

¹⁹⁹ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (Dublin 1972) 29. For reviews see, & Kathleen Hughes, 'Review: Ireland Before the Normans', *Studia Hibernica* 12 (1972) 190-93. & Alfred P. Smyth, 'Review: Ireland Before the Normans', *History* 58 (1973) 253. & Patrick Wormald, 'Review: Ireland Before the Normans', *The English Historical Review* 89 (1974) 147.

²⁰⁰ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland', in T.W. Moody (ed), *Nationality and the Pursuit of Independence* (Belfast 1978) 1-36.

²⁰¹ Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', 1-36. Ó Corráin, 'Dál Cais', 52-63.

the field of study had advanced since MacNeill, some of the primary concepts were still being debated, e.g. the existence of an Irish *natio*.²⁰² This thesis, being somewhat removed from those debates, aims to build upon and develop some of the concepts proposed by Ó Corráin, advancing the suggestion that the intertwined nature of ecclesiastical and secular affairs is a consequence of both co-existing within the matrix of dynastic politics. The result of this is to identify Dynastic Frameworks as the primary means through which politics of all kinds were carried out.

Finally, Ó Corráin's contribution to the study of genealogies and the genealogical tradition is significant. His contribution to the Proceedings of the seventh international congress of Celtic studies in 1986, 'Historical need and literary narrative' and his 1998 article 'The early Irish genealogical tradition' in *Peritia* 1998 are two important examples of his contribution in this area. Ó Corráin followed in MacNeill's footsteps and regarded genealogical tradition as indicative of political alignment, rather than genealogical fact.²⁰³ This thesis agrees with his assessment as it is borne out by the analysis of *AU*, *AI* and literary sources. Through Smyth and Ó Corráin, it is possible to identify the Dynastic Frameworks in early medieval Ireland as organised political blocs using genealogy as expressions of political loyalty or ambition. This is a crucial historiographical development for this thesis. When we no longer consider these entities to be dynasties we are left questioning exactly what they are, and hence a review of how they function is a natural next step. Their alleged kinship is political metaphor, and this forces the historian to reconsider the role of early medieval Irish Dynastic Frameworks as a larger sophisticated, hierarchical organisation.

The work of David Thornton builds upon Ó Corráin's understanding of genealogies as expressions of political power. Thornton's monograph *Kings, Chronologies and Genealogies*

²⁰² Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', 1-2.

²⁰³ Ó Corráin, 'early Irish genealogical tradition', 182.

(2003) provides an outline of the current state of scholarship with regards to our understanding of genealogies. Thornton does not differ greatly from Ó Corráin in so far as he considers genealogies indicative of political allegiance. Thornton's primary contribution to the following dissertation, however, was to propose a term called 'genealogical schizophrenia', thereby giving a name to the process by which genealogies could be made malleable for political gain.²⁰⁴ This term will be avoided in this thesis, however, as despite being an accepted meaning of the word, it problematically draws upon mental illnesses where a phrase like 'genealogical confusion' does not and has fewer syllables. Nevertheless, Thornton's articulation of this process, whereby genealogies could be altered depending on the contemporary political situation, is an important development. It unifies Smyth and Ó Corráin's thoughts on the matter into one proposal. This process highlights that early medieval Irish political powers were not consanguineous, and thus demonstrates the need for a reconsideration of their political organisation and sophistication.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the evolution of scholarly thought regarding political powers in early medieval Ireland, from MacNeill to Gleeson; in doing so it has highlighted existing questions that will be addressed throughout this thesis. From MacNeill until relatively recently there remained varying degrees of belief in the veracity of genealogical relationships as the foundation of early Irish political powers. This is understandable, especially with regards to the smaller units within the Dynastic Framework, i.e. the sept and family. Members of septs, and of families in particular, are likely to have had common ancestry. The larger Dynastic Framework, however, is fictitious, something that is becoming more accepted in the scholarship. Niall, Eógan and Labraid Loingsech did not exist, and the genealogies that spring

²⁰⁴ Thornton, *Kings Chronologies and Genealogies*, 65.

up around them serve more as a charter listing components of the Dynastic Framework than uncomplicatedly relating descent. It is, therefore, limiting to consider the Uí Néill a genuine ‘dynasty’, when evidence suggests the truth was more complicated. The thesis will demonstrate that the Dynastic Frameworks of early medieval Ireland were more sophisticated than consanguineous dynasties. By adopting a sceptical approach to the genealogical veracity of these political powers, the thesis will advance our understanding of early Irish politics in line with the conclusions of existing scholarship. It will be evident that Dynastic Frameworks of early Ireland were constructed by means of genealogical alterations and the proliferation of literature concerning the framework. This will, therefore, provide a more thorough understanding of the origins of some of the most powerful political entities in Irish history.

This thesis will provide numerous contributions to the scholarly understanding of early medieval Irish political powers. It challenges any suggestion that the linguistic shift identified by MacNeill, and expanded upon by Byrne, represented a major change in the political organisation of early medieval Ireland.²⁰⁵ It will be proven that there was no functional difference between the ‘tribal’ and ‘dynastic’ powers that Byrne proposed. This will assist in developing a better understanding of the early medieval Irish political sphere, and hopefully outline the very narrow use that the term ‘tribal’ maintains. It will be made evident that the Dynastic Frameworks of early Ireland were not genuinely consanguineous dynasties, but a fabricated genealogical backdrop that provided benefits and assisted in prolonging the longevity of their component septs. The issue of the historicity of these various political powers has plagued the study of early medieval Ireland for decades. Steps need to be taken in order to outline the degree to which they were fabricated and constructed, this thesis is a vital step forward in this regard. It will prove that the Dynastic Frameworks of early Ireland, the largest of Ireland’s political powers, were fabricated and constructed, and that they were a means of

²⁰⁵ See Sub-Heading, *Dynastic Frameworks: Why Use that Term?*.

relating political authority and establishing common cause. By establishing the Dynastic Framework as a synthetic political construct this dissertation will also aim to identify why the Uí Néill and other Dynastic Frameworks proved so robust and enduring in the face of changing fortunes. It has also proven necessary over the course of my research to establish a clear, closely defined, novel and consistently-applied lexicon. The entire body of this thesis will stand as proof of the historiographical benefits of such considered terminology. The lack of a consistent lexicon across the historiography, varying from author to author, that identifies both the Dynastic Framework and the component parts of this hierarchical political power is a major weakness in the field. The benefits of this will be immediately apparent through reading this thesis. There can be no confusion as to the grade of a political power being referenced within a hierarchical structure, when the logic behind choosing each term has been clearly outlined. This thesis will also approach the annals in a departure from the current historiographical norm. By appreciating the entire body of the annalistic corpus, inclusive of poetry and prose, this thesis will demonstrate a fault in current historiography. Whether these poetic and prose additions were of a later period is not a sufficient reason to exclude them from scholarly editions. They maintain historiographical value. Focusing on the annals as only having value in relating the earliest period of Irish history is disrespectful to the texts themselves. Furthermore, it will be proven that not all poetic additions were later inclusions. Sweeping generalisations as to the use of poetic and prose inclusions are therefore damaging to the historiography of this period and this thesis seeks to rectify that.

There is a lack of understanding as to the function of the larger Dynastic Framework, i.e. the manner in which it influenced politics, society and literature. It is necessary for scholarship to make the step forward and correctly identify the Uí Néill as a hierarchical political organisation using the pretence of ancestry to bind disparate, and often warring groups, together. The scholarship concerned with the genealogies plainly endorses this perspective by

providing evidence of assimilation into the Dynastic Framework. We will examine the precise function of these Dynastic Frameworks in Irish politics by means of a seventh-century case-study. Various factors that resulted in the preservation of Dynastic Frameworks over a long period of history will also be examined. These polities maintained relevance for so long thanks to a system of governance that involved demonstrating value and excellence among leaders in a hierarchy, thereby contributing to situational alliances and long-term clients. We will see this system of governance in action through the aforementioned case-study. The examination of the benefits of the Dynastic Framework will be particularly important to improving our understanding of the longevity of these entities. By identifying and understanding the benefits associated with membership it will be easier to understand how Dynastic Frameworks remained relevant for centuries.

Our understanding of early medieval Irish society will also be advanced by advocating this concept of the Dynastic Framework as a unifying factor across various spheres of politics. This thesis will highlight the manner in which the Dynastic Framework was an inescapable facet of early Irish society, both in secular and ecclesiastical spheres of politics. Of particular importance in this regard is the theory concerning the ‘scholarly’ wing of the Uí Néill, not as a dedicated force, but as a by-product of a society where bonds of loyalty to the Dynastic Framework were ever-present. This advances a more nuanced discussion of the role and impact of Dynastic Frameworks in early Irish society.

This thesis will provide an interpretation of early medieval Irish politics and society through the lens of its most powerful political entities. It will provide a much better understanding of the larger Dynastic Framework, as well as the wide-ranging impact the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework had on Irish society. We will see throughout the body of this thesis that by adopting the consistent terminology of Dynastic Framework, sept and family, it will be possible to accurately capture the nuances of early Irish politics present throughout the annals and

literature. By addressing these issues, this thesis will update our understanding of early medieval Irish political powers, demonstrate the need for a clear lexicon in the secondary literature that discusses such powers, and provide a thorough case study into the creation of, and benefits associated with, the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework.

Chapter 3:

The Role of the Irish Annals in Informing Politics

Introduction

The Irish annals are one of, if not *the* most valuable historical source for early medieval Ireland. They provide chronological context for events and outline the obituaries of prominent members of Irish society. It is no wonder that because the annals are such a key resource, at the behest of nearly every scholar concerned with this period, they have themselves been the subject of extensive study.²⁰⁶ Most of this scholarly examination focuses on the dating of specific events, however, they escape the same scrutiny often applied to more narrative texts.²⁰⁷ It is therefore appropriate and necessary to examine the role Irish annals had in informing politics in early

²⁰⁶ Eoin MacNeill, 'The Authorship and Structure of the Annals of Tigernach', *Ériu* 7 (1914) 30-113. Paul Walsh, 'The Dating of the Irish Annals', *Irish Historical Studies* 2.8 (1941) 355-75. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history*. John Bannerman, 'Notes on the Scottish Entries in the Early Irish Annals', in John Bannerman *Studies in the History of the Dalriada* (Edinburgh 1974) 9-26. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Mag Femin, Femen and some early annals', *Ériu* 22 (1971) 97-9. Smyth, 'The Earliest Irish Annals'. Marjorie O. Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* (Edinburgh 1973) 1-42. Smyth, 'The Húi Néill and the Leinstermen', 121-43. Gearóid MacNiocaill, *The medieval Irish annals* (Dublin 1975). Francis John Byrne, *A thousand years of Irish script: An exhibition of Irish manuscripts in Oxford Libraries* (Oxford 1979). A. D. S. MacDonald, 'Notes on terminology in the Annals of Ulster, 650-1050', *Peritia* 1 (1982) 329-33. David N. Dumville, 'Latin and Irish in the Annals of Ulster', in Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamund McKitterick & David N. Dumville (eds), *Ireland in early mediaeval Europe: Studies in memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge 1982) 320-41. Ó Cróinín, 'Early Irish Annals', 74-86; repr. 76-86. Grabowski & Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals*. Daniel P. McCarthy, 'The Chronological apparatus of the Annals of Ulster, AD 431-1131', *Peritia* 8 (1994) 46-79. Bart Jaski, 'Additional Notes to the Annals of Ulster', *Ériu* 48 (1997) 103-52. Joan N. Radner, 'Writing history: early Irish historiography and the significance of form', *Celtica* 23 (1999) 312-25. Daniel P. McCarthy, 'The Status of the Pre-Patrician Irish Annals' *Peritia* 12 (1998) 98-152. Daniel P. McCarthy, 'The Chronology and Sources of the early Irish annals', *Peritia* 10.3 (2001) 323-41. David Woods, 'Acorns the plague, and the 'Iona Chronicle'', *Peritia* 17/18 (2003/4) 495-502. McCarthy, 'The Original Compilation'. James E. Fraser, 'The Iona Chronicle, the descendants of Áedán mac Gabráin and the principal kindreds of Dál Riata', *Northern Studies* 38 (2004) 77-96. Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*. Evans, *The present and the past*. Daniel P. McCarthy, 'The Irish Annals – Their Origin and evolution, V to XI sec.', in *L'Irlanda e gli irlandesi nell'alto medioevo* (Spoleto 2010) 601-22. Daniel P. McCarthy, 'The Contribution of Armagh Scholarship to the Annals of Ulster', *Seanchas Ardmhacha* 25 (2014) 63-83.

²⁰⁷ Walsh, 'Dating of the Irish Annals', 355-75. Smyth, 'The Earliest Irish Annals'. Ó Cróinín, 'Early Irish Annals', 74-86. McCarthy, 'The Chronological apparatus', 47-79. McCarthy, 'The Status of the Pre-Patrician Irish Annals', 98-152. McCarthy, 'The Original Compilation'.

medieval Ireland, and in informing our conception of those same politics.²⁰⁸ The annals were compiled under the auspices of monastic institutions, and these monastic institutions were intrinsically linked with dynastic politics. The Irish annals, therefore, do not exist separate from the politics they record, and it will be useful to examine how the annals inform both a historian's perception of politics, and how they may have engaged in the reinforcement of unity among disparate septs.²⁰⁹ The following is an examination of the annals used for this thesis, *AU* and *AI*, and a consideration of the annals as source of historical information. This thesis does not propose to readily accept that the goal of the annals was a straightforward narration of history. Various aspects of the source material, such as pre-historical information, narrative prose and poetry, imply that the annals as a genre had another function. This secondary function cannot be separated from the text, as such, consideration must be given to any degree of authorial or institutional agenda that may have infiltrated the annalistic texts.

References to the Uí Néill

One of the most fascinating elements of the Uí Néill rise to power is how the rise is documented and portrayed in the manuscripts and textual sources available to us from the period. These sources range from the more prosaic *Vita Sancti Patricii* of Muirchú moccu Macthéni to the more plainly formulated language of the Irish annals.²¹⁰ A key aspect of the research undertaken for this thesis has been a collation of references to the Uí Néill in three Irish annals, the *Annals of Ulster (AU)*, the *Annals of Inisfallen (AI)* and the *Annals of Tigernach (AT)*.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ The issue of Patrician propaganda has been discussed in, James Carney, *The Problem of St Patrick* (Dublin 1973) 32, 34-36, 52. D.A. Binchy, 'Patrick and his biographers', *Studia Hibernica* 2 (1962) 7-173. N.B. Aitchison, *Armagh and the Royal Centres in Early Medieval Ireland: Monuments, Cosmology and the Past* (Suffolk 1994) 207-08. Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, 56-7. McCarthy, 'The Chronological Apparatus', 52, 72. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*, 140-43. Evans, *Present and Past*, 140-44.

²⁰⁹ The close relationship between Dynastic and Ecclesiastical powers is outlined in Ó Corráin, 'Dál Cais', 52-63. Sharpe, 'Organization of the Church', 230-70. Ó Corráin, 'Historical need', 142, esp. fn. 3. Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 280.

²¹⁰ Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii*, in Bieler, *The Patrician texts*, 61-121.

²¹¹ Mac Airt, *The Annals of Inisfallen*. Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster*. Whitley Stokes, 'The Annals of Tigernach' in *Revue Celtique* 16 (1895-98) 374-419; 17, 6-33, 119-263, 337-420; 18, 9-59, 150-303, 374-91; repr. in *The Annals of Tigernach* (Llanerch 1993).

The collation gathered references to members of any Uí Néill sept in a specific year and then added (in a different colour font) what a different annal observed to have occurred in that year. The goal in making this compilation of references has been primarily to observe the ways in which each annal portrayed the rise of the Uí Néill and the manner they interacted with 1) other Uí Néill septs, 2) different Dynastic Frameworks and powers and 3) the way they relate the more mythical and pseudo-historical elements in the annalistic record. The reason why the Irish annals are so useful for examining the larger Dynastic Frameworks is due to the fact that the annals are heavily concerned with the nobility, as well as interactions between kings. Interaction between septs of the same Dynastic Frameworks, or between septs and an external force, is the primary method through which the politics and goals of Dynastic Frameworks can be observed. The Irish annals are, therefore, a useful source for examining the relationship between these powers, and how the political narratives of the larger Dynastic Framework translated to the *realpolitick* of early medieval Ireland. The reasoning behind choosing these specific annals was in an attempt to target the most famous and often quoted annalistic text (*AU*), an annal from a part of the country outside of Uí Néill control (*AI*) and an annal from a different area of Uí Néill dominance (*AT*). Furthermore, *AU* and *AI* are descended from a common group of annals identified by McCarthy as the *Cuana Group*, while *AT* is associated with the *Clonmacnoise Group* of annals.²¹² As a result, these three annals should relate history from a wide geographic spectrum, as well as having more diverse textual origins.

References to the Uí Néill in the Irish annals occur quite frequently, with *AU* in particular seeming to detail Uí Néill political history in depth.²¹³ The ancient history of the Uí Néill is preserved, for the most part, in *AU*, and it serves as one of the primary means by which Kelleher's famous dictum about the Uí Néill is acted out, that they 'emerged from a dark cloud

²¹² McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*, 9.

²¹³ See, Smyth, 'The Húi Néill'. Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, 9-15.

of their own making'.²¹⁴ The history of the North East and Midlands of Ireland, as well as of North-West Britain, seems to be the focus of *AU*.²¹⁵ Thanks to this emphasis it is possible to decipher much of the political history of this time period, and the ramifications of certain events upon the political sphere in Ireland, such as the convention of Druim Cett, which *AU* notes as occurring in 575 AD.²¹⁶ Noteworthy, however, is the way in which *AU* seemingly expands its perspective in the second half of the sixth century outside of Ireland to the northwest of Britain. This may be easily seen through the references to the Ulaid expedition to Man in the wake of Druim Cett, and in the obituary of Bruide mac Maelchon, king of the Picts, in 584 AD.²¹⁷ It is during this period that *AU* begins to expand its scope to incorporate a portion of Britain. This also seems to be a fairly accurate assessment about the expansion of the Irish-speaking world, given the expedition by the Ulaid to Man and the settlements of the Dál Riata in the Hebrides.²¹⁸ It seems possible that, by the mid sixth century, many of the entries within the Irish annals were based upon genuine historical fact, something which the expansion of scope outside of Ireland would seem to echo.²¹⁹

One convention of the Irish annals that is quite useful in deciphering how the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework grew in power and influence is the record of battles between the Uí Néill and other political groups. Battles can be seen as a means of charting the expansion of Uí Néill power by recording when they gained victory over their opponents. If the annals are to be believed, then the Uí Néill themselves did not often fail in battle, and, especially in the early portion of *AU*, the Uí Néill win many decisive battles that seems to suggest this period was

²¹⁴ Kelleher, 'Early Irish History', 125.

²¹⁵ Evans and Dumville have both noted, however, a selection of entries from the *Clonmacnoise* group that may have been omitted from *AU* during transmission. See, Grabowski & Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals*, 115. Evans, *Present and Past*, 191-92.

²¹⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 86-87. See fn. 254 for further discussion surrounding Druim Cett.

²¹⁷ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 88-89 & 92-93.

²¹⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 158-63. Provides an outline of Irish settlements in Britain in the wake of the Roman legions departure.

²¹⁹ Smyth, 'The Earliest Irish Annals', 41-43. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*, 9.

their most successful push to gain new territory and influence.²²⁰ In fact, a great many of the battles that occur after the late sixth century focus on skirmishes and conflict between prominent Uí Néill figures from within their respective septs. It can often be difficult to keep track of these figures, because of the cut-throat nature of early Irish politics and the tendency for families to reuse similar names.

There are instances where the terms used to describe political powers betray a degree of organisation or cohesion amongst a group. For example, in 563 AD, *AU* notes,

Bellum Mona Daire Lothair for Cruithniu re nUib Neill in Tuaisceirt. Baetan mac Cinn co ndib Cruithnibh nod-fich fri Cruithniu. Genus Eugain ocus Conaill mercede conducti inna Lee ocus Airde Eolargg/ ‘The battle of Móin Daire Lothair was won over the Cruithin by the “Uí Néill of the North”. Báetán mac Cinn with two [branches] of the Cruithin (?) fight it against the Cruithin. Cenél nEógain and Cenél Conaill were hired being given the Lee and Ard Eolarg as recompense.’²²¹

This entry most likely does not date from the period in question (i.e. c. 563 AD), given what we currently know about the dating of the earliest Irish annals, and because there is a substantial piece of poetry included that expands upon the event in question.²²² The detailed nature of the entry, complete with poetry, coupled with the dating to a period of history prior to the supposed dating of the annals, make it difficult to determine the legitimacy of this entry as definite historical fact. Nevertheless, this entry on the battle of Móin Daire Lothair is significant beyond whether or not the battle definitively took place. The entry in *AU* demonstrates a perceived

²²⁰ See Sub-Heading, *The ‘Dynastic Framework’* for an outline of why the peculiar nature of *tuatha* makes simple conquest more difficult than described by *AU*.

²²¹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 82-83.

²²² Evans, *Present and Past*, 171-188.

distinction between the Northern and Southern septs of the Uí Néill at the time the entry was written, and it was in the main hand of the manuscript.²²³ This section on Móin Daire Lothair introduces the concept of ‘*Uí Néill in Tuaisceirt*’, as opposed to their Southern brethren that dwelt in the lands surrounding Tara. The difficulty here is in deciphering whether or not the entry on Móin Daire Lothair, and the terminology ‘*Uí Néill in Tuaisceirt*’, was a construction of a later period, or if it may have its origins in the early period of Uí Néill expansion. The fact that it was written in the primary hand of *AU* is a favourable point towards antiquity of the entry.²²⁴ Even beyond the implication this has for our understanding of Uí Néill history, this reference is noteworthy due to the focus it places on group identity, elaborating on the Uí Néill and the Cruithin, rather than listing out the names of leaders and an obituary for both sides, as was common practice in contemporary annalistic entries.²²⁵ Móin Daire Lothair has also been interpreted as an event of great importance for relations between the Northern Uí Néill septs, namely that after Móin Daire Lothair the Cenél nEógain rapidly expanded eastwards into the former territory of the Cruithin, while the Cenél Conaill were confined to Donegal.²²⁶ As a result, this battle saw the balance of power among the Northern Uí Néill shift slowly towards the Cenél nEógain over time.

In the description of Cúil Dreimne and Cúil Uinsen in 561 and 562 AD respectively, just years prior, we receive a plethora of named figures who fought and died in the conflict. In relation to Cúil Dreimne it is noted that

²²³ See Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *ibid.* For the statement concerning the hand.

²²⁴ Evans, *Present and Past*, 220. Discusses how marginal glosses in hand H indicate direct borrowing from the ‘Chronicle of Ireland’.

²²⁵ Annals are particularly susceptible to History centred around great men, where focus is directed onto individuals of note, rather than a wider society.

²²⁶ Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, 114. See also Francis J. Byrne, ‘The Ireland of St Columba’, in J.L. McCracken (ed.), *Historical Studies* 6 (Belfast 1965) 37-58.

Bellum Cuile Dreimne for Diarmait mac Cerbaill uibi .iii. milia ceciderunt/

‘The battle of Cúil Dreimne, in which 3000 fell, [won] over Diarmait son of Cerball.’²²⁷,

meanwhile Cúil Uinsen reads as follows:

Bellum Chuile Uinsen i Tebhthai for Diarmait mac Cerbaill re nAedh mac

Brendain. /Diarmait fugit/ ‘The battle of Cuill Uinsen in Tethba [won] over Diarmait mac Cerbaill by Áed mac Brénainn. Diarmait took flight.’²²⁸

In both of these battles the focus is on the individuals who took charge and were defeated in them, rather than on the larger political force associated with the battle. In contrast, the Battle of Móin Daire Lothair mentions only Báetán mac Cenn and provides no named commander for the two septs of the Uí Néill that fought alongside him, nor any details about who the enemy commander was.²²⁹

The entry on Móin Daire Lothair is strange and sticks out like a sore thumb when compared against/with the more detailed entries that may be found occurring nearer Tara and the royal seat of the Uí Néill. As mentioned earlier, *AU* is believed to have been a continuation of the no-longer-extant *Chronicle of Ireland*, composed initially on Iona, off the coast of Scotland.²³⁰ It is doubly strange that such a decisive moment for ‘*Uí Néill in Tuaisceirt*’ does not have more detail, given that Iona was a monastic settlement with strong ties to one of the belligerents in

²²⁷ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 80-81.

²²⁸ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 80-81.

²²⁹ Bear in mind the caveat that both of these entries concern Diarmait mac Cerbaill in some fashion. A figure of great import among the Uí Néill. This may suggest these events were attributed to him with little evidence, as part of his mythos.

²³⁰ See again, Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 147. & Evans, *The present and the past*. Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*.

the battle, the Cenél Conaill.²³¹ This is made even stranger as in the same year in which *AU* notes the battle of Móin Daire Lothair, it also mentions

Navigatio Coluim Cille ad Insulam Iae anno etatis sue .xl.ii./ ‘The voyage of Colum Cille to the island of Í in the 42nd year of his age.’²³²

Granted this is an addition in the margins of a secondary hand, but one would expect that the community of Iona, many of whom were Cenél Conaill monks and who followed the teachings of a Cenél Conaill monk, to be knowledgeable about a major battle which involved the Cenél Conaill, and which took place in the same year their monastery was founded.²³³

Given the increasingly accepted hypothesis about the origins of *CI* and the relationship between Iona and one of the belligerents in the battle, one may rightly expect the battle of Móin Daire Lothair to be more detailed in *AU* than it is, with at least some information on the leader of the ‘*Uí Neill in Tuaisceirt*’.²³⁴ To drive this home, the leader of the Cenél Conaill in battle was very likely to actually be one of Columba’s cousins; an absence is therefore conspicuous.²³⁵ Might the importance of the event, and the degree to which it is emphasised, in spite of very little precise detail, relate a position of prominence? Plenty of ahistorical annalistic entries exist as far back as the time of Patrick and Lóegaire that are fully fleshed out

²³¹ See, Thomas Owen Clancy, ‘Columba, Adomnán and the Cult of Saints in Scotland’, *The Innes Review* 48.1 (1997) 1-26: 20-21. For information on the Cenél Conaill association with Columban relics. See, John Bannerman, ‘Comarba Colum Cille and the Relics of Columba’, *The Innes Review* 44.1 (1993) 14-47. For information on how Cenél Conaill descent became a feature of ecclesiastical politics in subsequent centuries. See also, Miho Tanaka, ‘Iona and the Kingship of Dál Riata in Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae*’, *Peritia* 17-18 (2003-2004) 199-214. For information on how the Cenél Conaill and Dál Riata influenced Iona.

²³² Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 82-83.

²³³ Maire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic ‘Familia’ of Columba* (Oxford 1988) 36-46. Pádraig Ó Riain, *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin 1985) 81 & 184-88. Anderson & Anderson, *Adomnán’s Life of Columba*, xxxviii-xxxix. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 136. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 282. Michael Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons: The Origin of the Royal Anointing Ritual* (Berlin 1985), 5. Lacey, *Colum Cille*, 39-51.

²³⁴ Consider fn. 229 and how *AU* elaborates upon the myths of Diarmait mac Cerbaill. Móin Daire Lothair is fertile ground for the establishment of a Northern Uí Néill counterpart. The lack of a named figure is suspicious in this instance.

²³⁵ Ó Riain, *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae*, 81 & 184-88.

and realised with fictional characters. The battle of Móin Daire Lothair, however, is more focused on relating the events and the groups involved, rather than naming specific individuals. This approach may imply that this entry was an event worthy of recording from the early period of the compilation, that it was known to the community at Iona due to their relationship with the Cenél Conaill, but that specific details eluded them. Additionally, from everything we know about Móin Daire Lothair, it was an internal struggle amongst the Cruithin, who sought to enlist the services of ‘*Uí Neill in Tuaisceirt*’ by paying them in territory, e.g. *Genus Eugain ocus Conaill mercede conducti inna Lee Airde Eolargg/‘Cenél nEógain and Cenél Conaill were hired, being given the Lee and Ard Eolarg as recompense’.*²³⁶ According to *AU* then, Móin Daire Lothair was a larger than normal struggle, in which the prominent Northern Uí Néill septs gained territory, and in which relatives of the founder of Iona took part. It seems likely that, even if the entry isn’t strictly contemporary, the general idea would certainly have been relayed with relative accuracy, especially given it saw the Uí Néill gain territorial assets.²³⁷

Regardless, the inclusion of Móin Daire Lothair, and the reference to ‘*Uí Neill in Tuaisceirt*’ is highly notable, as it implies a conception of the Uí Néill framework as an encompassing unifying political factor, with a distinction between those powerful septs of ‘*in Tuaisceirt*’ and those surrounding Tara. Successfully dating when this reference in *AU* was first inserted would be highly informative about the function and organisation of the Uí Néill framework among the people of early medieval Ireland. Since it concerns the Cenél Conaill, and occurred in conjunction with a major milestone in the history of Iona, perhaps its historicity is roughly

²³⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 82-83.

²³⁷ For an idea of how this may have occurred, see Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, 55-58. Wherein he provides an interesting idea concerning the possibility that there was an early Irish source being composed on Iona.

reliable, and there was a perceived structure within the Uí Néill whereby the Northern and Southern septs were already established as distinct power blocs.²³⁸

Historicity in the Irish Annals

A common starting-point for Irish history is the arrival of Saint Patrick: some modern editions of annals are divided into pre/post-Patrician segments.²³⁹ The annals do not begin with Patrick; rather they begin much further back in an Irish pseudo-history that is historically unreliable, but rich in reflections on the political climate in which they were written.²⁴⁰ Obviously, the pre-/post-Patrician divide is less about marking the divide between documented period and that of 'pseudo'-history, but rather an important watershed in Ireland's past: that between pre-Christianity and Christianity, Ireland's Old/New Testament divide.²⁴¹

Splitting the annalistic texts between pre-Patrician and post-Patrician periods, however, is still immediately apparent to be flawed.²⁴² Although in terms of historiography this may be a useful event to use as a bookmark, given the prominence of Patrick and the survival of his *Confessio* and *Epistola*; the issue with dividing the annals along these lines is that the advent of Saint Patrick does not correlate with the beginning of the historical period, nor does it indicate the beginning of Christianity in Ireland. Most modern scholarship would agree that for some time after Saint Patrick the annalistic record was ahistorical.²⁴³ It is also fairly clear that there existed a pre-Patrician Christian community in Ireland, likely established due to close

²³⁸ We shall see presently in the example of Druim Cett how the dating can be unreliable. It is therefore difficult to say exactly how far removed exactly Móin Daire Lothair may be from the initial composition of annalistic content.

²³⁹ Two such examples being; Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*. & Mac Airt, *Annals of Inisfallen*.

²⁴⁰ McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*, 179-85, provides an overview of the prehistoric elements of *AT* and in doing so demonstrates the inclusion of 'secular Irish scholarship' into the annals.

²⁴¹ On the nature and implications of this divide, as well as how it has been represented in scholarship, see Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present* (Maynooth 1990). Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Review: Pagan Past and Christian Present', *Éigse* 29 (1996) 179-196.

²⁴² McCarthy, 'The Original Compilation', 94.

²⁴³ For dating please see, Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 118. Smyth, 'The Earliest Annals', 4-18. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 443-44. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*, 9, 159-163. Evans, *Present and Past*, 171-88.

proximity with Romano-Britain. We can be reasonably certain of this from Prosper of Aquitaine's Chronicle reference to Palladius, where it is stated that Pope Celestine sent him as the *primus episcopus*/'first bishop' *ad Scottos in Christum credentes*/'to the Irish believing in Christ'.²⁴⁴ This primary source implies a sufficient Christian population to warrant a bishop. The arrival of Patrick, then, really does not provide a useful watershed to divide Ireland's history in any meaningful way. Recently, the annals are believed to have become historically reliable, at some point in and around the late sixth to early seventh century, with some historians attempting to push the boat back even further.²⁴⁵ The advent of Christianity and the historical period are not firmly dateable to a single event, instead they both occurred slowly over a long period of time.

The Irish annals are believed to have begun at an early stage on the island of Iona, most likely by one of the abbots that followed Saint Columba, or even by the saint himself. It is currently believed there existed a chronicle, named the '*Chronicle of Ireland*' (*CI*), that served as the basis for many of the early medieval Irish annals.²⁴⁶ Although *CI* is believed to have been maintained on Iona until *c.* 740 AD, it is believed to have been relocated to an Irish monastery in the midlands, (possibly the midland kingdom of Brega) until *c.* 911 AD.²⁴⁷ *CI* was continued at Armagh by the main hand of *AU* from 911 AD until the break in the twelfth century, while other annals derive from a continuation written at Clonmacnoise; as a result, where annals from the Clonmacnoise group agree with *AU*, then we may be fairly certain that entry derives from *CI*.²⁴⁸ Iona and the Columban family of monasteries are therefore very

²⁴⁴ Theodor Mommsen (ed.), *Prosperi Tironis epitoma chronicon*, *Chronica minora saec. IV, V, VI, VII*, MGH AA 9/1 (Berlin 1892) 385:185; see, Christopher Holdsworth & T.P. Wiseman (ed.), *The inheritance of historiography 350-900* (Exeter 1986) 31-43; and Steven Muhlberger, *The fifth-century chroniclers: Prosper, Hydatius, and the Gallic Chronicler of 452* (Leeds 1990).

²⁴⁵ See fn. 243 for various dating proposals.

²⁴⁶ See Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 147. Evans, *Present and past*, 115-70. Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*.

²⁴⁷ Evans, *Present and Past*, 17-44. Elva Johnston, 'Mapping Literate Networks in Early Medieval Ireland: Quantitative Realities, Social Mythologies' in Ralph Kenna et al (eds), *Maths Meets Myths: Quantitative Approaches to Ancient Narratives* (Cham 2017) 195-211: 197.

²⁴⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, xix. McCarthy, *Irish Annals*, 1-17.

influential in recording the earliest period of Irish history. *CI* could have existed from approximately 660 AD, which means certain annalistic entries have the possibility of being reliable at least that far back.²⁴⁹ The annals suggest that Colmcille established Iona during his pilgrimage/exile in 563 AD, as we have already mentioned in the relevant section from *AU* earlier in this chapter, while *AI*, a member of the Clonmacnoise group, also notes that in 563 AD

*Colum Cille i n-ailithre. Prima nox eius i nAlbain in Pentecostén/‘Colum Cille in exile. His first night in Alba was during Pentecost’.*²⁵⁰

The exact date of the founding of Iona is not beyond doubt here; however, given that both annals in question at some point derive from *CI*, which is so heavily associated with Iona, it seems fair to state that Colum Cille’s journey to Scotland and the founding of Iona likely took place around this time.²⁵¹ There is an argument to be made that, if *CI* was composed initially by one of Colmcille’s successors, then they would have been individuals alive during the foundation of Iona, and therefore may have been able to relate the year it was founded with relative accuracy. Similarly, many of the events surrounding this period may not have been recorded contemporaneously, but would have been recorded within living memory for the initial compilers of *CI*.

Such an early dating would admittedly be generous to *CI*; it becomes much more likely, however, if the theory put forth by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, that the Irish annals began life as annotations to the Easter tables, before expanding to become fully fledged chronicles, is

²⁴⁹ Evans, *The Present and Past*, 171.

²⁵⁰ Mac Airt, *Annals of Inisfallen*, 74-75.

²⁵¹ We shall see, however, in the next page how this time period provides uncertain dates, as such they should be taken as more general guidelines than strict dates.

believed to be correct.²⁵² If this theory is accurate, it would be quite feasible to suggest that Iona had a long-lasting set of Easter tables, and as a result perhaps kept records of major events at the monastery at even a relatively early point in time.²⁵³ This theory would make it likely, however, that only major events, or ecclesiastically significant ones, would have survived into *CI* and therefore be reliable in *AU* or *AI*.

One such event that may have been worth recording is the convention of Druim Cett, that is quite likely to be historical when one considers the prominent role Saint Columba is alleged to have played in the convention.²⁵⁴ 575 AD,

Magna con[uen]tio Droma Cęta, in qua erant Colum Cille ocus Aedh mac Ainmirech/'The great convention of Druim Ceat at which were present Colum Cille and Aed son of Ainmire'.²⁵⁵

Columba at this time had established Iona and was the leader of his own monastic institution. It seems likely that, if the Saint was involved in a peace process at Druim Cett, it would have been common knowledge among the monks at Iona. If ever there was an event likely to be recorded in the Easter tables, or anywhere else for posterity, Columba's alleged presence at a politically significant convention that concerned his familial group, the Cenél

²⁵² O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and mythology*, 237-8; Ó Cróinín 'Early Irish Annals', 22; Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, I. 57-8. Cited in Evans, *The Present and the Past*, 3.

²⁵³ Later in the Sub-Heading *Internal Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century (Examples of Competing Septs)*, esp. fn. 387, we will encounter the issue of the Easter Controversy. The 'Easter Controversy' implies that there may have been an institutional culture at Iona surrounding their Easter tables. This is another point in favour of Ó Cróinín's Easter table argument.

²⁵⁴ See, Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 29, 201-02, 244-47 & 265-69. James E. Fraser, 'St Columba and the convention of Druim Cett: Peace and Politics at Seventh Century Iona', *Early Medieval Europe* 15 (2007) 315-344. Although the dating of *Vita Sancti Columbae* has been recently disproven, Fraser provides a good analysis of the contemporary political insights that may be gleaned from the episode concerning the Convention of Druim Cett in that text. Lacey, *Colum Cille*, 27-28.

²⁵⁵ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 86-87. See also, Michael Meckler, 'The Annals of Ulster and the Date of the Meeting at Druim Cett', *Peritia* 11 (1997) 44-52. For an opposing perspective see, Bart Jaski, 'Druim Cett Revised', *Peritia* 12 (1998) 340-50.

Conaill, seems a likely fit. Although the convention of Druim Cett occurs in 575 AD in *AU*, this dating does have certain issues which suggest a later year would be more appropriate.²⁵⁶

AU records the arrival of Patrick in Ireland in 432 AD

Patricius peruenit ad Hiberniam nono anno regni Teodosii Minoris /‘Patrick arrives in Ireland the ninth year of the reign of Theodosius the Less’.²⁵⁷

This leaves a period of one-hundred and forty-three years, in the annals, between the arrival of Patrick and the convention of Druim Cett in *AU*, where the events recorded are of highly dubious historicity, and are similar in many ways to the earlier synthetic history. This was the perfect time to compose and project the origins and claims of a political power, the ramifications of such synthetic history on the text will be discussed shortly.

It is precisely this break of time between Patrick’s arrival in Ireland and the eventual arrival of the Irish annals into recorded history that proves the concept of breaking the annals into pre- and post-patrician anachronistic. Although the advent of Patrick is a verifiable historical event, it does not provide a clean break into the period of verifiable historical fact. The difficulty is obviously in attempting to find the annalistic entry that marks the advent of the historical period; however, is that really necessary? All that accomplishes is the imposition of an arbitrary division that does not exist within the text, and the ahistorical elements of the text cannot just be disregarded as fiction and fancy, as doing so would cast aside segments that were deemed worthy of inclusion by the compilers. For the purposes of researching the Uí Néill and Irish politics, the division between pre-/post-Patrician in the annals is largely unhelpful. This murky period of history is the exact time when the Uí Néill consolidate their claims and their power

²⁵⁶ Richard Sharpe, ‘Druim Cett’, *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (2002), notes that one of the kings mentioned was not king of his own people until 586 AD Hence a later date is more likely for Druim Cett.

²⁵⁷ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 38-39.

through figures of doubtful historicity, such as Lóegaire mac Néill and the more intriguing Muirchertach mac Ercae.

Prose in the early Irish Annals

The Irish annals, as a genre, hold a position of distinction among early Irish historical sources. The annals are considered to be largely contemporaneous; however, quite a bit of discussion has arisen over the dating of the annals and how far back they can be trusted.²⁵⁸ The very useful structure of the annals, historically speaking, is one of the reasons that has led to their position of prominence among early medieval Irish sources. It is quite easy to look for information about a specific year and turn to the annals in order to see what happened in that year. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Irish annals are the primary means through which the political situation in early medieval Ireland is relayed to us, they are the first and most consistent port of call when attempting to make sense of early Irish history.²⁵⁹

It is worth discussing the many instances of prose insertions that are creative and ahistorical in the Irish annals and what their inclusion can tell us about the larger text.²⁶⁰ The most common form of creative prose in the Irish annals is the inclusion of synthetic history into the chronology of Irish history. The many ahistorical annalistic references included in the period of pre-history and during the period between Patrick and the date the annals became contemporary are creative inventions, and therefore, after a fashion, are literary insertions. Their inclusion in many ways is predicated upon pre-existing literature/mythology associated with certain groups.²⁶¹ It is also a pity that this period of synthetic history is largely ignored,

²⁵⁸ See fn. 243 for various dating proposals.

²⁵⁹ See, fn. 206 on the existing scholarship regarding the annals for a glimpse at how important they are to the larger field of study.

²⁶⁰ Evans, *Present and Past*, 221. Considers prose very briefly, however only in so far as it relates to the origins of poetry lying outside the annals. See also, Katherine Simms, *Medieval Gaelic Sources* (Dublin 2009) 73-90. Although this section deals with a later period it provides a basis from which to interpret prose inclusions in Irish annals.

²⁶¹ Evans, *ibid.*

due to its unreliability, as doing so ignores a large swathe of the text.²⁶² A text must be engaged with in its entirety; large aspects cannot be ignored or left out. Indeed, this period of pre-history, that is littered with ahistorical accounts of fictional rulers engaging in grand combat, can inform us about the function of the annals as a text.

A lengthy pre-history is included in both of these annals; they begin with the ahistorical and continue until the time of composition.²⁶³ What do these periods of pre-history have to tell us about the larger annalistic text? A function of the Annals in informing history is that they date the ahistorical, and by doing so provide those entries with legitimacy. This is a very obvious statement, but it is worth pondering, because by doing so, the genre of early Irish annalistic texts serves to reinforce the legitimacy and clout of early Irish political powers. The original mythology/synthetic history was not strictly dated; that is an innovation that takes place when these more literary and mythological aspects are translated into the format of a record of historical events.²⁶⁴ A natural by-product of including ahistorical references concerning myth and synthetic history alongside accurate historical entries is that the ahistorical is legitimised. The discussion regarding when the annals can be seen to be historical is a direct result of the inclusion of these synthetic pieces of history. The need that the compilers of the Irish annals felt to include aspects of Irish pre-history results in a nebulous period where the ahistorical and the tentatively historical mix together. This nebulous period is where many of the narratives concerning the Uí Néill rise to power are framed in the annals.²⁶⁵

²⁶² To clarify, this period of synthetic history is engaged with, but usually with regards to discussing the sources of these various annals, e.g. Clonmacnoise group, Cuanu group. See, McCarthy, *Irish Annals*, 61-116. When compared with the larger corpus of annalistic scholarship, see fn. 206, there is shockingly little work available that attempts to engage with this synthetic history as a text worthy of examination on its own regard. One of the very few texts that actually engages with this subject is O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History*. O’Rahilly’s work, however, contains a great deal of problems itself and often engages with the material as though it were historical.

²⁶³ David N. Dumville, ‘Ulster heroes in the early Irish annals: A caveat’, *Éigse* 17 (1974) 47-54: 51, asserts that *AU* had no pre-patrician section. McCarthy, *Irish Annals*, 101, suggests he was influenced by earlier conclusions.

²⁶⁴ Ó Corráin, ‘Historical need’, 141-58. Outlines how many of these ‘synthetic’ histories associated with the Uí Néill initially, were adapted and adopted by later political groups.

²⁶⁵ See Sub-Heading: *The Northern & Southern Uí Néill*.

A great example of such synthetic history from this nebulous period would be the entries regarding Lóegaire mac Néill. Lóegaire is a figure of doubtful historicity; although a king named Lóegaire may have possibly existed, the person portrayed in the annals and hagiographies certainly did not.²⁶⁶ We can be sure that Patrick did not confront Lóegaire at Tara on Easter for instance, given the fact that Patrick's *Confessio* and *Epistola* give no indication of a man that commanded kings, rather of a man who used the implicit protection that the friendship of sons and wives of kings provided in order to help him spread Christianity:

Unde autem Hiberione qui numquam notitiam Dei habuerunt nisi idola et imunda usque nunc semper coluerunt quomodo nuper facta est plebs Domini et filii Dei nuncupantur, filii scottorum et filiae regulorum monachi et uirgines Christi esse uidentur?/‘How has this happened in Ireland? Never before did they know of God except to serve idols and unclean things. But now, they have become the people of the Lord, and are called children of God. The sons and daughters of the leaders of the Irish are seen to be monks and virgins of Christ.’²⁶⁷

AU's entries on Lóegaire are fairly extensive, and are almost certainly informed by pre-existing literature and tales about him.²⁶⁸ What the annals do, however, is to date, and therefore, firmly place the pre-existing literature and tales concerning Lóegaire in the chronology of Irish

²⁶⁶ fn. 243 provides the dating of the annals from which Lóegaire is definitely outside the realm of historicity. See also, Gearóid S. Mac Eoin, 'The Mysterious Death of Lóegaire Mac Néill', *Studia Hibernica* 8 (1968) 21-48, for a summary of various legends applied to Lóegaire.

²⁶⁷ The text can be viewed at the website *Confessio.ie* (online at https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/confessio_latin#41), accessed 07. 08. 2020. & The translation can be viewed at the website *Confessio.ie* (online at https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/confessio_english#41), accessed 07.08.2020.

²⁶⁸ Evans, *ibid.*

history. Patrick's confrontation with Lóegaire, for instance, is likely being referred to when it is noted in 454 AD in *AU*,

Kl. Ienair 6 f., l. 16. Anno Domini .cccc.l.iiii.,iiiimdcluiii. Cena alia feis Temhra apud alias la Loeghaire filium Neill/ 'Kalends of January sixth feria, fifth of the moon. AD 454, [AM] 4658. The Feast of Temair [held] by Laegaire son of Niall'.²⁶⁹

Lóegaire and the confrontation at Tara are therefore legitimised in history; he becomes a more tangible historical individual, given his role in confronting Patrick and the fact that this event was noted by the annals. Later entries concerning Lóegaire go even further, however, in betraying the fact that the annals are drawing from a pre-existing corpus of literature/mythology in order to construct a chronologically sound timeline. In 462 AD in *AU* it is noted that

Mors Laeghaire filii Neill oc Greallaigh Daphil alias oc Greallaigh Ghaifil for taebh Chaisse in Campo Lifí etir in da chnoc, .i. Eiriu ocus Albu a n-anmanda, a rata re Laighnibh gumadh grian ocus gaeth ros-mharbhsad/ 'Death of Lóegaire son of Niall, at Grelach Dabhail or Grelach Ghaifil on the side of Caisse in Magh Life, between the two hills called Eiriu and Albu; for the Laigin thought that it was sun and wind that killed him.'²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 44-45. (Interestingly, although the transcription and translation infer an *Anno Domini* dating, it would appear instead to be an *Anno Mundi* dating in this instance).

²⁷⁰ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 46-47.

This entry is obviously drawing on a pre-existing literary tradition, especially the references it makes to the two hills of *Eiriu* and *Albu* as well as the sun and the wind being thought to have killed him.²⁷¹

There is an example, with reference to *Orguin Denna Ríg* in *AT*, of the Irish annals including synthetic or pseudo-history alongside historical events, the result being that these ahistorical elements are synchronised and therefore legitimised. The context in which Dind Ríg is found in *AT* is in the supposed time between the tale of God sending Angels to help Ezekiel defend against Sennacherib and Achaz, and a recording of the death of Romulus and the decision for the seniors of Rome to rule the city afterwards.²⁷² As a result, Labraid Loingsech is entered into the register of world history between a major biblical event and the death of Rome's eponymous founder. To argue that the Irish were attempting to assert their kingship and place in the broader Christian world using the classical scheme of succession of world empires is likely an exaggeration of what is or what could feasibly be accomplished by these entries. It makes much more sense to read these Irish texts with the audience for whom they were intended in mind, i.e., a learned class. We therefore have examples of Irish texts that appear to cleverly intertwine Irish history with important events in world history, but at the same time aimed their politically charged moments primarily at a local level. We are left then with an understanding of *Orguin Denna Ríg* in *AT*, not as an event that had much impact on the wider scheme of universal history (in the same way as the death of Romulus did), but instead is intended to be read as a political message directed pointedly at a learned Irish audience for the benefit of a specific group. The clever placing of the destruction of Dind Ríg within an important composition of world history demonstrates a sophisticated level of learning and

²⁷¹ This literary tradition is one of those discussed in Mac Eoin, 'The Mysterious Death'.

²⁷² Whitley Stokes, *The Annals of Tigernach* (Llanerch 1993) 378.

authority, giving more justification to the claim it presents.²⁷³ Obviously now the dating between a biblical and mythic Roman event does not overly stress the historicity of Dind Ríg. At the period of composition, however, *AI* was attempting to lend legitimacy to this event, in a world chronicle that had a particularly Irish perspective.

Another example of the legitimisation of ahistorical figures would be the manner in which *AI* legitimises Conn Cétchathach. *AI* notes:

Cond Cétchathach annis regnauit .l./ ‘Conn Cétchathach reigned for fifty years’

, and that

Ro rannad Heriu i ndo eter Mug Nuadat, .i. rig Muman, agus Cond Cétchathach, .i. eter dá Ath Cliath. Secht rí di Chruthentuathaib ro follnaisset for Herind cotanic Cond Cetchathach/ ‘Ireland was divided in two between Mug Nuadat, i.e. the king of Munster, and Conn Cétchathach, i.e. between two Áth Cliath. Seven kings from the Cruithin ruled over Ireland until the arrival of Conn Cétchathach.’²⁷⁴

Conn’s reign, and the legendary division of Ireland that took place during it, into *Leth Cuinn* and *Leth Moga*, are given a frame of historical reference and synchronised as occurring around the reign of a Roman emperor named Mark Anthony (not the same

²⁷³ This process is called synchronisation, for further reading see; Helge Jordheim, ‘Synchronizing the World: Synchronism as Historiographical Practice, Then and Now’, *History of the Present* 7/1 (2017): 59-95. Helge Jordheim, “Making Universal Time: Tools of Synchronization,” in *Universal History and the Making of the Global*, ed. Hall Bjørnstad, Helge Jordheim and Anne Régent-Susini (New York, 2018). Sinéad Ó Sullivan, ‘Aligning and Synchronising the Past: Troy, Rome and Virgil in the Frankish World’, (Forthcoming). Sinéad Ó Sullivan, ‘Mapping Medieval Ireland: Aligning and Synchronising the Past in Medieval Irish Sources’, (Forthcoming).

²⁷⁴ Mac Airt, *Annals of Inisfallen*, 35.

Marc Anthony from the time of Julius Caesar), *Marcus Antoni[n]us imperat annis .xix.*²⁷⁵ The Irish annals, by inserting Conn's life onto the chronological timeline of history, and by synchronising them with the life of a continental historical figure, add a date to this legendary piece of mythology, and in so doing legitimise it.²⁷⁶

The Irish annals inform politics, then, by dating and adding credence/legitimacy, to the mythical/pseudo-historical events of Irish pre-history, by framing them relative to actual historical events. Myth which occurs at an unstated time is given a place in the order of Irish history. In so doing, these events, some of which are of importance to political powers in Ireland, such as the division of *Leth Cuinn* and *Leth Moga*, or the Feast of Temair that Lóegaire celebrated, are ascribed a degree of importance and legitimacy. This occurs in pre-history and into the nebulous period of ahistorical references between Patrick and c. 660 AD.

Poetry in the early Irish Annals

Another major aspect of the annals that is not often discussed is the inclusion of poetry in order to supplement the annalistic record.²⁷⁷ These pieces of poetry must be considered carefully in relation to the annalistic entries they are attached to in order to extract information about early medieval Ireland. For instance, it is very tempting, if looking for information on the year 651 AD, to turn to *AU* and find that in that year there was the death of an Irish bishop of the Saxons, the killing of two sons of Blathmac son of Áed Sláine (named Dúnchad and Conall) and the killing of Oiséne son of Oiserg.²⁷⁸ However, this annalistic entry is supplemented with a piece of literature in the form of a poem, and here it should be mentioned that the victims in the

²⁷⁵ Mac Airt, *Annals of Inisfallen*, 35.

²⁷⁶ Thornton, *Kings Chronologies and Genealogies*, 59-62.

²⁷⁷ Although it is still underdiscussed, there are some scholarly pieces on the role of poetry. See, Breatnach, 'The Annals of Ulster', 221-238. There are, however, promising signs that further research may be on the way. Fangzhe Qiu gave a talk in 2016 to the Eleanor Knott conference, entitled 'Verses in 'The Chronicle of Ireland'? Some linguistic evidence', however this, as of yet, has not been converted into an article or monograph. The slides are available [here](https://www.academia.edu/25981605/Verses_in_The_Chronicle_of_Ireland_Some_textual_and_linguistic_evidence), https://www.academia.edu/25981605/Verses_in_The_Chronicle_of_Ireland_Some_textual_and_linguistic_evidence. Last accessed 28/01/2022.

²⁷⁸ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 126-127.

original tales are said to be three sons, not two, and they are said to be the sons of Diarmait mac Cerbaill, therefore the inclusion of the poem in *AU* seems to imply a degree of confusion and unreliability.²⁷⁹ This piece of literature itself is regarded as unhistorical, partially due to the genealogical uncertainty between the boys and Mael Odrán, however it is the political connotations that may have been attached to the poem, rather than the historicity and reliability that is currently in question.²⁸⁰

Blathmac mc. Aedha in ri ruc a mac ar digii, beraidh Hisu a da macc ina dhighail ar Blathmac. Maelodran cc. A Muilinn ce ro-milt mor di thuirinn, nibo chomailt far serbainn [a]ro-milt for uib Cerbhaill. An men meiles in muilind ní corca acht dergthuirind, is di fo[r]ghlu in cruinn mair fotha muilind Maelodhrain/‘Blathmac son of Aed, the king, Begot a son through excess (?); Jesus will take away his two sons From Blathmac in requital. Maelodrán recited O Mill, Though you have ground much wheat, It was no crushing of oats When you ground Cerball’s grandson. The grain which the mill grinds Is not oats but red wheat; Of the best in the great [genealogical] tree Was the feed of Maelodrán’s mill.’²⁸¹

This poem, along with the majority of other poems inserted into *AU*, is an addition to the text; therefore, we may tentatively propose that it was not present in the ‘underlying’ annalistic entry. This poem, however, was inserted into the manuscript by the hand of the primary contributor, identified by Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill as **H**.²⁸² Many of the poetic pieces

²⁷⁹ Kuno Meyer, *Hibernica Minora Being a Fragment of an Old-Irish Treatise on the Psalter* (Oxford 1894) 70-75. See also, Ó Corráin, ‘Historical need’, 141-58. For the adoption of established literary tradition.

²⁸⁰ Gearóid Mac Eoin, ‘The Death of the Boys in the Mill’, *Celtica* 15 (1983) 60-66: 60.

²⁸¹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *ibid.*

²⁸² Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, viii.

inserted into *AU* in this chronological period seem to have been written in the main hand of the manuscript. In 627 AD for instance, the same primary hand **H** records a poem about the battle of Carn Feradaig.

Ni torchair di Connachtaibh hi cath-cumai ind seisir: Mael Duin, Mael Ruain, Mael Calcaich, Conall, Maeldub, Mael Bresail. / 'There fell only of the Connachta in the battle-destruction of the six Máel Dúin, Máel Ruáin, Máel Calgaig, Conall, Máeldub and Máel Bresail.'²⁸³

In 642 AD there is a poem about Domnall mac Áedo, Uí Néill king of Ireland.

Iss ed a fo a fo thall, ni hedh a fo a fos-sa indosa ad-daim Domnall [] rish Rossa. In sui do-rega indes is e ad-fe duibh for les, beraid cumain cua thech do mac Aedho m. Ainmirech / 'His good is the good beyond, It is not the good here; [] the king of Ros. The sage who will come from the south, It is he who may tell you your weal; He will bring a gift to his house For the son of Aed son of Ainmire. - Colum Cille recited'²⁸⁴

In 669 AD, **H** inserts a eulogistic poem about Máel Fothartaig, king of Uí Thuirtri.

Ni diliu nach ri lim-sa alaliu o bretha Máel Fothartaigh ina geimnen do Dhairiu. / 'No dearer to me is one king rather than another Since Máel Fothartaig was taken in his shroud to Daire.'²⁸⁵

²⁸³ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 114-15.

²⁸⁴ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 122-23.

²⁸⁵ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 138-139. (Daire seems likely to be modern day Derry).

In 747 AD **H** includes another eulogistic poem concerning the death of a learned man, Cú Chuimne, which may well have been composed contemporaneously, given the fact it is directly attributed to his fostermother,

*Cu Chuimne Ro legh suithi co druimne, A lleth n-aill hiaratha Ro Leici ar chaillecha. Ando Coin Cuimne ro-mboi, im-rualaid de conid soi, re leic caillecha ha faill, ro leig al-aill arith-mboi / ‘‘Cú Chuimne, in youth, Read his way through half the Truth. He let the other half lie While he gave women a try. Well for him in old age, he became a holy sage. He gave women the laugh. He read the other half’.*²⁸⁶

These should be sufficient examples to prove that, although they are additions to the annalistic entries, **H** regarded these poems as a part of *AU*, rather than just an addition.²⁸⁷ Even in *AI* we see the inclusion of a poem mourning those noteworthy people that died in 661 AD are included in the main hand of the manuscript.

*Marbáin inna bliadnaso, nírbo chuínte nech occu, Mael Dúin, Béc macc Fergussa, Conaing, Cummíne Fota/ ‘The dead people of this year, None is to be mourned in comparison with them, Máel Dúin, Béc son of Fergus, Conaing, Cumíne Fata’.*²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 200-201. Translation provided from: John V. Kelleher, *Too small for stove wood too big for kindling* (Dublin 1979) 12.

²⁸⁷ Breatnach, ‘The Annals of Ulster’, 221-38. Makes the point that the textual history of *AU* is far more complex than it may appear, and it is not beyond possibility that these poems were part of *CI*.

²⁸⁸ Mac Airt, *Annals of Inisfallen*, 94-95. (For further information on the literary traditions associated with Cumíne Fata see Gearóid S. Mac Eoin, ‘A Life of Cumaine Fota’, in Bo Almqvist & Breandán Mac Aodha & Gearóid Mac Eoin (eds), *Hereditas: Tráchtas agus Aistí in Adhnó don Ollamh Séamus Ó Duilearga, Iar-Stiurthóir Oinigh Choimisiún Béaloideas Éireann, Eagarthóir Béaloideas 1927-1973, Éarlaimh ar an gCumann le Béaloideas Éireann* (Dublin 1975) 192-206.

We assume that **H** is copying from an earlier recension of *AU*, and, given the fact that these poems are additions to the annals, we assume that, in the majority of cases, the poetry was not originally part of the textual tradition.²⁸⁹ The insertion of what appear to be contemporaneous poetry, such as the Colmán moccu Cluasaig poem on Cumméne Fota in *AI* and the verse concerning Cú Chuimne recited by his fostermother in *AU*, would indicate, however, that poetry was an element of the Irish annals from the time of their initial composition. All that is available to us in these instances is the annalistic entry that is supplemented by the poetry. We must work with what we have, and in this instance the entry is using the more creative or ‘literary’ work in order to emphasise and elaborate upon the entry, as well as adding a degree of authority (*auctoritas*) to it. If these poems are inserted contemporaneously into the annalistic record, then they are inserted by the initial compilers with the desire to exercise *auctoritas*, and as a result are a purposeful inclusion in line with the scholarly tradition in which these texts were composed. Verse provided a degree of authority and credence when it was included in the historical record. Authors and scribes in early medieval Ireland frequently drew upon poetry in order to authenticate details and episodes of the history they were reciting.²⁹⁰ It is important to keep in mind that *auctoritas* was not the same as fact; indeed, there is evidence of tales that may be read as cautionary warnings to the Irish literary elite about putting too much stock in the *auctoritas* of verse and poetry.²⁹¹ The insertions of poetry into *AU* and, to a lesser extent *AI*, may therefore be read as the compilers of the annals seeking to lend credence and legitimacy to the entries, in much the same way that modern scholars use citations. In doing so, however,

²⁸⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, 2. Provides an overt example of this mindset, that the poetry was by necessity a later addition, and that the original Chronicle was a pure relation of fact. The result is an ‘edition’ of *CI* that contains minimal poetry, and thus lacks a fundamentally important dimension of the text. See also Breatnach, ‘The Annals of Ulster’, 224-27, where Breatnach challenges assertions made by Mac Niocaill and Mac Eoin in relation to the hands that composed both editions of *AU*.

²⁹⁰ A.J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia 1988) 9-39. Greg Toner, ‘Authority, Verse and the Transmission of Senchas’, *Ériu* 55 (2005) 59-84: 83.

²⁹¹ Toner, ‘Authority, Verse’, 75-76. Provides a specifically Irish account of this issue.

the annal in question ceases to be only raw data due to its association with the poetry, and the political overtones which the poem may carry. The annals take on a secondary function as a literary compilation, referencing poetry when it is relevant; this does not render the annal invalid as a contemporary source, but does associate it with whatever agenda the poem carries.

The extract of poetry concerning the sons of Blathmac/Diarmait, inserted into the annalistic entry at 651 AD serves to highlight the death of two members of the *Síl nÁedo Sláine* and the subsequent emotional impact of said death. *AU* is particularly prone to inserting poetic extracts into its annalistic record, while *AI* is largely more plain prose with much rarer poetic insertions.²⁹² In situations where the annalistic record is supplemented by an insertion of poetry, that specific entry must be viewed with a more critical eye. The many poetic insertions in *AU* mean that the text serves a secondary function, i.e., a literary compilation, and the literature they compile is based on the history being recorded. We have seen this earlier with the poetry regarding Domnall mac Áedo, King of Ireland.²⁹³ The poem serves to supplement the annalistic entry it is attached to, thereby drawing the reader's attention to Domnall's greatness. Similarly, Máel Fothartaig's eulogy in *AU* elevates him beyond the many obituaries that litter *AU*, but in plainer prose.²⁹⁴

It is possible that this secondary function of being a literary compilation was associated with the wider genre of the annals. The Fragmentary Annals (*FA*), for instance, are almost entirely poetry and prose.²⁹⁵ *FA* are notoriously unreliable and are not considered a genuine set of early annals, therefore their worth as an exemplar of the genre may be debatable.²⁹⁶ Despite this, their importance is primarily a literary one, acting as a compilation of unconnected tales about figures who feature in more historically reliable annals. It is significant that the composer of

²⁹² Breatnach discusses how certain poems were excluded from the Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill edition *Breatnach*, 'The Annals of Ulster', 236-37.

²⁹³ See fn. 284.

²⁹⁴ See fn. 285.

²⁹⁵ Joan Newlon Radner, *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* (Dublin 1978).

²⁹⁶ Radner, *Fragmentary Annals*, vii-xxxiii. Provides a brief overview of *FA* and the issues associated with them.

FA chose to frame their literary compilation of folk tales as an annal, and that decision should not be dismissed.²⁹⁷ A decision was made that this compilation of literature would be done in the style of the annals; this indicates there was an understanding amongst the literate elite of Ireland that the genre of the annals was particularly suited to serve as compilations of literary works. The inclusion of prose and poetry within *AU*, *AT*, *AF* and to a lesser extent *AI*, along with the synthetic history every annal contains in the earlier sections, demonstrate that a definite secondary function of the annals was to be a method by which pseudo-history could be framed and literature relating to annalistic entries could be compiled and preserved. Eventually this results in the *Cogad Gaedel re Gallaib* and *Cathréim Cellacháin Chaisil*.²⁹⁸

It must be acknowledged that a poem has a history in and of itself; it is recorded outside of the annalistic compilation and then included in it.²⁹⁹ It may be the case that pieces of poetry or prose included in the annals were composed initially for a different audience, and that the compilers of the annals simply included them in a relevant entry. Even if this is the case, it would not alter the degree to which the included poetry results in a secondary function, i.e., being a literary compilation, and the role that literary function played must be considered in the wider annals. Ultimately, the decision to include poetry still affects the reader, whether that was intended or not. In relation to *Maelodran's Mill* the poem has the effect of engendering sympathy for the Uí Néill sept in question, and in doing so adds to the preceding entry the perspective that the death of Blathmac's children was a sad event in the larger scheme of Irish history. The poem that praises Domnall mac Áedo is a fine example of this, as the inclusion of the poem and that poem's link with the annalistic entry in question adds a positive perspective on Domnall. The decision to include poetry into the annals — with all of the political

²⁹⁷ Radner outlines that the current manuscript of *FA* was composed by Dubhaltach Mac Fir Bhisigh in 1643, Radner, *Fragmentary Annals* (Dublin 1978) vii. Radner makes the argument however that the manuscript Dubhaltach was copying from may well date to the mid-eleventh century, Radner, *Fragmentary Annals*, xxvi.

²⁹⁸ Indeed, Radner suggests that the original compilation of *FA* was in response to *Cogad Gaedel re Gallaib*. Radner, *Fragmentary Annals*, xxvi.

²⁹⁹ Evans, *ibid.*

connotations and bias bound in with that literature —was actively made by a scholar at the monastery where the annal was composed.³⁰⁰

The Influence of Literary Additions on the early Irish Annals

If the annals as a genre have a secondary purpose of compiling literature, then we must be prepared to use the same level of scrutiny and scepticism that is applied to other literary sources to investigate whether or not the inclusion of this prose and poetry in any way affects the reliability of the annal in question.³⁰¹ The annals carry more weight than other texts in the eyes of modern historians. The death of Blathmac's sons, Dúnchad and Conall, is more likely to be viewed as a probable historical event due to their inclusion in an annalistic text than if it occurred in a separate piece of literature, such as a hagiography.³⁰² This seems a fair

³⁰⁰ Useful contemporary examples exist. As discussed in fn. 289, Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, provides no poetry. The result is that his 'edition' of *Chronicle of Ireland*, varies drastically from the exemplars he drew upon. The result is to affect the reader, particularly the academically minded, to consider these early editions of annals as historical plain prose. Charles-Edwards' 'edition' therefore acts out this exact issue from the opposite perspective, as he has made a conscious decision to alter the existing exemplars, thereby implicitly imposing his own perspective on the text. See also Breatnach and Stoke's criticism of Bartholomew Mac Carthy's prudishness when translating *AU*, Breatnach, 'Annals of Ulster', 236-37.

³⁰¹ For a brief introduction to the scope of existing textual analysis for more 'literary' sources when compared with the annals, the following are some scholarly works that provide textual analyses on just two of the 'literary' sources used for this thesis, e.g. *Vita Sancti Patricii, Collectanea*. Eoin MacNeill, 'The Earliest Lives of St Patrick', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries Ireland* 18.1 (1928) 1-21; repr in MacNeill and John S. Ryan, *Saint Patrick* (Dublin 1964) 113-36. James F. Kenney, 'St Patrick and the Patrick legend', *Thought* 8 (1933) 5-34. James Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and history* (Dublin 1955; repr. Dublin 1979) 324-73. Ludwig Bieler, 'The Celtic Hagiographer', *Studia Patristica* 5 (1962) 243-65; repr. In Ludwig Bieler and Richard Sharpe (eds), *Ireland and the culture of early medieval Europe* (London 1987). Liam de Paor, 'The Aggrandisement of Armagh', in T. Desmond Williams (ed.), *Historical Studies* 8 (Dublin 1971) 95-110. Ludwig Bieler, 'Muirchú's Life of St Patrick as a work of literature', *Medium Aevum* 43 (1974) 219-33; repr. In Ludwig Bieler and Richard Sharpe (eds), *Studies on the life and legend of St Patrick* (London 1986). Charles Doherty, 'The Cult of St Patrick and the politics of Armagh in the seventh century', in Jean-Michel Picard (ed.), *Ireland and northern France AD 600-800* (Dublin 1991) 53-94. Catherine Swift, 'Tírechán's motives in compiling the Collectanea: an alternative interpretation', *Ériu* 45 (1994) 53-82. Aileen O'Leary, 'An Irish Apocryphal Apostle: Muirchú's portrayal of St Patrick', *Harvard Theological Review* 89 (1996) 67-88. Edel Bhreathnach, 'Temoria: *Caput Scottorum*?', *Ériu* 47 (1996) 67-88. John Carey, 'St Patrick the Druids and the End of the World', *History of Religions* 36.1 (1996) 42-53. Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Reading Muirchú's Tara event within its background as a biblical 'trial of divinities'', in Jane Cartwright (ed.), *Celtic hagiography and saints' cults* (Cardiff 2003) 123-47. Damian Bracken, 'The authority of the contemplative in Muirchú's life of St Patrick', in Seán Duffy (ed.), *Princes, prelates and poets: essays in honour of Katherine Simms* (Dublin 2013) 220-40. Joseph Falaky Nagy, 'Excavating Loegaire mac Néill' in Dónall Ó Baoill, Donncha Ó hAodha and Nollaig Ó Muraíle (eds), *Saltair saíochta, sanasaíochta agus seanchais : a festschrift for Gearóid Mac Eoin* (Dublin 2013) 1-16. It would be possible to provide similar levels of scholarship for textual analyses of *Baile in Scáil*, *Baile Chuind Chétchataig* and *Vita Sanctae Columbae*; however, that would be excessive. The point here is to simply highlight that despite their importance to the field of study, *AU* and *AI* are understudied when compared with their more 'literary' counterparts.

³⁰² Meyer, *ibid*, points out that in this instance, as a result of examining the existing literary tradition, this is not likely to be a reliable narrative.

assessment, considering that hagiographies and narrative tales contain miracles and exaggerated accounts of superhuman abilities respectively, while an annal is a blander basic account of what occurred in that specific year. In a hagiography, however, historians may approach the text as a whole with knowledge of the context in which it was composed, perhaps knowing the author, or the monastery and the political affiliations of said author or monastery.³⁰³ This provides a more informed approach to the text than can be achieved with an annalistic entry, where the information is often limited to one or two lines and has little to no information about the compilers.³⁰⁴

When an annal introduces literature to complement an entry, an editorial decision has been made that alters the entry in a manner that, whether intentionally or not, influences the audience's interpretation of the events that occurred. As seen in the example of *Maelodrán's Mill*, the inclusion of tragic poetry influences the audience's interpretation of the event, that the death of Blathmac's children was to be mourned. The inclusion of literature in the entry can be seen to demonstrate the significance of the event to the group about whom it was written (in this case the Síl nÁedo Sláine). It demonstrates a familiarity about the internal history of the group in question, due to the fact that the simplistic annalistic entry was expanded upon and turned into a eulogy.

Each of the poems mentioned earlier does this in some manner, whether it is to aggrandise Domnall mac Áedo, to eulogise Máel Fothartaig, or to emphasise how devastating the battle of Carn Feradaig was. Similarly, the inclusion of *Leth Cuinn* and *Leth Moga* in *AI* is a reminder of a larger political schema, even though it is an entirely fabricated one. As a result, an attempt must be made to assess the reliability of the annal by critically examining the creative elements, and how they attempt to inform the reader about the rest of the annalistic compilation. Doing

³⁰³ Bieler, 'Muirchú's Life'. Doherty, 'The Cult of St Patrick'. Swift, 'Tírechán's motives'. O'Leary, 'An Irish Apocryphal Apostle'. Bhreathnach, 'Temoria: *Caput Scottorum?*'.

³⁰⁴ Evans, *Present and Past*, 19-30, provides an example of how this difference between texts affects the scholarly approaches. He analyses degrees of detail in *AU* entries in order to better understand the text.

so may help us to understand how to interpret the additions of creative works, such as prose and poetry onto entries within the annals. Given the examples provided in this chapter for instance, it seems fair to say that *AU* was an annal that often looked favourably upon the Uí Néill.³⁰⁵

This is an issue of methodological approach for researching and making use of annals that applies to events much more important than the death of Blathmac's children. The annals are combed through for valuable historical information relating to the obituaries and great deeds of famous Irish kings, while more narrative literature, that also details these events and kings, is sometimes left to the side in favour of the seemingly more reliable annalistic source.³⁰⁶ It is the duty of the historian to treat the annals critically until the motives behind their composition become known, or until we have a wide array of literature that seems to suggest that the annals are indeed telling the truth in a particular instance.³⁰⁷ One of the ways this could be accomplished is by examining the literary/creative elements that intrude into the annalistic entries, i.e., prose and poetry, and the way in which their inclusion may inform a historian about the degree of editorial bias present in the text.

It would be irresponsible to not acknowledge the degree to which the annals were influenced by the bias of the author, the supervisor, the abbot, the patron and the head of the *paruchia* within which they were composed. This individual bias is unavoidable, because, as will be further outlined by this thesis, each of these individuals was a member of a scholarly/learned wing of Dynastic Frameworks. It is through these individual biases that the politics of Dynastic

³⁰⁵ Evans, *ibid*, 17-44, would seem to generally agree with this assessment, arguing for a Conaille/Brega chronicle that relocated eventually to Armagh, based upon an analysis of stylistic features and levels of detail within certain entries.

³⁰⁶ See again the discrepancy between Annalistic analysis and 'Literary' analysis as outlined in fn. 206, 277 & 301.

³⁰⁷ Evans, *Present and Past*. Goes some way towards rectifying this by analysing the content and stylistic features together. His goal, however, is more generally to engage with the details within the annals to verify their origin and transmission c. 912-1000, in which he is very successful, but the more 'literary' content and its implications within the body of the text is not the main focus. Evans did however engage with this topic more in depth in, Nicholas Evans, 'Irish Chronicles as sources for the history of Northern Britain, AD 660-800', *The Innes Review* 69.1 (2018) 1-48.

Frameworks may have trickled, perhaps naturally and unintentionally, into the annalistic record. By this logic, *AU* is not the product of a grand conspiracy to rewrite history to serve the politics of a loose association of distantly related septs. Instead, *AU* was composed by scholars and scholarly institutions within Uí Néill territory, and this was what resulted in *AU* being kindly disposed to and concerned about the Uí Néill.³⁰⁸

When a literary element, i.e., the insertion of prose, poetry, mythology or any other creative diversion from the presentation of raw facts and data, is used to supplement entries in the annals, those creative elements are included along with the pre-existing understandings, perceptions and political significance attached to them. To simplify this statement by means of an example, the poem *Maelodrán's Mill* mentioned earlier is not made for the annals, it is a piece of literature with its own history and connotations.³⁰⁹ The poem included in the text is but a small element of a larger story, although it is lifted directly from the story and tacked onto the annal in a way that emphasises the entry. The boys mentioned in *Maelodrán's Mill*, for instance, instigate a reaction from Máel Odrán by undertaking a cattleraid into Laigin territory, and harassing Máel Odrán, who was on foot, from horseback.³¹⁰ The poem is then inserted into the annal that marks when the event took place. By inserting poetry in this way, that specific annalistic entry is to some degree emphasised and elevated above the rest and it becomes coloured by the same political connotations associated with the poem. The political connotations which colour this poem are more complex than most, although the poem concerns the death of Diarmait's sons, and although Diarmait embarks on a campaign against the Laigin for revenge at Loch Gabar, it takes an unexpected twist. Diarmait and Maelodrán make peace between one other, and Maelodrán returns to his people,

³⁰⁸ Evans, *Present and Past*, 17-44, provides a compelling argument for *AU* being housed within Conaille/Brega before eventual relocation to Armagh.

³⁰⁹ Meyer, *Hibernica Minora*, 70-75. Mac Eoin, 'Death of the Boys', 60-66.

³¹⁰ Mac Eoin, 'Death of the Boys', 62.

*Ocus ba cathmílid do Díarmait on uair sin imach Maelodrán/‘And from that hour forth Maelodrán was soldier in battle to Diarmait’.*³¹¹

As a result, the insertion of this poem brings with it the political connotations of a tale which portrays the Laigin and their kings as subservient to the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. This research will attempt to argue that the annals served to edify and inform the larger political narratives of Dynastic Frameworks. Larger political narratives relating to Dynastic Frameworks are reinforced in annalistic compilations when the annals choose to emphasise specific events through the insertion of prose or poetry, e.g., the death of Blathmac/Diarmait’s children, Domnall mac Áedo’s worthiness as a king, and the battle of Carn Feradaig mentioned earlier. Their inclusion influences and shapes the way the historical record is related.

The annal entries may be defined as history as they attempt to relate data to the audience, even if early entries are of questionable historicity.³¹² The poems and poetry may be defined as literary, as in many cases they were composed separately. As they are presented to us now, however, the literature and the history have been intermingled; there is short annalistic prose that strives to relate fact but that is supplemented for the reader by more extravagant creative work. The difficulty is that despite the pre-existing history of the literature and the more plain historical prose, in the form available to us, both are mixed and it would not be good practice to view either the insertion or the entry as disposable.³¹³ In the example of *Maelodrán’s Mill* both the plain prose of the annal and the poem are necessary parts of the entry as a whole. While it is possible to identify that this was not the origin of the poem (and as a result assume that at some point in history there existed a copy of *AU* that just noted that Blathmac’s children died without poetic insertion), the inclusion of the literary element alters the way the entry is

³¹¹ Kuno Meyer, *Hibernica Minora*, 73 & 75.

³¹² See fn. 243 for various dating proposals.

³¹³ Charles-Edwards, *ibid*, for instance omits the poem concerning Cú Chuimne.

read, and arguably how it is intended to be read. This is most certainly the proper way to approach the entry, given the fact that it was inserted by none other but the main hand **H**, we should regard the inclusion of these literary elements as intended by the primary compiler of the text.³¹⁴

This decision is a clear example of an editorial agenda that impacts the manner in which the text is to be read. By including artistic writing into what previously was likely plain prose recordings of history, whoever made that decision in that moment made the annals function not only as history, but also as a literary compilation. While the literary aspects may not be as consistent as the historical recordings, one would also imagine that not every event that occurred in the annals was worthy of song. It is tempting to divest the literary elements from the historical and to attempt to view the poems and prose as simply tacked-on insertions of whatever the compilers could get their hands on that was relevant. Doing so, however, would mean excluding an entire aspect of the text's potential. The decision made by the compilers of *AU* to include and elaborate upon literary events such *Maelodrán's Mill* or *The Battle of the Groans* is a decision made in full cognisance of how it influences the outcome of the text.³¹⁵ Indeed, even if the compiler didn't make the decision to actively include literature that was tied up in the nitty gritty of dynastic politics, and even if it was the result of a compiler throwing in as much related literature as possible, the fact that they are present in the Irish annals influences the audience that is engaging with the text.

The Uí Néill/Laigin in AU

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, one aspect about the Irish annals that ought to be mentioned is how a form of narrative emerges regarding the interactions between the Uí Néill and the Laigin. The Laigin are the primary antagonists of the Uí Néill in the early Irish annals

³¹⁴ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 200-201.

³¹⁵ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 126-127. & Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 190-93.

and this thesis does not doubt the historicity or validity of their very real, very bloody rivalry.³¹⁶ One aspect that must be considered, however, is the degree to which this rivalry was perhaps embellished by the members of the Uí Néill responsible for composing and compiling *AU* within the *paruchia* of Armagh or Iona, given that *CI* was relocated to a church in Meath before moving to Armagh.³¹⁷ It is difficult to demonstrate the relationship between the Uí Néill and the Laigin clearly with references to the text due to the fact there is no single telling reference that demonstrates how *AU* treats the relationship of the Laigin. Rather one can only understand by reading through the bulk of the text and seeing how they are treated consistently over a long period of time. The Laigin (Leinstermen) are the perennial punching-bags of the Uí Néill, subjected to near-constant raiding and battles that nine times out of ten will go poorly for them. The traditional border between the Laigin and the Uí Néill was defined by the *Ríge/Ryewater River*.³¹⁸ It is the Laigin that the Uí Néill defeated at Druim Derga to claim the plain of Meath, according to *AU*, territory that would become Uí Néill heartland.³¹⁹ Nevertheless, despite being battled, beaten and driven back over the course of nearly four centuries, the Laigin never fully succumbed to the might of the Uí Néill, something that may raise questions for scholars about whether they were beaten as badly as the source suggests, or whether, in these instances, *AU* is exaggerating somewhat. In order to demonstrate what exactly may be meant by this embellishment, see the two references to devastating defeat that the Laigin felt at the hands of the Uí Néill in the historical period below.

738 AD Ath Senaig i.e.

³¹⁶ Various instances of this bloody rivalry are outlined in brief in Sub-Heading; *The Northern & Southern Uí Néill*.

³¹⁷ Evans, *ibid.*

³¹⁸ Smyth, *Celtic Leinster*, 45-46.

³¹⁹ See fn. 19.

Bellum Atho Senaich .i. Cath uchbadh... inter nepotes Niall ocus Laiginenses | crudeliter gestum est, in quo binales reges, celci rigoris rectores, armis alternatim congressi sunt .i. Aedh Alldan, (.i. ri Tem)rach, ocus Aedh Mac Colggen .i. ri Laigen, e quibus unus superstes uulteratus uixit, .i. Aedh Allan; alius vero, .i. Aedh mac Colgan, militari mocrone capite truncates Lagenos suos emulos insolito more in fugam mittunt, calcant, sternunt, subuertunt, consumunt ita ut usque ad internicionem uniuersus hostilis pene deletur exercitus, paucis nuntis renuntiantibus; in tali bello tantos cecidisse ferunt quantos per transacta retro conflictu non conperimus/‘The battle of the Groans’... between the Uí Néill and the Laigin was sternly fought and the two kings respectively, leaders firm and exalted, i.e., Áed Allán, King of Temair, and Áed mac Colgan, king of Laigin. One of them, i.e., Áed Allán, though wounded, survived triumphant, but the other, i.e., Áed mac Colgan, was beheaded by a battle sword. Then the descendants of Conn enjoyed a tremendous victory when in extraordinary fashion they rout, trample, crush, overthrow and destroy their Laigin adversaries, so much so that almost the entire army is well-nigh annihilated, there being a few messengers to bring back the tidings. And men say that so many fell in this great battle that we find no comparable slaughter in a single onslaught and fierce conflict throughout all preceding ages.’³²⁰

Again in 770 AD

³²⁰ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 190-93.

Ráth Ailinne, .i.e., Congressio eter Donnchad mac Domnaill ocus Cellach mac nDonnchada ocus exiit Donnchad cum exercitu nepotum Neill cu Laigniu ocus efugerunt eum Laignin ocus exiuerunt i Sciaigh Nectin ocus manserunt Hui Neill .uii. diebus i Raith Alinne ocus accenderunt igni omnes terminus Laginentium. ‘An encounter between Donnchad mac Domnaill and Cellach mac Donnchad, and Donnchad went with the army of the Uí Néill against the Laigin and the Laigin eluded him and went to Sciath Nechtain. The Uí Néill remained seven days in Ráth Ailinne and burned all the confines of the Laigin with fire.’³²¹

In the same year that the Uí Néill burn the confines of Ráth Ailne with fire, the Ciannacht carry out a great slaughter of the Laigin:

Coscradh Atha Cliath ria Ciannacht for hu Teig. Arm or di Laignibh/The overthrow of the Uí Téig by the Ciannacht at Áth Cliath. There was a great slaughter of the Laigin.’³²²

Here we see three examples in the space of sixty-one years where the Laigin suffer defeat at the hands of the Uí Néill. In 738 and 770 AD, in particular, the defeats are devastating. Of the battle of Áth Senaig, for instance, it is noted that there was no comparison in the history of Ireland to a slaughter in a single onslaught, and the siege of Ráth Ailinne makes sure to drive

³²¹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 224-225.

³²² Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 222-25. Bear in mind the Síl nÁedo Sláine overthrew the Ciannacht and so this is another instance of Uí Néill violence directed at the Laigin, despite the different name. This is supported by a later reference to a disturbance of Oenach Tailtinn held by the Ciannacht.

home the fact that the Uí Néill burned all the confines of the Laigin with fire.³²³ Additionally, these are only references to the defeats that the Laigin suffered at the hands of the Uí Néill.

During this short period the Laigin also suffer a great slaughter at the hands of the Munstermen. In 735 AD, just three years prior to the battle of Áth Senaig, it is noted that

*Bellum inter Mumain ocus Laigniu ubi multi di Laignibh ocus plebe innumerabiles de Mume perierunt, in quo Ceallach mac Faelchair, rex Osraighi, cecidit, sed Cathal filius Finguine, rex Muman, euassit/ 'A battle between Mumu and Laigin, in which many of the Laigin and well-nigh countless Munstermen perished. Cellach mac Faelchar, king of Osraige, fell therein but Cathal son of Finguine, King of Mumu, escaped.'*³²⁴

It is obvious then, from reading through each of these annalistic entries, that between 735-770 AD the Laigin, according to *AU*, were a political entity that should have been on the ropes, allegedly suffering great slaughter three times in the space of thirty-five years. It would be fair then to presume that the Laigin, having suffered four crippling defeats in such a short span of time, would at least be licking their wounds and recuperating. The opposite is, in fact true; in 777 AD, just seven years after the Uí Néill allegedly “burned all the confines of the Laigin with fire” and the Ciannacht performed “a great slaughter of the Laigin”, *AU* notes *Slógad Lagen la Donnchad for Brega/*‘A hosting of the Laigin by Donnchad against Brega.’ and, presumably as a result of this *slógad*,

³²³ Evans, ‘Irish Chronicles’, 27-48, makes the point of Áth Senaig in particular that the hyperbolic nature of the language indicate it was the product of a gradual evolution from a less verbose entry in *CI* to a more expansive entry in *AU*.

³²⁴ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 188-89.

Cumuscc ind oenaigh la Donnchad for Ciannacht. In coccadh iter Donnchad ocus Congalach/'Disturbance of the assembly by Donnchad against the Ciannacht. Warfare between Donnchad and Congalach.'³²⁵

A *slógad* was an organised military procedure, a hosting, a rising out, or an expedition of the warriors of the people in question.³²⁶ It is worth noting that this *slógad* seems to have been called in order to disrupt *ind óenaigh*/'the assembly', as Donnchad organised a *slógad* against Brega, where *Óenach Tailtenn* would be held if the lord of the Uí Néill was suitably powerful. The manner in which *AU* presents the entry, leaves no doubt that Donnchad's intended targets were the Ciannacht, which was at times a title held by the lords of Northern Brega, presumably in response to the great slaughter they inflicted upon his people in 777 AD.³²⁷

The way the Laigin are treated in *AU* may therefore call into question how accurately the annalistic record relates the factual reality of Laigin/Uí Néill relations. None of this is to say that these annalistic entries were less than genuine; given the depth of detail, and the fact that many of the events seem to tie into one another in a form of cause and effect, it seems safe to assume they were genuine historical events recorded for posterity. It will be established during the course of this thesis that these annals were composed, (or had their composition overseen) by individuals thoroughly involved in the wider sept politics of Ireland.³²⁸ Given this information, and the knowledge that *AU* was a compilation that originated initially as *CI*, and was later relocated to territory within the Uí Néill sphere of influence, it may be reasonably questioned whether or not the treatment of the Laigin in the text is skewed in order to portray them in a less than favourable light. Again, this does not mean or insinuate that the annals are

³²⁵ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 230-31.

³²⁶ See eDIL s.v. *slógad*, *slúagad*.

³²⁷ Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400-800', 211. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 450-468, provides an alternative explanation of the Ciannacht as vassal people to the Uí Néill. For me, the fact that they were holding *Óenach Tailtenn* indicates a position of prominence and it is likely they were assimilated into the Southern Uí Néill.

³²⁸ Evans, *Present and Past*, 17-44.

fictional, but that they were susceptible to the politics of the period, and that individual politics, whether of the scribe or the abbot, may have seeped into the text and influenced the way in which the Laigin were portrayed. This may have manifested itself in ways as simple over-exaggerating the nature of their defeat or under-emphasising the nature of their victories.³²⁹ The way the Laigin are portrayed between 735-770 AD, i.e., that they were consistently defeated and slaughtered by the Uí Néill, the king of Munster and the Ciannacht, is likely to be somewhat true. Given the manner in which they pick themselves up, however, to organise a *slógad* into the heartland of Uí Néill territory and provoke the Ciannacht to warfare just seven years after their third slaughter, may suggest that the use of the word slaughter was slightly hyperbolic. Using language in this way can provide a false sense of scale of the importance of these events and may well be borne out of individual or institutional (in the case of the monasteries) bias, affecting the manner in which the history was recorded.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that the Irish annals are very important texts for the study of early medieval Ireland. We have briefly touched upon their historicity, and just how reliable they can claim to be. Something important to remember when studying the Irish annals, and using them, is that a text need not always be composed with the intention of fulfilling a purpose in order for it to fulfil that purpose. An example from the field of early medieval Ireland is that law tracts were not composed as a means of learning early medieval Irish; however, for students of the language today, they are an invaluable resource. In the case of the annals, they colour our understanding of politics as a natural by-product of the institutions which patronised their composition and their poetic and prosaic inclusions.

³²⁹ See again; Evans, 'Irish Chronicles', 27-48. Regarding the hyperbolic language surrounding Áth Senaig.

One of the natural by-products of recording the history of powerful political groups, their highs and their lows, is that it is almost impossible, especially in the early medieval period, to remain entirely divested from their politics. We can see this plainly in effect in *AU* with the poetic prophecy attributed to Colmcille concerning the greatness of Domnall mac Áedo an overt instance of this. Obviously, texts were an expensive resource to produce, they required the co-operation of people who provided the raw materials and specialists to compose them.³³⁰ As a result, in this period in Ireland we see that texts are composed and survive almost entirely in institutions; and, as is the prerogative of academic institutions today, these institutions had a say in the composition of the annals. These scholarly institutions cannot be separated from the politics of early medieval Ireland.³³¹ It is important, then, to remember exactly what the annals are: an attempt to record history as it happened, but carried out by people and institutions with an active role in that history.

The role the Irish annals have in informing contemporary Irish politics is to maintain a record of it, and a by-product of being composed by institutions with a stake in contemporary politics is that sometimes narratives emerge from the record, whether it is through *auctoritas* being placed on a section by the addition of poetry or through emphatic language being used to bring attention to one person's greatness or villainy. The annals do not make any attempt to declare themselves an objective relation of historical fact, and it would not be correct to treat them as such. The period of the annals that is most subject to the influence of contemporary patrons would be the early part of Irish history, from before the annals are historically reliable. The role of the Irish annals in informing a modern understanding of Irish politics, then, is that they are a supremely useful resource, but one that has been used for quite a long period of time without a sufficient regard for the motives and bias inherent in them. The role of literary

³³⁰ Kathleen Ryan, 'Holes and Flaws in Medieval Irish Manuscripts', *Peritia* 6-7 (1987-88) 243-64. Nancy Edwards, 'The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland', in Ó Cróinín, *A New History*, 235-300: 279-81.

³³¹ This lack of separation will be examined more thoroughly throughout Chapter 6; 'The Irish Church as the "Scholarly Wing" of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework'.

elements within the Irish annals, such as poetry/prose/synthetic history, etc, should not be discarded as mere additions. As much as historians may wish that the annals existed in two forms, one being the form we currently have, and the second being only the plain prose record of the annals, it is important to read these entries within the wider context of the text in order to use these annals as a means to better inform us of Irish history and politics.

As it stands, *AU* is an annalistic record that bears strong associations with the Uí Néill. It composes their history and places it into a context, along with relevant prose and poetry to complement it. The politics of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework, an association of septs bound by alleged common ancestry, is not created or emphasised by *AU*. That history is recorded with a positive perspective on the Uí Néill in mind; as such, while the text does not emphasise political narratives in the time it was composed, by preserving the politics and history, it emphasises a political narrative surrounding the Dynastic Framework for future generations. This perspective, that the annals were involved with the politics of Dynastic Frameworks has influenced the way this thesis has engaged with the annals, and it should inform the reader as to the approach taken in the following chapter. The next chapter aims to examine the Uí Néill framework in the seventh century through the lens of the Irish annals, and how reading the annals as a continuous text can inform our understanding of the larger Uí Néill framework.

Chapter 4:

The Uí Néill Framework in the Seventh Century

Introduction

Thus far this thesis has provided an outline of existing literature and the methodology through which the annals will be examined. In this chapter we will investigate the politics of the Uí Néill in the seventh century in order to better understand the function and organisation of the Dynastic Framework. The seventh century in Ireland was the period in which there is general consensus that the annalistic record is becoming historical.³³² There is a stark jump in the amount of historical documents, ranging from grammar to hagiography, available for analysis.³³³ As a result it is a very useful period to study in order to understand how the septs within the Dynastic Framework consolidated power.

The seventh century will be examined through two principal lenses. Firstly we will examine the internal politics of the Dynastic Framework, internecine conflict, the establishment of hierarchy, and how septs jockeyed for position within the framework. This ought to enlighten us further as to the degree to which Dynastic Frameworks were organised and operated with political unity. It will also be important to examine how the larger Uí Néill framework interacted with other political powers in Ireland, such as the Laigin, etc. Doing so will demonstrate that the delineation between political powers in Ireland along the lines of mythological ancestry was a conceived/artificial stratification. This allowed for the construction and assignation of political narratives to the larger group, for the creation and invocation of ‘us vs them’ narratives that concentrated on what divided the early Irish.

³³² Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 118. Smyth, ‘The Earliest Annals’, 4-18. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 443-44. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*, 9, 159-163. Evans, *Present and Past*, 171-88.

³³³ F.J. Byrne, ‘Seventh-Century Documents’, *IER* 108 (1967) 164-82.

Internal Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Competing Septs)

The Irish annals in the seventh century provide an interesting insight into an island in flux. Although it does not occur in the seventh century, an event that ought to be mentioned, due to its importance to Uí Néill politics, is the death of Columba in 595 AD (*AU*) or in 597 AD (*AI*).³³⁴ Columba founded Iona, one of the most prominent monasteries in the Irish-speaking world, and which was very closely tied to the Uí Néill, particularly the Cenél Conaill, of whom Columba was a member.³³⁵ While it occurs outside of the bounds of the seventh century, the death of such an influential clergyman with a large following among the Uí Néill ought to be noted due to the role of Iona within the larger Dynastic Framework.³³⁶

First, we shall examine the internal political disputes that occurred among the Uí Néill during the first half of the seventh century in order to interpret how the landscape was set politically. Specifically, we will focus on the manner in which septs seemed to operate politically against one another within the framework, oftentimes jockeying for political gain. *AU* opens the seventh century in 600 AD with reference to the slaying of Suibne mac Colmáin Máir by Áed Sláine at Brí Dam:

*Iugulatio Suibne mac Colmaen Moer mc. Diarmoda Deirgh mc. Ferghusa
Cerrbheoil mc. Conaill Cremthainne mc. Neill Naoighiallaigh la hAedh Slane
i mBri Dam for Suaniu, .i. riuulus./* ‘The slaying of Suibne son of Colman Mór

³³⁴ Although Mc Carthy has argued that the obit of Saint Columba actually took place in 593 AD, I will use the traditional death-date here; see, however, Daniel Mc Carthy, ‘The Chronology of Saint Columba’s Life’, in Pádraic Moran & Immo Warntjes (eds), *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship A Festschrift for Dáibhí Ó Cróinín* (Turnhout 2015) 3-32: 27.

³³⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 282-93, provides an overview of Columba’s early life and political background.

³³⁶ Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 63-7. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 501.

son of Diarmait Derg son of Fergus Cerrbél son of Conall of Cremthann son of Niall Naígiallach by Áed Sláine in Brí Dam Suaine, i.e. a stream'.³³⁷

This event apparently marks the beginning of a feud between the Síl nÁedo Sláine and the Clann Cholmáin Máir, the primary powers of the Southern Uí Néill, and is cited in *VSC* as a reason why the Síl nÁedo Sláine lost the kingship of Tara.³³⁸ The Síl nÁedo Sláine and the Clann Cholmáin Máir were neighbouring Uí Néill powers in the vicinity of Tara, and conflict between powerful neighbouring Uí Néill septs was commonplace.³³⁹ This is the first reference to the killing of a member of the Clann Cholmáin by a member of the Síl nÁedo Sláine, and the slaying is performed by none other than the eponymous Áed Sláine himself. This incident is emblematic of the first half of the seventh century among the Southern Uí Néill, which is defined by warfare and kin slaying between the Clann Cholmáin and Síl nÁedo Sláine. There are many instances which illustrate the incessant kin slaying that was rampant among the Southern Uí Néill; one of the best examples may be found in 634 AD, for instance: *AU* notes

Iugulatio .ii. filiorum Aedha Slane la Conall mac Suibne ecc Loch Threitni ar Fremuin .i. Cingal, ri Bregh, ocus Ailill Cruidire, senathair Síl Dluthaigh / 'The killing of two sons of Áed Sláine by Conall son of Suibne at Loch Treitni opposite Fremainn, i.e., Congal, King of Brega, and Ailill the Harper, ancestor of Síl Dlúthaig'.³⁴⁰

A year later, in 635 AD, the next entry, *AU* notes:

³³⁷ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 98-99.

³³⁸ Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 38-39. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 122.

³³⁹ This was alluded to in brief in Sub-Heading; *The Northern & Southern Uí Néill*.

³⁴⁰ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 118-119.

Occisio Conaill mac Suibne i tigh mac Nad-Fraich la Diarmait Aedha Slane /

‘The slaying of Conall mac Suibne in the house of Nad-Fraich’s son by Diarmait mac Áed Sláine’.³⁴¹

These entries, when taken together, seemingly tell the story of calculated revenge murder carried out on Conall mac Suibne of the Clann Cholmáin for his participation in the killing of two sons of Áed Sláine. Something that is interesting for the historian is the language at play in these entries. Conall mac Suibne is said to have killed two sons of Áed Sláine at Loch Treitni; this language, when considered in the wider context of the annals, likely meant to imply that they were assassinated as part of this extended inter-generational blood feud. The use of the word *occisio* in relation to Conall mac Suibne carries the implication of a political assassination in and of itself. *Occisio, -onis, f., coup mortel, meurtre, massacre (cl.)* ‘Death blow, murder, massacre’.³⁴² We may be further certain that *occisio* relates to a murder, or an underhanded death, when instances are noted of the word’s use by noteworthy contemporary Irish authors. One of the most prominent Irish scholars of his age, Sedulius Scottus, himself provides the definition of *occisio* in *Collectaneum in Epistolam B. Pauli ad Romanos* as, “*Homicidium*” est *innocentis occisio* / “‘Homicide’ is the killing of an innocent person’.³⁴³ The specific murder in question would furthermore appear to be an example of *díguin*, i.e. violation of a man’s protection through the wounding and slaying of another.³⁴⁴ The negative connotations of the

³⁴¹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 118-119.

³⁴² Albert Blaise, *Dictionnaire Latin-Français des auteurs Chrétiens* (Turnhout 1954-1967) s.v.. This is backed up by multiple other dictionaries using the *Database of Latin Dictionaries* available on *Brepolis*. The dictionaries are as follows: Charlton T. Lewis & Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford 1933); Félix Gaffiot, *Dictionnaire Latin-Français* (Paris 1934); R. E. Latham, D. R. Howlett & R. K. Ashdowne, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (Oxford 1975–2013).

³⁴³ Sedulius Scottus, *Collectaneum in epistolam B. Pauli ad Romanos*, L&S C680, 22. Export from the Archive of Celtic-Latin Literature. Exported at: 2020-08-02 13:53 (CET) (Turnhout 2011).

³⁴⁴ The reference can be viewed at the website *dil.ie* (online at dil.ie/16356), accessed 16.02.2021. eDil, s.v. *díguin*. For further information on terms used to relate death in the Irish annals see, Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, 21-33. He provides compelling evidence that there was a very considered language applied to relate the deaths of individuals ranging from admirable to lamentable. This thesis would advance this claim and suggest that

language are supported by the fact it was carried out in Nad-Fraích's house by Diarmait who was the son of Áed Sláine, the man that Conall murdered in 604 AD, *AU*:

Iugulatio Aedho Slane mc Diarmoda Deirg mc Fearghusa Cerrbheoil mc Conaill Cremthainne mc Neill Naoighiallaigh o Chonall mac Suibne qui regnauerunt Temoriam equali potestate simul/ 'The slaying of Áed Sláine son of Diarmait Derg son of Fergus Cerrbél son of Conall of Cremthann son of Niall Naígiállach by Conall son of Suibne. They reigned together with equal power at Temair'.³⁴⁵

Diarmait was the brother of the men Conall killed at Loch Treitni; this would imply that it was a continuation of a feud, and was a more underhanded slaying, like an assassination, definitely not one which took place in pitched battle, anyway, if it occurred in a house. These short thirty years among the Southern Uí Néill demonstrate a period of great instability and an increasingly intense rivalry between the two prominent septs in the South.

The Northern Uí Néill at this time were not without their own instability, however; indeed, their feuding was just as bloody, if not more so, than that of the Southern Uí Néill. In 604 AD, in the same year that Áed Sláine was assassinated, *AU* notes

Iugulatio Colmain Rimedho mac Baedain Brighi mac Muirchertaig mac Earca a uiro de genere suo / 'The slaying of Colmán Rímid son of Baetán Bríge son of Muirchertach mac Erca by a man of his own kindred.'³⁴⁶

Iugulatio and *Occisio* were not just individual deaths, but specifically underhanded deaths such as assassinations or murder.

³⁴⁵ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 100-101.

³⁴⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 100-101.

The assassination of Colmán Rímid — who is named as a king of Ireland in other texts — and Áed Sláine in the same year naturally resulted in a period of instability in both the North and the South. This instability is briefly halted by the efforts of Áed Uairidnach, who became king of Tara after the death of Colmán Rímid. Áed would die in 612 AD, however, seemingly of natural causes:

*Mors Aedho Alddain filii Domnaill, regis Temro / ‘Death of Áed Allán son of Domnall, King of Temair’.*³⁴⁷

After the death of Áed Uairidnach the Northern Uí Néill were not as active as their Southern brethren. Rather than open warfare, there is an alarming number of deaths recorded as *iugulatus est*, which (similar to *occissio*) likely means an underhanded death or assassination. E.g. 615 AD: *Iugulatio Maeli Cobo mac Aedho in bello Montis Tueth Bhealgadhain*; 618 AD *ocus iugulatio Fergusa filii Colmain Magni* (here possibly referring to Colmán Rímid); 621 AD: *Iugulatio Aengusa mac Colmain Maghni .i. regis nepotum Neill.*³⁴⁸

The next reference to a king of Ireland is Suibne Menn, a ruler from the Cenél nEógain who died at the hands of Congal Cáech, king of the Cruithin, in 628 AD:

*Occissio Suibne Menn mc Fiachna. Suibne Menn ri Erenn, mc Fiachna mc Feradhaigh mc Muiredhaigh mc Eoghain i Taerr Breni .i. la Conghal Caech mc Sgannlain / ‘The slaying of Suibne Menn the king of Ireland, Suibne Menn son of Fiachna son of Feradach son of Muiredach son of Éogan in Taerr Bréni, i.e., by Congal Cáech son of Scanlán’.*³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 106-107. For information on *Mors* as relating to natural causes, see Charles-Edwards, *ibid.*

³⁴⁸ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 106-111.

³⁴⁹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 114-115.

This entry is particularly noteworthy and informative of Uí Néill politics, for multiple reasons. Firstly it concerns the death of a man who was respected enough to be granted the title *Rí Érenn*. Taking this to mean, at the very least, that Suibne Menn was the leader or ruler of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework, and at most aspired to rule all of Ireland, it is noteworthy that this is the third individual in a row named from the Northern Uí Néill. Indeed, Suibne Menn would be succeeded by Domnall mac Áedo of the Cenél Conaill. As a result, we can speculate that, in the early seventh century, the Northern Uí Néill septs, both the Cenél Conaill and the Cenél nEógain, held a disproportionate amount of power compared to their Southern counterparts. Furthermore, the word used to describe Suibne Menn's death is *occissio*, which (as we have discussed) appears to have negative connotations in this time period.³⁵⁰ In an Irish context it seems fair to assume that the use of *occissio* implies some manner of underhanded or dishonourable murder, perhaps a political assassination. The murder of Suibne Menn is noteworthy in that it was orchestrated by the ruler of a rival Dynastic Framework, Congal Cáech, who may have had his own ambitions to be king of Tara. This may indicate a pre-meditated move by Congal Cáech to weaken the Uí Néill by removing their established ruler; Congal did after all have ambitions of his own on the kingship of Tara that was held by the Uí Néill. In the *Bechbretha*, c. 7th century, Congal is referred to as *rí Temro*/ 'King of Tara', until he lost an eye due to a bee sting, and as a result of this injury was *conid-tubart assa flaith*/ 'until [this] put him from his kingship'.³⁵¹ In the years following Suibne's death, Congal pushed into the territory of the Southern Uí Néill, eventually foiled by Domnall mac Áedo, before he fell at the battle of Roth in 639 AD according to *AI*,

³⁵⁰ See fn. 342.

³⁵¹ Charles-Edwards & Kelly, *Bechbretha*, 68-69.

Cath Roth i torchair Congal Caech / ‘The battle of Roth in which Congal Cáech fell’.³⁵²

The *occissio* of Suibne Menn may indicate a political assassination with the goal of causing chaos within the larger Uí Néill framework, during which Congal Cáech and his allies would be able to push into the territory of the Southern Uí Néill. This plan may even have worked, but for the emergence of Domnall mac Áedo, who defeated Congal Cáech at Dún Ceithirn in the year following Suibne’s assassination. 629 AD:

Bellum Duin Cethirnn in quo Congal Caech fugit oculus Domnall mac Aedho uictor erat, in quo cecidit Guaire mac Forindain / ‘The battle of Dún Ceithirn, in which Congal Cáech took flight, and Domnall son of Áed was victor, in which Guaire son of Forinnán fell’.³⁵³

Domnall appears to have been more than ready for Congal, according to *AU*, and perhaps his swift action against Congal was what solidified his status as *Rex Scottorum* in the years to come.³⁵⁴ Congal may also have led an alliance of the Cruithin and the Dál Riata against the Uí Néill, in which case Domnall defeating Congal would serve to solidify superiority against not only the Cruithin, but also the Ulaid, lending yet more credibility to his claim to be *Rex Scottorum*.³⁵⁵

³⁵² Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 120-121.

³⁵³ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 116-117.

³⁵⁴ For a dateable early poem that names Domnall mac Áedo as *Rex Scottorum* see, Karl Strecker (ed.), *Rythmi computistici*, MGH Poet. Lat. Aevi carolini 4/2 (Berlin 1896; repr 1964) 695-97: *Versus de annis a principio*. (For more information on the dating of the poem see Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Irish History and Chronology*, 80.)

³⁵⁵ We know Congal was king of the Cruithin, Sharpe has argued that a segment of *Vita Sanctae Columbae* concerns punishment for the Dál Riata for acting against the Uí Néill. See, Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 209. See also, Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 60.

Congal's actions, however, expose the weakness of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework, which is characteristic of many political entities at this period in time. Namely, the period of transition between the death of an old king and the arrival of a new was often bloody and filled with conflict. In the year after the battle of Dún Ceithirn, despite holding off the forces of the Cruithin, there was significant unrest amongst the Cenél nEógain, who fought amongst themselves, 630 AD:

*Bellum Leithirbhe inter genus Eugain inuicem, in quo Mael Fithrich cecidit
ocus bellum Mitani/ 'The battle of Leitheirbe between the Cenél nEógain
themselves, in which Máel Fithrich fell; and the battle of Mitaine'.³⁵⁶*

Mael Fithrich here appears to be the son of the prominent Cenél nEógain claimant to the office of High King, Áed Uaridnach (also known as Áed Allán).³⁵⁷ This skirmish amongst the Cenél nEógain would have helped to solidify Domnall's position however, as it rid him of a possible claimant to the High-kingship in Máel Fithrich.³⁵⁸ Although there is no supplementary information provided in the annals about the battle of Mitaine, one may assume, given the fact it follows so closely after the battle of Leitheirbe, that it was a secondary skirmish fought amongst the Cenél nEógain.

The second half of the seventh century in the annals is different from the earlier period, not least because the power seems to have shifted from the Northern Uí Néill to the Síl nÁedo Sláine after the death of Domnall mac Áedo. Warfare and feuding seem to have cooled somewhat among the Southern Uí Néill, and references to the Northern Uí Néill septs are not particularly common during this period, suggesting a relatively more stable period for them

³⁵⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 116-117.

³⁵⁷ O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 134.

³⁵⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 495. Argues that some members of the Cenél nEógain would have fought with Congal Cáech.

than what the Southern Uí Néill septs were facing. It appears, however, that the Síl nÁedo Sláine were in the ascendancy, as references to victories of the Clann Cholmáin do not frequently occur in this period, and this may be attributed to the success of Diarmait mac Áedo Sláine, who seems to have built on the powerbase his father had established and pushed on to make his sept a real political force in the South of Ireland. Both Diarmait and his brother Blathmac are among those listed as successors to the previous king of the Uí Néill in AU 643 AD.³⁵⁹

*Hic dubitatur quis regnavit post Domhnall. Dicunt alii historiographi regnasse .iiii. reges .i. Cellach ocus Conall C[a]el ocus duo filii Aedho Slane mc Diarmada mc Fergusa Cerrbheoil mc Conaill Cremthainde mc Neill Naoighiallaig, .i. Diarmait ocus Blathmac, per commixta regna / ‘Here it is uncertain who ruled after Domnall. Some historiographers state that four kings i.e. Cellach, Conall Cáel, and two sons of Áed Sláine son of Diarmait son of Fergus Cerrbél son of Conall of Cremthann son of Niall Naígiallach, that is Diarmait and Blathmac, reigned in joint rule’.*³⁶⁰

This supremacy of the Síl nÁedo Sláine among the Southern Uí Néill marks a period of peace for almost twenty years among the Uí Néill septs. The only conflicts concerning the Uí Néill mentioned in the annals during this period are the battle of Carn Conaill in 649 AD, and the battle of Dun Cremthainn in 650 AD, right at the beginning of Diarmait and Blathmac’s joint rule.

³⁵⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 89.

³⁶⁰ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 122-123.

649 AD:

Bellum Cairn Conaill ubi / Guaire fugit, oculus Diarmait uictor erat, mac Aedho Slaine / 'Battle of Carn Conaill in which Guaire took flight and Diarmait son of Áed Sláine was victor'.³⁶¹

650 AD,

Bellum Duin Craumtain in quo cecidit Oengus mac Domnaill. Filii Maele Cobha uictores errant, .i. Ceallach oculus Conal C[a]jel / 'The battle of Dún Cremthainn in which Óengus son of Domnall fell. The victors were the sons of Máel Coba, i.e. Cellach and Cáel'.³⁶²

After this early challenge to the kingship of Síol nÁedo Sláine, affairs between the Uí Néill sept were quiet, with very little reference to large-scale campaigns. One of the few exceptions is the battle of Ogomán in 662 AD:

Bellum Ogomain ubi ceciderunt Conaing m. Congaile oculus Ultan m. Ernaine, rex Ciannachte, oculus Cenn Faeladh m. Gerthide. Blamac m. Aedho uictus est, socius Diarmada / 'Battle of Ogomán in which fell Conaing son of Congal, and Ultán son of Ernaine, king of Ciannachta, and Cenn Fáelad son of Gerthide. Blathmac son of Áed, Diarmait's ally, was defeated'.³⁶³

Even this reference, however, does not seem to imply large-scale disruption. This seems to be a local feud amongst the Ciannachta in which Blathmac, acting as *socius Diarmada*, was defeated. *Socius Diarmada* is a noteworthy term in how it seemingly provides a rare reference

³⁶¹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 124-125.

³⁶² Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 126-127.

³⁶³ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 134-135.

to an alliance. e.g., ‘*socius*, -a (adj. et subst., cl. < associé, uni, allié >) - **1.** associé (le corps avec l’âme)’; or ‘reinforcements’ ‘*socius*, a, um (cf. sequor) **2.** allié: urbs socia LIV. 27, 1, 6, ville alliée; regum sociorum auxilia CIC. Fam. 15, 4, 3, les troupes auxiliaires fournies par les rois alliés.’³⁶⁴ This entry may therefore be read as one of the rare entries that demonstrate the role of alliances within a larger political framework at this time. After this *AU* seldom makes reference to battles or noteworthy wars in the seventh century; the only instances where the Uí Néill figure are in obituaries for certain members, e.g. 663 AD

*Iugulatio ii. filiorum Domnaill filii Aedho .i. Conall ocus Colgu / ‘The killing of the two sons of Domnall son of Áed, i.e. Conall and Colgu’.*³⁶⁵

All in all, the reign of Diarmait and Blathmac seems to be marred by open conflict only briefly, at the beginning and once more, very briefly, in the middle of their reign. It seems fair to state that the dual kingship of the Síl nÁedo Sláine was managing to maintain some level of stability amongst the Uí Néill septs who had been feuding earlier in the century.

There appears, in fact, to be much more peace among the Uí Néill septs in the second half of the seventh century than may be observed at almost any prior period, or indeed afterwards. This peace is ultimately disrupted by a plague named *Buide Chonaill* that resulted in a “great mortality” of individuals. 665 AD:

Mortalitas magna, Diarmait mac Aedo Slane ocus Blaimac ocus Mael Bresail filii Maele Duin mortui sunt .i. don bhuide Chonaill / ‘The great mortality.

³⁶⁴ Blaise, *Dictionnaire Latin-Français* & Gaffiot, *Dictionnaire Latin-Français*.

³⁶⁵ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 134-135.

Diarmait son of Áed Sláine and Blamac and Máel Bresail sons of Máel Dúin died i.e. of the buide Chonaill'.³⁶⁶

The death of Diarmait (and allegedly also of Blathmac) from the *buide chonaill* created a power-vacuum in early medieval Ireland. At some point after his father's death, Sechnusach, son of Blathmac, seized the kingship of Tara, but was killed at the beginning of winter in 671 AD:

*Iugulatio Sechnusaigh filii Blaimic regis Temoirie initio hiemis, Dub Duin rex geniris Coirpri iugulauit illum / 'The killing of Sechnusach, son of Blamac, king of Temair, at the beginning of winter; Dub Dúin, king of Cenél Cairpri, killed him.'*³⁶⁷

As discussed earlier, the use of the word *iugulatio*, as well as the circumstances of being killed in winter, when he was presumably not on campaign, would imply that Sechnusach was assassinated by Dub Dúin, possibly in order to weaken the Síl nÁedo Sláine and provide him the opportunity to promote his own claim to Tara as king of the Cenél Cairprí. Shortly after Sechnusach's assassination, his brother, Cenn Fáelad, ascended to the throne:

*Cenn Faeladh mac Blaithmaic regnare incipit / 'Cenn Faelad son of Blamac begins to reign.'*³⁶⁸

³⁶⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 136-137.

³⁶⁷ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 140-141.

³⁶⁸ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 140-141.

Open warfare finally erupts again in 675 AD, when a succession battle was fought between Cenn Fáelad and Fínechta mac Dúnnchad, his cousin. Fínechta was victorious and began to reign. 675 AD:

Bellum Cind / Faeladh filii Blathmaic filii Aedho Slane in quo Cind Faeladh interfectus est. Finechta mac Dunchada uictor erat : Finachta regnare incipit, scilicet Finachta Fleadhach mc Duncadha mc Aedha Slaine / ‘The battle of Cenn Fáelad son of Blathmac son of Áed Sláine, in which Cenn Faelad was slain. Fínechta son of Dúnnchad was victor : Fínechta begins to reign i.e Fínechta the festive son of Dúnnchad son of Aed Sláine.’³⁶⁹

Fínechta’s reign doesn’t see much discord within the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework, as sept violence is not really mentioned in this period, either. Instead, Fínechta embarked on campaigns that, similar to Domnall’s devastation of the Laigin, to be discussed shortly, may well have been intended to send a message about his authority and the military might he wielded.³⁷⁰ After assuming the kingship there is a fascinating entry which states that 676 AD:

*Distructio Ailche Fringrenn la Finechtae / ‘Destruction of Ailech Fringrenn by Fínechta’.*³⁷¹

Initially, one is inclined to jump straight to assuming the Aileach mentioned here is the famous *Grianán Ailigh* in Inishowen that was the centre of Cenél nEógain power. For the sake of argument, however, it ought to be considered that Ailech Fringrenn could refer to a different

³⁶⁹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 142-143.

³⁷⁰ Domnall’s devastation of the Laigin will be discussed under the Sub-Heading *External Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century*. See fn. 404.

³⁷¹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 142-143.

Aileach. In a study of Grianán Ailigh by Brian Lacey, attention was drawn to the nearby townlands named Elaghbeg and Elaghmore, now mainly in Co. Derry, that may have been the original Aileach.³⁷² It is possible that fortifications in this townland were destroyed by Fínnechta at the start of his reign, rather than the towering fortress overlooking Inishowen. Whatever the case, however, it seems undeniable at least that *Ailche Fringrenn* refers to a location within the territory of the Northern Uí Néill.

This entry is significant to the thesis in two ways; firstly, it suggests that, after Fínnechta began his reign, he needed to demonstrate power, just like Domnall did in the early seventh century, in order to affirm his rule. The fact that he conducted an aggressive military operation against the Northern Uí Néill, likely the Cenél nEógain, would imply that he faced opposition from that sept in the North, and by destroying their home gained their submission.³⁷³ Indeed, after the destruction of Aileach Fringrenn, Fínnechta's reign was quiet, as far as sept conflict in early medieval Ireland is concerned. It was not enough to assume the kingship and defeat claimants to your throne; in order to assume the kingship of the Dynastic Framework, examples had to be made.

After destroying Aileach Fringrenn, and achieving the submission of the Northern Uí Néill for his claim to the kingship of Tara, Fínnechta was involved in a battle with the Laigin near Loch Gabor in which he was victorious. *AU 677 AD*:

³⁷² Lacey, 'The Grianán of Aileach: A Note on its Identification', 145.

³⁷³ I suspect this entry concerns the Cenél nEógain as Aileach is traditionally associated with them. However, due to the fact that control of Aileach may have flipped depending on the relative power of the Cenél Conaill and Cenél nEógain at this stage it should also be made clear that *Ailche Fringrenn* could refer to the Cenél Conaill as well. See, however, Edel Bhreathnach, '*Níell cáich úa Néill nasctar géill: The political context of BCC*', in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin 2005) 60.

Bellum inter Finsnehta ocus Lagenos in loco proximo Locho Gabar in quo Finsnehta uictor erat / 'A battle between Fínnechta and the Laigin in a place near Loch Gabor, in which Fínnechta was victor'.³⁷⁴

This entry portrays the Uí Néill and the Laigin as remaining in direct opposition to one another. Given Fínnechta's position as a king of the Southern Uí Néill, it is not outlandish to assume that this battle was one which he undertook to maintain power in his local region. That being said, it does seem to echo Domnall's devastation of the Laigin after his assumption of power, and raises the question about whether Fínnechta was defending his territory or asserting his dominance.³⁷⁵

The single most important entry during Fínnechta's reign, however, concerns the raid on Mag Breg undertaken by the Saxons. *AU* 685 AD

Saxones Campum Bregh uastant ocus aeclesias plurimas in mense Iuni / 'The Saxons lay waste Mag Breg and many churches in the month of June.'³⁷⁶

This entry is informative not just about the scope of politics in Britain and Ireland, but also how the language may inform a historian as to the manner in which identity politics was interpreted by the annals.³⁷⁷ Northumberland played a major role in the politics of Ireland at the close of the seventh century, having laid waste the most noteworthy political power on the island. It is odd that the term *Saxones* is used in order to describe who carried out the attack.

³⁷⁴ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 144-5.

³⁷⁵ Domnall's devastation of the Laigin will be discussed shortly under the Sub-Heading *External Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century*. See fn. 404.

³⁷⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 148-149.

³⁷⁷ Doherty, "Cult of St Patrick", 56. See also, Tírechán, *Tírechani Collectanea de Sancto Patricio* 52, in Ludwig Bieler (ed. & transl.), *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin 1979) 165. Wherein there is a note concerning Patrick's petition that 'no foreign tribes' should rule over us. Bieler translates *gentes* as tribes, I believe 'peoples' more accurate terminology.

The use of *Saxones*, as opposed to *Angli*, is particularly notable due to the fact that Bede elaborated upon the ‘Anglian’ character of Northumbria in order to develop an English identity.³⁷⁸ It has been hypothesised that the usage of *Angli* became a catch-all term for all of the kingdoms established by ‘Germanic’ settlers as a result of Gregory the Great’s use of the word and the esteem in which he was held.³⁷⁹ The high esteem in which Gregory was held by Bede in particular led to the popularisation of the term *Angli/Anglorum*, etc., amongst the Anglo-Saxons of early medieval Britain. Indeed that same scholarship has also noted that the Irish annals and the *Annales Cambriae* almost invariably use the term ‘Saxon’, making no distinction between the different population groups of early medieval England.³⁸⁰

The influence of Irish churches in England at the time, especially in Northumbria, where Adomnán, the abbot of Iona, was intimately acquainted with the king, would heavily suggest that information about the various competing Saxon kingdoms was not difficult to obtain.³⁸¹ Irish ignorance of Angle/Saxon politics is made even more unlikely, given the fact that the annals were initially compiled in Iona, before at some stage being relocated to somewhere on the island of Ireland.³⁸² Iona’s heavy involvement with the politics of Northumbria would

³⁷⁸ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, II (1), in A. M. Sellar (ed. & transl.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of England: A Revised Translation with Introduction, Life, and Notes* (Oxford 1907).

³⁷⁹ Michael Richter, ‘Bede’s *Angli*: Angles or English?’, *Peritia* 3 (1984) 99-114: 105.

³⁸⁰ Richter, ‘Bede’s *Angli*’, 107. Richter’s explanation for the reason the Irish annals and textual sources would refer to the peoples living in England at this time as *Saxones* is less than satisfactory. It is noted from 700 AD onward the Irish have ‘diminishing involvement’ in the affairs of their neighbouring island. While the adoption of the Roman dating of Easter does lead to a weaker position for Iona, it is reckless to assume the island of Ireland would be ignorant of the social developments of their nearest neighbour. As for why *Angli* eventually wins out Richter mentions that the ‘Celtic peoples’ never abandoned their more archaic terminology of ‘Saxon’ due to the fact that Bede’s works ‘did not make an impact on the Irish or Welsh comparable to the one they made on the English and continentals’. This especially leaves a lot to be desired, given the fact that it requires believing that the Welsh, who shared the same island with the English, were less aware of correct terminology than continental sources. While it seems plausible that Bede’s huge scholarly influence assisted in popularising the term *Angli/Anglorum* in place of *Saxon/Saxonum*, neither explanation is sufficient to answer why the Irish annals persist with the terms *Saxon/Saxones/Saxonum*.

³⁸¹ G. T. Dempsey, ‘Aldhelm of Malmesbury and the Irish’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* 99.C (1999) 1-22. Caitlin Corning, *The Celtic and Roman traditions: conflict and consensus in the early medieval Church* (Basingstoke 2006). Colin A. Ireland, ‘Where was king Aldfrith of Northumbria educated? An Exploration of Seventh-Century Insular Learning’, *Traditio* 70 (2015) 29-73. Barbara Yorke, ‘Adomnán at the Court of King Aldfrith’, in Jonathan M. Wooding (ed.), *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker* (Dublin 2010) 36-50.

³⁸² Evans, *Present and Past*, 17-44.

indicate that the term *Saxones* was a catch-all term, rather than finding some manner to differentiate between the various Saxon, Angle and Jute kingdoms. With regards to Irish politics the annals make painstaking efforts to delineate not just between larger Dynastic Frameworks, but also as we have seen, between smaller political entities within frameworks. The use of a more generalised term for Northumbria may therefore be taken as indicative that the Irish annals were principally concerned with the affairs of the Irish speaking world and that news from neighbouring regions would only be preserved in brief, even if it involved the vested interests of numerous Irish parties.

With regards to the raid itself, Mag Breg was an important stronghold of the Uí Néill, right in their heartland in Míde. Mag Breg was not only in the heartland of the Uí Néill but was also the homeland of the Síl nÁedo Sláine, the sept that held power at the time of the raid.³⁸³ It may be reasonably inferred that the *Saxones* who took part in this raid understood that laying waste to Mag Breg was a strike at the strongest power among the Irish.³⁸⁴ There is evidence that the raid took place due to internal politics among the kingdom of Northumbria. It was common practice for Saxon nobles to flee into exile in the onset of a new regime, and Aldfrith, the half-brother of the then king of Northumbria, Ecgfrith, appears to have been in exile among the Irish during this period.³⁸⁵ Ecgfrith's raid on Brega may have been borne out of a desire to capture his Irish-speaking half-brother and claimant to the throne, and to block any aid the Uí Néill may have offered the Picts at the battle of Nechtansmere, which took place in the following year.³⁸⁶ This argument, however, has some issues of its own in that it doesn't explain why the Northumbrians would be led to believe Fínnechta and the Síl nÁedo Sláine would

³⁸³ Charles-Edwards, 'The Uí Néill', 396-418. Catherine Swift, 'The early history of Knowth', in F.J. Byrne and George Eogan (eds), *Excavations at Knowth at Knowth Vol. 4* (Dublin 2008) 5-53. Gleeson, 'Luigne Breg', 65-99.

³⁸⁴ Northumbria in particular had a strong connection to the Irish world, we can therefore expect them to have been at least somewhat knowledgeable on Irish politics.

³⁸⁵ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, 'The Kings Depart: The Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon Royal Exile in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries', *Quiggin Pamphlets on the Sources of Gaelic History* 8 (2007) 18.

³⁸⁶ James Fraser, *The Pictish conquest. The battle of Dunnichen 685 & the birth of Scotland* (Stroud 2000) 44-45.

assist the Picts. Nevertheless, the fact that there was an Irish-speaking heir to the kingdom of Northumbria, and that Ecgfrith was heirless, may have provided all the requisite incentive for Ecgfrith to attack Fínnechta, in order to stem possible Irish influence upon the kingdom. Furthermore, while it is indeed more likely that Aldfrith would have sought security amongst his relatives in the Northern Uí Néill septs, due to Fínnechta's prominence in Irish politics, it is possible Aldfrith sought the protection of the Southern Uí Néill, who were more powerful at the time.

The raid in 685 AD took place twenty one years after the Synod of Whitby, which marked the height of the Easter Controversy among the churches in the North of Britain. The dating of Easter in the Northern half of Britain and Ireland was contentious due to the churches that owed loyalty to Iona at the time following a different set of Easter tables than the rest of the churches in Ireland & Britain.³⁸⁷ This controversy came to a head in Northumberland, where churches loyal to Iona had been observing the Irish dating of Easter and where clergymen more loyal to Rome sought to impose the new dating system. Eventually, the papal system of dating Easter would succeed and Iona would fall into line. The laying waste to Mag Breg may have been a result of continuing tensions concerning Irish influence in Northumbria in a period when the

³⁸⁷ There is a huge amount of literature concerning the 'Easter Controversy' for computus and dating. See, Reginald L. Poole, 'The earliest use of the Easter cycle of Dionysius', *EHR* 33 (1918) 56–62, 210–13; repr. Reginald L. Poole, *Studies in chronology and history* (Oxford 1934) 28–37. Charles W. Jones, 'The Victorian and Dionysiac Paschal Tables in the West', *Speculum* 9 (1934) 408–21; repr. Jones, Bede, the schools and the computes Variorum Collected Studies Series CS 436 (Aldershot 1994). D. J. O'Connell, 'Easter cycles in the early Irish Church', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries Ireland* 66 (1936) 67–106. Kenneth Harrison, 'Easter cycles and the equinox in the British Isles', *Anglo-Saxon England* 7 (1978) 1–8. Kenneth Harrison, 'Episodes in the history of Easter cycles in Ireland', in Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamond McKitterick & David Dumville (eds), *Ireland in early mediaeval Europe: studies in memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge 1982) 307–19. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*. James Campbell, 'The Debt of the English church to Ireland', in Ní Chatháin and Richter, *ibid*, 332–46. McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*. Brian Lacey, *Colum Cille and the Columban Tradition* (Dublin 1997). Michael Richter, *Ireland and her neighbours in the seventh century* (Dublin 1999) 89–108. Pádraig Ó Néill, 'Romani influences on seventh-century Hiberno-Latin literature', in Ní Chatháin and Richter, *ibid*, 280–90. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 293–326. Masako Ohashi, 'The Easter tables of Victorius of Aquitaine in early medieval England', in Immo Warntjes & Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (eds), *The Easter controversy of late antiquity and the early middle ages. Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on the Science of Computus in Ireland and Europe, Galway, 18–20 July, 2008* (Turnhout 2011) 137–49. E.T. Daley, 'To choose one Easter from three: Oswiu's decision and the Northumbrian Synod of AD 664', *Peritia* 26 (2015) 47–64. Gilbert Markus, 'Adomnán, two saints and the paschal controversy', *The Innes Review* 68.1 (2017) 1–18.

kingdom was experiencing changes within its ecclesiastical structure.³⁸⁸ Furthermore, while this is speculative, it is worth noting the entry from 687 AD that occurs in the immediate aftermath of the raid. *AU 687 AD-Adomnanus captiuos reduxit ad Hiberniam* / ‘Adamnán brought back 60 [former] captives to Ireland.’³⁸⁹ This entry is almost certainly related to the raid on Mag Breg, given both how closely after the raid it follows and due to the fact that Adamnán was an ecclesiastic with close ties to the Uí Néill and to Northumbria.³⁹⁰ It makes sense that he would be called upon to act as negotiator for the release of important hostages. This entry may, then, be taken to further inform us that, either during the laying waste of Mag Breg in 685 AD, or in other less noteworthy skirmishes with the *Saxones*, important individuals were taken hostage by the *Saxones*. The annals do not provide much evidence for other skirmishes between the Irish and the *Saxones*, however, this implies that the hostage exchange

³⁸⁸ For analyses of the political aspect of the ‘Easter Controversy’ see, Kathleen Hughes, ‘The Celtic Church and the Papacy’, in C. H. Lawrence (ed.), *The English Church and the Papacy in the Middle Ages* (London 1965), 1-28. Eric John, ‘Social and political problems of the early English Church’, in Joan Thirsk (ed), *Land, Church and people: essays presented to H. P. R. Finberg* (Reading 1970) 39–63: 42–50. Gerald Bonner, ‘Ireland and Rome: the double inheritance of Christian Northumbria’, in Margot H. King & Wesley M. Stevens (eds), *Saints, scholars, and heroes: studies in medieval culture in honour of Charles W. Jones* (Collegeville 1979) 101–16. Clare Stancliffe, ‘Kings and Conversions: Some parallels between the roman missions to England and Patrick’s to Ireland’, *Fruhmittelalterliche studien* 14 (1980) 59-94. Richard Abels, ‘The Council of Whitby: a study in early Anglo-Saxon politics’, *Journal of British Studies* 23.1 (1983) 1–25. Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (New York 1966) 103-07. Donald A. Bullough, ‘The missions to the English and Picts and their heritage (to c. 800)’, in Heinz Löwe (ed), *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter* (Stuttgart 1982) 80–98. Edward James, ‘Bede and the tonsure question’ *Peritia* 3 (1984) 85-98. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, ‘“New Heresy for Old”: Pelagianism in Ireland and the papal letter of 640’, *Speculum* 60/3 (1985) 505–16; repr. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Irish history and chronology*, 87–98. Maura Walsh, ‘Some remarks on Cummian’s paschal letter and the commentary on Mark ascribed to Cummian’, in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds), *Ireland and Christendom: the Bible and the missions* (Stuttgart 1987) 216-29. Michael Richter, ‘Practical Aspects of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons’, in Ní Chatháin and Richter, *ibid*, 362-76. Clare Stancliffe, ‘The British Church and the mission of Augustine’, in *St Augustine and the Conversion of England* (Thrupp 1999) 107–51. Richard Sharpe, ‘Armagh and Rome in the seventh century’, in Próinséas Ní Chatháin & Michael Richter (eds), *Ireland and Europe in the early middle ages: texts and transmission* (Dublin 2002) 58-72. Arthur G. Holder, ‘Whitby and all that: the search for Anglican origins’, *Anglican Theological Review* 85 (2003) 231–52. John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon society* (Oxford 2005). Clare Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons*, Whithorn Lecture 14 (2005) 7–8. N. J. Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede: the Ecclesiastical History in context* (London 2006) 46. Benedicta Ward, *A true Easter: the Synod of Whitby 664 AD* (Oxford 2007). Leofranc Holford-Strevens, ‘Marital discord in Northumbria: Lent and Easter, his and hers’, in Immo Warntjes & Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (eds), *Computus and its cultural context in the Latin West, ad 300–1200. Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on the Science of Computus in Ireland and Europe, Galway, 14–16 July, 2006* (Turnhout 2010) 143–58. Clare Stancliffe, ‘‘Charity with Peace’’: Adomnán and the Easter question’, in Jonathan M. Wooding (ed.) *Adomnán of Iona Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker* (Dublin 2010) 51-68. David Woods, ‘Adomnán, Plague and the Easter Controversy’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 40 (2012) 1-13. Clare Stancliffe, ‘The Irish Tradition in Northumbria after the Synod of Whitby’, in Richard Gameson, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: New Perspectives* (Boston 2017) 19-42.

³⁸⁹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 150-151.

³⁹⁰ Yorke, *ibid*, 36-50.

Adamnán oversaw was connected to the *Saxones* raid on Mag Breg. Their importance is indicated by the fact that the most influential clergyman in Britain or Ireland at that time was called upon to negotiate their release.

Shortly afterwards *AU* 688 AD states that *Finsnechta clericatum suscepit* / 'Fínnechta assumed clerical life'.³⁹¹ This was not for long, however, as it is in the following year that *AU* notes, 689 AD *Finsnechta reuertitur ad regnum* / 'Fínnechta returns to the kingship'.³⁹² This entry details a sudden assumption and then rejection of clerical life for Fínnechta. There is no direct information provided about why this occurred, however this thesis would suggest it was related to the Raid on Mag Breg three years earlier. Fínnechta's assumption of clerical life may have been part of a deal struck with Adomnán, lip-service adoption of clerical vows as a means of thanking the abbot of Iona would explain why Fínnechta only remained in the clerical life for a year and why he was able to reassume the kingship so easily afterwards. If it was only pageantry to thank Adomnán we may assume that Fínnechta 'assumed the clerical life', but did not relinquish a great deal of his personal political power in doing so. There is unfortunately no hard evidence explaining why Fínnechta assumed the clerical life and rejected it so quickly, and more puzzlingly, found no difficulty in assuming his kingship again after leaving it. Whatever caused Fínnechta to temporarily step down from kingship, one thing is certain, the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework was heavily affected by the demonstration of Saxon military strength in the raid on Mag Breg.

It seems that while the seventh century was hectic and bloody, the Uí Néill were fairly stable when all things are considered. Warfare between septs was limited to the earlier half of the century, and although the reigns of Domnall and Fínnechta initially needed to be bookmarked with a handful of battles to reassert dominance and ensure loyalty, their status as the most

³⁹¹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 150-151.

³⁹² Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 152-153.

powerful military force among the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework was marked by long periods of relative stability. Internecine conflict was far from rare, but it by no means dominated the politics of the day; the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework for most of the seventh century was defined by interactions with other large political frameworks.

The manner in which these powers were identified and related through the annals has already been mentioned in brief. The focus by the compilers of the annals on larger identity and grouping people together is indicative of how politics was perceived to operate beyond the immediate politics of sept/family loyalty. Throughout the seventh century there is a consistent delineation between different groups that helps to coalesce these group identities in the historical record. The Laigin, e.g., are generally singled out in opposition to the Uí Néill; that is to say that they are seen and treated as a separate group identity that operated with a similar level of political cohesion. Although the annalists may not have been responsible for the composition and codification of these larger Dynastic Frameworks and group identities, they most definitely were accustomed to differentiating between political entities.

External Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Larger Dynastic Narratives)

It is now necessary to examine the external politics of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. The following section will be more focused on entries that relate information regarding the politics of the Dynastic Framework at large. During this early half of the seventh century the most prominent figure politically seems to have been Domnall mac Áedo of the Cenél Conaill, whom *AU* notes in 628 AD-

Uastatio Lagen la Domnal : Domnal mac Aedha mac Ainmirēch regnare incipit
/ ‘The devastation of Laigin by Domnall : Domnall son of Áed son of Ainmire
begins to reign.’³⁹³

The next reference that can be found to Domnall mac Áedo occurs in *AU* 642 AD-

Mors Domnaill mac Aedo regis Hibernie in fine Ianuari. / ‘Death of Domnall
son of Áed, king of Ireland, at the end of January.’³⁹⁴

This extract is unusually specific in that it singles out the end of January for the death of Domnall, as opposed to simply naming the month, as is much more frequently the case. This entry verifies that in both *Deus a quo facta fuit* and *AU*, Domnall was considered to be a king of Ireland.³⁹⁵

It would be more than fair to question at this time why the annals do not make reference to a king of Ireland in the duration of his fourteen-year reign. Obviously, some considerations must be made regarding the validity of the statement that he was, in fact, king of Ireland and what was entailed by this title at the time. It seems likely, however, that the entry in 628 AD that notes the beginning of his reign refers to his assumption of the kingship of Ireland, as opposed to assuming kingship over a sept. This is likely connected with his *Uastatio Lagen* that forms the earlier segment of the 628 AD annalistic entry. Domnall was a member of the Cenél Conaill. Almost the entire breadth of the island lay between Domnall’s lands and those

³⁹³ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of ulster*, 114-115. As will be discussed presently, it may be the case that *Domnal mac Aedha mac Ainmirech regnare incipit*, here refers to Domnall becoming king of Ireland/Tara/The Uí Néill, rather than noting the beginning of his time as ruler of his sept. The *uastatio* of the Laigin by Domnall was likely a show of force that allowed him to rise to a higher kingship.

³⁹⁴ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of ulster*, 122-123.

³⁹⁵ Strecker, *Rythmi computistici*, 695-97: *Versus de annis a principio*. (For more information on the dating of the poem see Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Irish History and Chronology*, 80).

of the Laigin, which raises questions about why he engaged with them in battle. One benefit of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework is that it allowed for the fashioning of alliances.³⁹⁶ Evidence for the fashioning of such alliances seems few and far between, however, possibly because they were commonplace but temporary and circumstantial, and so their occurrence is not as noteworthy as incidents of king-/kin-slaying. This reference to Domnall mac Áedo devastating the Laigin may be an example of a circumstantial alliance predicated on the common Dynastic Framework of the Uí Néill. That Domnall could more easily make his case for being pre-eminent among the Uí Néill if he was seen as their protector, hence military aid was provided as a result of politicking within the larger framework. Further elaboration may not have been necessary by the annalist, for whom it was plain that Domnall's raid against the Laigin, so far from his centre of power, was fuelled by his position within the framework, and his desire to rise above his peers. By providing protection for his weaker Southern counterparts, Domnall would have cemented himself as superior, and thus, pre-eminent amongst the Uí Néill.

The years immediately prior to Domnall's appearance paint the picture of a period of intense internal struggle for the Uí Néill. *AU* reports a victory over the Laigin in 605 AD at the battle of Slebe:

Bellum Slaebhre in quo uictus est Brandubh mac Eathach. Nepotes Neill uictores erant, .i. Aed Uaredac in quo tempore regnavit./ 'The battle of Slaebre in which Brandub son of Eochu was vanquished. The Uí Néill were the victors, i.e. Áed Uairidnach, who reigned at that time.'³⁹⁷

³⁹⁶ See fn. 363 for references to *Socius Diarmada*. See also the later Sub-Heading; *The Benefits of the Dynastic Framework for Powerful Septs*.

³⁹⁷ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 102-103.

This entry is worth attention as it refers to *Nepotes Neill*, giving the first hint that the wider Dynastic Framework could be interpreted as a singular entity with its own goals. The battle of Slebre was fought against the king of the Laigin, Brandub mac Eochach [.i. son of Echu], this further indicates tension between the Uí Néill and the Laigin during the early decades of the seventh century. The larger Uí Néill Dynastic Framework seems to be quite unstable at this time, given the death of two kings of the Uí Néill in AU 612 AD:

Mors Aedho Alddain filii Domnaill, regis Temro : Bellum Odbae re nOengus mac Colmain in quo cecidit Conall Laegh Bregh filius Aedho Slane / 'Death of Aed Allán son of Domnall, King of Temair : The battle of Odba, [won] by Aengus son of Colmán, in which fell Conall Laeg Breg son of Áed Sláine'.³⁹⁸

Furthermore, in 621 AD AU notes:

Iugulatio Aengusa mac Colmain Maghni .i. regis nepotum Neill / The killing of Aengus son of Colmán Mór, i.e., king of the Uí Néill.³⁹⁹

These three entries are important, as when they are taken together they present the concept of unity through the larger Dynastic Framework. The Uí Néill are responsible for the defeat of Brandub mac Eochach at Slebre, an entry that stylistically is a significant departure from the majority in AU, as it does not identify a victorious commander. Instead it insinuates that it was some form of hodge-podge grouping of *Nepotes Neill* that defeated him. This sense of unity among the septs of the Uí Néill, (or at least among a selection of them) may be seen emphasised

³⁹⁸ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 106-107.

³⁹⁹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 110-111.

in the title given to Aengus mac Colmáin Móir, *Regis Nepotum Niall*/ ‘The ‘King of the Descendants of Niall’’. These events take place in a shadowy period when Ireland was just entering historicity; we can be fairly certain that, although they display an Uí Néill bias, they do relate genuine events that took place.⁴⁰⁰ What is of particular interest to the historian is whether the language used, which implies an awareness of the larger Dynastic Framework, was a product of the initial composition, or whether it was inserted into the composition after more literature had developed the political benefits of the Dynastic Framework. It would be significant for the historiography of the island if the Uí Néill in the early seventh century indeed perceived and put faith in a political framework larger than their immediate sept. Such a development would mean that the Uí Néill of this period were more unified in their political desires than may previously have been believed, given the internecine warfare between septs. The entry regarding Aengus mac Colmáin Móir appears to have been written in the main hand of *AU*, and that would seem to suggest that it was an entry that **H** had intended on including from the beginning. It seems likely then that *Regis Nepotum Niall* is a genuine inclusion, and that the Uí Néill may have functioned as an organised political group from an early stage.⁴⁰¹

This thesis would contend that, while singular references to the larger Dynastic Framework in the annals may be attributed to a creative copy or a newer interpretation of a previous manuscript, seeing many references to group identity in quick succession and with similar intention indicates that these references may have been genuine, or at the very least that the scribe responsible for them was also responsible for a large number of entries. As a result, although the title applied to Aengus mac Colmáin Móir may have been a by-product of contemporary literature informing how he styled himself as a ruler, the use of *Nepotes Neill*

⁴⁰⁰ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 118. Smyth, ‘The Earliest Annals’, 4-18. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 443-44. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*, 9, 159-163. Evans, *Present and Past*, 171-88.

⁴⁰¹ The fact it was included in the main text and not as a gloss would suggest that **H** was using terminology present in the exemplar. Evans, *Present and Past*. Has outlined the textual transmission of *AU* and the various hands that composed it.

uictores erant in reference to battle with the Laigin in 605 AD implies an understanding of a larger political entity encompassing each sept. This is supported by the reference in 626 AD to *Obsesio Boilg Luatha a nepotibus Neill* / ‘The besieging of [Crunnmael] ‘Sack of Ashes’ by the Uí Néill’. The devastation of the Laigin by Domnall mac Áedo in 628 AD, mentioned earlier, demonstrates that, at the time of composition, the political framework of the Uí Néill was seen as clear and distinct.

The Uí Néill also had developed a specific relationship with the Laigin, that of a rival or an enemy. Battles occur frequently in the annals between the Uí Néill and the Laigin, and in nearly every instance they refer to the individuals involved and who died.⁴⁰² The information available between 605 AD at the battle of Slebre and culminating in 628 AD with the devastation of the Laigin by Domnall mac Áedo — an individual who travelled with his army across the breadth of Ireland to devastate the territory of the Laigin — implies a war waged with the politics of the larger Dynastic Frameworks of the Uí Néill and the Laigin in mind.

Further cementing an awareness of the larger framework is the manner in which Domnall, until his entry into the annals at 628 AD an entirely unknown figure, begins to reign over the Uí Néill after devastating the Laigin. As mentioned earlier, there is little evidence in the annals of alliances made predicated upon the Dynastic Frameworks. This thesis would suggest that the reason this period in the early seventh century is so full of references to larger Dynastic Frameworks and group identity is down to such alliances, or if not alliances, military campaigns made with the intention of securing loyalty from weaker septs. Domnall’s military adventure into the territory of the Laigin, and the subsequent devastation that occurred, may be interpreted as Domnall seeking to gain the loyalty and support of the feuding Southern Uí Néill for his bid to kingship. This campaign far from his homeland may also be a means by which

⁴⁰² See Sub-Heading; *The Northern & Southern Uí Néill*.

Domnall could demonstrate his *febas* in relation to succeeding to the kingship of Ireland.⁴⁰³

The entire entry for 628 AD reads:

*Bellum Boilgg Luatho in quo Faelan filius Colmain, rex Laegen, uictor erat :
Bellum Both in quo Suibne Menn mc Fiachna uictor erat, oculus Domnall mc
Aedho fugit : Occissio Suibne Menn mc Fiachna Suibne Menn ri Erenn, mc Fiachna
mc Feradhaigh mc Muiredhaigh mc Eoghain i Taerr Breni .i. la Conghal Caech mc
Sgannlain : Uastatio Lagen la Domnal; : Domnal mc Aedha mc Ainmir̄ech regnare
incipit / ‘The battle of Bolg Luatha, in which Fáelán son of Colmán, king of
Laigin, was victor : The battle of Both, in which Suibne Menn son of Fiachna
was victor, and Domnall son of Aed took flight : The slaying of Suibne Menn
the king of Ireland, Suibne Menn son of Fiachna son of Feradach son of
Muiredach son of Éogán in Taerr Bréni, i.e. by Congal Caech son of Scanlán :
The devastation of Laigin by Domnall : Domnall son of Aed son of Ainmire begins
to reign.’⁴⁰⁴*

The battle of Bolg Luatha, won by the King of Leinster, implies rather heavily a relatively weakened position of the Southern Uí Néill at this stage, due perhaps to their frenetic pace of kinslaying.⁴⁰⁵ It is therefore not difficult to read Domnall’s military campaign against the Laigin as one carried out with the intention of neutering the possible threat the Laigin showed to the Southern Uí Néill, in return for the political support of his Southern kinsmen. Such an acknowledgement of Domnall’s aid in return for political backing within the Dynastic Framework would imply both a definitive sense of unity within the framework, and displays

⁴⁰³ The role of *Febas* will be discussed further in Chapter 7: *Kinship and Dynastic Frameworks as Expressions of Political Alignment*.

⁴⁰⁴ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 114-115.

⁴⁰⁵ See fn. 337-44.

tangible benefits for those that operated within it. While there is no documentation that Domnall's military campaign against the Laigin was the product of an alliance between Uí Néill septs, it is difficult to interpret it as anything other than a political move undertaken in order to bolster his standing within the Dynastic Framework. It may simply have been opportune that Domnall engaged in *Uastatio Lagen* in that particular year, but given the close association of his devastation of their territory and his assumption to kingship, it is difficult to see these as two unrelated events. This is especially the case when we consider Fínnechta's campaigns against the Laigin early in his rule, which in its own way mirrors the political movements of Domnall prior to assuming the kingship.⁴⁰⁶

Conclusion

In this chapter we have examined the politics of the Uí Néill during the seventh century in *AU* and *AI* in great detail. What can be observed about the seventh century is that, by that early stage in Irish history, the larger Dynastic Framework of the Uí Néill, with septs vying for power within it, had fully emerged. Whatever the structure of the older 'tribal' entities speculated by Byrne was, they had faded and given way to a group of politically potent septs operating together under a supposed common banner derived from an ancient ancestor.⁴⁰⁷ This hierarchy, with septs operating as a means for political mobility within a larger Dynastic Framework, where leadership entailed a degree of authority over the smaller component parts, was definitely in full swing by the early seventh century. It also seems clear that, at this early period, a powerful king was capable of maintaining some degree of peace amongst local political rivals; in times of interregnum, however, it could devolve into a contest of who was most powerful.

⁴⁰⁶ See fn. 371. See also the later Sub-Heading *Muirchertach mac Ercae: A Case Study into Uí Néill Kingship*.

⁴⁰⁷ Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, 71. The concept of archaic 'tribal' entities and newer 'dynastic' entities will be discussed further in Chapter 8: *Kinship and Dynastic Frameworks as Expressions of Political Alignment*.

The seventh century in the Irish annals, as it pertains to the Uí Néill, paints a vivid picture of a Dynastic Framework emerging from the mire of pre-history. We know for a fact that there was no one united kingdom of either the Irish or the Saxons, as we understand it, in the modern sense. Instead, if such a kingdom existed, it was a temporary entity formed as the result of military and economic superiority over countrymen of the same perceived ethnicity.⁴⁰⁸ Consistent references in the various Irish annals to the exploits of the Laigin, Uí Néill, Ulaid, Munstermen, *Leth Cuinn*, Cruithin and the Saxons all imply distinction and separation. This distinction and separation simply cannot come without some degree of conceptualising the existence of politics associated with each group. The Irish annals became involved in codifying the larger political narratives of emerging and already established Dynastic Frameworks. This was something that served to heighten the distinction and differentiation between them. Engaging in relating the politics of these various groups in a manner that drew upon a literary tradition and detailed the differences between them meant the Irish annals became involved not just in relating history, but in their own way were involved in the politics.

The Irish annals are one of the most valuable tools we have to understand, not only the events that occurred in early medieval Ireland, but to interpret the manner in which said events were codified and had political significance attributed to them. The Irish annals create unique, politically significant narratives that operate on a larger scale than was possible with singular works of literature. The Uí Néill, Laigin, Ulaid and other Dynastic Frameworks had their own tradition and political narratives. The presence of a text to compile and record these individual literary narratives in one place, however, and put it into the historical timeline, placed the political narratives of these individual literary sources within a larger historical context.

⁴⁰⁸ This supposed kingdom would therefore bear some passing similarities at least to the concept of *Bretwalda*. See; Eric John, ‘ ‘Orbis Britanniae’ and the Anglo-Saxon Kings’, in *Orbis Britanniae and Other Studies* (Leicester 1966) 20. Patrick Wormald, ‘Bede, the Bretwaldas and the Origins of the Gens Anglorum’, in Patrick Wormald and Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (ed.), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford 1983) 128. Steven Fanning, ‘Bede, Imperium, and the Bretwaldas’, *Speculum* 66.1 (1991) 1-26.

Whether by design or accident, the compilation in a single text of the history of entire Dynastic Frameworks and ‘ancient’ population groups in the Irish annals fundamentally codifies what was written about them and creates a singular large narrative driving home a sense of unity amongst them. A reason the Uí Néill emerged as a functioning political unit, rather than a Síl Diarmado or a Cenél Cearbaill from among the Southern Uí Néill is the fact that the literature produced about them chose to pick Niall as their starting-point.⁴⁰⁹ This literature then reinforced a sense of unity and cohesion amongst them from that commonality, and this unity was then reinforced through the annals. The Southern Uí Néill were, in essence, cut off from the Northern Uí Néill, save by their ancestry, something they shared with the Airgíalla and the Connachta. The fact that they were considered Uí Néill, rather than using *Leth Cuinn* and Conn Cétchathach as a focal point for synthesising a political network of kinship, speaks volumes for the role of literature in coalescing a political entity out of disparate and warring septs. The manner in which literature was absorbed and branded as real history, blending genuine historical blood-feuds and *casus belli* with synthesised mythological history, served to complement pre-existing literature about Dynastic Frameworks and groups in early medieval Ireland. By doing this, there was an extra dimension added to them that caused them to emerge as fully fleshed-out entities with genuine political motivations and benefits entailed in becoming dominant among them. This chapter demonstrates that the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework was politically significant from an early stage, and the previous chapter that the annals had a secondary function as compilations of literature, some of which may have had their origins outside the annalistic tradition. The following chapter will present three sources of political narratives concerning the Uí Néill, as well as the political implications of each text.

⁴⁰⁹ This topic will be discussed further in Sub-Heading; *The Descendants of Conal Cremthainne/Conall Err Breg*.

Chapter 5:

The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks

Introduction

In this chapter we will examine various instances where Irish texts constructed political narratives and attached these narratives to Dynastic Frameworks. By doing this, these texts influenced politics that affected the entire Dynastic Framework. The construction of political narratives was intended to spread a message, either about the prestige associated with a long-dead mythological ancestor, or the political rights and claims that members of a Dynastic Framework may have felt entitled to by virtue of these ancestors. As a result, these political narratives can prove to be incredibly important in the way they influenced politics at the time and in the manner in which they can influence and inform a modern historian's interpretation of the period.⁴¹⁰

Political Narratives is a term that this thesis uses to describe any narrative that is assigned to a larger Dynastic Framework, or to a sept within a Dynastic Framework that can be interpreted as bearing political connotations. We will see many examples of such narratives in this chapter. These narratives that are assigned to Dynastic Frameworks are the principal means through which political discourse seems to take place. Ancestors are seen as allegorical of the political claims of the time, and the construction of narratives can inform us as to how these Dynastic Frameworks were seen to influence politics and to be a vessel for political claims and ambitions. Sometimes these narratives are complicated tales, promoting grand ambitions, e.g.,

⁴¹⁰ For further reading see Ó Corráin, 'Historical need', 141-58.

Echtra Mac nEchach Muigmedóin and the implications that has for Uí Néill supremacy of *Leth Cuinn*, and at other times they are more simple narratives with a straightforward purpose, e.g., Lóegaire's antagonistic outlook regarding the Uí Dúnlainge in Tírechán's *Collectanea*.⁴¹¹ In each instance it will be clear that the Dynastic Framework functions as a medium through which political claims can be expressed. Understanding the construction of these political narratives allows for a better sense of how a Dynastic Framework was constructed and how, even in its construction, it could have an effect on early Irish politics.

The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks:

The “Secular” Examples

Let us examine some of the political narratives that were created and assigned to the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework, and, when possible, the way they develop a partisan stance that may have been intended to court the political loyalty of specific septs. We understand Irish society to have been heavily concerned with lineage and dynasty, as such, tales that assign prominent roles to ancestors can convey complex political ideology in a concise and efficient manner.⁴¹² Most famous is the association of the Uí Néill with the kingship of Tara and how that further developed the legend of Tara as a regnal site for the entirety of Ireland. The antiquity of Tara as a regnal site is not really up for discussion, and it most certainly predates the Uí Néill rise to

⁴¹¹ Whitley Stokes, 'The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedón', *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903) 190-203. Carey, 'Echtra mac nEchach', 203-08. See also; Whitley Stokes, 'The death of Crimthann son of Fidach and the adventures of the sons of Eochaid Mugmedon' *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903) 172-207. For an analysis of the literary trope of the loathly woman see, R.A. Breatnach, 'The Lady and the King: A Theme of Irish Literature', *Studies in Irish Quarterly Review* 42.167 (1953) 321-36. Proinsias MacCana, 'Aspects of the theme of king and goddess in Irish literature', *Etudes Celtique* 7 (1955-56) 76-104 & 8 (1958) 59-65. Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin 1955; repr. Dublin 1979) 334-35. McCone, *Pagan Past*, 107-37. Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, 'Women in early myths and sagas', *The Crane Bag* 4.1 (1980) 12-19. Elva Johnston, 'Transforming women in Irish hagiography', *Peritia* 9 (1995) 197-220. For Lóegaire's antagonistic outlook in the *Collectanea* see Tírechán, *Tirechani Collectanea de sancto Patricio* 12, in Bieler, *The Patrician texts* 132-133. However, this will be discussed in more depth in Ch 6, Sub-Heading *Beyond Secular and Ecclesiastical: Dynastic Politics*.

⁴¹² Ó Corráin, 'Historical need', 144.

power in the fifth/sixth centuries.⁴¹³ The extent to which Tara was a regnal site for all of Ireland, however, is more doubtful, as it may originally have been more regional, something in the vein of Rath Croghan for Connacht, Cashel for Munster and in ancient times Emain Macha for the Ulaid. Complicating matters further is the fact that Tara does not appear to feature in Ptolemy's map of Ireland, which does not bode particularly well for its status as *caput Scottorum*.⁴¹⁴ In the historical period, however, Tara became synonymous with the Uí Néill. The Uí Néill further strengthened Tara's political importance, with literature even going as far as to create pre-historical ancestors for the Uí Néill who supposedly held the kingship of Tara, and who, by virtue of possessing the site, claimed the kingship of Ireland.

The first three texts we shall examine will demonstrate the manner in which a narrative could be crafted and assigned to Dynastic Frameworks, but as they are based in the ancient past of Ireland, and are less Christian in nature, they do not overtly promote the claims of any *paruchia*.⁴¹⁵ Where they possess the most historical value is in what Ó Corráin called, 'the particularities of the narrative'.⁴¹⁶ The inclusion of individuals in *BiS* and *BCC*, two texts that share a literary formula, is the means through which these texts provide historically sensitive information. This is why they are here termed as 'Secular' narratives, not because they are free of ecclesiastical influence, but that influence is not as overt as it is in the works attributed to Armagh and Iona that will be discussed later in this chapter.

⁴¹³ Newman, 'Re-Composing the Archaeological Landscape', 379. See also, Ragnall Ó Floinn, 'Freestone Hill, Co. Kilkenny: a re-assessment', in Alfred Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in Early and Medieval Irish Archaeology, History and Literature in Honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin 2000) 12-29. Denis Casey, 'Review: The Kingship and Landscape of Tara- Edited by Edel Bhreathnach', *Early Medieval Europe* 17 (2009) 344-47.

⁴¹⁴ R. Darcy and William Flynn, 'Ptolemy's map of Ireland: a modern decoding', *Irish Geography* 41.1 (2008) 49-69: 55-64. Outlines the issue with Tara in Ptolemy's map and some of the closest named locations. For further discussion on Ptolemy's map there is a collection of essays in David N. Parsons and Patrick Sims-Williams (eds), *Ptolemy: Towards a Linguistic Atlas of the Earliest Celtic Place-names of Europe* (Aberystwyth 2000).

⁴¹⁵ The definition and discussion of *Paruchia/ae* is far too dense to properly represent here, as nearly every piece written concerning early Irish ecclesiastical politics must, by necessity, grapple with the concept of *paruchia/ae*. The following texts, however, should prove informative; James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the early history of Ireland: an introduction and guide. Volume 1: Ecclesiastical* (New York 1966) 291-92. Sharpe, 'Some problems concerning', 230-70. Colmán Etchingham, 'The Implications of Paruchia', *Ériu* 44 (1993) 139-62.

⁴¹⁶ Ó Corráin, 'Historical need', 144.

A fine example of a text that promoted the importance of Tara and deepened the association between the site and the Uí Néill would be *Baile in Scáil (BiS)*. The text may have its origins as early as the ninth century, but was revised in the eleventh.⁴¹⁷ It outlines how Conn Cétchathach (Conn of the Hundred Battles, ancestor of the Uí Néill and Connachta), is whisked away by the pagan deity *Lug* to a supernatural fortress where he is brought face-to-face with a woman representing the sovereignty of Ireland:

Et ba sí an ingen bóí isin taig ara cind flaith hÉrenn ocus bás í do-bert díthait do Chunn/ 'And the girl who was in the house awaiting them was the Sovereignty of Ireland and she gave a meal to Conn'.⁴¹⁸

Conn is whisked away one day from his regnal-seat at Tara:

Laa ro buí Cond i Temraich iar ndíth dona rígaib at-raracht matin moch for [rígr]aith na Temrach ría turcbáil gréine/ 'One day after the fall of the kings when Conn was in Tara, he ascended the royal rampart of Tara early in the morning'.⁴¹⁹

She serves Conn food and drink and Lug instructs her to offer a drink from her vat to each of Conn's successors, one after the other, until the day of Judgement.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁷ Máire Herbert, 'Goddess and king: the sacred marriage in early Ireland', in Louise Olga Fradenburg (ed.), *Women and Sovereignty* (Edinburgh 1992) 264-75: 273. Jacqueline Borsje, 'Fate in Early Irish Texts', *Peritia* 16 (2002) 214-31: 220. Patrick Gleeson 'Constructing Kingship in Early Medieval Ireland: Power, Place and Ideology', *Medieval Archaeology* 56:1 (2012) 1-33: 23.

⁴¹⁸ Murray, *Baile in Scáil* 34 & 51.

⁴¹⁹ Murray, *Baile in Scáil*, 33 & 50.

⁴²⁰ Carey, "Tara and the Supernatural", 32-33.

*Fris-gart in scál dí íarum, ó rus-sluinn-sidí íarum cach flaith i ndegaid araile
ó aimsir Chuinn co brád./* ‘the phantom answered her then for he named every
lord, one after another, from the time of Conn onwards.’⁴²¹

Conn Cétchathach is an incredibly useful figure for the creators of early medieval Irish allegorical political messages because he is an alleged ancestor for three major Dynastic Frameworks, the Uí Néill, the Airgíalla and the Connachta.⁴²² Each of these Dynastic Frameworks are represented in *BiS* when they are referred to by the woman who represents the sovereignty of Ireland. The Connachta are first and foremost present through Conn, their eponymous ancestor. Specifically, within the Connachta the Uí Aillela are represented through the figure of Ailill Molt son of Nathí, who holds the sovereignty of Ireland between Lóegaire and Túathal Máelgarb, the son of Cairpre mac Néill, briefly breaking the Uí Néill hegemony over the title.

*Dáil de for Ailill Molt mac Nathi maic Fíachrach. Fer úallach, fer adcuínti
sochaidi. .x.x. blíadnae namá./* ‘Bestow some of it on Ailill Molt mac Nathí
maic Fíachrach. A proud man, a man lamented by a multitude. Twenty years
only.’⁴²³

Very brief reference to the Airgíalla appears by way of the three Collas, who are allegedly the ancestors of the Airgíalla:

⁴²¹ Murray, *Baile in Scáil*, 34 & 51.

⁴²² For Conn’s prominent genealogical position see, O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum*, 133.

⁴²³ Murray, *Baile in Scáil*, 39 & 56.

Dáil de for Colla nóss (.i. Úais) .iiii. blíadnai namá doda-ciig noda-íba, Scarfaid fri hardflaith, scél nglé do dénum na fíngaile./ ‘Bestow some of it on Colla Óss (i.e., Úais), four years only, he who shall approach it is he who shall drink it, He will relinquish great sovereignty, glorious news, for committing a kin-slaying’.⁴²⁴

What is most notable about this inclusion of the Airgíalla ancestor, Colla Úais, is that, although he is validated as a king of Ireland, he only ‘approaches’ the sovereignty, and must relinquish it for kin-slaying. The kin whom Colla Úais slew may have been Echu Mugmedón, given the fact there is a reference to the three Colla’s being the ones who slaughter Echu Mugmedón.

Na trí Colla glanfait ár hi tóeth Echu Muigmedán! ‘The three Collas will complete the slaughter in which will fall Echu Mugmedón’.⁴²⁵

If this was the case, the reference to kin-slaying as a means to disqualify the Airgíalla from ‘great sovereignty’ may be read as a tacit statement by *BiS* on the close genealogical relationship between the Airgíalla and the Uí Néill, as Echu Mugmedón was Níall Noígíallach’s father. If the *fíngal* here is a reference to Echu, then it stands to reason that the three Colla’s must have been a relation to his son, and through him the wider Uí Néill, also. The Uí Néill, of course, feature very prominently, as one would expect of a text that functions as a list of the kings of Tara (though they are styled as kings of Ireland), and Uí Néill names by far outweigh the occurrence of other Dynastic Frameworks.

⁴²⁴ Murray, *Baile in Scáil*, 39 & 56.

⁴²⁵ Murray, *Baile in Scáil*, 38 & 56.

The inclusion of Tuathal Máelgarb after Lóegaire mac Néill's death is actually quite noteworthy, due to the relative obscurity of Tuathal Máelgarb; indeed, in the Annals of Ulster and in *Baile Chuind Chétchathaig* (*BCC*), it is Lóegaire's son Lugaid who ascends to power after Ailill Molt.⁴²⁶ Septs that claimed descent from Cairpre had brief moments of power, but they never really challenged for provincial dominance or upset the status quo between the powerful septs of the Northern and Southern Uí Néill; indeed, we shall see when discussing Tírechán's *Collectanea*, that narratives even develop to explain how badly the Cenél Cairpri fared politically.⁴²⁷ Tuathal Máelgarb clearly seems to belong to pre-history, given his location alongside Ailill Molt, Muirchertach mac Ercae and Lóegaire mac Néill. He does, however, have the distinction of being named king of Ireland, something that stands in direct opposition to the curse that Patrick lays on Cairpre and his family in the *Collectanea*. Given his relative obscurity, it seems possible that he was intended to serve as a mythological representative of Cenél Cairpri claims to kingship of Tara in a period when they had yet to fade into obscurity. By the time the *Collectanea* was composed they had already begun to decline in power relative to the notable Uí Néill septs. Given the supposed 9th century origin for *BiS* it is possible that the Cenél Cairpri were advancing their claims at some point after the 9th-century, and were ignoring the curse of Patrick's Tírechán to do so. Tuathal Máelgarb's inclusion in the text may therefore suggest a possible fondness or disposition towards the Cenél Cairpri.

It is not enough, however, to use the insertion of Tuathal Máelgarb as evidence of Cenél Cairpri influence. The Cenél Cairpri are chiefly among the most westerly of the Southern Uí Néill, holding territory very close to Connacht. The Cairpre Dromma Cliab lived in Sligo, at the edge of the Northern Uí Néill territory, within the boundaries of modern Connacht; meanwhile, the Cairpre Gabra lived on the borders of Bréifne and again close to the boundaries

⁴²⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 52-53. (The beginning of Lugaid's reign is an interlinear gloss; however there is no mention of Tuathal Máelgarb in the record until after the deaths of both Lugaid and Muirchertach mac Erca).

⁴²⁷ See fn. 485.

of Connacht.⁴²⁸ The prominent position of Conn Chétchathach as the means through which the narrative is relayed, coupled with the unusually prominent position of Tuathal Máelgarb, may imply that the text was composed in the territory of a sept descended from Cairpre located near the borders of Connacht. A likely origin for this tale may have been from among the Cairpre Dromma Cliab in Sligo, due to their proximity to the Uí Ailella. The inclusion and promotion of Ailill Molt just prior to the insertion of Tuathal Máelgarb may have been borne out of a desire to placate or flatter their southern neighbours. The fact that the entire text is firmly framed as being of both the Uí Néill and the Connachta would also make the most sense for a sept that existed so far away from the Uí Néill heartland of Tara but that wished to keep their dreams of rulership alive.

BiS does not overtly promote the politics of the Armagh *paruchia*; certainly, it does not advance any territorial claim that the *paruchia* may have had. The only possible reference to the politics of Armagh in *BiS* may be found in the mention of Saint Patrick in relation to his confrontation with Lóegaire at Tara on Easter.

*Tascur dían, ticfa táilcend (.i. Pátraic), fer gráid móir nóifidius Día Mórbreó
ad-andaba línfus Éirinn cota muir./* ‘A swift expedition, a cleric will come (.i.e. Patrick), a man of high rank who will make God known. He will kindle a great flame which will cover Ireland to the sea’.⁴²⁹

This extract is worth mentioning, however, given the fact it appears in the middle of the narrative about confronting Lóegaire. Given the fame of Patrick as the Saint who had converted Ireland and confronted Lóegaire, his appearance in this section was probably not about

⁴²⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 20 fn. 43.

⁴²⁹ Murray, *Baile in Scáil*, 39 & 57. (Táilcend is a mantle with a hole at the top, associated specifically with Patrick; for reference see, eDIL s.v. bratt b. Tollcend).

furthering the goals of Armagh. Instead, this section most likely was just echoing a well-known tale about one of the most prominent saints to have lived in Ireland. This segment in *BiS* is actually an Irish reflection of a prophecy that can be found in Latin in the *Tripartite Life of Patrick*.⁴³⁰ This prophecy, therefore, seems to have had its own reputation among the followers of Saint Patrick; its inclusion may then be read as indicative that the composers of *BiS* were from the Patrician tradition.⁴³¹ It would be very difficult, however, to draw from this section that there was any tie between *BiS* and Armagh; and it is made more unlikely by the prominent role that is ascribed to Lug, the pagan deity, even if he is euhemerised and firmly placed into the Milesian tradition;

*Is hé mo slonnud, [Lug mac Eth]nen maic Smretha maic Thigernmair maic
Fáelad maic Etheuir maic Iríail maic Érimóin mac Míled Espáine/ 'My name
is Lug son of Ethniu son of Smreth son of Tigernmar son of Fáelu son Etheor
son of Irial son of Érimón son of Míl of Spain'.⁴³²*

The text would therefore seem to have an origin more concerned with kingship than the claims of a *paruchia*.

⁴³⁰ Gerard Murphy, 'Two Sources in Thurneysen's *Heldensage*', *Ériu* 16 (1952) 145-156: 148 fn. 7. Kathleen Mulchrone (ed. & transl.), *Bethu Phátraic: The Tripartite Life of Patrick [I. Text and Sources]* (Dublin 1939) 22. The dating of the Tripartite Life is a difficult subject, Jackson provides a useful summary of the debate and his own conclusions in Kenneth H. Jackson, 'The Date of the Tripartite Life of St Patrick', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 41.1 (2009) 5-45: 6-18. I accept Jackson's dating of the late tenth-century for one of the earliest recensions of the text, although given that the prophecy mentioned here is present in both the Tripartite Life and *BiS* it is possible that it is a literary remnant of an earlier source, acknowledged by Jackson and dated by Mulchrone to 895-901 AD. As both texts were revised in a similar period, i.e. the tenth to eleventh century, the inclusion of a common prophecy is notable and suggests a link between them. See also Kathleen Mulchrone, 'Die Abfassungszeit und Überlieferung Der Vita Tripartita', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 16.1 (2009) 1-94.

⁴³¹ An association with Armagh through Mael Ísu Ó Brollacháin has been argued by Frederic Mac Donncha, 'Dáta Vita Tripartita Sancti Patricii', *Éigse* 18.1 (1980) 125-142. Jackson has criticised this and argued on the basis of linguistic analysis this could not have been the case. Jackson, 'Date of the Tripartite Life', 9. This thesis does not take the position Ó Brollacháin composed the Tripartite Life, but the commonality between it and *BiS* suggests initial composition in a patrician monastery.

⁴³² Murray, *Baile in Scáil*, 34 & 51.

The tale of *BiS* has a rather straightforward purpose, to tie the Uí Néill/Connachta ever more closely to the kingship of Tara and to equate the regnal site of Tara with the kingship of Ireland. The narrative put forward in the text that seems to provide preference for the descendants of Conn, and the inclusion of such a wealth of prominent Uí Néill individuals, may allow historians to safely assume that *BiS*'s primary purpose was to act as a declaration of monopoly over the kingship of Ireland, by virtue of possessing Tara. The Uí Néill are the ones who most obviously benefit from the narrative of *BiS*, as they dominate Tara to the exclusion of other Dynastic Frameworks; however, the prominent position of Conn does serve as a means through which the kinship between the Uí Néill and their increasingly distant cousins in the West can be displayed. It is an interesting narrative in respect of the dynamic it presents between the Uí Néill and the Connachta: the role that Conn plays — rather than Niall — means that it does not just benefit the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework, but both the Uí Néill and the Connachta as a larger framework again. This, of course, is evocative of the Irish political doctrine of *Leth Cuinn* and *Leth Moga*, wherein Ireland is divided into two halves. In *Leth Cuinn*, the larger and Northern half, the descendants of Conn are the rightful rulers. *BiS* seems to promote the doctrine of *Leth Cuinn* and associates firstly the descendants of Conn with the kingship of Tara/Ireland, to the exclusion of those from *Leth Moga*.⁴³³ This may insinuate either that *BiS* drew upon the genealogical division of *Leth Cuinn*, or that there existed narrative and genealogical elements that would eventually evolve into the doctrine of *Leth Cuinn/Leth Moga*, and that *BiS* was engaging with them by establishing a king-list of Ireland that revolved around the descendants of Conn.

⁴³³ Jaski has briefly speculated that the doctrine of *Leth Cuinn* & *Leth Moga* had its origin in 737 AD, as a result of a meeting between Áed Állan and Cathal mac Finguine. I see no reason why the genesis of this idea could not have emerged in the wake of this meeting; however, it is a difficult term to date correctly. It is worth mentioning, however, as we will see presently in analysing *BCC*, that this period of turmoil between Munster and the Uí Néill figured prominently in their history. See Bart Jaski, 'The Vikings and the Kingship of Tara', *Peritia* 9 (1995) 310-53: 311. See also David Sproule, 'Origins of the Eoganachta', *Ériu* 35 (1984) 31-37.

Within *Leth Cuinn* the Uí Néill are obviously the most successful and powerful, promoting their right to rule over their kinsmen within the line of Conn. *Leth Cuinn/Leth Moga* is an interesting political doctrine due to the fact that it allows the Uí Néill framework to claim regnal jurisdiction over territory in disparate provinces. A genuine king of *Leth Cuinn* would have a better claim to be a king of Ireland than any opposing lord, given the fact that he would hold power over three of Ireland's *cúigí/cóiceda*, and if he exercised any control over the people of *Leth Cuinn* would have no difficulty in ascending to the title.⁴³⁴ *BiS* used the doctrine of *Leth Cuinn/Leth Moga* to associate the descendants of Conn with the kinship of Ireland, and to insinuate that they were the rightful claimants to that title, while also suggesting that the Uí Néill, who had developed such a monopoly and whose members comprise so much of the king-list, were perhaps the most rightful of all of Conn's descendants.

Another text that elaborates upon the Uí Néill association with the kingship of Tara, and promotes Tara as the most important regnal-site, is *Baile Chuind Chétchathaig (BCC)*.⁴³⁵ *BCC* is a text that is also based upon a vision had by Conn Cétchathach, *BCC*'s primary function seems to be to provide a list of each of the kings of Tara, and, like *BiS*, it is not very concerned with promoting the ecclesiastical claims of any *paruchia*. The matter of dating *BCC* is less complex than *BiS*, although there have been conflicting dates provided. For the purposes of this thesis we will assume a dating during the reign of Fínnechta Fledach, c. 675-95 AD.⁴³⁶ *BCC* is notable due to the fact that it very consciously attempts to impose a narrative upon each of the kings it mentions by means of the inclusion of small additions after the individual is named. Some of these additions can be quite flattering:

⁴³⁴ Jaski, 'Vikings and the Kingship of Tara', 312.-313.

⁴³⁵ Bhreathnach, '*Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*', 73-94.

⁴³⁶ For this dating see the evidence provided by Murray; Kevin Murray, 'The Manuscript Tradition of *Baile Chuind Chétchathaig* and its relationship with *Baile in Scáil*' in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin 2005) 69-73: 69-70. For alternative dating see; Murphy, 'On the Date of', 149-51. Byrne, 'Seventh Century Documents', 168-9. John Carey, 'The narrative setting of *Baile Chuind Chétchathaig*', *Études Celtiques* 32 (1996) 189-201. Bhreathnach, 'Temoria', 78-82.

Íbthus Art ier cethorcait aidche, comnart caur, con-becha Muccruimi/ 'Art will drink it after forty nights, a mighty hero. He will die at Muccruime',

or

Bid fuiri fír nDiermata. Dis-ngig Diermair díá rirsetar lis. Lond daig án con-fri Irthine n-acht/ 'Diermait's truth will be upon her. Diermait, by whom courts will be ruled, will request it. Glorious savage flame, he drove towards Irthine'.⁴³⁷

Others can be quite damning and allow the reader to infer a political motive woven into the text, such as *Ailt fuiri Féchno/* 'A blade over her, Féchno', likely meaning that the kingship was being held through violence, or *Dos-n-icfa fer fíngalach esmbrethach. Íbthus co deirc ndomuin/* 'A kin-slaying man of unjust judgements will come to it. He will drink it to the very bottom', likely referring to a king that abuses his royal privilege.⁴³⁸

What is fascinating about *BCC* is that the larger political intentions of the text are difficult to discern. Although most people mentioned in the king-list are members of the Uí Néill, *BCC* demonstrates an oddly positive perspective on the lords of Munster, whereas *BiS* excludes them. Examples of *BCC* providing positive representations of the lord of Munster are:

Án Crimthand, lethan lond, fúatha fo chois/ 'Glorious Crimthand, broad and fierce, phantoms under foot', and the indirect allusion to a future king of

⁴³⁷ Bhreathnach, 'Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig', 82-87.

⁴³⁸ Bhreathnach, 'Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig', 73-94.

Munster to rule over Tara: *Immus -aue- Coircc -ebla. Is é reithe Muman márlaithe i Temuir/* ‘The descendant of Corc will pursue them. He is the overlord of Munster of great princes in Tara’.⁴³⁹

This has been suggested to be a symptom of *BCC* originating as a text sympathetic in particular with the politics of the *Síl nÁedo Sláine*.⁴⁴⁰ The manner in which *BCC* was composed would seem to suggest that it was a text, written from a *Síl nÁedo Sláine* perspective, that preferred to declare loyalty for Munster than for a fellow member of the *Uí Néill*. This is difficult to reconcile with the concept of a Dynastic Framework as a coherent political force that is such a core tenant of this thesis. It ought to be kept in mind, however, that disloyalty and defection from the Dynastic Framework do not render it any more theoretical or impotent than other forms of governance. Further to this point, alteration of textual sources to reflect political reality has been noted in previous scholarship in relation to separate texts. Ó Corráin’s analysis of *Echtra mac nEchach Mugmedóin* acknowledges that, although elements of the narrative are dateable to the eighth century, the format in which it is preserved is a product of the eleventh century that makes concessions to the political reality in which the *Uí Néill* find themselves.⁴⁴¹

It cannot be denied that *BCC* was invested in the politics of Munster (as seen above). Although this may present a blow to the idea of the Dynastic Framework as a coherent singular political entity, elements of *BCC* actually demonstrate that the *Uí Néill* were, at the very least, a theoretical political entity. What is meant by a theoretical political entity is that, even if it held no practical legislative or jurisdictional powers, among the learned it was considered a legitimate, classifiable political entity. This is perfectly demonstrated in the section

⁴³⁹ Bhreathnach, ‘*Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*’, 83-87.

⁴⁴⁰ Bhreathnach, ‘*Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*’, 49-72.

⁴⁴¹ Ó Corráin, ‘Historical need’, 145. Carey, ‘*Echtra mac nEchach*’, 203-08.

Níell cáich úa Néill nasctar géill ‘The Níell of each [is the] descendant of Níell whose hostages are bound’.⁴⁴²

In this section it appears as though the word *Níell* takes on a different meaning. Although precisely what is meant by this section is difficult to discern for certain, it has been argued that this section turns the name Niall into a *Namenstitel*/ ‘Name title’.⁴⁴³ By doing so it would allegedly raise the claim of those who shared the name in the same manner that Caesar or Basileus was intended to do. Whatever the intent of this vague segment of *BCC* actually was, one of the few things about it that can be known definitively is that the words *úa Néill nasctar géill* refers to Niall of the Nine Hostages and those who claim descent from him. This section demonstrates that, for the composers of the text there was an understanding of a politically relevant group defined by their descent from *úa Néill nasctar géill*. This means that, at the time of the composition of *BCC*, the Uí Néill were considered a political entity of some importance by at least the learned elite of Ireland.

BCC’s portrayal of Munster, and its acknowledgment of Munster’s claim to the kingship of Ireland, is startling. An explanation that this thesis would propose would be to consider the exceptional circumstances in which it may have been composed. As mentioned earlier, *BCC* relates the perspective of a dejected and defeated Síl nÁedo Sláine, giving in to Munster rather than another Uí Néill ruler. It has been suggested that this allusion to a king of Munster refers to Cathal mac Finguine, who ruled over Munster.⁴⁴⁴ Cathal’s reign presumably started after his father’s death in 694 AD and lasted until his own death in 742 AD.⁴⁴⁵ If this is indeed the case, then this text may have been composed in this period when the Uí Néill appeared to be struggling heavily with Munster expansionism.

⁴⁴² Bhreathnach, ‘*Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*’, 84-85.

⁴⁴³ Bhreathnach, ‘*Níell cáich úa Néill*’, 65-72.

⁴⁴⁴ Bhreathnach, ‘*Níell cáich úa Néill*’, 71.

⁴⁴⁵ Mac Airt, *Annals of Inisfallen*, 100-101 & 108-109.

The eighth century was anything but an easy period for the Uí Néill. The already endemic warfare in Ireland seems to reach new heights due to a massive period of instability that may have had its roots in the battle of Corann in 703 AD.

Bellum Corainn in quo ceciderunt Loingsech mac Oengusa, rex Hiberniae, mac Domnaill mac Aedha mac Ainmirech .i. la Ceallach Locha Cime mac Radhallaigh, cum tribus filiis suis oculus duo filii Colgen oculus Dub Dibergg mac Dungaile oculus Fergus Forcraith oculus Congal Gabhra oculus ceteri multi duces.'The battle of Corann in which fell the king of Ireland, Loingsech son of Aengus son of Domnall son of Aed son of Ainmire i.e. by Cellach of Loch Cime son of Ragallach, together with his three sons, and two sons of Colgu, and Dub Díberg, son of Dúngal; and Fergus Forcraid and Congal of Gabar and many other leaders'.⁴⁴⁶

This battle, as we can see, was devastating to the Cenél Conaill and to their allies that participated in it because it appears to have wiped out their leadership in one day and the next generation of prospective leaders. The kings of the Cenél Conaill, the Uí Chonaill Gabra, the Cairpre Droma Cliab and ten other Irish kings, who it would be fair to assume were Uí Néill/Cenél Conaill allies or subjects, are alleged to have died in this battle. The subjugation and military aid offered by these less powerful septs is likely what gives rise to a trend noted by Ó Corráin of an increase in the usage of the term *duces*. It is a linguistic feature in the annals that informs the reader as to the rise of these 'great dynasties' noted by Ó Corráin.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 162-63.

⁴⁴⁷ Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', 9.

The ultimate disaster then occurs for the Uí Néill in 720 AD, when Mag Breg is devastated by the Munster king Cathal mac Finguine and Murchad son of Bran, the King of Leinster:

Uastatio Maigh Breg du Cathal mac Finguine ocus do Murchad mac Brain./'The wasting of Mag Breg by Cathal Mac Finguine, and by Murchad Mac Bran'.⁴⁴⁸

Presumably this alliance was organised in 714 AD during the hosting of Murchad to Cashel:

Sloghadh Murchada mac Brain du Chaissil./ 'The hosting by Murchad son of Bran to Cashel'.⁴⁴⁹

Although it is not explicitly stated by use of the word *uastatio*, in 733 AD, it is noteworthy that Cathal was overthrown in Tailtiu by Domnall, implying that in the period between 714-733 AD Cathal was still demonstrating his superiority and mastery of Tailtiu:

Coscrath Cathail do Domnall a Tailtae/'The overthrow of Cathal by Domnall in Tailtiu'.⁴⁵⁰

The death of Northern Uí Néill leaders and the succession crisis amongst the Síl nÁedo Sláine ultimately saw the Uí Néill weakened to such a degree that Cathal mac Finguine and Murchad mac Brain were able to capture Tailtiu between 714-733 AD. With this context in

⁴⁴⁸ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 174-75. Although *Slógad* was a military affair, given the distance between Caiseal and Leinster, and the subsequent alliance against their common enemy, it seems more likely to be something in the vein of diplomatic mission. For definition of *Slógad* see eDil, s.v. *Slógad*.

⁴⁴⁹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 170-71.

⁴⁵⁰ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 186-87.

mind, then, it is possible that the reason *BCC* was so openly pro-Munster was because the period in which it was composed was one where it seemed as though the Uí Néill were on the decline and Munster was on the rise. In this period of turmoil, *BCC* still recognised the existence of the Uí Néill as a group bound through common ancestry. *BCC* demonstrates that, although the Uí Néill were considered a coherent entity with genuine political power assigned to it, the septs within it still acted independently, and sometimes to the detriment of the larger Dynastic Framework. It is also worth keeping in mind that even more easily definable political powers such as modern states have been susceptible to infighting and defection throughout history, and indeed they still are.

Another example of politics being attributed to a Dynastic Framework may be observed in the manner in which *Orguin Denna Ríg* (*ODR*), an origin legend for the Laigin Dynastic Framework, was assigned political significance in relation to conflict between the Uí Néill and the Laigin.⁴⁵¹ The extant version of *ODR* may be dated to the beginning of the tenth century, however, material older than this date is present in the poem, suggesting an earlier tradition.⁴⁵² The Laigin (Leinstermen) are the perennial punching-bags of the Uí Néill, subjected to near constant raiding and battles that, more often than not, went poorly for them. ‘*Orguin Denna Ríg*’ is a tale about a mythical Irish king of the Laigin known as Labraid Loingsech.⁴⁵³ Labraid was the grandson of an Irish king, but his father and grandfather were killed by his uncle, who

⁴⁵¹ The following reading and citations follow from Whitley Stokes, ‘The Destruction of Dind Ríg’, *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* (1901) 1-14 & Greene, *Fingal Rónáin*, 16-26. Both editions were used in the creation of this argument and it seems proper to provide reference to both interpretations of the text. Furthermore, Stokes provides a translation in his edition which may prove useful for those wishing to engage with the text that do not have a grasp of *Sen-goidelc*. For analyses of *Dind Ríg*, see; O’Rahilly, *Early Irish history*, 101-117. Myles Dillon, *The Cycles of the Kings* (London 1946) 4-11. Máirtín Ó Briain, ‘Cluasa Capaill ar an Rí: AT 782 I dTraidisiún na hÉireann’, *Béaloideas* 53 (1985) 11-74. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The oldest story of the Laigin: observations on *Orguin Denna Ríg*’, *Éigse* 33 (2002) 1-18. Matthieu Boyd, ‘Competing Assumptions about the Drúth in *Orguin Denna Ríg*’, *Ériu* 59 (2009) 37-47. Heinrich Wagner, ‘The Archaic “Dind Ríg” Poem and Related Problems’, *Ériu* 28 (1977) 1-16.

⁴⁵² *Orguin Denna Ríg*, in Greene, *Fingal Rónáin*, 16-17.

⁴⁵³ Labraid appears to have been considered by some at least to have been a God or maintained god-like powers, see; James Carney, ‘Three Old Irish Accentual Poems’, *Ériu* 22 (1971) 23-80: 70-71. O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History*, 101-117. (Though bear in mind Ó Corráin’s cautionary footnote regarding O’Rahilly’s conclusions: Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, 5 & fn. 16-17).

assumed the kingship in his stead.⁴⁵⁴ Labraid was known as *Labraid Móen*, or *Labraid* ‘the mute’, because, when he was a child, he did not speak.⁴⁵⁵ As time went on, Labraid learned to speak, became a fine young man, amassed quite a following, and was sent into exile, thus earning the nickname *Loingsech*/ ‘the exile’.⁴⁵⁶ Labraid would eventually return, and, with the help of men he was given by his father-in-law, defeat his uncle and assume his kingship.⁴⁵⁷ After making peace, Labraid invited his uncle to his fortress at Dind Ríg for a feast, and with his uncle, mother and many other nobles trapped within the fortress, set it on fire and killed all inside.⁴⁵⁸ ‘The Destruction of Dind Ríg’ provides the Laigin with their history and place in the Irish political sphere, and in *Annals of Tigernach (AT)* it is assigned another meaning in relation to the conflict between the Uí Néill and the Laigin. The context in which Dind Ríg is found in *AT*, as well as a discussion of this insertion occurred earlier in this thesis.⁴⁵⁹

The destruction of Dind Ríg provides the Laigin with their history and origins, but crucially, in *AT* another meaning is assigned to this legend:

Cocad ó shein etir Laigniu ocus Leth Cuind/ ‘Warfare thence between Leinster and Conn’s Half’, where Conn’s Half refers to the Uí Néill, the Airgíalla and the Connachta.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁴ Stokes, ‘The Destruction of Dind Ríg’, 3 & 9-10. Greene, *Fingal Rónáin*, 19-20. For further discussion of Labraid see; O’Rahilly, *ibid.* Byrne, *Kings and High Kings*, 130-6. Brian Ó Cuív, ‘Some Items from Irish Tradition’, *Éigse* 11.3 (1965-66) 167-187. Brian Ó Cuív, ‘An Item Relating to the Legend of Labraid Loingsech’, *Ériu* 39 (1988) 75-78.

⁴⁵⁵ Stokes, ‘The Destruction of Dind Ríg’, 3-4 & 10. Greene, *Fingal Rónáin*, 19. An analysis of Labraid’s muteness as well as other mute and stammering figures in Irish society is provided in Hubert Butler, ‘The Dumb and the Stammerers in Early Irish History’, *Antiquity* 23 (1949) 20-31. The text must be approached with caution, however, as Butler leans heavily towards O’Rahilly’s conclusion the Laigin were a distinct racial entity. His analysis of muteness as a literary representation of merging cultures is thought provoking if not entirely convincing. Furthermore, there is an interesting discussion of the role of disability in ‘Celtic’ tales, with a reference to Labraid Loingsech, is outlined in; Lois Bragg, ‘From the Mute God to the Lesser God: Disability in Medieval Celtic and Old Norse Literature’, *Disability & Society* 12.2 (1997) 165-178: 174.

⁴⁵⁶ Stokes, ‘The Destruction of Dind Ríg’, 4 & 10. Greene, *Fingal Rónáin*, 19 fn. 3-3.

⁴⁵⁷ Stokes, ‘The Destruction of Dind Ríg’, 6 & 12. Greene, *Fingal Rónáin*, 21.

⁴⁵⁸ Stokes, ‘The Destruction of Dind Ríg’, 8 & 13. Greene, *Fingal Rónáin* 22.

⁴⁵⁹ Stokes, *Annals of Tigernach*, 378. See also this thesis fn. 272.

⁴⁶⁰ Stokes, *Annals of Tigernach*, 378.

This insertion provides a convenient excuse for the inter-generational conflict between the Uí Néill and the Laigin.⁴⁶¹ It is, of course, a pre-historical tale with little reason to believe in its veracity; however, one of the reasons why it was included in an Irish account of world history, on the same stage as the beginning of kingship in Athens, may be down to its contemporaneous relevance to the political sphere. Having a tale that provided justification for war between rival Irish powers included in an annalistic record alongside records of the obituaries of bishops and kings would have grounded the claim in reality, lending more credence to Uí Néill aggression against the Laigin, as the Uí Néill were justified thanks to this ancient grievance.⁴⁶² The inclusion of this event and its political ramifications demonstrates that churches in Ireland were actively engaging with politics, even when they were writing the annals. This inclusion is likely the product of a church aligned with a sept within the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. Indeed, *AT* was written at Clonmacnoise, a monastic institution between the western edge of Uí Néill territory and Connacht.⁴⁶³ This would make sense, considering the invocation of the doctrine of *Leth Cuinn* in relation to bringing war to the Laigin.

⁴⁶¹ There are obviously historical, social and political reasons behind these conflicts, and it would be foolish to accept that the many instances of warfare occurred as a result of this mythological tale. It is clear, however, that *Orguín Denna Ríg* was seen as relevant, perhaps as an allegorical tale, to the relationship between the Uí Néill and Laigin. For another instance of this belligerence being relayed through contemporary texts, see also; Tírechán, *Collectanea* 12, (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 132).

⁴⁶² In this regard, *Orguín Denna Ríg* and the political connotations within it is synchronised into the record of *AT*. Synchronisation has been discussed earlier in Sub-Heading *Prose in the early Irish Annals*.

⁴⁶³ The placing of *AT* at Clonmacnoise is generally well established and has even given rise to the term ‘Clonmacnoise Group’ to distinguish a set of Irish annals with a common exemplar. See; MacNeill, ‘The Authorship and Structure’, 30-113. McCarthy, ‘The Chronological apparatus’, 46-79. The issue of *AT* being somewhat at the behest of Míde and Connacht is discussed in Evans, *Present and Past*, 63-66.

The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks:

Armagh's Accounts

The texts discussed so far, *BCC*, *BiS* and *Orgain Denna Ríg* do not demonstrate overt ecclesiastical influence. They are instead more concerned with the history of secular powers and the institution of kingship in early medieval Ireland. They provide a valuable insight into narratives crafted about Dynastic Frameworks for political purposes, but that appear to not bear the hallmarks of ecclesiastical influence. As we will discuss in chapter 6, the Irish church was inseparable from 'secular' politics in Ireland at this time; as a result many of the texts produced in Irish monasteries engage with the secular politics of the time. We shall see in this section two such texts produced by Armagh, or by a monastery associated with Armagh, that demonstrate the fact that there was no border or distinction between Irish ecclesiastical and secular politics.

Great centres of learning, such as Armagh, 'grew in influence through its connections with the Uí Néill dynasty'; as such, it often created texts that glorified Uí Néill ancestors.⁴⁶⁴ Examples of such texts would be the *Vita Sancti Patricii* (VSP) by Muirchú and the *Tirechani Collectanea de Sancto Patricio* (*Collectanea*) by Tírechán. These texts may be heavily biased in favour of the Uí Néill and serve obvious political agendas; however, they can provide an illuminating understanding of what contemporary authors saw as the legacy and political

⁴⁶⁴ Michael Richter, *Medieval Ireland: the enduring tradition* (Dublin 2005) 97. It is particularly clear that Armagh and the Cenél nEógain had a favourable relationship, see; Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 57-97. Aitchison, *Armagh and the Royal Centres in Early Medieval Ireland*, 205. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 51. Charles-Edwards, 'The Uí Néill 695-743', 398 & 410. Immo Warntjes, 'The Alternation of the Kingship of Tara 734-944', *Peritia* 17-18 (2003-04) 394-432: 399 fn. 29 & 414. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Ireland c.800: Aspects of Society', in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, 1: Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford 2005) 549-608: 583-585. F.J. Byrne, 'Church and Politics c. 750-c.1100', in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, 1: Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford 2005) 656-679: 656-660. For an analysis of propaganda based on ancestry, see; Bart Jaski, 'Kings over Overkings: Propaganda for Pre-Eminence in Early Medieval Ireland', in Martin Gosman, Arie Johan Vanderjagt and Jan R. Veenstra (eds), *The Propagation of Power in the Medieval West: Selected Proceedings of the International Conference, Groningen 20-23, November 1996* (1997) 163-76. Elizabeth Dawson, 'Brigit and Patrick in *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigidae*: Veneration and Jurisdiction', *Peritia* 28 (2017) 35-50.

benefits of the Uí Néill framework. The earlier *Vitae* of Saint Patrick, that purport to relate the history of Patrick and his journeys around Ireland, are also incredibly useful examples of texts that promote and assign political narratives to the Uí Néill.⁴⁶⁵ The two examples of Patrician *vitae* given above are the focus of this chapter.⁴⁶⁶

It must be acknowledged that the *Collectanea* is not a true *Vita*; for the purposes of this thesis, however, it acts as a useful text, produced for the Armagh/Patrician *paruchia* with the intent of aggrandising both Armagh and a secular political power.⁴⁶⁷ In using the term, *paruchia* of Armagh, or some variable, this thesis does not argue that the church of Armagh was the ultimate beneficiary of these texts, but a wider Patrician *paruchia* of whom Armagh was the most prominent, or eventually would become most prominent.⁴⁶⁸ Although it is not a *Vita* in the traditional sense, it does relay the narrative of Patrick's life in a eulogising manner that adds to the saint's mythology. Muirchú and Tírechán's texts are perfect examples in this regard, as they seamlessly interweave the history and political claims of the Uí Néill with the history and the political claims of the *paruchia* of Armagh.⁴⁶⁹ The reason these claims are interwoven so effortlessly is due to the symbiotic relationship between the patrician *paruchia* of Armagh and the Uí Néill. It is very clear to see that the *paruchia* of Armagh and the Uí Néill were closely associated in Irish politics. In the seventh century the south midlands of Ireland were a hotbed of ecclesiastical controversy and dispute between the jurisdiction of the *paruchiae* of Armagh and Kildare. This divide is further compounded by the Uí Néill rivalry with the Laigin, who sponsored Kildare, in this context some of the older monastic churches

⁴⁶⁵ Doherty, 'The Cult of St Patrick', 53-54, outlines the spread and complex nature of the Patrician cult from an early stage.

⁴⁶⁶ A particularly apt quote from Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', 30. 'Hagiography is pressed into service in a direct and crude way as it is in continental Europe both for secular and ecclesiastical purposes'.

⁴⁶⁷ For references to the relationship between Armagh and the Uí Néill see fn. 464. See also; Sharpe, 'Armagh and Rome', 58-72. Sharpe, Richard, 'Some problems concerning', 230-70.

⁴⁶⁸ Swift opposes the position that the *Collectanea* was composed at the behest of Armagh. Instead Swift argues it was composed for a wider 'Patrician' *Paruchia*; hence the above caveat, see Swift, 'Tírechán's motives', 53-82.

⁴⁶⁹ Doherty, 'Cult of St Patrick', 65-69. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 251-256 & 416-427.

in the area took the initiative to negotiate a form of alliance with the patrician power of Armagh.⁴⁷⁰ This dispute, which had both ecclesiastical and secular connotations, may very well have been the impetus for these early Armagh documents that so strongly promote their primacy.⁴⁷¹ This is made even more likely when one considers the example of Sletty, a church in this area that demonstrably singled out Armagh as its chief church, and bishop Áed of Sletty was the sponsor of Muirchú's *VSP*.⁴⁷² The manner in which these *Vitae* emphasise both the political claims of the Uí Néill and of the larger *paruchia* is of particular interest to this chapter. That the texts simultaneously promote ecclesiastical and secular supremacy is massively indicative of the extent to which the ecclesiastical and secular sphere of politics operated in unison.

One obvious instance of a text fulfilling expressions of ecclesiastical and secular claims simultaneously is Tírechán's *Collectanea*. Dating the *Collectanea* is difficult, however, we can propose that it was written between 664-700 AD.⁴⁷³ Hagiographies sometimes took the guise of circuits of territory to act as an assertion of the dominance of their respective *paruchia* in the ecclesiastical sphere of Ireland. What is very important about the *Collectanea* is that it also acts as an assertion of Uí Néill territorial claims at the time of Patrick and was an expression of lordship, ecclesiastical as much as it was secular.⁴⁷⁴ Tírechán's *Collectanea* is framed as a circular journey, supposedly made by St Patrick himself around the northern half of Ireland. It begins on the east coast, a few miles north of Dublin, travelling west over the river Shannon into Connacht, north into Donegal, round the northern coast to Co. Antrim, and then back again to the midlands. In the *Collectanea* Patrick's circuit acts as a proclamation of churches that

⁴⁷⁰ Sletty will be discussed in more thorough detail in the Sub-Heading *Beyond Secular and Ecclesiastical: Dynastic Politics*. However, see; Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 174-76.

⁴⁷¹ De Paor, 'The Aggrandisement of Armagh', 101. See also, Charles-Edwards, *ibid*.

⁴⁷² For an analysis of how the Easter Controversy spurred on Armagh and Kildares desire to assert their ecclesiastical primacy; see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 416-440.

⁴⁷³ Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 41-43.

⁴⁷⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 10.

Armagh claimed the loyalty of throughout Ireland, but most of them lie within Uí Néill territory. As a result, it also doubles as an assertion of Uí Néill territorial claims.⁴⁷⁵

One section from Tírechán's *Collectanea* that most clearly demonstrates the manner in which Armagh sought to expand its influence into Uí Néill territory may be found near the beginning, in the list of churches that Patrick supposedly founded in Mag Breg.:

De aelessiis quas fundauit in campo Breg. Primum in Culmine .ii. aelessia Cerne, in qua sepultus est Hercus, qui portauit (?) mortalitatem magnam .iii. in cacuminibus Aisse .iiii. i mBlaitiniu .u. in Collumba, in qua ordinauit Eugenium sanctum episcopum .vi. aelessia filio Laithphi .viii. i mBri|dam, in qua {fuit} Kannanus episcopus, quem ordinauit Patricius in primo pasca hi ferti uirorum Feiccl/ 'On the churches which (Patrick) founded in Mag Breg. First On the Hilltop; ii. The church of Cerne, in which is buried Ercc, who suffered (?) a great plague; on the hills of Aisse; .iiii. in Blaitine; .u. at Scrín Columcille, in which he consecrated the holy bishop Eugenius; .vi. a church for the son of Lathphe; .viii. in Bri|dam, in which there was holy Dulcis, brother of Carthacus; (2) .viii. on Argetbor, where was bishop Kannanus, whom Patrick ordained on his first Easter at the Burial-Ground of Fíacc's Men (Slane)'.⁴⁷⁶

This is by no means close to the full list of churches claimed by Armagh, but the extract cited above does portray three useful pieces of information.

Firstly, it specifies Mag Breg and, as Mag Breg was Uí Néill heartland, the association of these churches with the cult of Patrick demonstrates the ecclesiastical designs of the *paruchia*

⁴⁷⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 8-67.

⁴⁷⁶ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 8 (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 131).

of Armagh upon churches that lay in the territory of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. Mag Breg was home to the Síl nÁedo Sláine and, more importantly, it was home to the regnal site of Tara itself, and Tara was the beating heart of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework.⁴⁷⁷ The decision by Tírechán to frame the beginning of the *Collectanea* in Mag Breg ought to be seen as motivated by a desire to closely tie the Uí Néill and their churches with the *paruchia* of Armagh. This is further exemplified through the manner in which the following sections outline the relationship various sons of Niall had with Patrick during the saint's lifetime, and how these interactions benefitted or doomed their descendants. Another interesting element is that Tírechán claims that Patrick founded the church *In Collumba* 'at Scrín Columcille'. It has been noted, however, that the translation of *In Collumba* to refer to Scrín Columcille (Skreen/Swords) is one that cannot be substantiated.⁴⁷⁸ Regardless of whether *In Collumba* refers to Swords or not, it most definitely is a reference to a church with strong Columban associations. It is curious that Tírechán would lay claim to a church, on behalf of Patrick, that literally had another saint's name in the title. Patrick is the earliest saint, and so a possible explanation could be that the church was initially founded by Patrick but greatly improved by and further associated with Columba, and thus it came to have his name attributed to it by the time Tírechán was writing. The wider context of the *Collectanea*, however, as a text concerned chiefly with promoting the territorial claims of the Armagh *paruchia*, means it would make more sense to read the claim that Patrick founded Scrín Columcille as an attempt by the author of the *Collectanea* to undermine the influence of Columba/Iona in the midlands of Ireland.⁴⁷⁹ In short, it was an attempt to say that this vaguely Columban church owed its foundation not to Columba, and hence Iona, but to Patrick and hence Armagh. If this is the case then it may even be likely that the name *In Collumba* was chosen partly due to how vague it was, a casual

⁴⁷⁷ Charles-Edwards, 'The Uí Néill', 396-418. Swift, 'The early history of Knowth', 5-53. Gleeson, 'Luigne Breg', 65-99.

⁴⁷⁸ Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, 94.

⁴⁷⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 250.

and non-specific means of delegitimising monasteries in the midlands that were associated with the *familia* of Colum Cille.

One way in which this influence may have been felt would have been through the association between the Clann Cholmáin and Columba. In the early period the Clann Cholmáin were heavily associated with Columba's churches.⁴⁸⁰ Two events that hint at this close relationship would be the instances in which the Law of Colum Cille was enforced by Clann Cholmáin kings:

Lex Coluim Cille la Donnchad ocus Bresal/ 'The law of Colum Cille [promulgated] by Donnchad and Bresal'.⁴⁸¹

The reference to *In Collumbal* 'at Scrín Columcille' may be indicative of a Columban presence in Mag Breg that Armagh/a Patrician *paruchia* was seeking to firmly rebut. Finally, the above extract from the *Collectanea* hints at a direct link between Slane (and through it the Síl nÁedo Sláine) and Patrick, through his establishment of a church at Fertae Fer Féicc. The Síl nÁedo Sláine were the dominant power in Mag Breg, and so it is no great surprise to see them mentioned briefly; they were also loyal to Armagh in a way their rival sept, the Clann Cholmáin, were not.⁴⁸² A special mention being given then to Slane and Mag Breg in the opening of the *Collectanea*, coupled with the cordial manner with which Conall Cremthainne (ancestor to both the Síl nÁedo Sláine and the Clann Cholmáin) interacts with Patrick, may imply some degree of favouritism towards the Síl nÁedo Sláine from Tírechán's perspective.

What modern historians can understand by this narrative of lordship and territorial claims presented in the text is not that the hagiographer is relating the political situation of Patrick and

⁴⁸⁰ Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 63-7. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 501. Lacey, *Colum Cille*, 61-62.

⁴⁸¹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 232-233.

⁴⁸² Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 254.

Lóegaire mac Néill's time precisely and accurately. Instead, the texts are relating their present-day political situation and projecting it back onto history in order to magnify the political claims of their contemporaneous patrons.⁴⁸³ Tírechán's *Collectanea* does not lack claims and allusions to the secular political reality of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. In the *Collectanea*, Patrick encounters three progenitors of the Southern Uí Néill, namely Cairpre, Conall Cremthainne, and Lóegaire, and the way the saint deals with them reflects the political reality of their septs at the time the text was composed.⁴⁸⁴ When Patrick encounters Cairpre the following incident occurs:

Prima feria uenit ad Taltenu, ubi fit agón regale, ad Coirpriticum filium Neill, qui uoluit eum occidere et flagillauit seruos eius in flumine Séle, ut indicarent Patricium Coirpritico; quapropter appellabat illum Patricius inimicum Dei et dixit ei: 'semen tuum seruiet seminibus fratrum et non erit de semine tuo rex in aeternum; et non erunt pisces magni in flumine Séle semper/' 'On the first day (of Easter) he came to Taltiu, where there is (held) a royal assembly, to Coirpriticus (Cairpre) son of Níall, who intended to kill him and scourged his servants in the river Séle to make them point out Patrick to Coirpriticus (Cairpre); for this reason Patrick used to call him an enemy of God and told him: 'Thy seed shall serve the seed of thy brothers, and there shall be no king of thy lineage for ever; and the fish in the river Séle shall never be of any size'.⁴⁸⁵

Only Conall is seen as virtuous by Patrick:

⁴⁸³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 116.

⁴⁸⁴ Kim McCone, 'An Introduction to early Irish Saints Lives', *Maynooth Review* 11 (1984) 26-59: 55-6. McCone, *Pagan Past*, 250.

⁴⁸⁵ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 9 (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 132-133).

Deinde autem uenit ad Conallum filium Neill ad domum illius, quam fundauit in loco in quo est hodie Aecclesia Patricii Magna, et suscepit eum cum gaudio magno et baptizauit illum et firmauit solium eius in aeternum/ ‘Then he came to Conall son of Níall, to his house which he had built in the place where there is now the Great Church of Patrick, and (Conall) received him very hospitably and he baptised him, and established his throne for ever’.⁴⁸⁶

It should therefore be no surprise to find out it is only the sons of Conall, the Síl nÁedo Sláine and the Clann Chólmain Máir, who go on to dominate the kingship of Tara among the southern Uí Néill.⁴⁸⁷ Furthermore, in the *Collectanea* the concept of leadership over the rest of the Dynastic Framework is something that Patrick views as natural, something that Cairpre would desire innately, but his punishment for defying the saint is that neither he nor his children will ever achieve it.⁴⁸⁸ For his transgressions he is cursed by the Saint so that he and his line will always be in servitude to his brothers. This should be interpreted as the hagiographer, probably at the behest of some leader within a rival sept, using the *Collectanea* in order to explain the poor political circumstances of the Cenél Cairprí at the time of composition. It may also have been done to delegitimise any possible claimant to the kingship of Tara that might have emerged from the Cenél Cairpri by casting their sept as cursed by Patrick. This extract demonstrates the way in which the Dynastic Framework could be utilised to lay out political claims, and how it operated as a means to craft political discourse in early medieval Ireland. The political discourse here, of course, refers to the discourse between the Cenel Cairpri and

⁴⁸⁶ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 10 (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 132-133).

⁴⁸⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 21. Swift, ‘Tírechán’s motives’, 67-78.

⁴⁸⁸ A second instance demonstrating this natural hierarchy among kinsmen may be observed later in the *Collectanea*. See the segment concerning Fíachu son of Níall; Tírechán, *Collectanea* 16 (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 136-137).

the author of the text, where the author is obviously attempting to demean and delegitimise their claims to the kingship of Tara.

These examples clearly demonstrate that, even in a text whose principal purpose was to outline the life of Saint Patrick, dynastic politics find their way into the narrative, emphasising that the politics of Irish churches and secular powers were inseparable. Attempts must be made, however, for the sake of clarity of purpose in this thesis, to refer to the politics of the Armagh and Kildare *paruchia* as ecclesiastical, and the politics of the Uí Néill and the Eóganacht Dynastic Frameworks as secular, due to their nature as ecclesiastical and political entities, respectively; however, there really was scant difference between the sphere of politics with which these powers were involved, especially when it came to the politics of the larger Dynastic Framework. This can be seen in the description of Lóegaire as a scion of the family that held the kingship of almost the entire island in Muirchú's *Vita Sancti Patricii*:

In illis autem diebus quibus haec gesta sunt in praedictis regionibus fuit rex quidam magnus ferox gentilisque, imperator barbarorum regnans in Temoria, quae <tunc> erat caput <regni> Scotorum, Loiguire nomine filius Neill, origo stirpis regiae huius pene insulae/ 'In the days when this took place there was in those parts a great king, a fierce pagan, an emperor of the non-Romans, with his royal seat at Tara, which was then the capital of the realm of the Irish, by name Lóegaire son of Niall, a scion of the family that held the kingship of almost all the entire island'.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁹ Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii* I 10 (9), (Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, 74-75). See also Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', 7, who provides an overview of a wider sense of nationality in this period, of which this specific quote was a part.

Going one step further, Muirchú doubles down on his aggrandisement of the site, by comparing Lóegaire to Nebuchadnezzar and Tara to Babylon:

Congregatis etiam regibus, satrapis, ducibus, principibus et optimatibus populi, insuper et magis, incantatoribus, auruspicibus et omnis artis omnisque doni inuentoribus doctoribusue uocatis ad Loigaireum uelut quondam ad Nabucodonossor regem in Temoria istorum Babylone exercere consuerant, eadem nocte qua sanctus Patricius pasca illi illam adorarent exercerentque festiuitatem gentilem/ ‘There assembled the kings, satraps, leaders, princes and the nobles of the people; furthermore, the druids, the fortune-tellers, and the inventors and teachers of every craft and every skill were also summoned to king Loíguire at Tara, their Babylon, as they had been summoned at one time to Nebuchadnezzar, and they celebrated their pagan feast on the same night on which holy Patrick celebrated Easter’.⁴⁹⁰

Muirchú’s *VSP* is an incredibly significant text for the way it can inform the reader about the political situation of the Uí Néill in the late seventh to the early eighth century, when Muirchú was alive, and when the text is believed to have been composed.⁴⁹¹ *VSP* is often read as a text that promotes the ecclesiastical primacy of Armagh, while simultaneously magnifying the legend of the Uí Néill and their right to high-kingship.⁴⁹² The copious references to the power and prestige of the pagan antagonist Lóegaire mac Néill and to Tara, despite his staunch opposition to Patrick, demonstrate that part of Muirchú’s motivation was to build a history for the Uí Néill that demonstrated their power, and to associate their power with the Armagh

⁴⁹⁰ Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii* I 15 (4), (Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, 84-85).

⁴⁹¹ Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, 1-35.

⁴⁹² Binchy, ‘Patrick and his biographers’, 59-60. O’Leary, ‘An Irish Apocryphal Apostle’, 295-296.

paruchia through the actions of Patrick.⁴⁹³ A fascinating element of Muirchú's *VSP* is that Lóegaire himself is arguably shamed, but his Dynastic Framework, the Uí Néill, is edified and glorified. Lóegaire could very well be interpreted as a great and powerful king, but also as the whipping-boy for the pagan past of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. Edel Bhreathnach noted that, in almost every tale that involves Lóegaire, he demonstrates undesirable characteristics.⁴⁹⁴ In *VSP* it is obvious that Lóegaire represents the barbaric pagan past of Ireland and of the high-kingship of Ireland, and Muirchú does not shy away from portraying Lóegaire as just such a barbarian:

*Fuit rex quidam magnus ferox gentilisque, imperator barbarorum regnans in
Temoria.*⁴⁹⁵

What Bhreathnach noted that was even more telling than the manner Lóegaire violated Christian sensibilities by being a ferocious gentile emperor of the barbarians, was that Muirchú takes great care to also paint Lóegaire as a king who would offend native Irish sensibilities by his violation of *gessa* or taboos.⁴⁹⁶ These *gessa* are relics of pagan Ireland, but their inclusion does not necessarily imply paganism, at this period and included in an ecclesiastical text we can read them more as traditional superstitions concerning the site. Muirchú's *VSP* portrays Lóegaire mac Néill just like *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* portrays Conaire Mór 'as a king doomed as his *gessa* are transgressed', the result of transgressing his *gessa* is that Lóegaire cannot triumph over Patrick.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹³ See also fn. 465.

⁴⁹⁴ Bhreathnach, 'Temoria: Caput Scottorum?', 73.

⁴⁹⁵ Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii* I 10 (9), (Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, 74-75).

⁴⁹⁶ For further reading on *gessa*, see Philip O'Leary, 'Honour-bound: the social context of early Irish heroic *geis*', *Celtica* 20 (1988) 85-107. Edel Bhreathnach, *Tara: A Select Bibliography* (1995). Newman, *An Archaeological Survey*, 8-9.

⁴⁹⁷ Bhreathnach, 'Temoria', 73.

The fact that Muirchú demonstrates an awareness — if not an outright familiarity — with the *gessa* associated with the king of Tara emphasises that he was a very learned man and that his narrative functioned to demonise Lóegaire to both a Christian and native Irish audience. This demonization of Lóegaire does not mean, however, that Muirchú was not a propagandist of the Uí Néill; if anything, it may make him even more of an Uí Néill propagandist, as it demonstrates an awareness of the internal politics of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. The sept that claims descent from Lóegaire would be the Síl Loégaire, and the Síl Loégaire, it is fair to say, never amounted to anything of note in the historical period.⁴⁹⁸ They are utterly unremarkable, and if not for Lóegaire mac Néill, would scarcely be mentioned. Lóegaire, however, is undeniably a great man; he may be a fierce barbarian emperor but he is an emperor likened to Nebuchadnezzar. When Muirchú was crafting the narrative of *VSP* a difficult decision for him to make must have been trying to choose which sept within the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework should hold the kingship of Tara. As a necessary part of the tale the king would have to be humbled before the saint, in order for Patrick to convert the Irish, and humbling the ancestor of a powerful Uí Néill sept would have run the risk of alienating them. By choosing Lóegaire, however, Muirchú is able to condemn him as a barbaric pagan ruler, while simultaneously promoting the larger Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. For example, Muirchú does not aggrandise Lóegaire, but Niall as the origin for the royal lineage of almost the entire island, *quae <tunc> erat caput <regni> Scotorum, Loiguire nomine filius Neill, origo stirpis regiae huius pene insolae.*⁴⁹⁹ It is Tara that is compared to Babylon and referred to as the capital of the Irish, both of which aggrandise the site first and foremost. Lóegaire's position of prominence is related to us with an understanding that he is a representative of his Dynastic Framework. He represents the Uí Néill, yet he is a fierce barbarian in violation of

⁴⁹⁸ O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum*, 166-67.

⁴⁹⁹ Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii* I 10 (9), (Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, 74-75).

God's will and of the *gessa* associated with Tara. He must be replaced, and although the Síl Loéigairi may take some solace in the fact that they were at one time kings of Tara, it could be inferred that their confrontation with Patrick and their paganism are what caused their downfall. Lóegaire serves to promote the Uí Néill, but without Muirchú needing to take sides for or against a particularly powerful sept at the time of composition. To put it simply, Muirchú needed a scapegoat that Patrick could scold for being an insolent barbaric pagan, while still needing the means to promote the larger Uí Néill Dynastic Framework, and Lóegaire allowed him to do just that.

An example of how Muirchú uses the *VSP* to develop an ecclesiastical political claim may be seen in his seemingly naïve admission of Armagh's lack of relics. McCone points out that Muirchú admits Armagh's lack of relics, but in a manner that reproaches the Airthir for trying to remove the body of Saint Patrick from Downpatrick by force, and that suggests that the ultimate rightful resting-place of the body should be Armagh. The premise of this argument is that, although *VSP* seems to overtly promote Dún Lethglaisse as the final resting-place for Patrick, the text deliberately evokes the story of the Ark of the Covenant in order to suggest that this was not a permanent decision.⁵⁰⁰ This is one of the many claims that Muirchú makes on behalf of Armagh as an ecclesiastical institution throughout *VSP*. Another example may be found in the description of Armagh:

ideo ad Ardd Machae missit, quam prae omnibus terris dilexit/ 'He therefore sent word to Armagh, the place he loved more than any other'.⁵⁰¹

⁵⁰⁰ McCone, *Pagan Past*, 246-247.

⁵⁰¹ Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii* II 4, (Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, 116-117).

The tale of Macc Cuill moccu Greccae's interactions with Patrick would also appear to carry tones of Armagh's political agenda, as the end result is that Macc Cuill, who would become the bishop of Man and prelate of the Isle of Man, placed himself under the tutelage of Patrick.⁵⁰² The implication of this tale is that Armagh, by virtue of being the seat of the heirs of Patrick, claimed a measure of ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the Isle of Man.⁵⁰³

The work of Muirchú also provides some degree of illumination on the genesis of the Uí Néill origin-legend, which is not to say that the Uí Néill were necessarily a fictional construct but simply that Muirchú most successfully ascribed a legendary history to them that linked their fortunes with those of Armagh. This thesis will stop short of definitively suggesting that the narrative of Lóegaire confronting Patrick at Easter was of Muirchú's construction, as it is possible this narrative was circulating before Muirchú completed *VSP*. Specifically tying the Uí Néill to Saint Patrick may have been a theme in an older incomplete work, *Cáin Fuithirbe*, which is believed to have been promulgated in the late seventh to early eighth century, and contains a version of Lóegaire mac Néill's conversion to Christianity. This may suggest that Muirchú adopted the core narrative of Lóegaire's conversion, rather than inventing it himself.⁵⁰⁴ However, Muirchú's is the earliest complete extant work emphasising the relationship between the Uí Néill dynasty and the church of Armagh through the conversion of Lóegaire, and it is certainly the work that became the most famous. In fact, his work was so well received and enduring that, whether children across Ireland know it or not, they are still taught the story of the Uí Néill ancestral right to kingship when they hear the legend of Saint Patrick confronting the High-King of Ireland at Easter at national school level. Due to the manner in which it was popularised by Muirchú it seems right to name him as the man

⁵⁰² Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii* I 23 (22) – B II 4, (Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, 106-107).

⁵⁰³ There is a forthcoming piece by Charles Doherty concerning Macc Cuill that may alter this interpretation. As it stands it is difficult to read the event in *VSP* anything other than a territorial claim.

⁵⁰⁴ Cólman Etchingham, *Church organisation in Ireland: AD. 650-1000* (Naas 2002) 197.

responsible for cultivating such a strong political narrative for the Dynastic Framework as Lóegaire's confrontation with Patrick.

The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks:

Iona's Perspective

Thus far we have seen both how the accounts of Armagh and tales concerned more heavily with secular society could influence the construction of Dynastic Frameworks. In order to fully elaborate upon the relationship between the ecclesiastical institutions and secular powers, and to provide as balanced a perspective as possible, it will also be useful to examine how texts written on Iona can influence the political narratives of certain Dynastic Frameworks.

Iona is a strange place with regards to the influence that it had upon the histories of Dynastic Frameworks such as the Uí Néill and Dál Riada. There is evidence that Iona was a monastery, at least in the earliest period, that was withdrawn from the world of politics and more concerned with asceticism as a means to grow closer to God. There are many aspects of this asceticism reflected in the *Amra Coluimb Cille*, a poetic eulogy supposedly written in the aftermath of Columba's death.⁵⁰⁵ This would be in stark contrast to Armagh, which even from the time of Tírechán and Muirchú seemed concerned with expanding its claims and power. As far as the *Amra* is concerned it would appear as though Columba was attempting to enter heaven via a state of *apatheia*, 'a state of freedom from worldly desire', and ignoring this implicit aspect of Iona's spirituality would also be ignoring a major part of their world view.⁵⁰⁶ This focus on asceticism is also strongly present in Adomnán's *Vita Sancti Columbae* (VC), implying that as a tenant of Christianity it was important to Iona churches, rather than just appearing as a

⁵⁰⁵ Although ACC is purported to have been from the period directly following the death of Columba, there is new evidence to suggest a dating in the first half of the ninth century. Bisagni, *Amrae Coluimb Chille*, 255-57. For a more in depth analysis of the ideals of asceticism present in the *Amra*, see Clancy & Márkus, *Iona: The earliest poetry*, 122-128.

⁵⁰⁶ Clancy & Márkus, *Iona: The earliest poetry*, 125.

stylistic feature in ACC. Adomnán's VC can be dated to the latter half of his lifetime, i.e. 627-704 AD.⁵⁰⁷ Noteworthy examples of this ascetic ideal in VC are the two entries concerning Cormac Ua Liatháin, as they both specifically mention his search for asceticism.

qui tribus non minus uicibus herimum in ociano laboriosae quaesiuit/ 'who sought with great labour not less than three times a desert in the ocean'.⁵⁰⁸

In both instances Columba is greatly of aid in helping Cormac and his crew survive the quest for a 'place of retreat'. These passages from VC are heavily reminiscent of *peregrinatio* and the manner in which Irish clergymen would often seek isolation in order to be closer with God. Given the position of Iona off the western coast of Scotland, Cormac's search for a 'place of retreat' and the fact that some *peregrini* sought their ascetic isolation in western Atlantic islands, it seems fair to assume that *peregrinatio* was a form of monastic asceticism that Iona approved of and took part in.⁵⁰⁹

This is all fine and well of course, but what is the relevance of this ascetic withdrawn ideal of monasticism to this chapter's examination of the construction of larger political narratives for Dynastic Frameworks? The reason Iona is so interesting is that, despite this ascetic ideal, they were thoroughly embroiled in the politics of secular nobility, and the members of the community of Iona were particularly invested in the politics of the Uí Néill because many of

⁵⁰⁷ Anderson & Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, xv-lxxiv. & Richard Sharpe (ed. & transl.) *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* (London 1995), 3. & Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 162-63.

⁵⁰⁸ Anderson & Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, 29-31 & 166-71. See also Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae* translated in Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 118 & 196-198, who translates 'desert in the ocean' as 'a place of retreat'.

⁵⁰⁹ For further information on *peregrinatio* and its societal implications see, Kathleen Hughes, 'The Changing Theories and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 11 (1960) 143-51. T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The social background to Irish peregrinatio', *Celtica* 11 (1976): 43-59. Clare Stancliffe, 'Red, White and Blue Martyrdom', in Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamund McKitterick and David Dumville (eds), *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge, 1982) 21-46. & Elva Johnston, 'Exiles from the Edge? The Contexts of Irish Peregrinatio', in Roy Flechner and Sven Meeder (eds), *The Irish in Early Medieval Europe: Identity, Culture and Religion* (London 2016) 38-53.

Iona's prominent abbots were from the Cenél Conaill sept of the Uí Néill.⁵¹⁰ In examining the works of Iona we will find that, due to the ascetic ideals Columba represents, he may not engage with secular politics as directly as Saint Patrick does in *VSP*. Nevertheless, some of the texts composed on Iona concerning Columba manage to construct certain narratives about secular powers, either the Uí Néill to whom Columba was related, the Dál Riada whose king granted him Iona, or the Picts whom Columba allegedly converted to Christianity.

One of the most telling instances of constructing a political narrative present in Iona texts would be the representation of the kingship of all Ireland, and how that kingship is intrinsically tied to Uí Néill kings.⁵¹¹ The way in which Adomnán narrates Columba's interactions with his kinsmen sometimes betrays the degree of political organisation and structure that lay at the heart of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. When interacting with Áed Sláine for instance, Columba prophetically warns him that, although he is destined to be the king of all Ireland, he may lose that blessing should he commit the sin of kin-slaying.

Praecauere debes filii ne tibi a deo totius Eueniae regni praerogatiuam monarchiae praedestinatum parricidalis faciente peccato amittas/'My son you must heed lest by reason of the sin of parricide you lose the prerogative of monarchy over the kingdom of all Ireland, predestined for you by God'.⁵¹²

Although this section is not as grand or as much of a spectacle as Muirchú naming Lóegaire 'the scion of the royal family of almost the entire island', it accomplishes a similar goal and ties the Uí Néill to the kingship of all Ireland. Where this diverges from *VSP*, however, is that

⁵¹⁰ Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 36-46. Pádraig Ó Riain, *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin 1985) 81 & 184-88. Anderson & Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, xxxviii-xxxix. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 136. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 282. Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, 5. Lacey, *Colum Cille*, 39-51. Tanaka, 'Iona and the Kingship', 210-211.

⁵¹¹ Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, 5-24.

⁵¹² Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 38-39. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 122.

here the Uí Néill are the rulers of all Ireland by the grace of God, as opposed to their legendary and barbaric past in *VSP*, where Lóegaire is explicitly associated with paganism.⁵¹³ In addition, there is a caveat included, that falling to sin may wrest away their control and right to rule over the kingship; therefore, in Adomnán's eyes the kingship of all Ireland is conditional upon being a good Christian. This becomes apparent later in the same segment after it is revealed that Áed killed Suibne mac Colmáin.

Quae uerba sancti sic sunt expleta secundum eius uaticinationem. Nam post Suibneum filium Columbani dolo ab eo interfectum, non plus ut fertur quam iiii. Annis et tribus mensibus regni concessa potitus est parte./ 'These words of the saint were fulfilled exactly according to his prediction. For after Áed had treacherously killed Suibne, Colmán's son, he had dominion over the part of the kingdom that had been yielded to him for no more, as it is told, than four years and three months'.⁵¹⁴

A second instance in *VC* where we can see that the kingship of all Ireland was granted by God's will is in the section concerning Áed Dub mac Suibne. Áed Dub killed Diarmait mac Cerbaill, whom Adomnán describes as 'ordained by God's will as king of all Ireland'.⁵¹⁵ This segment is interesting for a few different reasons, firstly that Áed Dub was a king of 'the race of Ulster', yet he has by his actions been driven into the priesthood in an attempt to hide, though it was to little avail, according to Adomnán.

⁵¹³ Jaski has raised issues with the concept of anointing during coronation being irreconcilable with early Irish laws concerning the equal relationship between the king and his people. Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship and Succession*, 62. However, whether or not there was a genuine coronation ceremony that involved anointment, it seems likely that Adomnán was attempting to establish the concept of a 'holy' king, which is distinct from *VSP*.

⁵¹⁴ Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 38-39. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 122. (Furthermore, the specific detail of Adomnán's statement implies that someone was keeping a regnal-list).

⁵¹⁵ Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 64-65. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 138.

*Aidus uero Niger, solummodo nominee prespiter, ad sua priora reuersus
scelera dolo lancea transfixus de prora ratis in aquam lapsus stagneam
disperiit/*‘and Áed Dub, priest only in name, returned to his former evil deeds,
and, pierced with a spear by treachery, fell from the prow of a ship into the
water of a lake, and perished’.⁵¹⁶

The depiction of Diarmait mac Cerbaill in this segment is definitely the most interesting part, what is so fascinating about Diarmait’s depiction is that, according to the annals, he celebrated the *Feis Temro*, and according to *AT* he is specifically noted as the last Irish king to do so.⁵¹⁷ Some have suggested that *Feis Temro* carried specifically sexual connotations and referred to a ritual of symbolically sleeping with the land in what was a pagan rite.⁵¹⁸ In *VC*, However, there is no indication of Diarmait’s possible paganism; in fact the reverse is the case, with Diarmait being God’s chosen ordained to rule all of Ireland. Diarmait’s death is therefore elevated beyond the run-of-the-mill assassinations and deaths in combat that litter the annals in this period. Furthermore, Diarmait is ‘ordained by God’s will’; he becomes like the kings of the Old Testament, sacred and holy, where his death is an affront to God himself.

⁵¹⁶ Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 66-67. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 139.

⁵¹⁷ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 80-81. D. A. Binchy, ‘A pre-Christian survival in mediaeval Irish hagiography’, in Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamund McKitterick & David N. Dumville (eds), *Ireland in early mediaeval Europe: Studies in memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge 1982) 165-78. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 164. See also; Ailbhe mac Shamhráin and Paul Byrne, ‘Kings named in Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig and the Airgíalla Charter Poem’, in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin 2005) 159-224: 189-192.

⁵¹⁸ For further reading on *Feis Temro*, see; D. A. Binchy, ‘The fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara’, *Ériu* 18 (1958) 113-38. Carney, *Studies in Irish Lit.*, 333-339. Byrne, *Kings and High Kings*, 64-65. Doherty, ‘Cult of St. Patrick’, 53-94, esp. 86. Doherty in particular considers the possibility that Muirchú was attempting to flatter the Uí Néill. David N. Dumville, ‘St Patrick and fifth-century Irish chronology: the kings’, in David N. Dumville (ed.), *Saint Patrick, AD 493-1993* (Woodbridge 1993) 45-57: 47-50. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 296. Bhreathnach, *A Select Bibliography* 8. Newman, *An Archaeological Survey*. Bhreathnach, ‘Temoria’, 82-86. Edel Bhreathnach, ‘Introduction’, in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin 2005) ix-xiv: ix-xii.

Adomnán's treatment of Diarmait betrays his thinking on kingship and perhaps also his ambitions for Iona moving forward. Adomnán seems to be using the *Feis Temro*, an originally pagan rite of kingship, and rewriting it so that it becomes a Christian ordination ceremony. The result of this subtle change is to elevate the Uí Néill king to unprecedentedly lofty heights, while simultaneously condemning his killer more thoroughly than any before in Irish history.⁵¹⁹ As we can be seen through both Áed Sláine and Diarmait mac Cearbaill, the Uí Néill are intrinsically linked to the kingship 'of all Ireland'. As has been observed by Enright, Adomnán seems to be particularly interested in developing Iona's association with ordination and coronation ceremonies.⁵²⁰ Throughout *VC* there are segments where Columba either advises rulers, prophesises their greatness, or crowns them. We have seen his interaction with Áed Sláine earlier and how turning away from the saint's counsel cost Áed the kingship he was to have. Columba encounters Domnall mac Áedo of the Cenél Conaill as a child, when he prophesises that

His post super omnes suos fratres superstes erit, et rex ualde famosus/'This boy will in the end outlive all his brothers, and will be a very famous king'.⁵²¹

We have encountered Domnall mac Áedo previously, he is named as *Rex Scottorum* in one of the oldest dateable Hiberno-Latin references to such a title in the poem *Deus a quo facta fuit*.

⁵¹⁹ Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 297.

⁵²⁰ Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, 5-24.

⁵²¹ Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 34-35. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 120.

Sunt octo decem et sexcenti a baptismo Domini / Anni usque ad Scottorum mortem regis Domnali / 'It is eight hundred and six years from the baptism of our Lord to the death of Domnall, king of the Scots.'⁵²²

Furthermore, there is a section of *VC* that is concerned with Columba ordaining Áedán of the Dal Riada as king. Despite refusing to do so initially, Columba is coerced by an angel to crown Áedán as king and does so on Iona itself.⁵²³

Iona develops the authority of the Uí Néill by linking them to the kingship of all Ireland; something that is intriguing and worth discussing is the manner in which it links the Uí Néill to Conn Cétchathach as well as to Niall Noígíallach. Columba is often referred to in relation to Conn rather than Niall; however, the most interesting occurrence is in the *Amra Choluimb Cille*. In the *Amra* there is a section devoted to detailing Columba's noble secular lineage, and prominent members of the Uí Néill are name-dropped and most of them are members of the Cenél Conaill, e.g. Áed, Conall, Fedelmid. Two of these names that are mentioned, however, invoke the longer genealogy of the Uí Néill deriving back from the Connachta, Art, the father of Cormac mac Airt, and Conn Cétchathach.⁵²⁴ This demonstrates an awareness at the time of the *Amra*'s composition that the Uí Néill derived from the Connachta and that they had an established genealogical tree to back up that assertion. The most fascinating element, however,

⁵²² Strecker, *Rythmi computistici*, 695-97: *Versus de annis a principio*. (For more information on the dating of the poem, see Ó Cróinín, *Early Irish History and Chronology*, 80.)

⁵²³ Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 188-91. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 208-209. The issue of the coercive angel has been the subject of discussion. Enright has argued it was an allusion to the Book of Kings and an attempt by Adomnán to model Irish coronation more closely on biblical precedent, see; Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, 5-58. Bear in mind, however, that Enright addresses some criticism of this argument in a subsequent article, see; Michael J. Enright, 'Royal Succession and Abbatial Prerogative in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', *Peritia* 4 (1985) 83-103: 89-90. Charles-Edwards, Sharpe and Jaski have been skeptical towards this idea. T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'A contract between king and people in early medieval Ireland? Crith gablach on kingship', *Peritia* 8 (1994) 107-19: 109 fn. 9. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 355 n 358. Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship and Succession*, 62. See also Tanaka, 'Iona and the Kingship', 199-214. For a reinterpretation of Enright's conclusions that this scene is indicative of Iona's political realities at the time of Adomnán, rather than an overt attempt to alter the Irish system of coronation.

⁵²⁴ Clancy & Márkus, *Iona: The earliest poetry*, 113.

is the manner in which Conn is included, as it is overtly reminiscent of the doctrine of *Leth Cuinn* and *Leth Moga* discussed elsewhere in this thesis.⁵²⁵ The *Amra* notes;

*Buich bron cer[t] Cuind dul do druib méte maith/ ‘Grief broke Conn’s region
for the going to rest of such a good one’.*⁵²⁶

The difficulty in asserting that the terminology of *cer[t] Cuind/‘Conn’s region’* is the same as *Leth Cuinn*] is that the *Amra* also includes a reference to *duë Néill/‘Níall’s land’*.

*Ní díscéoil duë Néill /‘Not newsless is Níall’s land’.*⁵²⁷

Níall’s land is not a term that has the same meaning as *Leth Cuinn*; however, given the dating of *ACC*, the division of Ireland between *Leth Cuinn* and *Leth Moga* would be codified by this period.⁵²⁸ It could be argued that *duë Néill* and *cer[t] Cuind* are simply being used to reference Columba’s wider genealogical tree, and that is most certainly part of it as both ancestors are called upon to refer to the territory that is in grief. The *Amra* builds upon the genealogical tree of Columba stretching back towards Níall and beyond to Conn Cétchathach as the earliest named ancestor, and in so doing provides a definition or reason why the disparate local dynasties that ultimately derived their ancestry from Conn could be united in their grief for a common kinsman in Columba. Columba is therefore not just pre-eminent amongst the Uí Néill, but also amongst the Connachta, and if modern scholarship is to be believed, the Airgíalla

⁵²⁵ See fn. 433.

⁵²⁶ Clancy & Márkus, *Iona: The earliest poetry*, 112-113.

⁵²⁷ Clancy & Márkus, *Iona: The earliest poetry*, 104-105.

⁵²⁸ See; fn. 505 for Bisagni’s evidence that *ACC* was dated to the first half of the ninth century, and fn. 434 for Jaski’s proposed dating of *Leth Cuinn* and *Leth Moga* to the period c. 737 AD.

too.⁵²⁹ In this way the *Amra*, and Iona, help to construct a distinct territorial unit predicated upon common ancestry through Conn.

It does appear, then, that, although Iona was a monastery concerned with ascetic ideals and isolation in order to achieve a closer relationship with God, they were thoroughly invested in the politics of their contemporary secular rulers. Iona is less direct than Armagh, and *VC* is concerned with relating the sacral nature of Columba along with his many miracles and prophecies in a way that is comparatively neglected by *VSP* and the *Collectanea* in relation to Patrick. When examining the literature from Iona, however, it is difficult not to note the political nature of what is included. Whether it is to promote the Uí Néill as kings of all Ireland, to promote Columba's relationship to them and through them the Connachta, Iona is still influential in the development of ideas on regnal authority and the groups over whom regnal authority could be held.⁵³⁰ Iona assists in developing the concept of the Uí Néill as a definable political group, and linking their authority and jurisdiction to an institution of Christian regnal kingship that extended throughout all Ireland.

Conclusion: The Implications of these Narratives

The political narratives we have explored in this chapter each serve, in their own way, to assign politics to the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. *BCC* and *BiS* demonstrate that a fundamental part of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework was an association between their ancestors and the kingship of Tara. Tara was the means through which they ruled over Ireland, and a further aspect of both texts is to establish the *nepotes Niall* as the true leaders and rulers of the descendants of Conn Cétchathach, therefore making them rulers of *Leth Cuinn*. Meanwhile *Orgain Denna Ríg* shows an understanding of how the belligerence of two groups of people could be codified into a text and associated as a core part of both their political identities. We

⁵²⁹ See fn. 422.

⁵³⁰ Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, 5-58.

have also seen how *VSP* and the *Collectanea* serve to promote the ties between Armagh and the Uí Néill, while simultaneously furthering the Uí Néill claim to sovereignty over the entire island of Ireland. Iona meanwhile operates similarly to Armagh, but is focused more intently on creating a Christian kingship of Ireland that, in many ways, is distinct from Ireland's pagan past. These are grand political ambitions that become codified and associated directly with the Dynastic Framework. The Dynastic Framework therefore serves as a medium through which the political ambitions of powerful individuals can be realised; it informs who falls under the jurisdiction of the king of Tara; it informs the prestige associated with that title, and it informs who the natural enemies of the Dynastic Framework and its membership are.

These narratives do not emerge out of the ether, however. They are constructed and assigned to the Dynastic Framework, and a pertinent question to ask would be, by whom? The answer, as we shall shortly see, is the various Irish churches and monasteries that lay in the territory of powerful dynastic 'secular' powers. The association and link between these ecclesiastical institutions and the 'secular' Dynastic Frameworks goes deeper than it may first appear.

Chapter 6:

The Irish Church as the “Scholarly Wing” of the Uí

Néill Dynastic Framework

Introduction

This chapter shall introduce and investigate the concept that the churches of early medieval Ireland functioned as the ‘Scholarly Wing’ of Dynastic Frameworks. That is not to say they functioned primarily as the ‘Scholarly Wing’, as their primary duties in society were pastoral and ecclesiastical ones, but that, due to their nature as institutions comprised of members of Dynastic Frameworks, most churches at least served the secondary function of being a “Scholarly Wing” for Dynastic Frameworks.⁵³¹ The relationship between certain ecclesiastical institutions and politically unsuccessful branches of local dynasties is well documented in early medieval Ireland. Examples include the abbacy of Áth Truim, which was largely controlled by a family within the local Cenél Lóegaire sept between 756-846 AD, as well as the abbacy of Lusc being dominated by the Ciannachta Míde between 702-805 AD.⁵³² When a member of the Dynastic Framework entered into ecclesiastical life, they learned a great deal of skills and techniques that were beneficial to the Dynastic Framework and the construction of a wider political vision.⁵³³ The reason why such skills were available to those who joined the Church in particular, was the monopoly that the Irish Church had developed on producing texts. There was no institution in early medieval Ireland that could have provided anywhere close to a

⁵³¹ Colmán Etchingham, ‘The Early Irish Church: Some Observations on Pastoral Care and Dues’, *Ériu* 42 (1991) 99-118.

⁵³² Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, 18.

⁵³³ Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, 18. Ó Corráin makes the point that the cleric-jurists, poets and royal propagandists were recruited from politically unsuccessful families.

similar level of texts/works/writings from which a scribe could learn and draw inspiration.⁵³⁴ It is this “Scholarly Wing” that was responsible for composing and assigning political narratives to the larger Dynastic Frameworks.⁵³⁵ The reasoning behind setting aside a chapter for demonstrating and explaining such an assertion is that often the churches in early medieval Ireland are said to ally themselves with politically powerful Dynastic Frameworks and septs.⁵³⁶ Using this terminology implies that the Dynastic Frameworks and ecclesiastical powers in Ireland were entities that operated separately from one another. This chapter intends to emphasise that churches in Ireland were inextricably linked with the politics of Dynastic Frameworks, and that the construction of larger political narratives was less to do with an alliance between churches and Dynastic Frameworks, but rather that these narratives emerged as a natural by-product of the inseparability of ecclesiastical and secular politics of this time.

In keeping with this thesis’ focus on the Uí Néill, we shall examine how that Dynastic Framework interacted with *paruchia*, specifically the *paruchia* of Armagh and Iona. What exactly was meant when referring to *paruchia* has been a subject of lively discussion.⁵³⁷ An accurate assessment of the political organisation of ecclesiastical institutions in Ireland, is that ‘The patchwork quilt political map of Ireland is simplicity itself compared with the complicated network of ecclesiastical ownership, loyalties, conflicts, claims and counter-claims which

⁵³⁴ Sharpe outlines how Irish churches supplied new monastic missions with books as a material resource for learning, which demonstrates the abundance of literary resources at the behest of various Irish ecclesiastical organisations. Sharpe, ‘Books from Ireland’, 19-26. Ó Corráin summarises in brief the role of ecclesiastical schools, comprised of dynastic ecclesiastical clergy, in maintaining law, literature, poetry, history, and genealogy, and how they declined in the wake of religious reforms in the twelfth century. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘What happened Ireland’s Medieval Manuscripts?’, *Peritia* 22-23 (2011-2012) 191-223: 205-207.

⁵³⁵ Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, 9-10. Discusses the manner in which the church did much to strengthen kingship and provides a brief outline of how most churches were not comparable to their powerful royal counterparts. This thesis will argue that rather than seeing the church as subsidiary to the crown, it was instead a part of the Dynastic Framework and served to strengthen kingship and Dynastic claims in that fashion.

⁵³⁶ This will be explored further in this chapter, Sub-Heading: *Recent Historiographical Approaches and their Implications*.

⁵³⁷ Etchingam, *Church organisation in Ireland*, 105-7, Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 168-170 & Sharpe, ‘Some problems’, 230-70. See also Etchingam, ‘The Early Irish Church’, 99-118 (esp. 107) & Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘The Early Irish Churches: Some Aspects of Organisation’, in Donnchadh Ó Corráin (ed.), *Irish Antiquity Essays and Studies presented to Professor M.J. O’ Kelly* (Cork 1981) 327-341 (esp. 334-335). Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 65-148.

extended throughout the entire country and even overseas'.⁵³⁸ For the purpose of this thesis, however, *paruchia* will refer to a large monastic federation that had control over monasteries in territories far beyond the immediate locality of the head monastery. By examining the relationship between the Uí Néill and these two *paruchiae* of Armagh and Iona it should become clear that there was an almost symbiotic relationship between these entities.

Recent Historiographical Approaches and their Implications

As referenced earlier, the Uí Néill are frequently noted as having an “alliance” with clergymen, especially Armagh clergymen, due to the fact that Armagh was responsible for the production of most of the texts historians would consider Uí Néill propaganda.⁵³⁹ Examples of this terminology from the scholarship are: ‘After conquering almost the entirety of Ulster, the Uí Néill proceeded to gain a monopoly on the Kingship of Tara through military strength and important alliances with clergymen’, and ‘Their alliance with important churchmen gave the Uí Néill access to a literate class that assisted in creating a literary tradition of dynastic propaganda that further established their claim to Tara’.⁵⁴⁰ Another instance would be: ‘What is striking about this section of Patrick’s circuit is the complete absence of any mention of Cenél nEógain. The latter were to be, from the middle of the eighth century, the Uí Néill dynasty closest allied with Armagh’.⁵⁴¹ These are fine summaries of the Uí Néill rise to prominence, and indeed, that the interests of the Uí Néill were so closely represented by early Irish clergymen is partly why it is so difficult to discern their true origins.⁵⁴² The use of the word ‘alliance’, however, is somewhat misleading. There is no explicit agreement between two

⁵³⁸ Ó Corráin, ‘Early Irish Churches’, 335.

⁵³⁹ Examples have already been detailed in Sub-Heading; *The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks: Armagh’s Accounts*. See especially Muirchú’s *VSP*.

⁵⁴⁰ Edel Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the medieval world AD 400-1000: landscape, kingship and religion* (Dublin, 2004) 60.

⁵⁴¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 51.

⁵⁴² Consider again Kelleher’s description of the Uí Néill as having ‘emerged from a dark cloud of their own making’, the dark cloud in this instance is the product of ecclesiastical institutions, e.g. the Armagh *paruchia*. Kelleher, ‘Early Irish History’, 125.

parties working towards a common goal, and this literate elite is oftentimes as much part of the secular nobility as it was part of ecclesiastical institutions.⁵⁴³ The usage of ‘alliance’ fails to take note of the agency of the individual, the degree to which secular and ecclesiastical aims coincided under the umbrella of dynastic politics, and it prioritises the role of the institution.⁵⁴⁴

The role of Christianity and the Church in early medieval Ireland has been much discussed in the historiography; however, we must be careful not to forget that the Church in this context exists because of the faithful that ensure its continuation. The more faith, power and wealth that the Irish invested in their churches, the more important they became; but in this period of Dynastic Frameworks Ireland was a country where dynasty and kinship were of paramount importance. The prevalence of kinship and dynastic loyalty is unavoidable in Irish politics of this time. The *tuatha*, among the smallest political units in Irish society, are identified and named after the sept present there, and the word itself can refer either to the people or to the territory.⁵⁴⁵ Most of the modern words for identifying territory in Ireland are derived from the names of the Dynastic Frameworks that held power there previously. The *Laigin*, the *Ulaid* and the *Connachta* provide the modern names for Leinster, Ulster and Connacht, respectively, County Tyrone derives its origin from an Uí Néill sept that held power there, the Cenél nEógain. The land and the people were closely linked to one another, and Irish society on the political level was entirely constructed out of an identification with the dynastic group that held power in a locale, this dynastic affiliation often spread to the local ecclesiastical centres.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴³ One only needs to look to Saint Columba and how much of the written material concerning him focuses on his Uí Néill background to see the intrusion of secular nobility into ecclesiastical institutions. See Sub-Heading: *The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks: Iona's Perspective*. Consider also, from the Patrician tradition Tírechán and how his work is influenced by his place of birth, see Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 35-37. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 48.

⁵⁴⁴ Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 280, outlines the shared nature of ecclesiastical and secular powers from a landholding perspective.

⁵⁴⁵ See eDIL s.v. 1 *túath*.

⁵⁴⁶ Ó Corráin provides a well-researched analysis of the dynastic nature of ecclesiastical leadership through the case study of the Dál Cais and Killaloe, Inis Celtra and Terryglass. Ó Corráin, ‘Dál Cais’, 52-63. Bear in mind Ó Corráin’s study begins c. 991 AD, and is therefore late for this time period. It is, however, one of the more in-depth and personalised studies of how a single dynasty could affect ecclesiastical organisation, before and after

Iona is a monastery that, in the beginning and for many years afterwards, was heavily linked with the Cenél Conaill sept of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. This was not a strange exception to the rules, either; many churches were run by members of the local ruling elite; even an important ecclesiastical site like the monastic centre of Kildare in Leinster was a dynastic capital in the ninth century for the Uí Dúnlainge dynasty.⁵⁴⁷ Armagh is well known to have had abbots primarily of the Airgíalla, but its location in the heart of Airgíalla territory may also allow historians to infer that the monastic community itself was generally comprised, for the most part, of local members of the Airgíalla who pursued a vocation in the church.

Defining Armagh, Iona, Kildare, or any monastic institution that held political clout in this period as a distinct organisation must therefore be tempered with acknowledging that any such institution was comprised, especially in its leadership, of individuals born into and thoroughly invested in the politics of Dynastic Frameworks in Ireland.⁵⁴⁸ It is perhaps not entirely accurate, then, to posit an alliance between Iona and the Cenél Conaill, for instance, when the people in power in Iona for quite some time were members of the Cenél Conaill. Iona, although a powerful and influential monastery in the ecclesiastical field, was also a part of the Cenél Conaill political apparatus, due to the fact that many of its abbots — though not all — were members of that sept up until the second half of the eighth century.⁵⁴⁹ The Irish secular sphere was inseparable from the ecclesiastical; this is not a novel interpretation of affairs, and there have been scholars who have proposed and championed this inseparability as a cornerstone of how to interpret the role of churches in society, that they were ‘of the world rather than apart

the reform period in Ireland. Consider also Ó Corráin’s discussion of monastic schools, which were often beholden to dynasties, influencing the Irish genealogical corpus. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Creating the Past: The Early Irish Genealogical Tradition Carroll Lecture 1992’, *Peritia* 12 (1998) 177-208: 181 & 187 & 188.

⁵⁴⁷ McCone, *Pagan Past*, 244. See also, Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 153-60 & 236-39.

⁵⁴⁸ Ó Corráin, ‘Dál Cais’, 52-63: esp. 61-3. Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, 18-19.

⁵⁴⁹ Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 36-46. Ó Riain, *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae*, 81 & 184-88. Anderson & Anderson, *Adomnán’s Life of Columba*, xxxviii-xxxix. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 136. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 282. Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, 5. Lacey, *Colum Cille*, 39-51.

from it'.⁵⁵⁰ Part of the difficulty, however, is that, although these monasteries and *paruchia* did have autonomy and goals entirely their own, they were active participants in the sphere of dynastic politics, and this has sometimes been rendered rather simply as the politics of the secular world.⁵⁵¹ Granted, the arrangements were beneficial to both the Dynastic Framework and the *paruchia*, but individuals, who were members of the Dynastic Frameworks, and who were active within monastic institutions, are the ones responsible for influencing the production of manuscripts that present favourable perspectives on the politics of Dynastic Frameworks.⁵⁵²

Beyond Secular and Ecclesiastical: Dynastic Politics

This thesis would propose that there was a more subtle and implicit reason behind Armagh taking sides with the Uí Néill in their literature, rather than an alliance between the secular and ecclesiastical sphere. Instead, this thesis would argue that, when the secular and ecclesiastical sphere met in the realm of politics, such distinctions became entirely academic.⁵⁵³ One of the ways this will be demonstrated will be by taking the case of bishop Áed of Sletty as an example. Sletty was a monastery in modern-day County Laois in south Leinster. Laois was a long way away from Armagh, but it seemed to be firmly loyal to the church of Patrick's heirs. In the additions to Tírechán's compendium of Patrician churches there is preserved a quasi-legal document that records how the church of Sletty placed itself under the jurisdiction of Armagh.⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁵⁰ Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland*, 1. See also, Kathleen Hughes, 'The Church and the world in early Christian Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies* 13 (1962) 99-116. Hughes, *The Church*, 39-90. Ó Corráin, 'Dál Cais', 52-63. Charles Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade in Early Medieval Ireland', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 110 (1980) 67-89. Ó Corráin, 'Some aspects of Organisation', 327-41. Doherty, 'Some aspects of hagiography', 303-15. Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, 48-74. Lacey, *Colum Cille*, 39-51.

⁵⁵¹ Sharpe, 'Some problems concerning', 268-70. Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 280.

⁵⁵² See fn. 534.

⁵⁵³ The blurring of lines between native and ecclesiastical learning is, at the very least, well attested. See Ó Corráin, 'Historical need', 142, esp. fn. 3. Sharpe, 'Some problems concerning', 268-70. Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 280.

⁵⁵⁴ Francis John Byrne, 'Varia III', *Ériu* 33 (1982) 167-69: 169. Francis John Byrne, 'A Note on Trim and Sletty', *Peritia* 3 (1984) 316-19. Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200*, 174.

Epscop Aed bóí i Sléibti. Luid du Ardd Macae. Birt edoct cu Segéne du Ardd Machae. Dubbert Segene oitherroch adicacht du Aíd, ocus adopart Áed aidacht ocus a chenél ocus a eclis du Pátricc cu bbráth. Fáccab Áed a idacht la Conchad. Luid Conchad du Art Machae. Con tubart Fland Feblae a cheill dóo, ocus gabsi cadessin abbaith./ ‘Bishop Áed was in Sletty. He went to Armagh. He brought a testament to Ségéne for Armagh. Ségéne gave back his testament to Áed and Áed offered his testament and his kin and his church to Patrick for ever. Áed left his testament with Conchad and Conchad went to Armagh and Fland Feblae explained its import to him, and Conchad too assumed the abbacy’.⁵⁵⁵

Áed of Sletty eventually died 700 AD, and given the above extract it seems that he died at Armagh.⁵⁵⁶ It is likely that Muirchú, who in his writings demonstrates incredible loyalty to Armagh, met Áed there as it is believed generally to be at Áed’s behest that *VSP* was composed.⁵⁵⁷ The fact that Sletty was loyal to Armagh, even though Kildare was much closer, may inform historians about the manner in which the secular and ecclesiastical coincided in the political sphere.⁵⁵⁸ Áed of Sletty was a member of the Uí Bairrche sept within the Laigin, and while Armagh was much further away than Kildare, Kildare was a monastery heavily associated with the Uí Dúnlainge, a rival sept within the Laigin Dynastic Framework. The rivalry between the Uí Bairrche and the Uí Dúnlainge may have incentivised Áed, and his presumably Uí Bairrche community at Sletty, to opt ‘for a kind of federal status within the *paruchia* of Kildare’s great rival Armagh’.⁵⁵⁹ A fascinating element of the claim that places

⁵⁵⁵ *Additamenta* 16, in Ludwig Bieler (ed. & transl.), *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin 1979) 178-179.

⁵⁵⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 158-59.

⁵⁵⁷ Bieler, *The Patrician texts*, 1 & 62-63.

⁵⁵⁸ Doherty, ‘Cult of St Patrick’, 72-78.

⁵⁵⁹ Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 175. See also, Byrne, ‘A Note on Trim and Sletty’, 318.

Sletty in subservience to Armagh is that Áed offered ‘his testament and his kin and his church to Patrick forever’. The inclusion of kin is particularly noteworthy in relation to this chapter, as it highlights the interwoven nature of the ecclesiastical and secular sphere in politics. Áed may have been a spiritual leader to the community of Sletty, but he was also an important member of the Uí Bairrche sept, and the negotiation he undertook with Ségéne of Armagh was on behalf of both the religious community of Sletty and the dynastic power of the Uí Bairrche. Áed, as an important bishop and respected man within his community, may have had the same role in society that notable modern ecclesiastics, such as Bishop Edward Daly, had, as representative of the church and his people. It is likely that Áed’s negotiation with Ségéne was a means of staving off Kildare’s expansionistic claims on Sletty, a sentiment that has been echoed in previous scholarship, “Sletty, by the late seventh century, was beginning to feel the chill winds of expansionistic claims emanating from its neighbour Kildare”.⁵⁶⁰

Sletty was definitely declaring loyalty to Armagh and to Patrick, at least in Áed’s time; the problem that persists, however, is that it cannot be quite determined through what means this ecclesiastical submission was acted out: ‘this reconstruction of the historical background cannot explain how Armagh actually protected Sletty from the tentacles of Kildare expansion’.⁵⁶¹ This loyalty may have been demonstrated by the *cuairt* (‘circuit’/‘visitation’) that the church of Armagh seemed to use in order to extract revenue (perhaps as some form of tribute) from the churches that it claimed the loyalty of.⁵⁶² This appears to be a situation where Armagh profited without needing to take political action; but what did Sletty stand to gain? It is worth noting that, in the time of Áed and Ségéne, Armagh was very much under the control of the Airgíalla, and while the Airgíalla could exercise great political power through their

⁵⁶⁰ Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 175.

⁵⁶¹ Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 175.

⁵⁶² Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, 214-215. (This example is drawn from the mid-tenth century, although the possibility that this was the manner in which *paruchia*e operated even at an early stage should be considered). For an instance of Armagh collecting rent from subject churches, see also Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 256 and Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 70.

bishops who were the leaders of the Armagh *paruchia*, they were hardly likely to enforce submission through means of arms on a church in modern-day County Laois. If the Uí Bairrche admitted loyalty to Kildare, they would have been acknowledging the ecclesiastical supremacy of their Laigin kinsmen, the Uí Dúnlainge in Kildare, whom they militantly opposed. In practical terms, it would be disastrous, not just for the autonomy of Sletty, but for the autonomy of the Uí Bairrche, to have their ecclesiastical services placed under the jurisdiction of ecclesiastics with rival political agendas in mind.

With the implications of ecclesiastical submission to Kildare in mind, not just for the community at Sletty but also the Uí Bairrche of which he was a member, Áed may have decided that the best solution for maintaining a level of political autonomy for his church and kin was to seek some measure of protection from Armagh. This may be because Armagh, given their distance, would be less likely to exercise direct control over the community at Sletty. It seems clear that Áed of Sletty's decision to declare loyalty to the *paruchia* of Armagh was motivated not just by a desire for Sletty to achieve autonomy, but by an Uí Bairrche desire to stave off possible Uí Dúnlainge influence. In terms of practicality, losing some measure of autonomy in their church to a distant *paruchia* that had no designs upon them was preferable to placing their ecclesiastics under the supervision of an Uí Dúnlainge bishop.⁵⁶³

In a similar fashion the Southern Uí Néill septs of Síl nÁedo Sláine and Clann Chólmain Máir, associated with Armagh and Iona respectively, despite being much closer geographically to the monastic settlement of Kildare. It is very likely that the reason both Uí Néill septs sought closer ties with more distant *paruchiae* was to hold off influence from a *paruchia* controlled by their immediate Laigin rivals. This rivalry is perhaps what is being echoed when Lóegaire requests to be buried facing the Uí Dunlainge *facie ad faciem usque ad diem erdathe* in

⁵⁶³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 262.

Tírechán's *Collectanea*.⁵⁶⁴ Indeed the fact that Lóegaire here represents the Uí Néill (and as a result Armagh's parochial claims), while the Uí Dunlainge represent Kildare, would seem to suggest that this statement both functions to relate an ancient animosity between the two political groups, and to allude to the animosity between the ecclesiastical institutions associated with said groups. The case of Áed of Sletty demonstrates the difficulty with understanding the relationship between prominent ecclesiastical institutions and dynastic politics. It is difficult not to draw the conclusion that Áed sought the assistance of Armagh for the political benefit of his people, and so it is understandable why the word 'alliance' has been used to summarise the relationships between powerful *paruchia*e and notable dynastic powers. Nevertheless, it is misleading, as it does not do justice to the degree to which the Uí Néill and Armagh were connected. Thus far, this chapter has sought to emphasise the role of the individual who lived as both a part of an ecclesiastical institution and as a member of a Dynastic Framework. Áed of Sletty is a good example of such an individual, acting both for the benefit of his ecclesiastical institution and also his larger kindred; this should hopefully demonstrate that dynastic politics defies being confined to strictly the secular or the ecclesiastical, and that it can influence the politics of both.

Although the monastery of Armagh itself was predominantly Airgíalla, the *paruchia* of Armagh was another story. Through texts such as Tírechán's *Collectanea* and the *Liber Angeli*, the *paruchia* of Armagh extended its strength and political clout far beyond the borders of Airgíalla control. We have already seen an example of this, namely the churches that Patrick founded in Mag Breg.⁵⁶⁵ That one extract does not fully capture the degree to which Tírechán used the *Collectanea* as a means to promote Armagh's agenda. Still within the lands of the Uí

⁵⁶⁴ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 12, (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 132).

⁵⁶⁵ See earlier in this thesis, 'Chapter 5: The Construction of Political Narratives Concerning Dynastic Frameworks', Sub-Heading *The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks: Armagh's Accounts*.

Néill, Patrick encounters Conall Cremthainne son of Niall, and so hospitable was Conall to Christianity and to Patrick that not only was he baptised but

Pensabatque aeclessiam Deo Patricii pedibus eius sexaginta pedum/ '(Conall) measured a church, sixty foot (in length), with his own feet for Patrick's God'.⁵⁶⁶

This of course serves as an allegory to indicate the presence of Patrician loyalties within the lands of the Southern Uí Néill, though we know that the Clann Cholmáin associated more closely with Iona in the early period.⁵⁶⁷ Following his time in the lands of the Southern Uí Néill, Patrick travels into the territory of the Connachta, and spread Christianity wherever he went. He founded two churches at Carraic Dagri and Mruig Túaithe before baptising many thousands that day.⁵⁶⁸ While in Connacht Patrick encountered Ende son of Amolngid;

ab occidentalibus plagis de campo Domnon et de silua Fochloth/'I am Énde son of Amolngid son of Fíachrae son of Echu, from the western district, Mag Domnon and the Wood of Fochloth' and he baptised and bestowed a blessing upon his son.⁵⁶⁹

Later six sons of Amolngid were brought before Lóegaire and Patrick to be judged, and Ende offered his son and his inheritance to Patrick's God and to Patrick,

⁵⁶⁶ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 10, (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 132-133).

⁵⁶⁷ See; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 512 & 563. Charles-Edwards' thoughts are supported by the promulgation of *Lex Coluim Cille* by Donnchad mac Domnaill of the Clann Chólmáin. See; Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 222-23.

⁵⁶⁸ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 13, (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 132-135).

⁵⁶⁹ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 14, (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 134-135). For a discussion of the sons of Amolngid, see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 47-51.

Et dixit Endeus: 'Filius meum et partem hereditatis meae ego immolo Deo Patricii et Patricio' / 'And Énde said: 'I offer my son and my share in the inheritance to Patrick's God and to Patrick.'⁵⁷⁰

Through this section Tírechán extends the claims of Armagh and Patrick to the territory of the Connachta, and this is explicitly clear towards the end when Tírechán states that

Per hoc dicunt alii quia serui sumus Patricii usque in praesentem diem / 'It is for this reason, some say, that we are servants of Patrick to the present day'.⁵⁷¹

So far, not even halfway through the *Collectanea*, Tírechán has demonstrated the manner in which he uses Patrick as an allegorical figure to lay Armagh's claim throughout Ireland.⁵⁷² Armagh's influence then extends far beyond the mere monastery. Even more curious is that Patrick's circuit of travelling and founding monasteries and winning the loyalty of dynasties occurs almost entirely in *Leth Cuinn*, predominantly in the territory of the Uí Néill and Connachta. It is not until the very final section that Patrick travels outside of *Leth Cuinn*, and almost as an afterthought, lays claim to Leinster and Munster.⁵⁷³

The *paruchia* of Armagh must, therefore, have been susceptible to the political interests of the lands in which its vassal churches lay, especially when the tributary churches lay in the territory of the most powerful Dynastic Framework in Ireland, the Uí Néill. Furthermore, it is likely that as an early and prominent church, Armagh was granted core royal land, and thus

⁵⁷⁰ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 15, (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 134-135).

⁵⁷¹ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 15, (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 134-135).

⁵⁷² Sharpe, 'Churches and Communities', 88-89.

⁵⁷³ To support this reading of Leinster and Munster as an afterthought within the *Collectanea*, see Tírechán, *Collectanea* 51 (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 162-163), which includes a tiny segment wherein Patrick travels to Cashel.

was limited in its ability to expand its own labour and production. By bringing other ‘lesser churches’ under its wing it became entitled to the fruits of their labour, and thus benefitted itself.⁵⁷⁴ The case of Áed of Sletty shows Áed reaching out to the power of Armagh, but with the implicit understanding that, if he placed his church under their protection, he would also be placing his kin under their ecclesiastical jurisdiction. The various churches within Uí Néill territory that were answerable to Armagh, which, according to Tírechán, was quite a lot, would likely also bring the faithful of the local sept under the sway of the Armagh *paruchia*. Such influence could not have come cheaply, as, without playing to the crowd, the *paruchia* of Armagh would not have been able to maintain the loyalty of the churches within Uí Néill territory. This thesis would contend that this is the primary reason why texts from Armagh so often crafted or promoted the political narrative of the larger Uí Néill Dynastic Framework, because, although the monastery of Armagh may have been Airgíalla, most of the larger *paruchia* it oversaw was comprised of churches in Uí Néill territory, as we have seen from the citations of the *Collectanea* above. Furthermore, many of the interactions whereby Patrick lays claim to a monastery, or the ecclesiastical loyalty of a sept occurs via allegory with the leader of the Dynastic Framework. This can occur in a positive manner, e.g., Énde son of Amolngid volunteering his son for service to Patrick, or Conall Cremthainne raising a grand church in Patrick’s honour. These are not just territorial claims, then, but tales that appease the audience by aggrandising their ancestor. The territorial claims of Armagh, in the case of Tírechán, were therefore directed, at least in part, at the kin-based group that dominated the territory as much as at the ecclesiastical institution there. This may have been a natural by-product of attempting to entice Uí Néill churches and clergymen into the *paruchia*. It was less an alliance, and more of a merger or symbiotic relationship, where the learned/scholarly/ecclesiastical wing of the Uí Néill Framework operated within the larger *paruchia* of Armagh or Armagh affiliated

⁵⁷⁴ Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 68-70, 129-48 & 279-81.

churches. This would mean that the larger *paruchia* of Armagh became more and more favourably disposed towards the Uí Néill as it became more comprised of clergymen and churches from the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework.

In some instances, scholars have interpreted *VSP* as the church of Armagh hitching their wagon to the Uí Néill horse and solidifying a marriage of church and state at the highest level.⁵⁷⁵ Would it make more sense, however, to view this merger as occurring the other way around? That the Uí Néill, and the Síl nÁedo Sláine/Cenél nÉogain in particular, as a still fairly emergent, yet potent, political force in Ireland, decided to use Armagh, the seat of Patrick's heirs, dominated by the unthreatening Airgíalla, as the ecclesiastical power to which their churches could be loyal? Thus by immersing their churches in the *paruchia* of Armagh, the Uí Néill could legitimise their claims to be kings of Tara by closely associating their history with Patrick, the saint who converted the Irish.

There are caveats to be raised with the implication of such a reversal, however; this chapter has examined the case for the power of individuals within monasteries that were also members of Dynastic Frameworks, displaying a predisposition for those Dynastic Frameworks in the works their monastic institution produced.⁵⁷⁶ A monk responsible for the composition of a hagiography, such as Muirchú and his *VSP*, may have been influenced by an Uí Néill clergyman who sought to see his family included in the narrative. Interpreting *VSP* as the Uí Néill currying favour with the *paruchia* of Armagh relies on the caveat that, although the secular and ecclesiastical spheres coincided in the realm of politics, the ecclesiastical sphere was more proficient in certain political machinations than the secular, and vice versa. The ecclesiastical world was the realm of scholarly and learned warfare between men of letters that dedicated their lives to the advancement of knowledge and the honouring of God and his saints.

⁵⁷⁵ de Paor, 'The Aggrandisement of Armagh', 103-107.

⁵⁷⁶ See fn. 534.

Meanwhile, the secular was one of physical violence and warfare between opposed kings who sought to enforce political designs on the loser. This is not a strict rule, however, it is by and large the means through which these groups promoted their agendas.

In the case of Kildare and Sletty, it would have been disastrous to allow church services to be conducted, or church assets commissioned by an institution that may have ultimately declared loyalty for a rival sept.⁵⁷⁷ There are many examples of ecclesiastical leaders using their platform to influence the public from the medieval period even to the modern day, e.g., the role of Adomnán in promulgating *Lex Innocentium*, and bishops working against Charles Stewart Parnell and against trade unionists.⁵⁷⁸ Allowing a local monastery to fall under the sway of a distant powerful *paruchia*, that itself was a manifestation of the political clout of a rival sept, would have allowed for the appointment of a bishop loyal to that rival power. An individual loyal to a rival sept would have been perfectly situated to direct either his homily, or the homilies performed in his ecclesiastical institution, in order to make his audience more agreeable to the political agenda of his parent monastery.⁵⁷⁹ There had to be some measure of agreement between the secular and ecclesiastical powers of the *tuath*. With this in mind, it may be time to reconsider whether Armagh was currying favour with the Uí Néill. Instead, perhaps when ecclesiastical institutions in Uí Néill territory were confronted with Armagh and Kildare's claims for primacy, like Sletty they chose to acknowledge the claims of the *paruchia*

⁵⁷⁷ Specifically, with regards to assets it is the creation and composition of expensive manuscripts that is in mind. See fn. 111.

⁵⁷⁸ Adomnán's *Lex Innocentium* had major implications for Irish society with regards the political leanings of those who promulgated the law, and it even was a precedent for international law. There is an extensive literature concerning *Lex Innocentium* but to begin see; Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The Lex Innocentium: Adomnán's Law for Women, Clerics and Youths, 697 AD', in Mary O'Dowd and Sabine Wichert (eds), *Chattel, Servant or Citizen: Women's Status in Church, State and Society*, (Belfast 1995) 53-76. Máirín Ní Donnchadha, 'Birr and the Law of the Innocents', in Thomas O'Loughlin (ed.), *Adomnán at Birr AD 697: Essays in Commemoration of the Law of the Innocents*, (Dublin 2001) 13-32. James E. Fraser, 'Adomnán and the Morality of War', in Jonathan M. Wooding (ed.) *Adomnán of Iona Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker* (Dublin 2010) 85-111. James W. Houlihan, *Adomnan's Lex Innocentium and the Laws of War* (Dublin 2020). James W. Houlihan, 'Lex Innocentium (697 AD): Adomnán of Iona-Father of Western Jus in Bello', in *International Review of the Red Cross* 101 (2019) 715-35.

⁵⁷⁹ Richard Sharpe, 'Churches and communities in early medieval Ireland: towards a pastoral model'. In John Blair & Richard Sharpe, *Pastoral care before the parish* (London 1992) 81-109: 81-84. Provides an overview of the pastoral role of a church in the community in early medieval Ireland.

that was not under the control of their rivals, but of a people who claimed to be their kinsmen.⁵⁸⁰ In a sense, rivalries between *paruchia* were not acted out strictly in the ecclesiastical sphere, precisely because of how inseparable the secular and ecclesiastical spheres in Ireland were. Because rivalries between *paruchia* necessarily spilled out into the secular sphere, it involved not only the community at the monastery, but the people of the local sept. Just as we have seen with Áed of Sletty, placing his church and his kin under Armagh because of a local secular rivalry, it may not be as simple as Armagh hitching their wagon to the powerful Uí Néill horse. Instead, it may well have been the local rivalries between septs that caused them to declare allegiance for Armagh or Iona respectively.

This would, of course, make sense, as many powerful Uí Néill septs and kings of Tara had allegiance to the church of Armagh, in particular the Cenél nEógain.⁵⁸¹ Furthermore, the mutually beneficial narrative that came forth from the literature of the time seems to hammer home the point that the ecclesiastical and political spheres were intertwined, as Armagh's claims to be the paramount church in Ireland through Patrick are clearly seen in Muirchú's *VSP*, when Patrick is described quite literally as the apostle of the Irish: *Ut eos quibus apostolus fuisti iudices*.⁵⁸² As he is their founder and patron, this elevates Armagh and Patrick above other saintly cults. The Uí Néill likewise claimed paramountcy as a secular power in Ireland, with a monopoly over the kingship of Tara; therefore, by asserting the affiliation between the heirs of Patrick and the Uí Néill, Armagh established spiritual authority over Tara, and through Tara, Ireland.⁵⁸³ There could be no more suitable marriage between the secular and ecclesiastical powers of Ireland than for the Uí Néill to express their politics and political narratives within the framework of the Armagh *paruchia*. Their relationship meant that the secular and ecclesiastical spheres on the highest level in Ireland generally worked in tandem. The claims

⁵⁸⁰ See fn. 554-59.

⁵⁸¹ See fn. 464.

⁵⁸² Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii* II 4 (Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, 117).

⁵⁸³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 473.

that Muirchú puts forward, that Tara was *Caput Scottorum*, may be viewed as accurate, but with some qualification: ‘By the seventh century the original sacral function of Tara, which had been partly the reason behind the site’s prestige, was put aside and refashioned by the Uí Néill, and especially by some of the southern dynasties, for their own ends’.⁵⁸⁴ The relationship both entities share in Muirchú’s work seems then to echo the political reality of when he was writing, and a strategy they had adopted for maintaining that reality by remaining symbiotic dominant forces in both ecclesiastical and secular political circles. Muirchú links the Uí Néill with the most important saint in Irish history and the most powerful monastic centre on the island of Ireland from their very inception.

Beyond Armagh we can also see the impact of secular politics within ecclesiastical institutions in the case of Iona, and how it was influenced by the Cenél Conaill and the Dál Riada. As outlined earlier, Iona was a monastery that strove for asceticism and achieving sanctity through isolation; yet, despite that, we see multiple references in Iona texts to how the monastery became embroiled in the politics of the period.⁵⁸⁵ It is natural that in the *VC* and any poem concerning Columba we will encounter reference to his kinsmen, the Cenél Conaill. The groups that Iona texts focus upon, however, are often informed by the political realities of the monastery and its position. It was a monastery run, for most of its history, by members of the Cenél Conaill or other Uí Néill septs. We have discussed this earlier in how Adomnán presents Diarmait mac Cerbaill and Domnall mac Áedo in *VSC*, and this positive presentation of the Cenél Conaill is present in many pieces of literature created or preserved on Iona. In another poem known as *Fo réir Choluimb* by Beccán mac Luigdech, it is possible to see the association between Iona and the Uí Néill heavily emphasised through verse.⁵⁸⁶ Throughout the poem there are multiple references to Columba’s ancestry, with a specific and notable fixation on Níall

⁵⁸⁴ Bhreathnach, “Temoria: Caput Scottorum?”, 67-88.

⁵⁸⁵ See Sub-Heading: *The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks: Iona’s Perspective*.

⁵⁸⁶ Clancy & Márkus, *Iona: The earliest poetry*, 138-139.

Noígíallach. To begin with Columba is noted as ‘Colum úa Néill’, departing from the *Amra* and *VC* in identifying Columba predominantly as Uí Néill rather than Cenél Conaill, but this makes sense given that the poet was believed to have ties to the Cenél nEógain, who were rivals to the Cenél Conaill.⁵⁸⁷ Beccán refers to him as

Columb n-auë Néill/ ‘Colum úa Néill’,

Columb Cille, caindel Néill/ ‘Colum Cille, Níall’s candle’

and

*Columb Cille, cáich di Níall, ní cen toísech, táthus sóer/ ‘Colum Cille, of all Níall’s folk: not chiefless, they have a lord’.*⁵⁸⁸

Given the references in *VC* and *Fo réir Choluimb* it seems fair to say, then, that Iona was a monastery that, in its literature, was heavily concerned with the politics of the Uí Néill, and more specifically, of the Cenél Conaill. The community at Iona was therefore very much the ‘Scholarly Wing’ of the Cenél Conaill, either composing literature that enhanced their reputation and prestige, or preserving already existing literature that had the same effect.⁵⁸⁹

It was not just the Cenél Conaill and the Uí Néill whom Iona assisted, however. It was argued earlier that Armagh was, to a certain extent, beholden to the secular powers in the areas where they established constituent monasteries. Essentially the argument is that a political necessity for gaining the loyalty and submission of monastic communities in an area far from Armagh control was to maintain good relations with the secular power in that region. To further

⁵⁸⁷ Clancy & Márkus, *Iona: The earliest poetry*, 130.

⁵⁸⁸ Clancy & Márkus, *Iona: The earliest poetry*, 139-141.

⁵⁸⁹ See; Bisagni, *Amrae Choluimb Chille*, 252-57, wherein he discusses how the *Amrae* may have been a product of Iona desperately attempting to strengthen ties with the Cenél Conaill at a later stage. This may inform us with regard to the goals of later poetry.

this argument, however, we should examine the other powers that appear in texts originating from Iona, specifically the Dál Riada. The Dál Riada are possibly the most cut-and-dry example of a monastery being beholden to the local secular power. Dál Riada kings appear throughout *VC*, often in a positive light; this thesis would argue that the reason for including the Dál Riada was out of necessity, as they were the most powerful Irish Dynastic Framework in the region surrounding Iona, and maintaining a good rapport with them was crucial to maintaining the loyalty of churches established in Dál Riada land. According to their annals, Iona itself was founded by virtue of a grant of land given to Columba by the Dál Riada king.

Mors Conaill m. Comghaill anno regni .xvi. sui qui obtulit insulam Iae Columbe Cille/ 'Death in the sixteenth year of his reign of Conall son of Comgall who granted the island of Ia to Colum Cille'.⁵⁹⁰

It is fair to assume, then, that Iona was beholden to the Dál Riada, in spite of their predominantly Cenél Conaill leadership, and as Iona began to establish monasteries throughout western Scotland it would have been imperative that they maintain good relations with the local powers. It is for this reason that *VC* provides almost as positive a representation of the Dál Riada as it does of the Cenél Conaill and the Uí Néill.

Throughout *VC* Columba provides supernatural assistance to the Dál Riada, when Áedán mac Gabráin was going into battle with the Southern Picts, Columba dropped to his knees to pray for his success and said:

⁵⁹⁰ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 86-87.

Nunc intente pro hoc populo et Aidano rege dominum oremus. Hac enim hora ineunt bellum./'Let us now pray earnestly to the Lord for this people and for the King Áedán. For in this hour they are going into battle'.⁵⁹¹

By far the most extraordinary moment that highlights the dependency Iona must have had on the local Dál Riada is when Columba is coerced against his will by an angel of God to crown that same Áedán mac Gabráin as a king. The angel provides Columba with a glass book of the ordination of kings:

Qui cum secundum quod ei in libro erat commendatum Aidanum in regem ordinare recussaret, quia magis Iogenanum fratrem eius dilegeret, subito angelus extendens manum sanctum percussit flagillo, cuius livorosum in eius latere uestigium omnibus suae diebus permansit uitae/'But when he refused to ordain Áedán as king, according to what was commanded him in the book, because he loved Eóganán, Áedán's brother, more, the angel suddenly stretched out his hand and struck the holy man with a scourge, the livid scar from which remained on his side all the days of his life'.⁵⁹²

After the saint's insubordination in the face of God's order, the angel whipped him for three successive nights before the saint relented and agreed to crown Áedán, who was waiting for him on Iona to be ordained by the saint as a king.

⁵⁹¹ Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 32-33. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 119.

⁵⁹² Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 188-89. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 208.

*Sanctus uerbo obsequutus domini ad Iouam transnauigauit insulam, ibidemque Aidanum hisdem aduentantem diebus in regem sicut erat iusus ordinauit/‘The holy man submitted to the word of the Lord. He sailed over to the island of Io, and there, as he had been bidden, he ordained as king Áedán, who arrived about that time’.*⁵⁹³

Whichever way this section is read it is beyond extraordinary that in a saint’s hagiography he had to be coerced through the violence of an angel to follow God’s will.⁵⁹⁴ Whether it is a reflection of a story passed down among the community of Iona about Áedán’s ordination or a tale composed entirely by Adomnán based on biblical precedent, it is remarkable that Columba is portrayed as stubborn in the face of God’s command. Nevertheless it does indicate the power that the Dál Riada held over Iona that their saint could be compelled, against his initial will, to provide an ordination for their king. In a separate text, however, by Cumméne the White, there is an account of the prophecy that Columba gave Áedán as he ordained him king, and this prophecy is fully in line with what one would expect from a monastery led by Cenél Conaill abbots:

Indubitanter crede Ó Aidane quoniam nullus aduersariorum tuorum tibi poterit resistere, donec prius fraudulentiam agas in me et in posteros meos. Propterea ergo tú filiis commenda, ut et ipsi filiis et nepotibus et posteris euis commendent, ne per consilia mala eorum sceptrum regnis huius de manibus suis perdant. In quocumque enim tempore malum aduersum me aut aduersus cognatos meos qui sunt in Hibernia fecerint, flagellum quod causa tui ab angelo

⁵⁹³ Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 188-89. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 209.

⁵⁹⁴ The role of the coercive angel has been outlined previously, see fn. 523.

sustenui per manum dei super eos in magnum flagitium uertetur/'Believe, O Áedán, and doubt not, that none of your opponents will be able to stand against you until first you practice deceit against me, and against my successors. For this reason therefore do you charge your sons that they also shall charge their sons and grandsons and descendants, not through evil counsels to lose their sceptre of this kingdom from their hands. For at whatever time they shall do evil to me, or to my kindred who are in Ireland, the scourge that I have endured from an angel on your account will be turned by the hand of God to a great disgrace upon them'.⁵⁹⁵

Not only is this prophecy very reminiscent of another prophecy which Columba gave to Áed of Sláine, but it is specifically intended to guard the interests of the Cenél Conaill from any expansionistic behaviour the Dál Riada may undertake. Of course this prophecy comes to pass, and because Áedán's grandson, Domnal Brecc, laid waste to the territory of Domnall ua Ainmirech of the Cenél Conaill it is said that

Hoc autem uaticinium temporibus nostris completum est in bello Roth, Domnallo Brecco nepot{e} Aidani sine cause uastante prouinciam Domnali nepotis Ainmuireg. Et a die illa usque hodie adhuc in procliuo sunt ab extraneis/'This prophecy has been fulfilled in our times, in the battle of Roth, when Domnall Brecc, Áedán's grandson, without cause wasted the province of Domnall, Ainmuire's grandson. And they are from that day to this still held down by strangers'.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹⁵ Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 188-91. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 209.

⁵⁹⁶ Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 190-91. Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*, 209.

The prophecy itself is very much indicative of the political leanings of the *paruchia* of Iona, that it bore strong loyalty to the Cenél Conaill, but needed to ensure the co-operation of the Dál Riada in order to maintain its position.

Iona's portrayal of the Dál Riada in *VC* is indicative of the *realpolitik* of a monastery needing good relations with the local powers in the regions where they were establishing constituent monasteries.⁵⁹⁷ This may inform our reading of the *Collectanea* and *VSP* as an attempt to court the favour of monasteries whose loyalty Armagh needed to gain in order to advance their claim. The advancement of 'secular' dynastic politics and 'ecclesiastical' politics were accomplished simultaneously, in many instances, because of the interwoven nature of politics in Ireland. This is the heart of the issue with monastic sites as centres for manuscript production. They are demonstrably partisan in nature, and different monasteries may be partisan to different Dynastic Frameworks, or even septs. Throughout the medieval period in Ireland the monasteries that were responsible for the production of manuscripts take the side of particular Dynastic Frameworks in the literature that they produce. We have seen it here in *VSP* and in the *Collectanea* attributed to Tírechán. It is precisely this degree of inseparability that is pivotal; there was no split in loyalties between an Uí Néill/Éoganacht/Airgíalla clergyman's monastic institution and the political affiliations of his Dynastic Framework; they are all to be taken into account as his politics. A clergyman from Armagh, who is loyal to the Uí Néill by virtue of his birth into an Uí Néill sept, is not being negligent in his duties to Saint Patrick and Armagh by using the Life of Saint Patrick to promote the politics of his sept; he is simply echoing his own political reality in the text. Neither has he abandoned his family once he enters into service with Armagh; rather, he has simply taken on a new role in society.⁵⁹⁸

⁵⁹⁷ Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 280, demonstrates the close relationship between Ecclesiastical institutions and local land-owning bodies in Ireland.

⁵⁹⁸ See fnn. 544-47 and Tírechán's own political agenda.

It should be clear, then, that the church in early medieval Ireland provided a Dynastic Framework with the means to create for itself a scholarly/learned wing. This scholarly/learned wing of people is not separate either from the Church or from the Dynastic Framework it serves, because it never has really left the service of either entity, due to the inseparable nature of ecclesiastical and secular politics in early medieval Ireland.⁵⁹⁹ These are the people who are crucially important to the construction of the politics of the Uí Néill identity. The churches in early medieval Ireland provided a setting for the study and production of manuscript texts that, as we have seen, were so important to the construction of Dynastic Frameworks and assigning political narratives to them.

The Dual Nature of Ecclesiastical and Secular Politics

In discussing Irish churches and monasteries as the ‘scholarly’ wing of Dynastic Frameworks it is implied that both the ecclesiastical institutions and the secular kin-based frameworks operated in the same sphere of politics. To summarise the words of modern scholars: they were ‘of the world rather than apart from it’.⁶⁰⁰ One of the ways that this becomes most obvious is via the manner in which septs within Dynastic Frameworks, especially the Uí Néill, seem to declare loyalty to a *paruchia* with an appreciation for how it might affect their standing in the framework.

Within the Uí Néill the Cenél Conaill favoured Iona and the Cenél nÉogain Armagh.⁶⁰¹ Both of these septs were opposing powers in the Northern Uí Néill, theirs was a local political rivalry among the Uí Néill of Ulster as they vied for supremacy in that region. This is mirrored among the Southern Uí Néill via the Clann Cholmáin support of Iona and the Síol nÁedo Sláine support

⁵⁹⁹ Sharpe, ‘Some problems concerning’, 268-70.

⁶⁰⁰ Cólman Etchingam, *Church Organisation in Ireland AD. 650-1000*, 1.

⁶⁰¹ See fn. 464. & Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 36-46. Ó Riain, *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum*, 81 & 184-88. Anderson & Anderson, *Adomnán’s Life of Columba*, xxxviii-xxxix. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 136. Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, 5. Lacey, *Colum Cille*, 39-51.

of Armagh.⁶⁰² This informs us, that as with the attempt of Sletty to secure some manner of independence from the designs of Kildare, the opposing powers of the Uí Néill in the North and the South chose their *paruchia* with some consideration given to their rivals association. This is to be expected among the Northern Uí Néill; given the prominent position of the Cenél Conaill amongst the clergy of Iona, it would not have been politically advantageous for the Cenél nÉogain to place their churches under the supervision of the *familia Columbae*. Among the Southern Uí Néill, however, it is more complicated: as the Clann Chólmáin do not have any strong control over Iona it is unclear why they would chose to associate so heavily with Iona rather than Armagh in the earliest period. Given that the Cenél nÉogain would not associate with Iona for political reasons, and given that the local rivals of the Clann Chólmáin, the Síol nÁedo Sláine, had associated with Armagh, that the Clann Chólmáin opted for an association with Iona in the earliest period seems to be a calculated political decision.⁶⁰³

Many of the early texts from Armagh stress its primacy and prominence among the Irish *paruchia*. The text *Liber Angeli*, is probably one of the most obvious examples of this, acting to promote ecclesiastical jurisdiction and promotion of Armagh to ecclesiastical primacy in Ireland.⁶⁰⁴ In one of the last sections of *Liber Angeli*, Patrick, acting as an allegorical figure for Armagh, acknowledges the domain of Brigit's *paruchia* over her province, with a caveat:

*O mea Brigita, paruchia tua in prouincia tua apud reputabitur monarchiam
tuam, in parte autem orientali et occidentail dominatu in meo erit/* 'O my Brigit,

⁶⁰² Michael Byrnes, 'The Árd Ciannachta in Adomnán's Vita Columbae : a reflection of Iona's attitude to the Síol nÁeda Sláine in the late seventh century', in A.P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin 2000) 127-36: 134-35.

⁶⁰³ See fnn. 464 & 602.

⁶⁰⁴ Richard Sharpe, 'Palaeographical considerations in the study of the Patrician documents in the Book of Armagh (Dublin, Trinity College MS 52)', *Scriptorium* 36.1 (1982) 3-28, esp. 23-24. Sharpe further argues that the *Liber Angeli* was among the earliest of these Patrician texts that outlined the Armagh *paruchia*'s ecclesiastical jurisdiction. See, Sharpe, *Ibid*, 20.

your paruchia will be deemed to be in your province in your dominion, but in the eastern and western part it will be in my domination'.⁶⁰⁵

This section implies that Brigit and her churches are allowed by Patrick to be most important in her province, i.e. Leinster, but outside this exception churches are subservient to Patrick. Armagh's struggle for primacy over Kildare and Iona led to the creation of texts that put forward its territorial claims, e.g. *VSP* and *Collectanea*. Siding with the *paruchia* of Armagh in the ecclesiastical battle for primacy may have proven to be mutually beneficial, as it staved off the threat of monasteries in Uí Néill territory with loyalty towards the Uí Dúnlainge-dominated *paruchia* of Kildare in a similar fashion to what Áed may have been attempting to do with the Uí Bairrche/Sletty, while simultaneously providing Armagh with a large number of monasteries to claim into its *paruchia*. The Clann Chólmain/Cenél Conaill association with Iona may be seen as a similar attempt to stave off the claims of Kildare and the Uí Dunlainge, but also to stave off the claims of Armagh and further differentiate themselves politically from their rivals in the Síl nÁedo Sláine/Cenél nÉogain respectively. It has been noted that, in the works of Beccán mac Luigdech, a poet associated with Iona, in the context of fervent devotion to Iona both among the monks and lay people, that they 'are part of a thought-world which extended the relationships of clientship, protection and patronage across the boundaries of death'.⁶⁰⁶ To put it simply, even though it is stressed that Columba achieves his sanctity through rejecting the material world and turning to God, his relationship with God and to his kinspeople is often framed in a similar way that the relationship between a noble and his king might be. Columba provides his *snádud* for those who fall under the jurisdiction of his protection.⁶⁰⁷ This provides a very clear intrusion of 'secular' politics into the ecclesiastical world, and make

⁶⁰⁵ *Liber Angeli* 32, in Ludwig Bieler (ed. & transl.), *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 10 (Dublin 1979) 191.

⁶⁰⁶ Clancy & Márkus, *Iona: The earliest poetry*, 153.

⁶⁰⁷ Clancy & Márkus, *Iona: The earliest poetry*, 153.

Iona's references to Columba's kinsmen like Conn, Níall and Conall, an attempt to assert jurisdiction to guide all their descendants to salvation. This is the dual nature of 'ecclesiastical' and 'secular' politics in action, highlighting that they function as two sides of the same coin, and that the jurisdiction of a *paruchia* and of a sept or a Dynastic Framework may at times intermingle, given how closely they co-operate.⁶⁰⁸

Influence from the base: Armagh's Political Assimilation

Let us examine how Armagh may have been politically beholden to the less wealthy monasteries that comprised the *paruchia*. Armagh was an incredibly important power in the ecclesiastical sphere of Ireland, and one of the ways it spread its power was by claiming dominance and jurisdiction over smaller, less important churches and monasteries. This is most obviously accomplished via Tírechán's *Collectanea* and the *Liber Angeli*, which, as we have seen earlier, used Saint Patrick as a means to claim the loyalty and subservience of monasteries throughout Ireland.⁶⁰⁹ An important point of this chapter is the degree to which the Irish monasteries did not necessarily function as independent of the dynastic politics in Ireland, due to the fact the individuals who controlled or administered to most monasteries were themselves a part of the larger Dynastic Framework. Considering this, it seems fair to assert that these monasteries functioned as a scholarly wing of the Dynastic Framework.⁶¹⁰ Part of the difficulty in approaching the role Armagh played in constructing obviously pro-Uí Néill texts, e.g. *VSP* or the *Collectanea*, is that Armagh was not controlled directly by the Uí Néill in the early period. Armagh was controlled by Airgíalla abbots, and although it grew more and more heavily involved with the Cenél nÉogain from the middle of the eighth century, it was the Airgíalla who dominated the institution.⁶¹¹

⁶⁰⁸ Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 280.

⁶⁰⁹ Sharpe, 'Churches and Communities', 88-89.

⁶¹⁰ See fn. 546.

⁶¹¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 51.

This chapter would and has posited that the *paruchia* of Armagh was affected by different social factors than the monastery of Armagh. The monastery of Armagh was dominated by the Airgíalla, while the *paruchia* of Armagh needed to maintain the loyalty of the various monasteries it claimed jurisdiction over that lay throughout Ireland. The resulting pro-Uí Néill texts, from a monastic institution not directly controlled by the Uí Néill, may be attributed to the fact that many of the monasteries claimed by the *Liber Angeli* and *Collectanea* lay within the territory of the Uí Néill, and thus the *paruchia* of Armagh benefitted from placating these subject monasteries.⁶¹²

The Uí Néill prospered, thanks in no small part to monasteries that could weave a narrative surrounding their past that influenced their present and future by fabricating claims on territory. Hagiographies and tales concerning Uí Néill kings were preserved in manuscripts composed in important Irish monasteries that had a mutual dependence on the Irish secular powers in their locality. The hagiographer Muirchú worked on behalf of the *paruchia* of Armagh; as a result, his bias towards the seat of Patrick's heirs is clear in *VSP*. We have already seen some of the narratives developed by *VSP* concerning the Uí Néill and their claims to supremacy; we may therefore claim that Muirchú — and by proxy the *paruchia* of Armagh — were responsible for promoting the political narratives in this text that would come to define the Uí Néill, and perhaps most strongly tie them to the High-Kingship of Ireland.⁶¹³ Churches and clergymen loyal to the Armagh *paruchia* were often responsible for creating texts that tied the primatial ambitions of their *paruchia* to the political ambitions of the Uí Néill. *VSP* is also among the

⁶¹² Sharpe, 'Churches and Communities', 88-96. Outlines how many of the 'lesser' churches had a tie to the local sept or family. Doherty, 'Cult of St Patrick', 70-71, where it is suggested that Armagh became entangled with the Uí Néill as a reflection of the Airgíalla seeking protection from the Ulaid. See also, Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 281, where it is suggested the establishment of many 'lesser churches' diluted the power of the major *civitates* as they no longer held a monopoly.

⁶¹³ The specific event of Patrick confronting Lóegaire appears to be established tradition, however, Muirchú and *VSP* preserve this tradition and elaborate upon the glory of the Uí Néill in a way not accomplished by Tírechán. See fn. 504 for a discussion of the existing tradition surrounding Lóegaire. See also; Patrick Wadden, 'The Pseudo-Historical Origins of the *Senchas Már* and Royal Legislation in Early Ireland', *Peritia* 27 (2016) 141-158. Patrick Wadden, 'Church, Apostle and Nation in Early Ireland', in Walter Pohl & Andre Gingrich (eds), *Medieval Worlds* 5 (Vienna 2017) 143-69.

earliest instances in which the ecclesiastical power that was Armagh demonstrated its involvement in the dynastic politics of the island. The reason why such political engagement may have first begun between Armagh and the Uí Néill may have its roots in the expansion of the influence of the *paruchia* into the territory of other Dynastic Frameworks. Armagh lay within the lands of the Airgíalla and was likely comprised in leadership by members of the Airgíalla; however, as Armagh grew in power and expanded its ambitions towards asserting their claim on the primatial see, it would have been prudent to engage with the most powerful secular powers and achieve their support. The Uí Néill did not manage to insert even one of their own into Armagh in this early period, save for one instance, the bishop Mac Laisre, who, although he has a disputed heritage, seems to have been a member of the Cenél nEógain.⁶¹⁴ Mac Laisre seems, however, to be an anomaly, as figures such as Ailill I, Ailill II, Carláen (Cáerlan Ciarláech, Cairellán), Senach, Ségéne, and many of the other bishops and abbots of Armagh seemed to either be members of the Airgíalla or born in the vicinity of Armagh.⁶¹⁵ An easy way for Armagh to achieve the support needed to authoritatively claim the primatial see would be to expand the influence of their *paruchia* onto the monasteries and churches that dotted the landscape of Ireland. What this would entail for the larger *paruchia* of Armagh is that it would become, as an ecclesiastical institution, dependent on these smaller churches to which it laid claim.⁶¹⁶ To take the *manaig* of the early Irish church as an example, the *Córus Béscnai* states that the church is entitled to tithes, firstlings, first fruits and burial payments from its *manaig*.⁶¹⁷ This meant that the first-born child of the *manaig*, who were usually the tenantry of church lands, were to be given to the church, but was not necessarily cut off from their

⁶¹⁴ Paul Walsh, *Genealogiae Regum et Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin 1918) 47.

⁶¹⁵ F.J. Byrne, 'Heads of Churches to c. 1200', in T.W. Moody & F.X. Martin & F.J. Byrne (eds), *A New History of Ireland IX: Maps, Genealogies, Lists* (Oxford 1984) 238. This is further evidence of the role that locality had upon the leadership of ecclesiastical sites, and the likelihood that the Armagh affiliated churches within Uí Néill territory would have been supervised by local ecclesiastical wings of the Dynastic Framework.

⁶¹⁶ Doherty, 'Cult of St Patrick', 68-94, esp. 94. Provides clarity that it was possible that Armagh was entreated with offers of allegiance, rather than imperialistically spreading throughout Ireland. This would even further imply that Armagh was beholden to the 'Old churches' that provided it with legitimacy.

⁶¹⁷ Ó Corráin, 'Early Irish Churches', 334.

family. The first-born receives a ‘share in his inheritance in the same way as other sons and lives on his own farm but he is educated by the church and is under certain obligations of service to it as a *manach*.’⁶¹⁸ The more churches that were brought into line, the greater their influence and the stronger their claim to primacy. It is not surprising that Armagh produced many texts bolstering and propagating Uí Néill claims to power, because the Airgíalla lay in the sphere of influence of their more powerful Uí Néill neighbours, and because of the many churches Armagh claimed that lay within Uí Néill territory.

Playing to the whims of Uí Néill nobility by creating propagandistic texts about that Dynastic Framework would have been beneficial to Armagh. As the *paruchia* of Armagh expanded its influence into the territory of the Uí Néill and the actual community at Armagh became politically subservient to and economically dependent upon the neighbouring Uí Néill, Armagh became reliant to a degree on their position in Uí Néill territory. The reason the *paruchia* may have assimilated Uí Néill politics into their texts then, as we have seen happen in the works of *Liber Angeli*, *Tírechán* and *Muirchú*, was because of the churches loyal to Armagh that lay within the territory of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. Proof of Armagh developing its power and influence within the territory of the Uí Néill may be found in both *Tírechán*’s *Collectanea* and the *Liber Angeli*, both of which outline the churches that Patrick founded and what Armagh is due as their senior. The churches outlined in the *Collectanea*, as we have seen earlier in this thesis, are overwhelmingly within the territory of the Uí Néill and Connachta.⁶¹⁹ Armagh, at the time of the composition of the *Collectanea*, therefore expanded its influence rapidly into the territory of the Uí Néill in an attempt to gain the loyalty of their churches.

⁶¹⁸ Ó Corráin, ‘Early Irish Churches’, 334. See also; Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law*, 32-3, 39 & 54.

⁶¹⁹ See Chapter 5, Sub-Heading *The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks: Armagh’s Accounts*.

Armagh's relationship with the Uí Néill is therefore somewhat similar to Iona's relationship with the Dál Riata, mentioned earlier, namely that Armagh out of political necessity needed to appease the Uí Néill in order to maintain positive relations.⁶²⁰ This was the difference between Armagh the monastery and Armagh the *paruchia*. While the monastery was comprised of members of the local Airgíalla and was therefore often run by abbots from the local area, the larger *paruchia* was heavily populated by Uí Néill clergymen and Uí Néill ecclesiastical sites. The *Collectanea* notes that Patrick founded — and thus we may interpret that Armagh claimed the loyalty of — churches in Mag Breg, amongst the descendants of Conall Cremthainne, in Mruig Túaithe, at Áth Segi, Cinnena, and Áth Carnóí in the Boyne.⁶²¹ All of these churches are specifically noted to be founded as part of the deeds he performed in the *regionibus nepotum Neill* 'the territories of the Uí Néill'.⁶²² After this the *Collectanea* notes Patrick's continued journey into Connacht, with only a tiny addition concerning Leinster and Munster, added in as an afterthought at the end. It seems safe to assume, based on the circuit of Patrick in the *Collectanea*, that Armagh claimed the loyalty (and perhaps even tribute) of churches in the *regionibus nepotum Neill* and *regionibus Connacht*. This seems even more likely to be the case when one considers that the territory, which is suspiciously absent from the *Collectanea*, is that of the Northern Uí Néill, possibly due to their close association with Columba at the time Tírechán was writing.⁶²³ Although Armagh was gaining political power and clout from these subject-churches, its politics and the texts it created must have been informed, on some level, by the political sway these smaller churches collectively held over Armagh, through its need to appease them in order to extract tribute and loyalty. It is these small monasteries and

⁶²⁰ See fnn. 597-98 & Sub-Heading *The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks: Iona's Perspective*.

⁶²¹ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 8-16 (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 131-139).

⁶²² Tírechán, *Collectanea* 17 (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 138-139).

⁶²³ It is worth noting that the lands of the Uí Néill and Connachta outlined in the *Collectanea* roughly correspond to the segment from *Liber Angeli* discussed earlier beginning with *O Mea Brigita*. See *Liber Angeli* 32, (Bieler, *The Patrician texts*, 191), where the Connachta are *orientali* and the Uí Néill in Míde are *occidentali*.

churches, that were crucial to expanding Armagh's primatial claim, and that lay within the jurisdiction of the *paruchia*, if not necessarily the original monastery of Armagh, that can be interpreted as operating as the scholarly wing of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework.

The growing influence of the Uí Néill on Armagh can be seen as being borne out in the political reality of the period when, later, the territory of Armagh came under the indirect control of the Northern Uí Néill, specifically the Cenél nEógain.⁶²⁴ It was mentioned earlier that the Cenél nEógain was associated with Armagh, while its rival the Cenél Conaill associated with Iona. The works of Tírechán and Muirchú may be seen as an attempt by the *paruchia* of Armagh to tempt the prominent Uí Néill septs away from Iona.⁶²⁵ The way that the Cenél nEógain expanded their sphere of influence to encompass Armagh, and eventually exert control over it, may be interpreted as the natural conclusion of what would happen to a *paruchia* that courted a position of favour among a prominent secular power.

Conclusion

What sets the Uí Néill apart from other groups in Ireland initially is more than just their political success, it is the fact that they have broader horizons. The Uí Néill from the outset claim the kingship of Tara in any tale they are involved in, and that kingship is further equated with the kingship of the entirety of Ireland. They are ambitious in their undertaking to become the most powerful group in Ireland, and the Irish churches within their territories help them accomplish this goal by codifying their history so that it stands as a tacit manifesto of their political undertaking. The politics of the Uí Néill on a local small-scale level was that of intermittent warfare; they lived in a state of near constant turmoil, with battles and obituaries of commanders reported near annually. In this they were the same as the rest of the Irish nobility, with no grand schemes or desires to expand beyond their own territories. This changed,

⁶²⁴ Aitchison, *Armagh and the Royal Centres*, 205.

⁶²⁵ Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, 72-73. See also fn. 482 and discussion concerning *Scrín Colmcille* in the *Collectanea*.

however, when the Irish churches became involved in the production of propaganda on behalf of the Uí Néill.

The various Irish churches associated with the Uí Néill, such as Armagh and the monasteries within that *paruchia*, were responsible for creating the political narratives of the Dynastic Framework. Their claim to higher status and supremacy over the other lesser groups in Ireland was crafted by Irish churches in the many hagiographies, annals and tales that they composed. This is not to say that the Uí Néill were divorced from crafting their own history, but that it was a scholarly/learned wing of the Uí Néill framework, working in the churches, that was responsible for creating the broader Uí Néill politics. These churches should not be considered entities distinct from Dynastic Frameworks that would often operate in alliance with them; rather, they should be interpreted as two sides of the same coin, as they were entities led by people from these frameworks, and which thus engaged in the crafting of larger political narratives that resulted in imposing order or meaning upon some of the warfare that was ever-present in this period. The inseparability of the Irish churches from dynastic politics is best exemplified in how the rivalry between local Uí Néill septs in the North and South adopted the further complication of representing two rival *paruchiae* in Armagh and Iona. The attempts by both Iona and Armagh to exercise primacy in the territory of the Northern and Southern Uí Néill operated along the same political avenues as the Uí Néill struggle for primacy in their respective regions. Irish churches influenced the politics of the Uí Néill framework by composing their own texts, or transcribing oral tales that related the politics of the Uí Néill on a larger provincial scale.

The composition of any text in Ireland was fundamentally influenced by the political leanings of those scholars present within the church responsible for the composition of the text, that were also members of a Dynastic Framework. In the context of early medieval Ireland, however, the Armagh/Uí Néill relationship, a merging of church and state at the highest level,

results in the composition of many texts that relate the larger political claims of the Dynastic Framework. These political claims can be seen exemplified through *VSP*, the *Collectanea*, *BCC*, *BiS*, *VC*, *Fo Réir Choluimb* and the description of *Orgain Denna Ríg* to name but a few. There is no way to properly separate the political agendas of the various ecclesiastical institutions of Ireland and the ‘secular’ powers. The influential monasteries within Uí Néill territory became a scholarly/learned wing of that Dynastic Framework, responsible for crafting narratives that elevated politics in Ireland beyond just cattle-raiding and internecine warfare, and developed it into more intricate narratives on a scale larger than sept-versus-sept violence.

Chapter 7:

Kinship and Dynastic Frameworks as Expressions of Political Alignment

Introduction

It has been argued here that early medieval Irish society was divided along the lines of Dynastic Frameworks, oftentimes crossing the boundary between ‘secular’ and ‘ecclesiastical’, if any existed. At the highest political echelon, then, the primary powers in Ireland were based on shared ancestry. This focus on shared ancestry was partly responsible for the vast corpus of genealogies composed in early medieval Ireland.⁶²⁶ On an individual level, however, a person’s rank and position in society, as well as their wealth, were determined by their ancestry. The most clearly attested relevance of ancestry to societal status is the effect a *Fine*/(Kin-Group) could have on an individual’s life through the various legal actions they were entitled to take. These could range from restricting the sale of common land, to ejecting an individual from the *Fine*, and in so doing, from legal representation in society.⁶²⁷ The legal remit of the *Fine*, however, does not fully encapsulate the manner in which dynasty and relation permeated the highest echelon of politics in early medieval Ireland.⁶²⁸ Events recorded in the annals are often attributed to individuals. When a battle is won the victor is named and noteworthy individuals who fell in battle are mentioned, often described through their paternal relationship.

⁶²⁶ O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*. (O’Brien’s text provides genealogical examples, drawn from various manuscripts, in a single centralised location. For further genealogies see Ó Corráin *Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium* Vol. 2).

⁶²⁷ Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 12-16. & Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 532.28-30 & 18.20. See also MacNeill, *Phases of Irish History*, 231-32.

⁶²⁸ Ó Corráin, ‘Dál Cais’, 52-63. Ó Corráin, ‘Historical need’, 149-58.

675 AD: *Bellum Cind Fhaeladh filii Blathmaic filii Aedho Slane (in quo Cind Faeladh interfectus est.) Finechta mac Dunchada uictor erat/* ‘The battle of Cenn Faelad son of Blamac son of Aed Sláine, (in which Cenn Faelad was slain.) Fínnechta son of Dúnchad was victor’.⁶²⁹

There are many instances, however, when the annals record larger groups, either as the victorious or the defeated party.

605 AD: *Bellum Slæbhre in quo uictus est Brandubh mac Eathach. Nepotes Neill uictores erant (.i. Aed Uaredac in quo tempore regnauit)/* ‘The Battle of Slaebre in which Brandub son of Eochu was vanquished. The Uí Néill were the victors, .i.e. Áed Uairidnach who reigned at that time’.⁶³⁰

These examples of victories and defeats are related with an awareness of the individual’s kinship as well as the respective groups to whom they belonged. We can clearly see that politics in early medieval Ireland functioned on a grander scale than individual triumphs and losses. Although certain names may catch the eye in the annals, there was also an awareness of larger group affiliation and identity. Examining the various instances in which the Uí Néill benefited from their group identity can better inform historians about how the many septs that comprised it were incentivised to remain within that political structure, and even why they promoted its legitimacy and political potency. Therefore, in order to better understand this political

⁶²⁹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 142-143. Segments within closed brackets () are additions to the original annal.

⁶³⁰ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 102-103.

framework that was so fundamentally predicated upon kinship, it is important to examine the role of kinship in early medieval Ireland in more depth.

Kinship and Group Identity in Early Medieval Ireland

The role of kinship in relation to early Irish law is a subject of wider scope than the limits of this thesis can allow. There is a significant corpus of secondary literature devoted to a better understanding of early Irish law and how it shaped early Irish society.⁶³¹ This section will concern itself with aspects of kinship in early medieval Irish society that may better inform the reader about the function and formation of a large political framework founded on kinship. When investigating the origins of these septs it can be helpful to dedicate some time to aspects of kinship and relation at a larger societal level.⁶³² Doing so will go some way towards ensuring that modern conceptions of what precisely kinship is does not affect our ability to objectively study kin-relations in the context of early medieval Ireland. An aspect of kinship that must be considered is the degree to which kinship was seen as a social bond, rather than a necessarily inherited bond.⁶³³ This concept may prove to be quite useful in unravelling the origins of the Uí Néill and in providing a comprehensive explanation of why identity, especially the allegiance of a sept in early medieval Ireland, was malleable.⁶³⁴

The degree to which affiliation with septs (and, by association, the larger Dynastic Framework) permeated early medieval Irish society is ever-present in the sources. It may have been an ultimate goal of one king to become the king of the Uí Néill and wield the great power that was associated with such rank; however, in order to scale the lofty heights of Irish politics

⁶³¹ For primary sources see, Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*. This text is critical for the subject of early Irish law. It provides a transcription of various early Irish law tracts from a wide corpus of manuscripts. Breatnach, *Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici*. Breatnach provides a useful piece of secondary literature for navigating Binchy's compilation. For secondary reading concerning kinship see, Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law & McLeod, Early Irish Contract Law*. See also; Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 21-166. Thornton, *Kings Chronologies and Genealogies*.

⁶³² Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 21-89.

⁶³³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 73-89.

⁶³⁴ The issue of kinship as an inherited bond at the level of Dynastic Framework has been briefly discussed through the 'West-Munster Synod'; see fnn. 103-04.

it was necessary to have a solid political base. We have established earlier the likely relationship between a *tuath* and a ‘family’ as the base of political power.⁶³⁵ Nevertheless, these septs were still members of the larger framework that came into existence due to the legend of Niall; they remained as members of the Uí Néill and thus were still part of a greater whole. In order to achieve a measure of true political power, it was necessary to subjugate other Septs. This is made abundantly clear in the definition of a *Rí Ríg*.⁶³⁶ The leader of a sept, who had under their control, numerous smaller families that represented the leadership of *tuatha*, would naturally qualify as a *Rí Ríg*.

It was therefore crucial for families in power to maintain the hierarchy of a Dynastic Framework. Every text that elaborated on the relationship between the leader of a sept with Niall, or other prestigious Uí Néill ancestors, was a text that, whether intentionally or not, solidified the place of the sept within a larger Dynastic Framework. This larger framework provided a unifying factor for the various septs that comprised it, and operated as a means by which larger political narratives and claims could be crafted via allegorical allusions to ancestors. MacNeill noted that the genealogical doctrine ‘Must be taken as often expressing political status rather than racial origin’.⁶³⁷ MacNeill backed this up with reference to a twelfth-century poem:

*Fallet se muid sain mebair * cummaiscit craeb ngenelaig, totinsma daerchland
ic dul * i-lloc saerchland re slonnud. Torrchi mogad mod mebla * ocus dibad
tigerna, serg na saerchland étig uath* la forbairt na n-aithechthuath.
Miscribend do gné eolais * do lucht uilc in aneolais, nó lucht ind eolais ni ferr
. gnúit ar múin miscribend./ ‘Six ways there are of special note that confound*

⁶³⁵ See Sub-Heading; *The ‘Dynastic Framework’*.

⁶³⁶ Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 568.17.

⁶³⁷ MacNeill, ‘Early Irish population-groups’, 93.

the tree of genealogy : intrusion of base stocks usurping the place of free stocks by name; migrations of serfs, a way of shame; and decay of lords; withering of the free races, dreadful horror; with overgrowth of the vassal folks; miswriting, in the guise of learning, by the unlearned of evil intent, or the learned themselves, no whit better, who falsify the record for luche'.⁶³⁸

This poem would imply that, during the twelfth century, Irish society was aware of the way that genealogies and genealogical relation could be used and abused to advance political ambition. Obviously, there are issues with taking this poem as testimony for what Irish society was like nearly six-hundred years before it was written. Upon examining the genealogies, however, it is possible to observe instances in which the genealogical tree was used for political intent rather than as a relation of historical fact. Indeed, when one considers the fact that most genealogies begin with a mythological figure about whom there can be no historical information, it appears safe to follow MacNeill's assertion regarding genealogical doctrine as a means of relaying political status rather than racial origin.⁶³⁹ MacNeill's sentiment was more recently elaborated upon by Ó Corráin when he discussed that, for an individual the statement that they were an O'Brien may mean a lot to their pride, but it is not an accurate or complete biological assessment of their DNA. Furthermore, terms such as ancestor, descent and kin cannot be taken too narrowly as there is no evidence that the authors of the Irish genealogies understood these terms in a narrow genealogical sense.⁶⁴⁰ One of the most important things noted by Ó Corráin was that 'descent' and 'kinship' could be metaphors for other processes, e.g., subjugation of a dynasty, or replacement or the establishment of a hierarchy.⁶⁴¹

⁶³⁸ MacNeill, 'Early Irish population-groups, 93.

⁶³⁹ MacNeill, 'Early Irish population-groups, 93. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 112. Thornton, *Kings Chronologies and Genealogies*, 23.

⁶⁴⁰ Ó Corráin, 'The early Irish genealogical tradition', 182.

⁶⁴¹ Ó Corráin, 'The early Irish genealogical tradition', 183.

We can see how a framework with political connotations and claims to supremacy was crafted in the example of the genealogy of Síl Chuind in Rawlinson B 502.⁶⁴² The genealogy of Síl Chuind provides a common origin for the Uí Néill, Airgíalla and Connachta. Each of these large frameworks are descended from Conn Chétchatach: *Trí meic Cuind .i. Art Óenfer agus Crinna agus Cellach*/ ‘Three sons of Conn i.e. Art Óenfer and Crinna and Cellach’.⁶⁴³ In the Síl Chuind genealogy the Uí Néill take centre stage, i.e. most of the individuals mentioned are founders of Uí Néill septs. This prominent position would imply that the Síl Chuind genealogy is primarily concerned with outlining the place that various Uí Néill septs occupied in the genealogical framework, and that the inclusion of the Connachta/Airgíalla is not the primary focus. The position of privilege that the Uí Néill carry within this genealogy carries an especially political connotation, when one considers how this genealogy relates to the doctrine of Leth Cuinn and Leth Moga. The doctrine of Leth Cuinn and Leth Moga has been discussed earlier.⁶⁴⁴ This doctrine appears frequently in sources that have an Uí Néill agenda. In *Baile in Scáil (BiS)* and *Baile Chuind Chétchathaig (BCC)* we see this doctrine in full swing.⁶⁴⁵ Both texts are concerned with a vision had by Conn Chétchathach, the progenitor of Síl Chuind. Both texts also heavily associate and equate the descendants of Conn with the kingship of Tara, implying that Tara and the kingship of Ireland were ancestral to the Síl Chuind. That the Uí Néill occupied such a position of prominence within the Síl Chuind genealogy, as well as within *BiS* and *BCC*, would imply that, at least in these texts, there was an attempt to promote the Uí Néill as the foremost genealogical line within Síl Chuind/Leth Cuinn. Due to their privileged position and the dominance of the Síl Chuind genealogy, *BiS* and *BCC* by the Uí Néill, it would appear fair to state that there was a political narrative being grafted onto descent

⁶⁴² O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 133-136.

⁶⁴³ O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 133.

⁶⁴⁴ See fn. 433.

⁶⁴⁵ See Sub-Heading; *The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks: The “Secular” Examples*.

from Conn Chetchathach/Níall Noigíallach.⁶⁴⁶ It is also apparent that the primary means for applying political narratives was via the Dynastic Framework. Despite the benefits of using genealogical tradition to advance political claims, however, the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework was reliant upon the success of the septs that comprised it. In this manner we can see the truth of Charles-Edwards assessment, that, ‘To mitigate the divisive effects of competition for supremacy, it was standard practice to attempt to advance the interests of several branches, not just the one in current possession of the over kingship.’⁶⁴⁷ This does not imply that the other septs promoted the aims of their neighbours, but that by means of competition the smaller septs were incentivised to advance their own aims lest they fall behind, and in doing so, promote the larger framework.

The legends that detail the origins of the Uí Néill build upon a common narrative focus. This focus was that the Uí Néill were all descended from one man, Niall Noigíallach, and that he and his sons carved out a great swathe of the island of Ireland, transforming the political sphere of the island for centuries to come. Charles-Edwards attempted to work backwards from historical sources and counts generations in order to attempt and date the origins of the Uí Néill, according to their own internal chronology.⁶⁴⁸ According to the Uí Néill narrative of conquest, they emerged from the north-west and expanded aggressively into Ulaid territory, reducing the Ulaid to a shell of their former greatness and burning down their capital, Emain Macha. This narrative is difficult to believe and has been the subject of debate.⁶⁴⁹ Given how stalwartly and comprehensively the Ulaid put up resistance to the Uí Néill over the initial

⁶⁴⁶ This has been demonstrated in numerous references over the course of this thesis from sources with a varied institutional background. For instance, Iona poetry is concerned about Columba’s descent from Conn. See fn. 524.

⁶⁴⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 14.

⁶⁴⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 441-46.

⁶⁴⁹ See, Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, 48-108. & Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 441-68. & Mac Shamhráin, ‘*Nebulae discutiuntur?*’, 83-97. & Smyth, ‘The Húi Néill and the Leinstermen’, 121-43. & Gleeson, ‘Luigne Breg’, 65-99.

historical period and the following centuries, this thesis would suggest it to be false.⁶⁵⁰ There is no military or political benefit to allowing the Ulaid to remain as neighbouring enemies; The early success of the Ulaid would, therefore, seem to suggest that the Uí Néill narrative of conquest is not reliable.⁶⁵¹ The Ulaid do not fade from the political sphere quickly; rather, they remain politically involved in the affairs of the Uí Néill for a few generations after the historical period.

To further increase doubt around the Uí Néill narrative of conquest, certain groups within the Northern Uí Néill have been supposed to predate the Dynastic Framework as a whole. Brian Lacey's work on the history of the Cenél Conaill highlights historical discrepancies that suggest they were not related by blood to Niall of the Nine Hostages or to the Uí Néill, and thus identified as Uí Néill at a later date.⁶⁵² This would therefore imply that groups such as the Cenél Conaill were not genuinely related to the Southern Uí Néill, but became inducted into a larger political framework. They may have originally been septs that owed allegiance to the Ulaid, but a combination of natural disaster and increasingly aggressive Uí Néill expansionism may have convinced both the Cenél Conaill and the Cenél nEógain to associate with the Uí Néill and become inducted into that Dynastic Framework. There are plenty of issues with this traditional narrative of conquest by the Uí Néill; however, it serves as the fundamental basis for the origins of the Uí Néill framework, a political framework that would endure for centuries as the foremost political structure in Ireland, second only in longevity and impact in the medieval period to the Church.

A clear parallel with the Uí Néill structure would be the Éoganacht of Munster, as this framework is similarly etymologically related to a common ancestor and contained similarly

⁶⁵⁰ Although archaeological evidence suggests that Emain Macha was burned down c. 100 AD it would be difficult to see this incident as linked to conflict with the Uí Néill because there is no evidence to suggest that the Uí Néill existed before the early fifth century.

⁶⁵¹ Thornton, *Kings Chronologies and Genealogies*, 26. Suggests caution when using migration narratives as direct evidence in any case.

⁶⁵² Lacey, *Cenél Conaill*, 165.

numerous septs, such as the Éoganacht Chaisil and Éoganacht Áine, the Éoganacht Glendamnach and the Éoganacht Locha Léin.⁶⁵³ The Éoganacht also seem to emerge at a contemporary period to the Uí Néill; they have the same issues with sept conflict/rivalry within the Dynastic Framework and, most importantly, their power-base in Munster is seen as a reflection of the Uí Néill power in Ulster and Connacht. This rivalry is clearly demonstrated through the division of Ireland between *Leth Cuinn* and *Leth Moga*, where the the Éoganacht act as the opposing political power in *Leth Moga* in the South.⁶⁵⁴ Better understanding the structure of the Dynastic Framework and its role in politics, using the Uí Néill as a case study, provides the basis for further research on other frameworks throughout Ireland, such as the Éoganacht, Ulaid and the Laigin.

It is unlikely that the Uí Néill shared one single ancestor, given the rapid growth in their power and influence between the time when Niall was considered to have died (AD 425-450) and when annals in the Irish world are believed to have been first composed, during the lifetime of Columba.⁶⁵⁵ However, it should be acknowledged that this dating of the annals is slightly generous; a more acceptable dating for the earliest annal would be in the approximate region of 660 AD.⁶⁵⁶ By the time of Columba, however, and definitely by 660 AD, the Uí Néill had already established themselves as one of the foremost political powers in Ireland.⁶⁵⁷ They rose from humble beginnings, with the death of their eponymous ancestor allegedly occurring at some stage in the early to mid-fifth century, they ended up as the most dominant political force in early medieval Ireland in the space of little over a hundred years.⁶⁵⁸ This rapid rise to power seems unlikely, given how relatively stable the political situation remains in Ireland over the

⁶⁵³ Sproule, 'Origins of the Eoganachta', 32-33. O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 195-234.

⁶⁵⁴ Sproule, 'Origins of the Eoganachta', 31. & Charles-Edwards, *Early christian Ireland*, 476.

⁶⁵⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 443.

⁶⁵⁶ Evans, *The present and the past*, 171. & Smyth, 'The Earliest Irish Annals', 41-43. & McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*, 9.

⁶⁵⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early christian Ireland*, 441. & Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400-800', 201.

⁶⁵⁸ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 34-35.

next four hundred years, with no new major players rising to the top. It is at this point, however, that issues possibly affecting the political stability and status quo in Ireland during the period of Uí Néill emergence should be acknowledged.

During the sixth century, in 551 AD, contemporary with the death of Diarmait mac Cerbaill and the early establishment of Uí Néill power, the country was suffering from a plague known as *Crom Connaill*. *Crom Conaill*, .i. *plaga magna*/The ‘Crom Conaill’ i.e. A great plague’.⁶⁵⁹ It is tempting to endorse the historicity of this *plaga magna*, as it is likely to be a recurrence of the same plague mentioned in Tírechán’s *Collectanea, in qua sepultus est Hercus, qui portauit mortalitatem magnam*/‘in which is buried Ercc who suffered a great plague’.⁶⁶⁰ It may well be the case that a natural disaster such as this sixth-century plague may have wrought havoc within Ireland’s political sphere, leaving gaps for what were newly emergent groups at the time, such as the Uí Néill and the Éoganacht, to rise to political prominence. This argument may be used compellingly to hypothesise a weakened Ulaid, which would have allowed a new group to seize territory from them in a manner that was unprecedented and not replicated for centuries. Given the ruination a devastating disease may have caused for the Irish population, it is possible that this chaos could have provided the necessary ladder for the Uí Néill to rise to never-before-accomplished heights.

The explanation for the rapid rise and continued success of the Uí Néill may also lie in the function of their Dynastic Framework, though this does not diminish the opportunity they may have been afforded by a plague. Firstly, it seems unlikely that Niall and his sons could have produced enough descendants to fill in the political gaps that their meteoric rise to power would have left on local levels. A cadre of fewer than ten mythological men were responsible for the

⁶⁵⁹ Mac Airt, *The Annals of Inisfallen*, 71, & Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 78-79. This plague is likely to have been the ‘Justinian Plague’ which was prominent in Europe around this period. For further reading on the Justinian Plague see, Ann Dooley, ‘The Plague and Its Consequences in Ireland’, in Lester K. Little (ed.), *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*, (Cambridge 2007) 215-30. Peter Sarris, ‘Viewpoint: New Approaches to the ‘Plague of Justinian’’, *Past and Present* 254.1 (2022) 315-346.

⁶⁶⁰ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 8 (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 130-31). See Sharpe, ‘Churches and Communities’, 87.

establishment of septs and ruling families across almost half of Ireland. There were many septs that ruled *tuatha* under the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework, the number of members that would have had to have been produced by the sons of Niall in order to take over the reins at a local political level across the modern-day counties of Donegal, Tyrone, Meath, Kildare and more would have been remarkable. In the sixth century the Uí Néill would have been so few in numbers as to only constitute a legal *fine*.⁶⁶¹

One anthropological consideration that could prove useful in unravelling this rapid rise to power is the extent to which Irish society considered the concept of family and lineage to work as a form of social contract, rather than as a fact that must be inherited by blood. If, for example, familial relations were more fluid than we consider them to be today, it would leave room for the possibility of the various Uí Néill septs adopting new members into their groups in order to make up the population to control and work the land on a local level. We have seen in the so-called West Munster Synod that the terminology used in establishing a large alliance was reminiscent of kinship e.g. *brāithirse*.⁶⁶² It would also allow for us to consider that some of Niall's sons were not his blood relations, and may have been adopted by him into the framework as a sign of political submission. We have seen earlier that the political subjugation of a *tuath* was commonplace.⁶⁶³ It is possible that the early Uí Néill amassed their political power and expanded the scope of their Dynastic Framework by adopting, or replacing the leadership of existing *tuatha* and establishing *brāithirse* between newly subjugated *tuatha*. This requires expanding on MacNeill and Ó Corráin's aforementioned assessment of the genealogical record as a statement of political processes involving the Dynastic Framework

⁶⁶¹ Byrne, 'Tribes and tribalism', 152.

⁶⁶² Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 201. Elva Johnston, 'The Saints of Kerry in the Early Middle Ages', *Kerry History and Society: Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County* (2020) 1-17: 11.

⁶⁶³ Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 568.17.

and septs within it, as these assessments necessitate that kinship (at least in the genealogies) was considered primarily a political/social bond.⁶⁶⁴

That the genealogical record was an expression of political affiliations and expressions of overlordship would imply that septs could have become inducted into a Dynastic Framework in order to formalise their submission. It was not unheard of for a group, previously unrelated to the Uí Néill, to become inducted into the Dynastic Framework when it was politically opportune. An example of this sort of behaviour from groups from the historical period would be the *Fir Tulach* of Leinster joining with the Uí Néill after they had been beaten down and threatened by their neighbours for decades. The *Fir Tulach Midi* claimed descent from Brandub mac Echach, a king of Leinster who died in the early seventh century.⁶⁶⁵ If Irish society was similar during the Uí Néill rise to power, with fluid kin allegiance, then it is very possible that a group small enough to count as a single *fine* could spread their influence over half the island by integrating pre-existing *tuatha* into their Dynastic Framework.

A further instance of this absorption of pre-existing *tuatha* can be seen through the *Brecrige*. The *Brecrige* are noted as being destroyed in AU 752:

Forddbe Brecrige do Cheniul Coripri i Telaigh Findin/ ‘Destruction of the Breccraige by the Cenél Cairpri, in Tulach Finnin’.⁶⁶⁶

This destruction indicates that it was certainly not out of place for the Uí Néill to violently replace the existing population of a region. Interestingly however, what appears to be the same political unit of the *tuath* of the *Breccraige* continues to exist, but under another name. They are

⁶⁶⁴ See MacNeill, ‘Early Irish population-groups’, 59-114. & Ó Corráin, ‘The early Irish genealogical tradition’, 183.

⁶⁶⁵ Byrne, ‘Tribes and tribalism’, 147. Byrne provides no primary source citation for this claim; however, one of the sources he draws upon, Walsh, cites that the O Dubhlaoich, who were chiefs of Fir Tulach, were descended from Énna Cinniselach. Paul Walsh, *The Place-names of Westmeath* (Dublin 1957) 100.

⁶⁶⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 206-207.

brought into the Cenél Maine, given a new genealogical ancestor with Uí Néill origins, Breccán mac Maine, and find for themselves a new political reality.⁶⁶⁷

Given the influence that dynastic and pseudo-dynastic powers had on the Irish political sphere, it would not be unreasonable to question the degree to which familial relation was a social concept. If Ireland held familial relationships to be socially based, then some of these sons of Niall may not in fact have been blood relatives, but adoptive kin. More importantly, however, than proving whether the pre-historic sons of Niall were actually blood relations is that a degree of fluidity in familial bonds may clarify our understanding of the larger Uí Néill framework. By evaluating the degree to which kinship was interpreted as being based upon inheritance and blood-relation, the groundwork can be built for understanding whether dynasty and dynastic relations were changeable or set in stone.⁶⁶⁸ The degree to which dynasty and dynastic relations were changeable is something that could have had a major impact on the way early medieval Irish politics operated, and the way these frameworks (and indeed septs) may have originated. If kinship in early medieval Ireland can be seen to have operated along social lines, this may explain the manner in which the genealogies operated as records of political processes, as outlined by MacNeill and Ó Corráin.⁶⁶⁹ It may also account for the rapid rise of the Uí Néill in terms of their political territory, as well as why certain groups chose to alter their genealogies in order to become members of the wider Uí Néill framework when it was more politically convenient.

The Uí Néill framework may not have originated as a means to achieve political power, but it most definitely became a vehicle for greater political aspirations in early medieval Ireland. If kinship in early medieval Ireland was primarily a social contract, rather than something that

⁶⁶⁷ Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', 10. See also; Paul Walsh, 'Meath in the Book of Rights', in John Ryan (ed), *Féil-sgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill* (Dublin 1940) 511-12. Thornton, *Kings Chronologies and Genealogies*, 65. As discussed, I will not be using Thornton's term 'genealogical schizophrenia'.

⁶⁶⁸ Though as we have just seen in fnn. 665-67, it is likely that they were mutable.

⁶⁶⁹ See MacNeill, 'Early Irish population-groups', 59-114. & Ó Corráin, 'The early Irish genealogical tradition', 183.

had to be inherited, then the larger Uí Néill Dynastic Framework may be seen as functioning more like political affiliation. One instance in which we see the genealogies operating as allegory for political relationships is in the period after the decisive battle of Druim Derga.⁶⁷⁰ Druim Derga, according to tradition, saw the Laigin driven from the plain of Míde and the Uí Néill establish themselves on former Laigin territory. It is not likely that the territory from Uisneach to Birr was directly occupied by the victorious Cenél Fhiachach, but rather that the groups who occupied the land were made into a subservient tributary of the more powerful Uí Néill conquerors.⁶⁷¹ The Uí Néill expanded into the territory of the Fir Tulach, Fir Cell and Fir Asall respectively after the battle of Druim Derga and maintained power over this region as a core part of their home territory for a long time. It is no wonder, then, to see the Fir Tulach, the Fir Cell and the Fir Asall subsumed into the maze of Uí Néill septs after the Uí Néill demonstrated their dominance over the region.

This may imply that the original occupants of the territory were allowed to rule over their land but had to acknowledge the Uí Néill or an Uí Néill sept as their overlord, rather than acknowledging a singular Uí Néill ruler as a temporary overlord, as occurred in the case of the *Brecrige*.⁶⁷² The difference here is that it allows for the development of a long term, multi-generational hierarchy, rather than a society in which power needed to be routinely displayed through acts of violence. Considering again the definition of a *Rí Buiden* as a king who had power over three or four *tuatha*, one can see the appeal in establishing this form of long-term power base.⁶⁷³ If small, inconsequential septs operated as perennial subjects of their more powerful and affluent kinsmen, then it means that some of the power held by the four most prominent Uí Néill septs was derived from their subjects, rather than the resources and power of a single *tuath*. It could imply that the kings of at least these four most important Uí Néill

⁶⁷⁰ See also this thesis, 100-03.

⁶⁷¹ Smyth, 'The Húi Néill and the Leinstermen', 140.

⁶⁷² See fn. 666.

⁶⁷³ Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 568.17.

septs maintained, via genealogical hierarchy and prestige, influence over smaller *tuatha*, and thus qualified as *Rí Buiden* or *Rí Ríg*. One of the reasons such a hypothesis can be made is that the territory that was seized following the battle of Druim Derga was very important to the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework for centuries to come and did not flip back to Laigin control. Hence it is fair to hypothesise that the Fir Tulach, Fir Cell and Fir Asall were made the tributaries of a specific Uí Néill sept, who kept them in line. Alternatively, the original rulers may have been replaced with members of the Uí Néill identity and the Fir Tulach, Fir Cell and Fir Asall were allowed to exist as political entities representing ownership of the area, but under either Uí Néill sympathetic rulers, or under rulers with Uí Néill ancestry, thus being absorbed into the larger Uí Néill genealogical tree.⁶⁷⁴ Whatever the case may be, the expansion of the Uí Néill framework to encompass the entirety of the plain of Míde (without obliterating the local *tuatha*), demonstrates a degree of flexibility of political association that was afforded to septs operating within the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. Unlikely political alignments such as this begin to make more sense if Irish society placed a high value on the social aspect of kinship, as it is essentially adopting a new framework of ancestry, but for a group of people rather than an individual.

Ancestry as Political Expression

One of the reasons why the Uí Néill are such an intriguing and often-discussed group is their position in the literature. Not only did they achieve a great deal of political prominence in the island, but even some of the earliest written sources from the island of Ireland serve to

⁶⁷⁴ This would appear to be the more likely option given it corresponds with the treatment of the Breccrige. To clarify, this would mean that the Fir Tulach, Fir Asall and Fir Cell had their nobility replaced by members of the Uí Néill framework and their genealogical history re-written. It is difficult to say what happened to the larger population of these groups, but one may assume that they were simply allowed to continue, albeit ‘under new management’.

emphasise the prominence of the Dynastic Framework.⁶⁷⁵ We have already seen how these pieces of literature could serve to develop political narratives and a unity amongst the Dynastic Framework, now we shall consider the manner in which literature can be used to promote political expression using ancestors as allegorical figures.⁶⁷⁶

An important aspect of these early tales concerning the Uí Néill was the politicisation of the identity. Muirchú began the process of politicising the dynastic identity of the Uí Néill with his simple, but charged, claim that the Uí Néill were the most important political power in Ireland through the inclusion of their claim to sovereignty over almost the entire island. This claim to sovereignty in *VSP* occurs as follows: *Loiguire nomine filius Neill, origo stirpis regiae huius pene insulae* 'by name Loíguire son of Niall, a scion of the family that held the kingship of almost the entire island'.⁶⁷⁷ In the *Collectanea*, although there is little reference to a king of Ireland, there is no lack of references to the politicisation of group identity, particularly between rival Dynastic Frameworks. Loíguire is one of the most useful figures in the *Collectanea* in this regard as he serves as a euphemism for the conflict and aggression between the Uí Néill and the Laigin.

*Nam Neel pater meus non sinivit mihi credere, sed ut sepeliar in cacuminibus
Temro quasi uiris consistentibus in bello (quia utuntur gentiles in sepulcris
armati prumptis armis) 'facie ad faciem usque ad diem erdathe' (apud magos,
id est iudicii diem Domini) 'ego filius Neill | et filius Dúnlinge imMaistin in
campo Liphi pro duritate odi[u]i ut est hoc.'* 'My father Niall did not allow me

⁶⁷⁵ See, Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii*, (Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*) & Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, Anderson & Anderson, *Life of Columba*. & Sharpe, *Life of St Columba*. & Tírechán, *Collectanea*, (Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 132-133) & *Liber Angeli*, (Bieler, *The Patrician texts*) & Bhreathnach, 'Baile Chuinn Chéthathaig'. & Murray, *Baile in Scáil*.

⁶⁷⁶ See Chapter 5: 'The Creation of Political Narratives Concerning Dynastic Frameworks'. See also; Ó Corráin, 'Historical need', 141-58.

⁶⁷⁷ Muirchú, *Vita Sancti Patricii* I 10 (9) (Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, 74-75).

to accept the faith, but bade me to be buried on the ridges of Tara. I son of Niall and the sons of Dúnlang in Maistiú in Mag Líphi, face to face (with each other) in the manner of men at war' (for the pagans, armed in their tombs, have their weapons ready) 'until the day of erdathe' (as the druids call it, that is, the day of the Lord's judgement), because of such fierceness of our (mutual) hatred'.⁶⁷⁸

This statement from Lóegaire is informative about the fact that at the time of composition there was a strong enough conception of singular identity that was based in descent from Niall, that they could have fierce, established, rivals in the Uí Dúnlainge. This statement in the *Collectanea* actually solidifies and testifies to a concrete rivalry that was coded, or at the very least in this text was beginning to become coded, along ancestral lines. It is not the Síol Lóegaire who are the fierce rivals of the Uí Dúnlainge, it is the sons of Niall and the sons of Dúnlang that must face each other in the manner of men at war until the day of judgement. This statement from Lóegaire is a clear indication of hostile politics being grafted onto the larger Dynastic Framework. The tacit implication here is that the Uí Néill must be in some way organised in order to adopt larger group politics. A disorganised rabble of feuding families could not operate with a cohesive political statement. Furthermore, this political statement emerged from an ecclesiastical institution, the *paruchia* of Armagh, indicating either there was a degree of patronage from the Uí Néill, the ecclesiastical institution was embedded in this political conflict in some way, or both.⁶⁷⁹

Later texts continued to elaborate upon this relatively simple concept, but in a much more explicit manner. We see throughout *VSP* and the *Collectanea* that the Uí Néill dynasty is associated explicitly with the aims of the *paruchia* of Armagh. The fact that the Uí Néill have

⁶⁷⁸ Tírechán, *Collectanea* 12, (Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, 132-133).

⁶⁷⁹ See Chapter 6: 'The Irish Church as the "Scholarly Wing" of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework'.

their origins and claims to sovereignty over all of Ireland, expressed in a text written by an Armagh clergyman for the purpose of venerating Patrick, would hint that the link between Armagh and the Uí Néill was strong at the time of composition.⁶⁸⁰ Armagh was not, however, the only monastic institution with which the Uí Néill were aligned, nor the only institution to attempt and curry their favour through the production of texts. The reason these texts and the textual references to the Uí Néill are important is because they are among the earliest literary works of Ireland, and they begin the legend of, and continue to politicise the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. These are the moments we see group politics introduced into Ireland first. It therefore would appear that the politics of large groups were present in Ireland even from almost the very beginning of recorded history.

In early medieval Irish society, a great emphasis is placed upon descent in the law tracts. An individual's role in society, and their eligibility to inherit land and titles, was well laid out in the law and it appears that relation and group-identity were pivotal factors in an individual's status under the law, rather than direct inheritance from parent to child.⁶⁸¹ One of the most prominent examples of this can be found in Eoin MacNeill's examination of the degrees of kinship in early medieval Ireland, *derbfine*, *gelfine*, etc.; essentially, the people who had viable claims for kingship due to the degree of relation between them and another king.⁶⁸² How thoroughly this concept was applied in early medieval Ireland has been disputed, but the concept of *derbfine* seems to have been a popular and accepted way in which potential claimants to the throne were designated in legal tracts.⁶⁸³ By early in the eighth century,

⁶⁸⁰ See Sub-Heading: *The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks: Armagh's Accounts*.

⁶⁸¹ Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 12-16. & Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 532.28-30 & 18.20.

⁶⁸² MacNeill, *Phases*, 231-32. See also, Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 46. For discussion of related *-fine*, terminology. See also *ibid*, 93. For a brief critique of MacNeill's conclusions concerning *derbfine* and some scholarly developments since.

⁶⁸³ Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 100 n. 7. & Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 247.24-5. See also, Ó Corráin, 'Irish Regnal Succession', 7-39, wherein he provides a substantial overview of the Laigin genealogies to prove that it was very unlikely that an individual from outside the *derbfine* would inherit.

derbfine appears to have been replaced by the smaller system of *gelfine*.⁶⁸⁴ *Derbfine* is defined as ‘true kin. family group of four generations comprising one person, i.e. the grandfather of the individual, and 8 categories of persons represented by the individual, his children, his father, his brothers, their children, his paternal uncles, and their children and grandchildren.’⁶⁸⁵ Although this may highlight the prominent position that relationship and ancestry had in matters of inheritance, it should be noted that the concept of *derbfine* a wide scope of inheritance, created more heirs than most contemporary succession models. The *derbfine* therefore provides an interesting way for modern historians to understand the concept of the larger Dynastic Framework and the way in which political power in Ireland was passed down in a non-linear manner.

Apart from relationship to a king, one of the most important factors that governed an individual’s claim to the throne was their *febas*, which in this instance, may refer either to their ‘worthiness/dignity’ or their ‘wealth/property’.⁶⁸⁶ This is exemplified by the maxim *sinnser la fine, feabtu la flaith, ecna la eclais*.⁶⁸⁷ This maxim demonstrates that for *flaith* i.e. ‘Lordship, sovereignty or rule’, worthiness was a key factor.⁶⁸⁸ Nevertheless, succession in early medieval Ireland favoured the older family members. Only in instances where the junior was demonstrably more qualified, which was measured by the number of clients at his disposal, would he have the right to inherit.⁶⁸⁹ This can be seen as a tradition, backed by laws, that favoured widening the scope of inheritance to numerous branches of a family as *Febas* was important in establishing *Flaith*. Responsibility for the wider kindred was angled towards the

⁶⁸⁴ T.M. Charles-Edwards, ‘Kinship, status and the origin of the hide’, *Past and Present* 56 (1972) 3-33: 15-17. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh*, 55-60.

⁶⁸⁵ See eDil, s.v. *derbfine*.

⁶⁸⁶ Jaski, *Early Irish kingship*, 124. See also; Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 96-111 & Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the medieval world*, 179-88. Where the role of *febas* as a qualifier for kingship is discussed.

⁶⁸⁷ Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 1232.25-6.

⁶⁸⁸ See eDil, s.v. *Flaith*.

⁶⁸⁹ Jaski, *Early Irish kingship and succession*, 125.

person within a large group of claimants that was most capable of shouldering that responsibility, either through their own economic strength or their worthiness as a leader.⁶⁹⁰

This form of succession at the level of lordship or rulership provides a political system that was, at least theoretically, grounded in common ancestry and relation, but favoured moving laterally across generational lines to candidates that had more time to accumulate wealth or good standing. This is most evident at the highest level of the Dynastic Framework, where only the most wealthy and powerful leaders of septs saw their candidacy achieved by acts that asserted their *febas*.⁶⁹¹ As such, this system did not really favour a succession of father-to-son-to-grandson, unless the junior candidate was overqualified for his position; in this instance it may be *febas* as ‘political clout’ that played a role in his ascension to power, as we will see presently.⁶⁹² In succession, the Dynastic Framework did not focus on a singular line of descent, choosing instead from multiple lineages, as long as there was a certain degree of separation from a previous ruler. It is also worth noting that, depending on which system of *fine* is believed to be most commonly used to define a list of claimants, then it could be any living claimant within four generations of a previous king (*derbfine*).⁶⁹³ When anyone from a number of cousins, uncles, sons and grandsons could be chosen to rule, who was the son of the previous king mattered less than the competency of the candidates. The importance of familial relation can be seen through the primary function of the system of *derbfine*, which appears to be to maintain the independence of the *tuatha* at all costs.

⁶⁹⁰ In this matter I agree with Ó Corráin’s assessment that ‘... the *derbfine*, however near or distant such customs may have been to men’s mind as a general ideal of the fitness of things, but by the everyday realities of power-politics within dynasties of growing strength and confidence’. Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, 11. *Febas* may serve as a legal method through which this *realpolitik* could be exercised. See also Ó Corráin, ‘Irish regnal succession’, 7-39.

⁶⁹¹ For further information on demonstrations of political capability in order to achieve greater political power see Sub-Heading; *Internal Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Competing Septs)*.

⁶⁹² Jaski, *Early Irish kingship and succession*, 126.

⁶⁹³ MacNeill, *Phases*, 231-32.

According to the letter of the law, an individual's genealogy may have been circumstantial, depending on their birth. A child that was not born to a *cétmuintir* (first wife), *adaltrach airnadma* (betrothed concubine) or a *ben aititen* (acknowledged woman) would be considered 'a son of darkness' and was given no inheritance rights, unless the father and his kindred acknowledged them.⁶⁹⁴ This is an interesting concept, as, in the eyes of the law, whether or not an individual would join a noble family, and thus be eligible for rulership, could depend on the social circumstances in which they were conceived. This demonstrates the degree to which early medieval Irish society viewed inheritance and familial relations as a form of social contract. The child was not necessarily excluded from the kindred but was given a chance to be evaluated at a later stage in life, where, if they were deemed to be someone who could benefit the kindred, they would be adopted into the group and gain inheritance rights. Perhaps one of the most famous 'sons of darkness' is Niall Noigíallach himself, who (according to legend) earned his right as heir through his own exceptional abilities; these abilities may be represented legally through a candidate's *febas*.⁶⁹⁵ The story of Niall may suggest that the category 'Sons of Darkness' was one in which the rules could be bent in order to allow exceptional possible rulers a claim.⁶⁹⁶ Instances where candidates who were particularly adept, either at warfare, politics or were just very wealthy, have a precedence for pressing a weak claim so long as their *febas* was sufficient.⁶⁹⁷ The *derbfine* and the role of 'sons of darkness' may provide a system, however, in which capable and advantageous claimants could be found, if necessity required.

⁶⁹⁴ Jaski, *Early Irish kingship and succession*, 149.

⁶⁹⁵ Jaski, *Early Irish kingship and succession*, 163.

⁶⁹⁶ The tale of Niall is mythological and fabricated, and so unfortunately we can only use it as indicative of wider cultural views on the subject of acknowledging an exceptional 'son of darkness'. To my knowledge there isn't evidence of such an instance in the historical record, or at least not associated with the Uí Néill.

⁶⁹⁷ Eoin Mac Neill, *Celtic Ireland* (Dublin 1921; repr. Dublin 1981) 122. See also Hogan, 'The Irish Law of Kingship', 186-254. Ó Corráin, 'Irish Regnal Succession', 7-39. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 89-166, esp. 90-92.

A prominent feature of the early Irish political scene that may also inform modern historians about how familial relations were considered to operate as social bonds was the practice of fosterage (a child, usually noble, being raised in the household of another noble who was often unrelated).⁶⁹⁸ Fosterage was a contract between two families where one agreed to raise the other's child from a young age, often to maturity.⁶⁹⁹ Fosterage therefore provides yet another form of social contract through which familial sentiment, or in this case pseudo-familial, is formed. The child is not adopted into a different family, but naturally, being raised by a different group, would develop an attachment to them; perhaps they may have even become friends with prominent members of that kin group. In the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, for instance, Fergus and his foster-son Cú Chulainn remain affectionate to one another, even though they find themselves fighting on the opposite side of a war.⁷⁰⁰ In fact, it is difficult to see how fosterage would not create a secondary familial structure, albeit one that did not entail inheritance. A child that was fostered in the care of another dynasty may have grown to have more affection for that group than his own, given the fact they spent most of their formative years with them. The terms used for foster-father and foster-mother were the terms derived from words which in Indo-European languages carry connotations of affection, *muim(m)e* and *(d)aite*.⁷⁰¹ The usage of these terms strongly reinforces the concept that fosterage created a form of social kin-group and is further demonstrated by specific fines payable to an injured foster-brother *comaltai*.⁷⁰² Although certain wisdom texts are cynical about the benefits of fosterage, with Triad 249 naming one of the three dark things in life 'depositing an object into somebody's custody, going surety, fosterage', generally speaking it was so widespread in Irish

⁶⁹⁸ Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 86-90.

⁶⁹⁹ Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 86 n. 147: (The *Díre*-text; Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 439.16; refers to a foster-brother reared in the same cradle (*comalta óenchleib*)) See also Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 115-17.

⁷⁰⁰ Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 89.

⁷⁰¹ eDIL s.v. *muim(m)e* and eDIL s.v. 1 *dait*. Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 86-87, provides a comparison of the two words for foster-parents with similar English words such as Dait → Dad & Muim(m)e → Mummy. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 80-81.

⁷⁰² Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 90.

society that it must have been advantageous.⁷⁰³ Fosterage was typically an honour rather than a burden for the fostering family, as seen in literature through Buchet, a hospitaller (*briugu*), fostering the daughter of the king of Leinster, Eithne.⁷⁰⁴ It was not as though one noble family was foisting their children upon other groups more capable of rearing them; instead, through fosterage other families were being given the responsibility of raising a future king. The possible benefits of this are numerous, not least the fact that positive experiences in fosterage might encourage the child in the future to advocate for more favourable political terms for his foster family.

With regard to understanding how early medieval Ireland viewed kinship and familial relations, it must be said that fosterage was seen as distinct from kinship; that is to say that, being fostered with another group did not create kinship.⁷⁰⁵ With Irish society as subject to change as it was, however, there was no guarantee that the foster-child raised would ever have the chance to be particularly powerful; however, raising the son of an established line of kings would seem to be a safe bet to acquire political benefits later on in their life. It is clear from the legal texts that bonds forged in fosterage were seen as stronger than just mere friendship. Fosterage would, therefore, have created useful relationships that may even have served to increase an individual's political clout by granting him the aid of his foster-family in attempting to put forward his claim within the *derbfine*. A claimant needed to have *febas*; if a claimant had political ties to a particularly powerful sept or family within his own sept, then his *febas*, support and chances of claiming the kingship would likely have been high. Even viewing fosterage without the complex social bonds it forged between individuals, it provides a powerful case that familial relations in early medieval Ireland were seen as more akin to a social contract than something that strictly had to be inherited. Understanding early medieval

⁷⁰³ Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 89-90.

⁷⁰⁴ Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 90.

⁷⁰⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 78-81.

Irish dynastic politics to function as though kinship was a social bond would therefore explain, to a degree, the political flexibility of certain septs we have seen throughout this thesis.

Conclusion: The Politics of Identity

It should at this stage be clear that the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework was more than just an indication of linear descent from Niall Noígíallach, and that this is true of any Dynastic Framework in Ireland at the time. Obviously, these frameworks do serve the function of recording descent and creating a sense of wider familial ties, but that is not all, as these familial ties become vaguer, they do more than just merely relate ancestry. They relate political affiliation, and this is a natural result of these groups, that may have initially been predicated upon genuine common descent, becoming ever more powerful and influential politically speaking.⁷⁰⁶

There are many ways that genealogical descent and kinship were used as means of political expression. The genealogies, the bonds forged in fosterage, *febas* as a means to choose the worthiest from a large pool of candidates, each of these demonstrate that kinship and genealogical descent were fundamentally important fixtures of political expression in Ireland. The manipulation of the genealogies, the manner in which common descent was used to create a sense of cohesion among disparate and oftentimes feuding groups, demonstrate that this political affiliation, as with most political affiliations, was not set in stone.⁷⁰⁷ Genealogical descent in Ireland was a means of expressing which Dynastic Framework and sept an individual led or was loyal to. To assign a narrow, biological understanding to statements regarding dynastically based powers is therefore clearly misleading.⁷⁰⁸ With an appreciation for the fact that the Dynastic Frameworks that are the subject of this thesis were chiefly expressions of

⁷⁰⁶ By 'genuine common descent', I am here referring to the possibility of common descent in smaller groups, e.g. the Síol nÁedo Sláine, not the wider Uí Néill where Niall is very much ahistorical.

⁷⁰⁷ See fn. 674. See also the discussion concerning Munster politics in *BCC*. See this thesis, 150-51.

⁷⁰⁸ This, for instance, needs to be borne in mind when interpreting the promising scientific results outlined in fn. 115.

political loyalty rather than descent, we can examine them as a political structure that provided benefits/incentives for its members.

Chapter 8:

How did the Uí Néill Dynastic Identity Benefit and Incentivise Septs to Remain within the Identity?

Introduction

With a firmer understanding of Dynastic Frameworks as a means of expressing political affiliation, we can move on and discuss how these Dynastic Frameworks benefitted the groups within them. These large power structures, based upon shared ancestry, take on more importance and fulfil a purpose in Irish society that is so much more than narrow biological descent.⁷⁰⁹ They are sophisticated, hierarchical, political entities, rather than haphazard and ramshackle naturally occurring families. This chapter shall examine some of the ways that these frameworks provided political benefits for the various septs and families within them. This could be accomplished in many different ways, from the development of political narratives that promote the claims of supremacy by members of the framework, to providing a power hierarchy within the framework that served as a basis for furthering the political ambitions of leaders of septs.

The most apt way to begin would be to examine an instance that demonstrates there were tangible political reasons to remain within the framework. This will build upon our already established understanding of genealogical descent as political expression, and explain how the case study of the descendants of Conal Cremthainne demonstrates tangible political benefit and incentive to remaining within the parameters of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework, at least until it began to collapse internally.

⁷⁰⁹ MacNeill, 'Early Irish population-groups, 93. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 112. Thornton, *Kings Chronologies and Genealogies*, 23.

The Descendants of Conal Cremthainne/Conal Err Breg

Keeping in mind the political flexibility and possible genealogical manipulation practised by septs in order to achieve political gain, it is worth examining the Uí Néill septs that claimed descent from Conall Cremthainne (also known as Conall Err Breg).⁷¹⁰ This is because their political situation does not quite align with what we might expect from septs attempting to achieve more political power. The Uí Néill dominated the political sphere of early medieval Ireland for nearly four centuries. During this time the Uí Néill framework very rarely gained or lost large amounts of territory. As a result, the Uí Néill do not grow much in terms of territory after their initial expansion in the time of Niall and his sons; these sons then spawned septs that served as local kingdoms within the larger Uí Néill identity.⁷¹¹ Indeed, it is worth noting that in the earliest period of annals, contrary to the traditional narrative of conquest, the Uí Néill do not pull off a great sweeping conquest in order to establish themselves; rather, the sense from this period is that they were simply a prominent power in Mide growing into full strength.⁷¹² The battle of Druim Derg in 516 AD (*AU*) or 513 AD (*AI*) was the moment the Uí Néill managed to seize the plain of Mide from the Laigin. 516 AD

Bellum Droma Derge for Failghi. Fiacha uictor erat. Deinde Campus Midhe a Lagenis sublatus est./ ‘The battle of Druim Derg against Failge. Fiacha was victor. Thereafter the plain of Mide was taken away from the Laigin’.⁷¹³

At that period then they were allegedly still struggling for dominance in the area surrounding Tara.

⁷¹⁰ See fnn. 665-67.

⁷¹¹ See Sub-Heading, *The Northern/Southern Uí Néill* for detail on area of Uí Néill control.

⁷¹² See fn. 649 for further detail on the Uí Néill narrative of conquest.

⁷¹³ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 62-63.

Obviously one cannot put too much stock in the earliest period of the annals, because most of the annalistic entries prior to 550 AD, at the earliest, were certainly not contemporaneous and must be taken with a grain of salt.⁷¹⁴ It is interesting, nonetheless, that the Uí Néill emerge both into the framework of Irish history (i.e. pre-historic annalistic entries), and into the historical period proper (i.e. contemporaneous annalistic entries) as already established political powers.⁷¹⁵ As far as can be deciphered from the annals, the Uí Néill can be judged to be a political power already established by the dawn of the historical era in Ireland, but whose origins elude us. The references in the *Collectanea* to Lóegaire representing the sons of Niall, as well as in *VSP* to Lóegaire being the origin of the royal line of almost all of Ireland, implies that by the mid to late seventh century there was already a conception of the Uí Néill as a political power which was distinct from the Connachta.⁷¹⁶ What makes them intriguing beyond the simple mystery of wanting to know the origins for this powerful but nebulous political force, is that the Uí Néill do not segment and split apart in a manner that would be reasonable to expect from an Irish Dynastic Framework, especially one spread across almost half of Ireland and that was already divided into smaller fragments in terms of septs.⁷¹⁷ This point is driven home further when one considers some of the tales that have emerged concerning Conal Cremthainne's alleged grandson, Diarmait mac Cerbaill. Diarmait has an established literary canon that some argue even predates the Uí Néill and was originally associated with the Luigne and Gailenga.⁷¹⁸ Ó Corráin argues that the literature concerning Diarmait mirrors the changes

⁷¹⁴ Thornton, *Kings Chronologies and Genealogies*, 26.

⁷¹⁵ For dating see, Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 118. Smyth, 'The Earliest Annals', 4-18. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 443-44. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals*, 9, 159-163. Evans, *Present and Past*, 171-88.

⁷¹⁶ See also fn. 504. For Lóegaire's potential link with high kingship before even Muirchú and Tírechán.

⁷¹⁷ Segmentation and the emergence of new political frameworks from within existing Dynastic Frameworks appears to be a common feature of these Frameworks. With the Uí Néill it eventually leads to the Máel Sechlainn, the O'Donnell's, the O'Neills, the Ua Cannannáin and the Mac Lochlainns. This is far from an exhaustive list and it is likely there are smaller and less consequential entities emerging from the decline of the Uí Néill. See Byrne, 'The trembling sod', 15. & O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 175 & 176 & 435. The example of the Airgíalla, Connachta and Uí Néill emerging from the Connachta are evidence of this segmentation, but is based in pre-history and it is difficult to verify. See also; Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*, 199-200.

⁷¹⁸ Ó Corráin, 'Historical need', 147-51.

in political fortune of the Uí Néill, and thus separation from the Uí Néill is not far from the realm of possibility. The fact this fails to occur hints that the larger Dynastic Framework offered tangible political benefits.

In order to prove that these frameworks provided tangible political benefits, then, it is necessary to evaluate why certain Uí Néill septs did not fragment and separate off from the main group, despite having the means and motive to do so. If the sept chose to remain within the larger Uí Néill Framework, despite having both means and motive to leave and attempt to strike out on its own, then it is logical to assume that there were sufficient benefits to make remaining within the larger Uí Néill Framework worthwhile. The most prominent example of Uí Néill septs that could have segmented off from the group are those that emerge from the line of Conall Cremthainne. The line of Conall Cremthainne provides the two most powerful septs of the Southern Uí Néill, Clann Cholmáin Máir and Síl nÁedo Sláine, as we can see in the genealogies of Síl Chuind [in Rawl. B. 502]: *Conall Err Breg a quo Clann Colmáin ocus Síl nÁeda Sláine/* ‘Conall Err Breg from whom Clann Cholmáin and Síl nÁeda Sláine’.⁷¹⁹ Conall Cremthainne was himself a grandson of Niall Noigíallach, his children, Áed Sláine and Colmán Már, became the progenitors for the two most powerful groups within the Southern Uí Néill.⁷²⁰ Both the Síl nÁedo Sláine and the Clann Cholmáin Máir were powerful enough to push their political agendas and become kings of Tara at different times. Given the apparent political strength that they held, and the many skirmishes recorded between them and the political powers of Leinster, it is reasonable to assume that, had both of these groups worked together, they could well have monopolised the kingship of Tara between themselves.⁷²¹ These powerful Southern Uí Néill septs also shared a common ancestor, which the powerful groups

⁷¹⁹ O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 133.

⁷²⁰ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, ‘Ireland, 400-800’, 210. For the genealogical history of Áed Sláine and Colmán Már see, O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 159 & 160-161.

⁷²¹ For detail on the internal political relationship between Síl nÁedo Sláine and the Clann Cholmáin Már, see Sub-Heading; *Internal Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Competing Septs)*, esp. 109-13.

of the Northern Uí Néill did not. This provided them with a similar but slightly different lineage, derived from a prestigious figure. This situation would have provided them with the genealogical means to segment into a framework descended from Conall Cremthainne, and that could have operated in a manner similar to how the Airgíalla or the Uí Néill allegedly segmented off from the Connachta.

The Airgíalla are probably the most useful comparison in this situation, as they derive their genealogical distinction from being prestigious cousins of Niall of the Nine Hostages. The following analysis of the Airgíalla demonstrates precedent for segmentation and separation within perceived Dynastic Frameworks. One of the Airgíalla claims to fame is the story of the ‘Three Collas’ and their military victories over the Ulaid. The history of the Airgíalla, and how historians should interpret their founding ancestors, the ‘Three Collas’, is an issue of some disagreement. Some historians, such as O’Rahilly and Ó Cróinín, believe that the ‘Three Collas’ serve simply as sons of Niall Noigíallach in a different guise.⁷²² F. J. Byrne provides yet another theory, that the Airgíalla may even have had “plebeian” origins: ‘The genealogies are obscure and contradictory, but they reveal that the Airgíalla were not a coherent ethnic or dynastic group, and sometimes they hint at plebeian origins.’⁷²³ Needless to say, the genuine origins of the Airgíalla — and even their mythological origins — are quite difficult to decipher, resulting in these different theories in an attempt to make sense of it. What is important to this thesis is the narrative the Airgíalla attempted to put out there, that they were descendants of three men, Carrell, Muredach and Áed, who were known in the folklore as Colla hUais, Colla Fochríth and Colla Mend, respectively.

⁷²² Ó Cróinín, ‘Ireland, 400-800’, 202, & O’Rahilly, *Early Irish history*, 223-32.

⁷²³ Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, 74. See also a discussion on the archaeological history of Clogher, a site of importance to the Uí Chremthainn within the Airgíalla, in Gleeson ‘Constructing Kingship’, 1-33. I personally cannot agree with Byrne as the distinction between ‘plebeian’ and noble is especially blurred in early Irish society. Given the various means for social advancement in legal tracts, (albeit over generations), in conjunction with the previously discussed role of *febas*, indicates to me a society wherein nobility was not as divinely ordained or inherited as we may think.

Na trí Collae. Colla hUais a quo Huí Meic hUais, Colla Mend a quo Mugdorna, Colla Fochríth a quo Huí Chremthaind eter dá loch/ 'The three Colla's. Colla hUais from whom the Uí Meic hUais, Colla Mend from whom Mugdorna, Colla Fochríth from whom Uí Chremthaind between two lakes'.⁷²⁴

These three men were allegedly responsible for the sacking of the capital of the Ulaid at Emain Macha, and the ultimate decline of the Ulaid.⁷²⁵

The three Collas were cousins of the Uí Néill, being descended from the same family tree as Niall Noigíallach. This is interesting, as far as displays of kinship and the importance of Dynastic Frameworks in early medieval Ireland go, as the primary goal of the Airgíalla in fabricating their own history is to associate themselves as the closest relations to the Uí Néill on the island of Ireland. It has even been hypothesised that the epithet Noigíallach meaning ('Of the Nine Hostages') refers in some way to the Airgíalla, that they may have had to send Niall hostages, or before him to the Ulaid, in recognition of his overlordship, and the overlordship of his progeny, over the various septs of the Airgíalla in central Ulster.⁷²⁶ This demonstrates an overt attempt by a political power in Ireland to use their genealogy and Dynastic Framework to demonstrate loyalty to the Uí Néill, and perhaps even reap some of the benefits such a close relationship would entail.

A much more explicit example of diplomacy between the Uí Néill and the Airgíalla can be found in a poem concerning the status of the Airgíalla.⁷²⁷ This poem explicitly outlines the

⁷²⁴ O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 139.

⁷²⁵ See also Charles-Edwards, 'The Uí Néill 695-743', 402-12. In which he proposes a date for this poem in the reign or approximate period of Áed Alláin of the Cenél nÉogain.

⁷²⁶ O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*, 223-32.

⁷²⁷ This poem is taken from the National Library MS No. 7 (Phillipps Collection).

rights and obligations of the Airgíalla towards the Uí Néill.⁷²⁸ On the matter of the nobility of the Airgíalla's descent the poem notes

*Comshaíre ceneuil do Uip Néill fri Oirgialda acht clanda righ conoatar frit ria
illbliadna/ 'The Uí Néill and the Airgíalla are equal in nobility of race save the
descendants of kings who preserve truth through many years.'*⁷²⁹

The poem goes on to name these kings that 'preserve truth', they are Aod Allán, Aod son of Ainmere, Aod Sláine, Conall Cremthainne, Colmán Becc and Colmán Mór.⁷³⁰ It is the descendants of these five kings whom the poem establishes as superior nobility to the Airgíalla. The poem then elaborates upon the obligations and dues of the Airgíalla and it appears to largely put them in a position of servitude to the Uí Néill, owing them three fortnights of military service once every three years, and other obligations.⁷³¹ This poem stands as clear and indisputable evidence of the loyalty and subservience that the Airgíalla often express towards the Uí Néill.

If the Síl nÁedo Sláine and the Clann Cholmáin Máir had segmented off from the Uí Néill in the same manner as the Airgíalla did from the Connachta, as cousins of the Uí Néill, they would have been able to monopolise the kingship of Tara with relative ease. They were the most powerful groups living in the area adjacent to Tara. The only other septs that historically had any interest and enough power to claim the title were the Cenél Conaill and Cenél nEógain, who would have had to travel half the length of Ireland to contest the title. The Southern Uí Néill, therefore, had the means and motive to segment off from the larger Uí Néill Dynastic

⁷²⁸ See also Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh*, 121-23, for an outline of a similar charter of obligations concerning the Laigin.

⁷²⁹ Máirín O Daly, 'A Poem on the Airgíalla', *Ériu* 16 (1952) 179-188: 180 & 185.

⁷³⁰ O Daly, 'A Poem on the Airgíalla', 186.

⁷³¹ O Daly, 'A Poem on the Airgíalla', 186.

Framework. Their means was their distinguished ancestor Conall Cremthainne, and from his line also Diarmait mac Cerbaill, whose status as an important Uí Néill king more than merits the establishment of a branch family within the Uí Néill. The motive would have been the chance to monopolise the kingship of Tara and with it all the legends, prestige and entitlements built up by previous Uí Néill kings concerning the importance of that title to suzerainty of the island of Ireland. This did not happen, however, even during the period after 734 AD in which the high-kingship of Tara was being alternated regularly between the Cenél nEógain and the Clann Cholmáin, the two dominant powers of the Uí Néill in the North and South respectively.⁷³² This testifies to the fact, that until that stage, the Uí Néill identity must have provided some political benefits, as otherwise it would have been the perfect opportunity for the Southern Uí Néill to monopolise the title.

Eventually, c. 1000 AD, an attempt was made by the Southern Uí Néill to monopolise the title after the time of Máel Sechnaill. The family of Máel Sechnaill attempted to make the kingship of Tara hereditary, rather than resuming the customary alternation of power between Northern and Southern septs that had been in place since around 730 AD.⁷³³ Much of the politics after this moment can inform modern historians about the benefits that the Uí Néill Framework provided the Southern Uí Néill, that incentivised them to remain within the larger kin group. The Uí Máel Sechlainn attempt to monopolise the kingship of Tara upset the Cenél nEógain of the Northern Uí Néill, who withdrew their support for the Southern branches.⁷³⁴ Without assistance from their Northern counterparts, the Uí Máel Sechlainn were left to contest against the various political powers of Leinster and Munster, both Norse and Irish, for what had long been considered the most prized title on the island of Ireland. It is no coincidence that the political clout of Munster, and later Connacht, increased just as the Uí Néill power began

⁷³² Smyth, *Celtic Leinster*, 78-83. Ó Cróinín, 'Ireland, 400-800', 211. See also, Warntjes, 'The Alternation', 394-432.

⁷³³ Byrne, 'Tribes and tribalism', 152.

⁷³⁴ Byrne, 'The trembling sod: Ireland in 1169', 8.

to wane in the midlands, and the attempt to monopolise Tara for the gain of the Uí Máel Sechlainn only served to expedite this new political status quo.

This disruption to the alternation of the kingship of Tara opened the door for a reshuffling of the political sphere of early medieval Ireland. In previous centuries, the powers of the rest of Ireland were faced with the formidable challenge of tackling both branches of the Uí Néill, each of which was the most dominant power in their respective provinces.⁷³⁵ The attempt to monopolise the kingship of Tara effectively isolated the Southern Uí Néill from assistance from within the rest of the framework, and this, coupled with the rising power of the other provinces, led to their eventual decline.⁷³⁶ It seems safe to propose that the principal reason the kingship of Tara and the territory of the Uí Néill stayed relatively stable for centuries prior to this decision was because the Uí Néill Framework provided a sense of unity and a larger array of allies, that made it easier to defend territory from external forces. There are very few examples of external forces capitalising upon the weakness of either the Northern or Southern Uí Néill, this is because usually, if there was an external power stronger than one of them, the Northern and Southern Uí Néill combined would still be capable of fending off an attack. The following is an account of one such instance, and what should be apparent is that there needed to be crisis among both the Northern and Southern Uí Néill for an external power to make their move. One of the few examples we have of an external force capitalising on a weakened Uí Néill Dynastic Framework occurs in the period following the battle of Corann in 703 AD:

⁷³⁵ For previous discussion concerning alliance within the Dynastic Framework, see Sub-Heading, *Internal Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Competing Septs)*, esp. 118-19 & Sub-Heading, *External Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Larger Dynastic Narratives)*, 131.

⁷³⁶ Consider here fn. 393, and the subsequent political ramifications of the ‘Devastation of the Laigin by Domnall’. No longer did the Uí Máel Sechlainn have Northern kinsmen with a vested interest in securing their loyalty and territory.

Bellum Corainn in quo ceciderunt Loingsech mac Oengusa, rex Hiberniae, mac Domnaill mac Aedha mac Ainmirech .i. la Ceallach Locha Cime mac Radhallaigh, cum tribus filiis suis ocus duo filii Colgen ocus Dub Dibergg mac Dungaile ocus Fergus Forcraith ocus Congal Gabhra ocus ceteri multi duces.'The battle of Corann in which fell the king of Ireland, Loingsech son of Aengus son of Domnall son of Aed son of Ainmire i.e. by Cellach of Loch Cime son of Ragallach, together with his three sons, and two sons of Colgu, and Dub Díberg, son of Dúngal; and Fergus Forcraid and Congal of Gabar and many other leaders'.⁷³⁷

This battle, as we can see, was devastating to the Cenél Conaill and to their allies that participated in it because it appears to have wiped out their leadership in one day and the next generation of prospective leaders.⁷³⁸ A further blow is the death of Adamnán in the following year, a prominent clergyman and leader from amongst the Cenél Conaill. *Adomnanus .lxx.iii. anno etatis sue, abbas Iae, pausat*'Adamnán, abbot of Í, rests in the 77th year of his age'.⁷³⁹ This battle, by the very nature of how deadly it was to the nobility and leadership present, created a political vacuum in multiple Irish kingdoms. It does not seem to have been long until the effects of this leadership vacuum were felt, as in 706 AD we can see the beginnings of a power-struggle from within the Uí Néill, with the death of Conchobar son of Máel Dúin, king of Cenél Cairpri.⁷⁴⁰

⁷³⁷ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 162-63.

⁷³⁸ See this thesis, 153.

⁷³⁹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 162-63.

⁷⁴⁰ See this thesis, 113. For an analysis of the chaos caused by interregnum.

Concobur mac Maele Duin, rex generis Coirpri, iugulatus/'Conchobor son of Mael Dúin, king of Cenél Cairpri, was killed (had his throat slit).'⁷⁴¹

The inferred meaning of *iugulatus* is not that he was killed in battle, or in combat, or died naturally, but that he had his throat slit.⁷⁴² It would seem fair then to infer that the use of *iugulatus est* may be taken to mean specifically that the person was killed in a treacherous or dishonest fashion. The assassination of one king is no indication of widespread turmoil, however, yet it is not the only reference to a possible succession crisis. 707 AD notes the slaying of Indrechtach son of Dunnchad of Muirisc by a son of Loingsech and the king of the Cenél Cairpri:

Occisio Indrechtaigh mac Dunnchada Muirsce. Fergal mac Maele Duin ocus Fergal mac Loingsigh ocus Conall Menn, rex generis Coirpri, occiderunt eum/'The slaying of Indrechtach son of Dúinchad of Muirisc. Fergal son of Máel Dúin and Fergal son of Loingsech and Conall Menn, king of Cenél Cairpri, slew him'.⁷⁴³

In 712 AD a battle between two descendants of Áed Sláine is noted, followed closely, in 714 AD, by reference to another battle among them.⁷⁴⁴ In 715 AD Murchad son of Diarmaid, king of the Uí Néill, is killed treacherously:

⁷⁴¹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 164-165.

⁷⁴² 'Jugulare est jugulum praecidere, incidere, et generatim obruncare, trucidare, interficere, Angl. *to cut the throat, butcher, kill, stay*'. Egidio Forcellini & Giuseppe Furlanetto & Francesco Corradini & Josephus Perin, *Lexicon Totius Latinitatis* (Pativii 1940). This is backed up by multiple other dictionaries using the *Database of Latin Dictionaries* available on Brepolis. The dictionaries are as follows. Charlton T. Lewis & Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford 1933). Félix Gaffiot, *Dictionnaire Latin-Français* (Paris 1934). These references can be viewed at the website *Brepolis.net* (online at <http://apps.brepolis.net/libgate.library.nuigalway.ie/BrepolisPortal/default.aspx>), accessed 18.03.2021. See also, fnn. 342-44 for further discussion on terms of death in the Irish annals and their meaning.

⁷⁴³ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 164.

⁷⁴⁴ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 168-71.

Iugulatio Murchadho mac Dermato filii ceci regis nepotum Neill. ‘The killing of Murchad son of Diarmaid son of [Airmedach] Caech, king of the Uí Néill’⁷⁴⁵

In that same year there is a hosting by Murchad son of Bran to Cashel, likely an expedition to gain Cathal mac Finguine’s support for an attack on Mag Breg.⁷⁴⁶

Given these references, it would be fair to say that the Northern Uí Néill were weakened significantly by the loss of their leaders at Corann. It would also appear that the previously dominant Southern Uí Néill sept of the Síl nÁedo Sláine were in a similar state of disarray, with a succession crisis that lasted from at least 712 AD until 713 AD. The weakness of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework was publicly observable in 717 AD in *AU*, where the fair of Tailtiu is disturbed by Fógartach and two men are killed: *Comixtio agonis Talten la Fogartach ubi ceciderunt filius Rubai ocus filius Duib Sleibhe.*⁷⁴⁷ The ultimate disaster then occurs for the Uí Néill in 720 AD, when Mag Breg is devastated by the Munster king Cathal mac Finguine and Murchad son of Bran, the King of Leinster.⁷⁴⁸

This crisis within the Uí Néill was made possible by the fact that there was no clear leader within the Dynastic Framework to take control and fend off the external forces of Munster and Leinster. It is no wonder that this is the period in time that saw the emergence of a new status quo within the Uí Néill, as the Cenél Conaill were replaced in the North by Áed Allán and the Cenél nEógain, while in the South Domnall Midi and the Clann Chólmain would replace the Síl nÁedo Sláine supremacy.⁷⁴⁹ Being of sufficient power to maintain the integrity of the larger Dynastic Framework was important, and although they frequently fought against one another,

⁷⁴⁵ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 170.

⁷⁴⁶ See fn. 449.

⁷⁴⁷ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 172.

⁷⁴⁸ See Sub-Heading, *The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks: The “Secular” Examples.*

⁷⁴⁹ See Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 89-111. Jaski, ‘Vikings and the Kingship of Tara’, 313.

it was still beneficial to remain within this larger framework as members in the north or south had a vested interest in the kingship of Tara. As such they would at times provide indirect help, either by defeating external forces which occupied the kingship of Tara, or waging war against external forces in a bid to earn the allegiance of their kinsmen.⁷⁵⁰

In the case of the Fir Tulach, Fir Asall and Fir Cell, mentioned earlier, the fact that the larger Laigin Dynastic Framework was unable to defend its territorial integrity meant that they lost access to the resources of these three *tuatha*, who instead served their enemies.⁷⁵¹ Maintaining the territorial claims of the larger Dynastic Framework was therefore ultimately in the best interests of any sept that wished to rise to power over it, as it maximised the political clout and resource available to the leadership.⁷⁵² There were different factors that contributed to other regions becoming more prominent over time. The straw that broke the camel's back, and ultimately caused the decline of the Uí Néill, however, arguably began with the Uí Máel Sechlainn attempting to monopolise the kingship of Tara, as it disrupted the unity and supremacy that the Uí Néill framework provided at a crucial time, when the power of Munster and Connacht was rising. For the descendants of Conall Cremthainne, it was more beneficial to remain within the larger Uí Néill Dynastic Framework and have access to more political resources if they were to rise to become the leaders, than it was to segment off, break free and fend for themselves, as the Uí Máel Sechlainn attempted to towards the end of Uí Néill domination.

Muirchertach mac Ercae: A Case Study into Uí Néill Kingship

Another mythological figure with significance to the larger Uí Néill framework (and that particularly catches the eye when reading AU) is the story of Muirchertach mac Ercae.

⁷⁵⁰ For more information, Sub-Heading; *External Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Larger Dynastic Narratives)*.

⁷⁵¹ For the discussion of the Fir Tulach, see Sub-Heading, *Kinship and Group Identity in Early Medieval Ireland*, 226-28.

⁷⁵² See fn. 183, for Charles-Edwards informative statement concerning these political powers.

Muirchertach mac Ercae is an ahistorical figure that features prominently in this period and plays a major role in the development of Uí Néill political narrative in the annals. Muirchertach mac Ercae is portrayed to have been a prominent warlord at the end of the fifth century, first appearing in AU in 482 AD, though he is included by a later hand, where he fights alongside Lugaid mac Lóegaire against the forces of Ailill Molt at the battle of Ochaë.

Bellum Oche, .i. la Lugaid mc. Laegaire ocus la Muirchertach mc. Earca in quo cecidit Ailill Molt/ ‘The battle of Ochaë i.e. [won] by Lugaid son of Laegaire and by Muirchertach mac Erca, in which Ailill Molt fell.’⁷⁵³

He is a member of the Cenél nEógain, and his exploits in the following fifty years would be enough to solidify his place as one of the most important members of that sept, were he not fictional.⁷⁵⁴ Muirchertach’s actions in the annals, and the manner in which he is portrayed as historical, serve as a template which ambitious members of the Uí Néill Framework may have found useful to follow in order to become king of Tara.

Something eye-catching about Muirchertach is that his genealogy is first laid out in the annals at his obituary.⁷⁵⁵ He emerges as a man seemingly attached to the Uí Néill as he fights alongside them, but there is no mention of an Erc(a) whom he might be descended from, barring his contemporary from among the Connachta named ‘Mac Erce’. Muirchertach is the sort of remarkable figure that needs no introduction, but needs a fitting conclusion. It would be worth keeping in mind Muirchertach’s relationship to Niall Noigíallach, and whether he was a pre-existing figure adopted into the traditions of an Uí Néill sept for their political betterment. This may appear somewhat conspiratorial; however, at the time of Muirchertach’s life we are only

⁷⁵³ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 52-53.

⁷⁵⁴ O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 134.

⁷⁵⁵ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 70-71.

one generation removed from the eponymous man Niall himself; Muirchertach fought at Ochaé alongside Niall's grandson Lugaid, who was the son of Lóegaire mac Néill.⁷⁵⁶ It seems odd, if Muirchertach was always a descendant of Niall, that he did not receive similar treatment. Bearing in mind the references to 'Mac Erce' amongst the Connachta, it is possible that Muirchertach emerged initially among the Cenél nÉogain as an attempt to project political power backwards in the annals to a period when they were overshadowed by the Cenél Conail, something we will discuss presently.⁷⁵⁷ For context Muirchertach (according to tradition) is the grandson of Éogan, son of Niall Noígíallach. Muirchertach's claim to membership in the Cenél nÉogain is clear in his obituary in *AU*, even though again it is only included in a later hand,

Demersio Muirchertaig filii erce, .i. Muirchertaigh mc. Muireadhaidh mc. Eoghain mc. Neill Naoighiallaigh, in dolio pleno uino in a[r]xe Cletig supra Boinn/'The drowning of Muirchertach Mac Erca i.e. Muirchertach son of Muiredach son of Éogan son of Niall Naígíallach, in a vat full of wine on the fort of Cleitech above Bóinn'.⁷⁵⁸

One of the reasons for choosing to focus so heavily on Muirchertach mac Ercae, instead of Lóegaire mac Néill or Conall Gulban, is that his life is the most remarkable of any descendant of Niall during the period between Patrick and historicity; and because the annals develop his deeds to have further significance. Although Lóegaire plays the role of antagonist to Saint Patrick in the hagiographies of Muirchú and Tírechán, and has some acclaim on this account, he emerges already king of Tara and comfortable in his position as leading secular power in the land. Muirchertach is more of an informative figure about the manner in which Uí Néill

⁷⁵⁶ O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 167.

⁷⁵⁷ See also, Ó Corráin, 'Muirchertach Mac Lochlain', 238-51, which provides a great deal of information regarding some of the political context of the 'Circuit' of Muirchertach.

⁷⁵⁸ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 70-71.

Dynastic Framework works — or was believed to have worked — due to the fact that he reaches the highest position in the land from relative obscurity.

Muirchertach emerges from nowhere at Ochaë to fight against Ailill Molt, a high-king of Ireland. He then goes on tour across Ireland fighting and defeating major political powers in each of the ancient fifths. The battle of Granaiet is attributed to *filius Erce*, which may refer to Muirchertach or to the aforementioned Mac Erca from the Connachta.

*Bellum Primum Granaerad. Coirpri mc. Neill Naoighiallaigh uictor erat, in quo cecidit Fincath; †filius Erce uictor ut alii dicunt / ‘The first battle of Granaiet. Coirpre son of Niall Naígiallach, was victor and Finnchad fell; or Mac Erca was victor, as others state’.*⁷⁵⁹

The battle of Cell Osnaidh, though Muirchertach is only stated to have a role by an addition in a different hand,

*Uel hic cath Cell osnaidh secundum alios. Mac Earca uictore, ocus Casil uictus/‘Or here, the battle of Cell [L]osnaidh according to others. Mac erca was victor, and [the king of] Caisel defeated’.*⁷⁶⁰

The battle of Inne Mór, fought against the Laigin and directly attributed in the primary hand to Muirchertach, 498 AD:

⁷⁵⁹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 52-53.

⁷⁶⁰ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 54-55.

Bellum Inni Moer i crich Oa nGabla for Laegniu. Muirchertach, .i. Filius erce, uictor erat./ ‘The battle of Inne Mór in the territory of the Uí Gabla, [won] over the Laigin. Muichertach Mac Erca was victor.’⁷⁶¹

Finally he is mentioned in the battle of Segais against the king of Connacht, 502 AD:

Bellum Segaisse in quo cecidit Dauí l Duach Tinga Umhai .i. Ri Connacht. Muirchertach Mc. Earca uictor fuit./ ‘The Battle of Segais in which fell Daue or Duach Tenga Umae i.e. king of Connacht. Muirchertach Mac Erca was victor.’⁷⁶²

After winning battles in Meath, Munster, Leinster and Connacht, and with the implication that he had already pacified his home region of Ulster before embarking on this marauding spree, eventually *AU* notes (though in a later hand) that *Muirchertach mc. Earca regnare incipit/* ‘Muirchertach Mac Erca begins to reign’, presumably an addition that was included in order to bolster his claim as king of Tara.⁷⁶³ Muirchertach is the first documented person in the Irish annals to have explicitly been stated to have forced submission from each of the fifths of Ireland, (considering of course that he is supposedly of the Cenel nÉogain it is safe to assume he had dominance in Ulster as well at this time). Although Muirchertach lies outside of the bounds of history, an examination of his significance to the Cenél nÉogain and the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework will prove that he was an aspirational figure and reflective of the manner in which kingship or suzerainty over the Dynastic Framework was conceptualised.

Muirchertach was tied into not just the larger Uí Néill claim to dominion over the island, but pivotally to the Cenél nÉogain claim to the kingship of Tara.⁷⁶⁴ Muirchertach’s exploits

⁷⁶¹ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 58-59.

⁷⁶² Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 60-61.

⁷⁶³ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 62-63.

⁷⁶⁴ Ó Corráin, ‘Muirchertach Mac Lochlain’, 238-51.

and deeds throughout his life occur at a period when the Cenél nEógain had yet to rise to political distinction among the Northern Uí Néill. During the time period in question, and indeed for some time into the historical period, it was their rivals, the Cenél Conaill, that dominated the political landscape of the Northern Uí Néill, with both Airmire mac Sétna and Áed mac Airmirech being consecutive kings of the Cenél Conaill, and both seemingly pre-eminent among the larger Uí Néill Dynastic Framework in their time.⁷⁶⁵ As such, the character of Muirchertach reads decidedly as the fulfilment of a Cenél nEógain wish to have an ancestor that was king of Tara in a period when their rivals the Cenél Conaill had kings such as Airmire mac Sétna and Áed mac Airmirech in order to assert some level of political clout back onto a period in history when they were weak. Wishing to have a more noteworthy ancestor may explain why many of the entries concerning Muirchertach Mac Erca are additions made in later hands. It would be one thing if they were additions included by the primary hand, but often Muirchertach has exploits attributed to him by an entirely different composer.⁷⁶⁶ Given the prominence of the Cenél nEógain among the Northern Uí Néill after they successfully excluded the Cenél Conaill from power after the seventh century, it seems likely that Muirchertach Mac Ercae was a figure conceived in this period when the Cenél nEógain had power in the North.⁷⁶⁷ Political leverage with the *paruchia* of Armagh may have resulted in Muirchertach being written into the early history of the Uí Néill in order to legitimise the power and claim that the Cenél nEógain had to the kingship of Tara and to enhance the prestige of their own ancestry.⁷⁶⁸ In this regard Muirchertach is not only an exemplar for the Uí Néill as a whole, but also serves to legitimise the credentials of one of the most powerful Uí Néill septs in the later periods. It is necessary, therefore, to read his inclusion in the annals of Ulster as politically motivated,

⁷⁶⁵ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 84-85 & 98-99.

⁷⁶⁶ Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 52-53, Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, 54-55, referenced above both include Muirchertach mac Ercae in the hand of H2. For further information on H2, see Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster*, viii.

⁷⁶⁷ See Ó Corráin, 'Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn', 238-251. See also Sub-Heading 'Dynastic Framework'.

⁷⁶⁸ See fn. 464.

borne not just out of a desire by the learned/scholarly wing of the Uí Néill to bolster the larger Dynastic Framework's claim to Tara and the kingship of Ireland, but to promote the politics of a specific group within that Dynastic Framework.⁷⁶⁹

In the annals we see Muirchertach's life expanded upon in order to develop him as an exemplar of Uí Néill kingship. He is given a threefold death in later legends that expand in more detail upon the obituary from *AU* mentioned earlier.⁷⁷⁰ Coupled with his rapid rise to power and assertion of dominance over the entirety of Ireland through force of arms, Muirchertach provides the perfect example of an Uí Néill overking, who, having gained power in Ulster, makes each of the other provinces recognise his right to rule. His inclusion may have come at a much later period and he may be an idealised king of the Uí Néill; but it seems clear that, when one views the entries concerning Muirchertach, there is a purposeful attempt to craft the ideal road to the kingship of Tara. Having this figure planted among the annalistic record, in an attempt to ground him in reality not only legitimises the power of the Cenél nEógain who claim descent from him, but also legitimises the Uí Néill claim to sovereignty of Ireland.

This thesis asserts that Muirchertach was a fictional character initially dreamt up in order to act as an instructional figure for achieving the high kingship. It cannot be known when Muirchertach Mac Ercae was first conceived of and when his exploits were written down in order to act as guidelines for those wishing to follow in his footsteps. Muirchertach's circuit of Ireland in the early sixth century drives home the importance of demonstrating martial superiority over one's rivals in early medieval Ireland. Muirchertach's circuit informs those wishing to emulate him and reach the highest level of political power in early medieval Ireland that doing so was predicated upon forcing the submission of rival groups.⁷⁷¹ This would

⁷⁶⁹ See fn. 615.

⁷⁷⁰ Whitley Stokes, 'Aidead Muirchertaig Maic Erca Insin/The Death of Muirchertach Mac Erca', *Revue Celtique* 23 (1902) 395-437.

⁷⁷¹ See the instances of submission acted out in the annals in Sub-Heading, *Internal Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Competing Septs)*.

coincide with the theory that cattle raids and skirmishes between neighbouring groups was just as much about enforcing dominance and establishing a hierarchy over a weaker subordinate people as it was about amassing wealth.⁷⁷² It is not explicitly stated that Muirchertach took the submission of these people after having defeated them; however, his ascension to kingship only after defeating an enemy from each province would heavily imply this is how we are supposed to read his tour of Ireland.

One further fascinating point of information that the case study of Muirchertach Mac Ercae may provide is an insight into how, at the time of his inclusion in the annals, we may read the way in which the Dynastic Framework was supposed to have functioned. Muirchertach's first appearance at Ochaë is striking. Together with Lugaid, Muirchertach manages to defeat Ailill Molt, the reigning high-king of Tara, and in doing so brings to an end the brief period when the title was wrested from the hands of the Uí Néill. The presence of Muirchertach, which tacitly implies the presence of soldiers from the Cenél nEógain, at the battlefield of Ochaë alongside Lugaid is evocative of an alliance between the lords of the Northern and Southern Uí Néill, which as we have seen, was commonplace in later centuries.⁷⁷³ Furthermore, the fact that both work together to reinstate Uí Néill kingship over Tara demonstrates a desire to provide a political cohesion between the two based upon their Dynastic Framework. To be clear, this is not to say that any of these events actually happened, or that such an alliance between North and South existed at this stage in history; rather it is to point out that, at the time of composition, the desire for such an alliance was at least present within the literate/scholarly community in Ireland. The battle of Ochaë demonstrates that the concept of an alliance between two disconnected groups, united only through the vague links of the Dynastic Framework, was at the very least considered possible in Ireland, if not an outright allusion to the cordial relations

⁷⁷² Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship and Succession*, 103.

⁷⁷³ See fn. 732.

between the Northern and Southern septs of the Uí Néill.⁷⁷⁴ It is noteworthy that Muirchertach and Lugaid reinstated Lugaid onto his father's throne and established Uí Néill control over the kingship of Tara, and then after Lugaid's death it is Muirchertach who ascends to the throne. In this way Muirchertach not only acts as an instructional/aspirational figure for ambitious Uí Néill kings, but he and Lugaid serve as the men that initially begin to rotate the title of King of Tara between the Northern and Southern Uí Néill, something that was fairly common practice in later centuries.⁷⁷⁵

Muirchertach and Lóegaire's relationship with the kingship of Tara (and hence of the Uí Néill), demonstrates that, at the point their stories were recorded, the Uí Néill had a strong conception of common identity founded upon their Dynastic Framework, and that framework was strongly tied to the kingship of Tara, and through it the political dominance of the entire island of Ireland. Furthermore, the story of Muirchertach demonstrates a belief or an understanding at the time of composition of the benefits entailed in being a member of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. The benefits this Dynastic Framework carried was military support, seen through Muirchertach and Lugaid assisting one another at Ochaë for Lugaid's immediate gain and Muirchertach's long-term advancement.⁷⁷⁶ It was also a beneficial political entity for Muirchertach to operate within as, although he had to enforce the subjugation of other major political powers by force, he did not have to wage war against the Southern Uí Néill, the

⁷⁷⁴ The alternation between North and South is well established in the historiography. When considering the antiquity of such a concept we may consider again Jaski, 'Vikings and the Kingship of Tara', 311, where the doctrine of *Leth Cuinn & Leth Moga* is speculated to emerge c. 737 AD, as a result of a meeting between Áed Allan and Cathal mac Finguine. Throughout the thesis we have seen this period following the battle of Corann and culminating in the eventual overthrow of Cathal mac Finguine was a change in the political landscape, with new powers in the North and South respectively. (See also Battle of Cloítech fn. 13 for Northern change in leadership). I believe alternation was likely established in this period and the battle of Ochaë in *AU* is a metaphor for this new political reality.

⁷⁷⁵ Smyth, *Celtic Leinster*, 78-83.

⁷⁷⁶ Bearing in mind the discussion of both Domnall mac Áedo and Fínechta and the efforts they made to extract submission by force of arms outlined in Chapter 4. This interpretation of the literature is, therefore, backed up by historical references.

implication being that their commonality within the Uí Néill Framework allowed him to establish himself as pre-eminent among his Dynastic Framework diplomatically.

Control and Developing a Monopoly of the Kingship of Tara

One of the major boons that the Uí Néill Framework retained for centuries during their political dominance, and that may have acted as a binding agent for the geographically and genealogically distant septs, was control over the kingship of Tara. We have seen references made time and again in the various literary sources analysed in this thesis to the kingship of Tara.⁷⁷⁷ Given the geographical position of the Southern Uí Néill and the prominent position Tara maintains in literature, it can be said that the Uí Néill and Tara shared a unique connection.⁷⁷⁸ Tara is, perhaps, the most famous archaeological site on the island of Ireland, and an extensive corpus of scholarship has emerged concerning various aspects of the site and its importance to Irish history. This thesis focuses upon the Uí Néill and Dynastic Frameworks, it is thus primarily concerned with the perceived importance of Tara as a regnal site for the Uí Néill/Ireland in the historical period; therefore, much of the archaeological and material scholarship that exists concerning Tara's pre-history is not directly relevant, but will be briefly discussed to provide context.⁷⁷⁹ Tara is frequently equated with kingship and is understood in literature as a regnal site, it is difficult to determine for certain, however, if this royal function existed in pre-history.⁷⁸⁰ What we do know is that the Tara of pre-history was strongly associated with ritual.⁷⁸¹ Tara, therefore, appears to be a site that was significant in the pre-

⁷⁷⁷ In particular see Chapter 5: 'The Creation of Political Narratives Concerning Dynastic Frameworks'.

⁷⁷⁸ Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the medieval world*, 120-21.

⁷⁷⁹ For archaeological literature concerning Tara, see the following to begin with; Edel Bhreathnach, 'The topography of Tara: the documentary evidence', in *Discovery Programme Reports: 2* (1995) 68-76. Edel Bhreathnach & Conor Newman, *Tara* (1995; repr. 1999). Newman, *An Archaeological Survey*. Joe Fenwick & Conor Newman, 'Geomagnetic Survey on the Hill of Tara, Co. Meath, 1998-9', in *Discovery Programme Reports 6* (2002) 1-18. Helen Roche, 'Excavations at Ráith na Ríg, Tara, Co. Meath, 1997', in *Discovery Programme Reports 6* (2002) 19-82. Particular attention must be paid to Bhreathnach, *A Select Bibliography*, 43-157, as it provides a more concrete overview of the scholarship concerning Tara than could be performed here without deviation from the argument. See also fn. 12.

⁷⁸⁰ Newman, *An Archaeological Survey*, 237-42. Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the medieval world*, 116-18.

⁷⁸¹ Newman, *An Archaeological Survey*, 183-86 & 240-41. Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the medieval world*, 113-16.

historic period, and likely morphed from a ritual site to a regnal one over time.⁷⁸² Tara as an important Irish site, therefore, predates the Uí Néill, but much of the literature concerning the kingship of Tara and its royal aspects was a product of Uí Néill dominance.⁷⁸³

The kingship of Tara was a prestigious title in its own right that likely emerged from the pre-historical significance of the archaeological site. Over the course of Uí Néill supremacy, the legend of Tara was embellished with passing generations until it became the ultimate symbol of sovereignty and the site associated with the kingship of all Ireland.⁷⁸⁴ It was a title desired by the leaders of the various powerful Uí Néill septs and it only became increasingly enticing over time, even becoming desired by powerful political groups from other provinces in Ireland.⁷⁸⁵ An example of a non-Uí Néill ruler who is associated with the kingship of Tara would be Congal Cáech of the Cruithni.⁷⁸⁶ Congal is an outlier, however, and it may have more to do with the Cruithni pushing back against initial Uí Néill expansion or the secession of groups, such as the Airgíalla, from their sphere of influence. In any case, Congal Cáech is the only external force to claim the kingship of Tara for centuries after the initial establishment of the Uí Néill, and in the historical period the Uí Néill demonstrate an impressive monopoly over the title.⁷⁸⁷

Remaining as part of the Uí Néill meant that Southern Uí Néill septs had to recognise the power, authority, and claim of powerful Northern Uí Néill septs, but it also limited the number of unrelated groups that could contend for the title. This was the key factor in preserving and

⁷⁸² Newman, *An Archaeological Survey*, 240-41. Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the medieval world*, 118-20.

⁷⁸³ Tara's status in 'Uí Néill' literature is discussed within Chapter 5: 'The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks'.

⁷⁸⁴ For sources regarding Tara's stature in Irish society and literature, see the following to begin with; Binchy, 'The Fair of Tailtiu', 113-138. Byrne, *The Rise of the Uí Néill*. Bhreathnach, 'Temoria: Caput Scottorum?', 67-88. Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, 5-78. Catherine Swift, 'Óenach Tailten, the Blackwater Valley and the Uí Néill kings of Tara', in A.P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin 2000) 109-20. Anne Connon, 'The Bansenchas and the Uí Néill queens of Tara', in A.P. Smyth (ed.), *ibid* 98-108. Again, see also Bhreathnach, *A Select Bibliography*, 43-157.

⁷⁸⁵ Edel Bhreathnach, 'Authority and Supremacy in Tara and its Hinterland C. 950-1200', in *Discovery Programme Reports 5* (1999) 1-24: 1. Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the medieval world*, 115.

⁷⁸⁶ See fn. 351.

⁷⁸⁷ A brief interruption of this monopoly was in the reign of Cathal mac Finguine. See fn. 26.

developing the Uí Néill monopoly on the kingship of Tara, and through it their claim to be kings of Ireland. Whatever Tara's relationship was to the kingship of Ireland, it had a special relationship with the Uí Néill and, during the historical period, an Uí Néill king of Tara was at least pre-eminent over his larger Dynastic Framework. The fact that Tara was a title desired by multiple Uí Néill kings meant that the larger framework would, barring exceptional circumstances, have the requisite manpower to defend it, as it was in the best interests of any Uí Néill sept to keep Tara within the Framework.⁷⁸⁸ One of the reasons why this was in the best interests of Uí Néill leaders was because it lent more credence to the legitimacy of the kingship of Tara as the regnal site of Ireland, if it was recognised and held by men from the midlands and Ulster, as well as allegedly having been held by non-Uí Néill rulers in prehistory, e.g., Ailill Molt and Nath Í.⁷⁸⁹ That Tara was a site contested by more rulers than just the Uí Néill allowed them to more persuasively argue that the kingship of Tara was the centre of Irish kingship and more than just a provincial title.⁷⁹⁰ As the Uí Néill monopolised the title in the historical period it was a short jump in logic to assert that they were the only Dynastic Framework capable of becoming kings of Ireland.

There is more to the importance of Tara than just what the Uí Néill wrote, however; there was something unique in the way it existed on a political level that naturally afforded it a more prestigious position. If Tara had just been the domain of the Southern Uí Néill, it would arguably be roughly equivalent in importance to the kingship of Aileach, not inconsequential but provincial and hardly exceptional or worthy of the high-kingship of Ireland.⁷⁹¹ Consider the outlined hierarchy of the Dynastic Framework and the equivalence between leadership of

⁷⁸⁸ Domnall mac Áedo demonstrated this by overthrowing Cathal at Tara. See fn. 450.

⁷⁸⁹ Note the number of non-Uí Néill figures mentioned in *BiS*. Murray, *Baile in Scáil*.

⁷⁹⁰ The exact significance of the kingship of Tara is debated. Mac Neill, *Celtic Ireland*, 38. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History*, 173. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship*, 11. Byrne, *Kings and High-Kings*, 48-69. Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, 6. Ó Corráin, 'Historical need', 147-51. Bhreathnach, *A Select Bibliography* 10-15.

⁷⁹¹ See fn. 12 for some of the discussion surrounding these other 'royal' sites. Consider also Tara's supposed sacrality, Bhreathnach, 'Authority and Supremacy', 1.

a sept and *rí ruireach* and of a family and *rí tuaithe*.⁷⁹² It was not simply the domain of Southern Uí Néill septs; it was a title that was contested and desired by Uí Néill septs in Ulster too. The kingship of Tara did not operate like a provincial title, it was a title that was associated in practical political terms with overlordship of the Northern and Southern Uí Néill, with overlordship of two provinces. With this in mind, the kingship of Tara is something of a unique case as no other title in Ireland granted the same level of political clout. It is difficult to say conclusively if this was an intended function of Tara in the literature, or a by-product of their association with the Uí Néill who were spread across multiple provinces. The result is that the kingship of Tara, by nature of its unique position in Irish politics, functioned perfectly to encapsulate leadership of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. It is arguable that this level of political power was only attained by the various literary efforts of the Uí Néill to aggrandise their ancestral seat of power; however, the fact remains that to be a king of Tara meant that you were operating at a level of political rank higher than any competitor. The Uí Néill gained a monopoly on the Kingship of Tara through military strength, and their association with important churches played a key role in legitimising their claims to the kingship of Ireland by virtue of possessing Tara.⁷⁹³

In terms of military strength, the primary political powers in two provinces (Ulster and Leinster) were incentivised to keep the title from powers in the rest of the island. The resources and manpower that were available to the Uí Néill would therefore always be at a higher level than what was available to their competitors in Munster and Connacht, and they would have a better chance of retaining their monopoly on the kingship of Tara. Therefore, the Uí Néill restricted the number of possible claimants to Tara to members of their Dynastic Framework, increasing the prestige and political power of the most powerful Uí Néill septs. When the Uí

⁷⁹² See Sub-Heading *The 'Dynastic Framework'* esp. 27-28.

⁷⁹³ Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the medieval world*, 60.

Néill began to decline, the kingship of Tara was no longer regularly alternated between Uí Néill kings, and eventually the prestige and political clout that the various legends surrounding Tara had provided for them in the past began to fade from their grasp. The importance of Tara and the legends created around it did not fade along with the Uí Néill, rather they were co-opted by later kings seeking to reclaim mythical prestige. This is made particularly clear through the resurgence of *óenach Tailten* in the twelfth century, long after the Uí Néill had fallen from pre-eminence.⁷⁹⁴ This demonstrates that although the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework may have declined, their impact on the social and political sphere remained for centuries.

In order for the Uí Néill to have thrived for as long as they did, the Uí Néill framework must have provided a particular allure for the powerful septs as well. One of the most alluring notions which the Uí Néill identity offered for politically powerful septs was the kingship of Tara, and through it leadership within the larger Dynastic Framework, and potentially the High-Kingship of Ireland. In the early medieval period, there were four septs that regularly claimed the kingship of Tara, the Cenél Conaill and Cenél nÉogain in the North, and the Síl nÁedo Sláine and Clann Cholmáin Máir in the South; these powerful septs dominated the ‘official’ regnal-lists of the kingship of Tara, a fact that speaks to their political power and suggests that the leader of the Uí Néill was often chosen from amongst their ranks.⁷⁹⁵ These provincially dominant Uí Néill septs were associated with the kingship of Tara through their genealogical ancestors, therefore granting them association with one of the most prominent titles in Ireland, as well as a chance to seize it for themselves, should they be politically formidable enough.

The Benefits of the Dynastic Framework for Powerful Septs

The Uí Néill Framework also proved a useful political tool for the various Uí Néill overkingdoms. An over-king within the Uí Néill Framework would have had a common factor

⁷⁹⁴ Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, 20.

⁷⁹⁵ Ó Cróinín, ‘Ireland, 400-800’, 210. This is furthermore evident in the king lists of *BiS* and *BCC* in Murray, *Baile in Scáil*. & Bhreathnach, ‘*Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*’.

that may have facilitated closer relations and *cairde* treaties with smaller Uí Néill septs.⁷⁹⁶ It is known that certain Uí Néill septs were subservient to more powerful ones and usually comprised armies for the more provincially powerful septs; for example, the Cenél Lóegairi were subservient to the kings of Mide, or those kings present at the battle of Corann were assumedly subservient to the king of the Cenél Conaill.⁷⁹⁷ The subservience of weaker Uí Néill septs would have in turn bolstered the strength of the powerful septs and their chances at becoming the high-king of Tara. If a Southern or Northern Uí Néill sept had many different tributaries, then that would greatly increase its prestige and power and, as a result, they would have a better chance of seizing the kingship of Tara.⁷⁹⁸ It was not uncommon in early medieval Ireland for a sept to have other dynastic groups as tributaries underneath them; this is precisely what it meant to be an ‘over-king’ *ruiri* or *rí ruirech*.⁷⁹⁹ Part of the difficulty with cultivating long-lasting political power under one sept in early medieval Ireland, however, lay in the fact that, upon succession, formerly subjugated *rí tuaithe* may have taken the chance to break free from the suzerainty of their *rí ruirech*. As a result, an incumbent *rí ruirech* was forced to earn his rank by bringing new *tuatha* under his rule.⁸⁰⁰ It is arguable that the most defining and prevalent form of violence and battle in early medieval Ireland for centuries, the cattle raids, had to do with *ruiri*’s or *rí ruirech*’s attempting to assert their dominance over lesser kings. These raids were more than simply an attempt to plunder and weaken neighbouring *tuatha*; they can be seen as indicative of the aggressor asserting their superiority in battle and an attempt by an incumbent *rí* or *rí ruirech* to prove his ability to retain the clients of his predecessor.⁸⁰¹

⁷⁹⁶ See fnn. 102 & 363 for previously discussed evidence of alliance predicated upon this shared kinship.

⁷⁹⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 574. See also fn. 446.

⁷⁹⁸ See this thesis, 27-28. Esp. the discussion surrounding Rí Buiden.

⁷⁹⁹ See fn. 87.

⁸⁰⁰ Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship and Succession*, 103.

⁸⁰¹ Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship and Succession*, 103.

Cattle raids and other forms of violence to assert superiority were prevalent within the Uí Néill; however, the larger Dynastic Framework may have served to benefit the more powerful septs by making these assertions of dominance less frequent.⁸⁰² The likelihood of treaties such as *cairde* being formed with more ease amongst septs within the Uí Néill, due to their common ancestor, has already been outlined.⁸⁰³ It is possible that the very process through which *cairde* treaties were established was something that was made easier by the fact these groups existed within a common kindred. In a *cairde* a member of the junior *tuath*, called an *aitire* ('between man'), volunteered to become the representative of his *tuath* in future disputes. If his *tuath* violated previous arrangements, then he could be taken hostage by the *muiredach* until the dispute was resolved.⁸⁰⁴ The *aitire* acted as a hostage with rights and responsibilities to both parties. In the example of the Cenél Lógairi and the kings of Míde, rather than through brute force and the taking of hostages/*gíalla*, who had fewer rights in the eyes of the law, it is likely that reaching a *cairde* treaty through an *aitire* was made simpler and more feasible through the sense of hierarchy the larger Uí Néill framework provided.⁸⁰⁵

Forming alliances through a commonality would have been of particular interest to the larger and more powerful Uí Néill septs, as it was not common in early medieval Ireland to utterly defeat a rival group and take their land. Irish politics usually resulted with the victor in a conflict subjugating the defeated party, sometimes replacing the leadership of the conquered group with relatives of the conqueror.⁸⁰⁶ For example, in 925 AD the leadership of the Corcu Mruad was replaced by a member of the Uí Thairdelbaig. This did not mean, however, that the

⁸⁰² See fn. 371. The destruction of Ailech Frigrenn as an expression of political will through violent means.

⁸⁰³ See Sub-Heading, *Internal Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Competing Septs)*, Sub-Heading, *External Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Larger Dynastic Narratives)*. & fnn. 102 & 363.

⁸⁰⁴ Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship and Succession*, 103. See also Andrew Ó Donnghaile, 'An Overview of Inter-Territorial Law in Early Medieval Ireland', *Peritia* 30 (2019) 197-214.

⁸⁰⁵ This assumption is predicated upon the well-demonstrated fact in this thesis that certain Uí Néill septs were more politically prominent through generations and especially at Corann, appeared to have subject/clients that were likely multi-generational.

⁸⁰⁶ D. Blair Gibson, 'Chiefdoms, Confederacies, and statehood in early Ireland' in Bettina Arnold and D. Blair Gibson (eds), *Celtic Chiefdom, Celtic State* (Cambridge 1995) 122. See also fnn. 665-68.

subjugated group was assimilated into the conquering party's Dynastic Framework; in fact, the conquered group still retained their separate identities and territorial integrity.⁸⁰⁷ However, this was not a sustainable method of attaining long-term political power, and in some instances the imposed leadership could be overthrown and replaced by a member of the original Dynastic Framework.⁸⁰⁸ The Uí Néill Dynastic Framework provided the means for the establishment of a somewhat more permanent power-base by establishing a hierarchy among the septs. This hierarchy of septs is best exemplified in the genealogies through the lists of sons that the eponymous progenitor had that founded their own families within the sept. Taking the Cenél Conaill genealogy in Rawl. B 502, we can see, for instance, that within this sept there were politically consequential families that owed allegiance to the leader/primary dynasty:

*Seact meic Conaill Gulban meic Néill .i. Fergus Cennfoda ocus Bogaine ó táit
Cland Bogaine, Áengus Gundat ó táit Cland Áengus/ 'Seven sons of Conall
Gulban, son of Niall i.e. Fergus Cennfoda and Bogaine from whom Clann
Bogaine, Áengus Gundat from whom Clann Áengus'.⁸⁰⁹*

Although each group within the Uí Néill had an ancestor that was a king of Tara (either Niall Noigíallach or perhaps one of his sons), what was much more important in claiming the kingship of Tara was that there was sufficient political and military power backing up the claim.⁸¹⁰ The conflict and struggle for the kingship of Tara over the years can therefore be seen as a means to understand which septs were the most powerful in the Uí Néill Dynastic

⁸⁰⁷ Gibson, 'Chiefdoms, Confederacies, and statehood', 122-123.

⁸⁰⁸ Gibson, 'Chiefdoms, Confederacies, and statehood', 123.

⁸⁰⁹ O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 163.

⁸¹⁰ This is demonstrably the case when one considers the careers of Diarmait mac Áedo and Fínechta discussed in Chapter 4, as well as the instructional life of Muirchertach Mac Ercae, discussed in this chapter Sub-Heading; *Muirchertach Mac Ercae: A Case Study into Uí Néill Kingship*.

Framework.⁸¹¹ Only those that were best able to establish themselves in the long term were capable of continually contesting the title, as already mentioned, especially when it began to be alternated between a select group of powerful Uí Néill septs.⁸¹² This Uí Néill monopoly of the most powerful title in Ireland was one of the biggest benefits and incentives for powerful septs to remain within the Uí Néill. Competition for the kingship of Tara was so intense that powerful Uí Néill septs were able to form a degree of exclusivity about the title. By remaining within the Uí Néill Framework for centuries, until descent from Niall Noigíallach had become an antiquated detail, they were able to establish a political and Dynastic Framework capable of fending off competitors from the other provinces of Ireland. Tara was a very valuable prize for an ambitious Uí Néill king and it was much easier for powerful Uí Néill septs to capture it than it was for external political powers.⁸¹³

As long as there was a strong sense of relation between the various septs they could squabble and fight to be the most powerful as much as they wished, if the larger Framework remained intact. It was in the best interests of component members to protect against losing influence and territory to outside groups. For example, the Northern Uí Néill often squabbled, but never so much that they let the Ulaid get the upper hand in the battle for control of Ulster. In this manner the Uí Néill Framework was of great benefit to both the larger and smaller Uí Néill septs. The larger Uí Néill septs were provided with a means to actually expand their influence and power in a consistent manner, while the smaller septs were provided with relief from being the targets of Uí Néill raiding and aggression, and even a measure of protection from outside forces. This framework essentially allowed for the establishment of a hierarchy of power within it. In a society where long-term territorial expansion was never really seen, having a degree of sustainable control and loyalty over subservient septs kept territory fairly fixed to members of

⁸¹¹ Consider the correspondence between the septs mentioned as prominent throughout this thesis and those ‘kings who preserve truth’ outlined in the Airgíalla Charter Poem. O Daly, ‘A Poem on the Airgíalla’, 186.

⁸¹² Ó Cróinín, ‘Ireland, 400-800’, 211.

⁸¹³ This is most obviously demonstrated via the kings listed in *BCC*.

the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework.⁸¹⁴ This is a very important benefit for the powerful Uí Néill septs. Through the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework, then, the kings of Aileach or the Southern Uí Néill had the capability to develop a long-term hierarchy and territorial overlordship that was predicated upon common ancestry and genealogy.

Conclusion: The Implications of Beneficial Dynastic Frameworks

The Uí Néill identity existed for centuries and was the most enduring framework in Irish history. This is a distinction that would not have been possible if it were not for the various benefits that it provided for its septs. In the context of early medieval Ireland, the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework should not just be seen as the structure through which a group of septs claimed common ancestry, because it was much more. Mere sentimentality and attachment to a semi-mythological ancestor dating back to the early fifth century would not have resulted in a Dynastic Framework that endured for centuries, and thrived as the most powerful political group in Ireland at the time.

When discussing the system of honour-price in early medieval Ireland, Jaski points out that the rank of king is worth seven *cumala*, that is an honour-price that could also theoretically be equalled by ‘a bishop, an *ollam* (poet of the highest rank), a *briugu* (hospitaller) and a *suí litre* (master in learning)’, and using this equality between the highest grades of different classes he argues that this testifies to ‘sophisticated political thought rather than tribal custom’.⁸¹⁵ In a similar fashion it should be understood that the way in which the Uí Néill Framework functioned was not simple happenstance of genealogical inheritance.⁸¹⁶ By the time the Uí Néill were in the ascendancy, it had become a sophisticated political framework that allowed

⁸¹⁴ See the immutability of the *tuath* in Sub-Heading, *The ‘Dynastic Framework’*.

⁸¹⁵ Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship and Succession*, 49. This equivalency, though useful to demonstrate sophisticated political thought must be read with an appreciation for the fact that legal ideals did not correspond to political reality, and that the king and monarchy leveraged much more power in Irish society. See; Ó Corráin, ‘Nationality and kingship’, 1-36.

⁸¹⁶ MacNeill, ‘Early Irish population-groups’, 93. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 112. Thornton, *Kings Chronologies and Genealogies*, 23.

for the accumulation of power. If this requires further testimony, then one need look no further than the adoption of the same style of Dynastic Framework, with powerful septs being the primary means of political manoeuvrability, that was employed by the Uí Néill throughout the island of Ireland.⁸¹⁷ Apart from the Uí Néill, the political system of the Dynastic Framework is something that we see occurring especially with the Laigin and the Éoganachta, who both seem to demonstrably have septs that act as part of the wider Dynastic Framework.⁸¹⁸

These Dynastic Frameworks were uniquely suited to thrive in the political climate of early medieval Ireland, where an individual's kindred was of paramount importance. In such a society it only makes sense that large kin-based groups that could accommodate an ever-expanding list of peoples, and that were used to navigate to a superior political position, were very successful. One of the few sources we have that suggests this system of local kings had deep roots is Patrick's *Epistola*.

*Lupi rapaces deglutierunt gregem Domini, qui utique Hiberione cum summa diligentia optime crescebat, et filii Scottorum et filiae regulorum monachi et uirgines Christi enumerare nequeo/ 'Greedy wolves have devoured the flock of the Lord, which was flourishing in Ireland under the very best of care – I just can't count the number of sons of Scots and daughters of kings who are now monks and virgins of Christ.'*⁸¹⁹

⁸¹⁷ This is not to give credence to Byrne's assertion that 'Dynasty' replaced 'Tribe', but instead to note that the system of Dynastic Framework's, whenever and with whoever it originated, was widely adopted in the historical period.

⁸¹⁸ See O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*, 1-78, 195-234, 334-357 & 362-366.

⁸¹⁹ *Epistola*, The text can be viewed at the website *Confessio.ie* (online at https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/epistola_latin), accessed 07. 08. 2020. & The translation can be viewed at the website *Confessio.ie* (online at https://www.confessio.ie/etexts/epistola_english), accessed 07.08.2020.

The reference to the many *filiae regulorum* indicates rather strongly that the Irish of this period had numerous local kings. This suggests that the political structure of Ireland during Patrick's time was not drastically different than during the time of the Uí Néill. Although it is not informative with regards to the presence of larger Dynastic Frameworks one may infer that this system of Dynastic Frameworks was present as well. The fact that the Uí Néill adopted the structure of the Dynastic Framework, along with other major groups, such as the Éoganacht and the more antiquated Ulaid, should be sufficient evidence that the Dynastic Framework employed by the Uí Néill was much more than remembering the dead. Furthermore, the function of these Dynastic Frameworks is perfectly aligned with Irish legal concepts regarding land ownership and lordship. While it is difficult to say whether the proverbial chicken or the egg came first, it is undeniable that the system of Dynastic Frameworks, with their malleable genealogical relationships was perfectly suited to a culture where territories could be synonymous with people and therefore immutable.⁸²⁰ By the time the Uí Néill were at their most powerful they had figured out the basics of manipulating this structure for maximum prestige and political benefit. In essence, the Uí Néill are the first Irish historical example of a group truly utilising every possible benefit a larger Dynastic Framework offered to achieve political success. One can see the desirable aspects of Uí Néill claims advanced through politics when much of that same literature is adopted upon their decline in an attempt to promote rising stars on the political scene.⁸²¹

The Uí Néill Framework was one that brought the benefits of political unity, security and prestige, as well as improving the potential power that an early Irish king could hold. Outside of the Uí Néill Framework, a leader of the Cenél Conaill or the Síl nÁedo Sláine would not

⁸²⁰ Byrne, 'Tribes and tribalism in Early Ireland', 162. See also; Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 138-39. See also, Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 29-30. Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 582.32. See also, Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship*, 197-98. Note that while groups are 'displaced' often they retain the names of the *tuath* they have conquered. The Uí Chonaing becoming the Ciannachta for instance.

⁸²¹ Ó Corráin, 'Historical need', 146. Provides an analysis of how the Uí Chonchobair eventually adopted tales previously associated with the Uí Néill for their political advancement.

have been able to become the high-king of Ireland, or sufficiently powerful enough that they had the right to claim the title. By providing a commonality there was a framework put in place where the most powerful Uí Néill septs could establish themselves, and from there a worthy leader could achieve provincial dominance and go on to claim the allegiance of his Northern or Southern counterparts. With such power at his hands, that king would be unmatched by any other single political power in early medieval Ireland. If the Uí Néill Framework had not existed, then once provincial dominance was achieved, the leader would be forced to attempt to achieve the overlordship of another province by force of arms, something that was very seldom accomplished in the historical period in Ireland by a figure from any Dynastic Framework.⁸²² Having a commonality meant that powerful Uí Néill septs had a diplomatic avenue to achieve influence over two provinces. The Uí Néill identity should therefore be seen as responsible in no small part for paving the path to the establishment of a monopoly on the high-kingship of Ireland by certain septs, and by proxy for establishing the very prestigious and fundamentally intrinsic link between the hill of Tara and Irish kingship and the enduring nature of the Uí Néill as a political power.

⁸²² See the instance of Cathal mac Finguine, and his ultimately unsuccessful attempt to impose himself on Míde long term, due to a combination of the hostility of the local and Northern Uí Néill powers. Sub-Heading, *The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks: The "Secular" Examples*.

Conclusion:

An Overview

The Uí Néill are particularly noteworthy and significant within Irish history. Perhaps it is precisely their mystique that makes them such an alluring topic. Their shadowy origins, enduring name and long lasting impact on Irish culture and society makes them compelling. Their origins may be just beyond the realm of historicity and out of our grasp to definitively confirm, however, we can better understand and appreciate their political organisation, and how it allowed them to become so powerful and established. This thesis provides the groundwork for interpreting the Uí Néill as a hierarchical political entity from the beginning of the historical period in Ireland. We can understand them better if we interpret their genealogical relationships to one another as expressions of political unity. Their Dynastic Framework was both the means through which they established power, and the key to their endurance.

The goal of this thesis has been to demonstrate the benefits associated with, and the impact of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework upon early medieval Irish society, and the implications of Dynastic Frameworks on Irish history as a whole. This thesis is indicative of the benefits the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework afforded to its members and the benefits that considered and consistent terminology can have for modern historiography. The establishment of clear language and a discussion of its meaning allows for the author to convey the hierarchical system in place with ease. The terminology associated with these political groups heretofore has been vague, and establishing Dynastic Framework, sept and family, as ranks within a hierarchy assists in understanding and translating this period of Irish history from early

medieval Irish into a secondary scholarly language.⁸²³ The use of considered terminology has facilitated the preceding identification of early medieval Irish Dynastic Frameworks as hierarchical political institutions with real weight and consequence in the political sphere of their day.

To conclude this thesis, I would like to examine the benefits and results of the research, and provide some final remarks. The primary achievements of this thesis are as follows. The assertion that there was no boundary between ‘secular’ and ‘ecclesiastical’ spheres of politics, and that both fell within the remit of the Dynastic Framework. An analysis of the Irish annals as containing elements of institutional agenda and the historiographical problems entailed in imposing our own morals onto translations and editions of texts. A thorough case study of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework in the 7th century, which provides the basis for assertions regarding the function and organisation of the Dynastic Framework as a whole. The analysis of various contemporary Irish narratives and how they functioned as part of a wider ‘scholarly wing’ of their respective Dynastic Framework, providing legitimacy, crafting origins and codifying politics. Finally, the benefits of the Dynastic Framework, as a vehicle for the relation of ideas and prestigious titles, as well as providing the means for an enduring hierarchical political organisation in pre-feudal Ireland that was uniquely a product of its time and location.

The Sphere of ‘Dynastic’ Politics

It has been demonstrated throughout the thesis that there was no boundary between ‘secular’ and ‘ecclesiastical’ politics in this period. Although there were notable centres of ecclesiastical power, they were not insulated from the politics of the Dynastic Framework.⁸²⁴ This is an opinion that has become increasingly accepted in the wider field of study and the relevant

⁸²³ See Sub-Heading; *The ‘Dynastic Framework’*. By ‘secondary scholarly language’ I mean English in this instance. It is my belief that the usage of Dynastic Framework, Sept and Family provides the means to translate the ranks within Dynastic Frameworks accurately into English.

⁸²⁴ See Chapter 6: ‘The Irish Church as the “Scholarly Wing” of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework’.

secondary literature has proven useful.⁸²⁵ Given the role of ecclesiastics in creating and preserving literature, the issue of dynastic politics can therefore not be ignored in any piece of contemporary literature. There is no definitive answer to what degree institutional or dynastic agendas influenced the creation of texts, save critical analysis of the source material. The Uí Néill political narratives present in *BCC*, *BiS*, *VSP*, *Collectanea* and *VSC* outlined in this thesis are generally well established; however, it is hoped that the analysis of the Dynastic Framework as a hierarchical political institution can help shed some extra light on the nuanced political dialogue within these texts.⁸²⁶ Understanding the Uí Néill as a hierarchical political entity will better inform us of Uí Néill politics, and thus make it easier to understand the many political narratives woven through such texts. For instance, a text may be pro-Uí Néill yet maintain the nuances of sept and even family politics.⁸²⁷

Furthermore, although there is more scholarship concerning the lack of boundaries between ecclesiastical and secular politics, this thesis posits political motivations that may be behind this lack of distinction. It argues that the politics of Armagh was borne out of a need to appease the many local churches that owed it tribute and upon which Armagh depended economically.⁸²⁸ Armagh may be the pre-eminent church, it may have most of the wealth, but it depended upon its clients for such a lofty status, at least in the earliest period. This is the explanation for what has otherwise been considered the *paruchia* of Armagh aligning itself with the Uí Néill. This suggestion is supported by the manner in which churches in early medieval Ireland chose a patron based upon the political leanings of their respective Dynastic Framework.⁸²⁹ Seeing Armagh affiliated churches within the territory of the Uí Néill as an

⁸²⁵ Ó Corráin, 'Dál Cais', 52-63. Sharpe, 'Some problems', 230-70. Ó Corráin, 'Historical need', 142, esp. fn. 3. Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish Landscape*, 280.

⁸²⁶ E.g. The reading of *BCC* in the light of Cathal mac Finguine's conquest of Míde; see 150-52, & Adomnán's need to appease the Dál Riata, 204-05.

⁸²⁷ See 164.

⁸²⁸ See Sub-Heading; *Influence from the base: Armagh's Political Assimilation*.

⁸²⁹ This is best exemplified through Sletty & Bishop Áed, 187-205.

extension of the Dynastic Framework provides a necessary step in appreciating the degree to which secular and ecclesiastical politics intermingled within it. An understanding of Irish politics primarily operating within the scope of the Dynastic Framework provides much more secure footing for future analysis of texts and interpretations of historical events.

The Historiographical Approach to the Annals

The analysis of the Irish annals demonstrates the manner in which editorial or institutional agendas may infiltrate superficially reliable sources. The annals in particular are ripe for further research with regards to the possible impact of these Dynastic Frameworks. It is not the case that any collection was overwhelmingly biased towards a singular Dynastic Framework, and caution must be exercised against such an assertion in future research. What can be demonstrated is influence and agenda trickling into the annalistic record through subtle use of language and the inclusion of literature. Although the study of poetry and prose within the annals is currently underdeveloped in the wider field, it has the potential to inform the reader more fully on the composition of the annal in question.⁸³⁰

The analysis in this thesis of more narrative texts, such as *BCC*, *BiS*, *ODR*, *VSP*, *Collectanea* and *VSC*, demonstrates the potential historiographical benefits of a close reading of more ‘literary’ sources.⁸³¹ Despite the possible historiographical benefits of investigating more literary sources, it is a fundamental and inescapable flaw of modern scholarship that we have seen fit to excise content from the annals on the grounds that it was a later addition. While we pursue a perfect exemplar of the Irish annals that is a supposedly historically ‘pure’ record of the past, we ignore some of the extant material left to us. This scholarly attitude needs to change as it has unintentional effects on the wider field of study, for instance, the treatment of early Irish poetry. Breatnach’s discussion of excised poetry demonstrates the harm that can be done

⁸³⁰ A discussion on existing research regarding prose & poetry can be found on 81 & 87.

⁸³¹ See Chapter 5; ‘The Creation of Political Narratives Concerning Dynastic Frameworks’.

to the literary tradition by editorialising the content. It is perfectly understandable for mistakes to be made in translation or transmission of a text, it is unacceptable to choose to ignore an insertion because of personal taste.⁸³² Although this thesis is concerned with the earliest period of Irish history, it is poor scholarship to excise later literary additions that could be used to develop informed opinions on the politics of later periods. Moving forward, it should be the ideal goal to relate content as faithfully as possible, with allowances made for the reader via critical apparatus to understand when a section is suspected to be ahistorical. The irony with this quandary is that it is borne of a desire to pursue an objective history, a great tradition, yet allowing individual agendas to alter translation and transcription of these texts interferes with objective preservation of the past.

A 7th Century Case Study

No Dynastic Framework more perfectly encapsulates the period than the Uí Néill, emerging from the dying gasps of pre-history, cloaked in the shadow they cast upon themselves and declaring their homeland the seat of Irish political power. The analysis of the Uí Néill Framework in the 7th century provides a well-researched example of their political structure and organisation. We can see, through references to historical events, the significance of the larger Framework, as well as the primary methods of political advancement within it. Multiple instances from this century indicate that performing feats that demonstrated superiority and power inside the larger Framework was key to achieving pre-eminence within it. This demonstrates that a significant portion of political events, (e.g. assassinations and battles), were a by-product of septs and families jockeying for power in their respective Frameworks.⁸³³ This furthers our understanding of early medieval Ireland as a politically sophisticated society,

⁸³² Breatnach, 'The Annals of Ulster', 224-27.

⁸³³ See Sub-Heading, *Internal Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Competing Septs)*, Sub-Heading, *External Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Larger Dynastic Narratives)*.

where the hierarchical system of the Dynastic Framework provided a vehicle for the accumulation of power for the leaders of septs and families. It provides further context for the frequent bloodshed and kin slaying of the annals as being indicative of wider political struggle.

This 7th century case study also provides clear evidence that alliances and co-operation between septs was common. The manner in which the Uí Néill shake off Cathal mac Finguine, the *socius Diarmada* and the leaders present at the battle of Corann being prominent examples of this unity.⁸³⁴ These instances of alliance, whether of convenience or more substantial, founded through the Dynastic Framework, provides an explanation for the longevity of the Dynastic Framework in early medieval Ireland. It is significant for our understanding of early medieval Ireland that we interpret the Dynastic Framework as more than only a vehicle for the accumulation of prestige. It also had real bearing, weight, and consequence upon the political sphere from the beginning of the historical period. The existence of a large, hierarchical political structure, with the capacity for establishing long term political bases and narratives, challenges any remaining notion of early medieval Ireland as ‘tribal’ or uncivilised, and highlights that what has been considered primitive was only different. Of course, there needs to be caution that we do not wildly overestimate the political sophistication of early medieval Ireland. Nevertheless, there is a strong argument to be made that the various Dynastic Frameworks in this period were uniquely a product of their society.

The Creation of the Dynastic Framework (Political Narratives)

To say that Dynastic Frameworks were ever-present in Irish society is an understatement, because to a certain extent, Dynastic Frameworks were Irish society. The Uí Néill, and all Irish Dynastic Frameworks, were not created from sheer happenstance of genealogical relationship. Even ecclesiastical politics, as we have seen, functioned within the boundaries of, and in

⁸³⁴ See fnn. 450, 363 & 446.

conjunction with, dynastic politics. Although the *Síl Cuind* genealogy tells us that Niall of the Nine Hostages sired fourteen sons who went on to impact Irish society greatly, this is likely to be historical fable. In the subsequent centuries, however, the legends and political narratives associated with the *nepotes Niall* grow grander and more embellished than Niall, if he existed, could ever have dreamed. The same is the case for Cathaír Már, Labraid Loingsech and Eógan Már.

The political narratives created surrounding the Uí Néill are indicative of the prominent role of the Dynastic Framework within Irish society. *BiS*, *BCC*, *ODR*, *VSP*, *Collectanea* and *VSC* are all examples of literature that legitimise and codify the politics of this period. They provide the history and origins of these Dynastic Frameworks, grounding them in the past through ties with ancient and prestigious ancestors. Through literature the Dynastic Frameworks grow and change, they augment their genealogies, they craft wider Frameworks and they appropriate pre-existing literature for their own ends.⁸³⁵ The processes through which literary narratives shape and signal the alignment of Frameworks, septs and families further prove that this hierarchical political organisation was fundamentally an imposed and constructed one, as opposed to naturally occurring. This assists in furthering the previous sub-heading's point, that the Dynastic Frameworks were political constructions, and thus sophisticated in and of themselves. It also provides a further basis for the historian to engage with the Frameworks being constructions, and to move beyond consideration of genuine ancestral origins.⁸³⁶

Benefits

Establishing clear benefits associated with the Dynastic Framework is a major tangible outcome of this thesis as regards to our understanding of the period. The benefits provided for

⁸³⁵ See the adoption of the Brecrige 227-28, the creation of *Leth Cuinn & Leth Moga*, see fn. 433, and Ó Corráin, 'Historical need', 141-58.

⁸³⁶ Bearing in mind fn. 115 and the possibility for hard scientific evidence for genuine genealogical relation, as unlikely as it currently appears.

component septs and families of a Dynastic Framework were long term accumulation and preservation of political power, a vehicle for political narratives and expressions of ambition as well as pretence by which to establish alliances or call for aid. We have seen how the Dynastic Framework functioned as a vehicle for political narratives, with regards to the origin legends and creation of the Framework in the previous sub-heading, however it is worth noting that the association of the Framework with beneficial political narratives such as the kingship of Tara or overlordship over *Leth Cuinn* was another major contributor in ensuring that the Uí Néill provided suitable incentives for their component septs to remain within the Framework.⁸³⁷

We have seen instances of these benefits manifest themselves throughout the thesis; the hierarchical structure is readily apparent in the various political struggles outlined in the case study of the 7th century, as well as in the instructive nature of the life of Muirchertach mac Ercae.⁸³⁸ The hierarchical nature of the Uí Néill, as well as the political struggles that came along with it, are part of what allowed the Dynastic Framework to remain dominant in the early historical period. This hierarchical nature resulted in the establishment of four clear power blocs that, as we have seen, were crucial to the social, political, and cultural impact of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework.⁸³⁹ The hierarchy of the Uí Néill provided these groups with clients and allies over multiple generations, which is what allowed these four power blocs to establish themselves so firmly in this period.

Tied into the hierarchical nature of the Framework is the manner in which it served as a justification to establish alliances or call for aid against foreign aggression. The 7th century case study is very clear that the Dynastic Framework resulted in aid against external aggressors,

⁸³⁷ See Chapter 5: 'The Creation of Political Narratives concerning Dynastic Frameworks'.

⁸³⁸ See Sub-Heading, *Internal Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Competing Septs)*, Sub-Heading, *External Dynastic Politics in the Annals during the Seventh Century: (Examples of Larger Dynastic Narratives)*, Sub-Heading, *Muirchertach mac Ercae: A Case Study into Uí Néill kingship*.

⁸³⁹ These four power blocs being the Cenél Conaill, Cenél nEógain, Síl nÁedo Sláine & Clann Cholmáin Már.

even when alliance is not specifically mentioned and between roughly equivalent political powers. This is often the by-product of a king's desire to prove superiority and therefore the dependence of the Framework upon him. Instances in which superiority are displayed are followed by proclamations of kingship. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the Framework was a means through which more formal alliances could be established, e.g. *socius Diarmada*.⁸⁴⁰ This is not confined to the Uí Néill, as the West-Munster Synod and the usage of *bráithirse* hint that the establishment of alliances and defence against mutual threat, in general, was accomplished through formalised familial terms.⁸⁴¹

Yet another vector through which to interpret the benefits and consequences of the Dynastic Framework was the overlap of affiliation between secular and ecclesiastical powers. Establishment of this 'scholarly wing' allowed the influence of the Dynastic Framework to permeate through both secular and ecclesiastical society, resulting in the narratives we have previously discussed, as well as the potential for legitimisation of royal authority and political claims.⁸⁴² The Dynastic Framework was, therefore, a large political organisation, predicated upon alleged consanguineous ancestry, and it can be declared to be sophisticated due to its hierarchical nature and the degree to which it permeated all aspects of early Irish politics.

Final Remarks

When this thesis began, it was originally planned as an investigation of the historicity of these ancestor figures, and it was assumed that the Dynastic Frameworks were an artificial construction in their entirety. This is not possible, given the lack of sources available from the period; however, neither is it relevant. Whether or not there was a Niall who took nine hostages bears very little significance to what the Uí Néill became. Any such legend is surely different from the historical figure upon which it was based. The Saint Patrick of Patrician tradition

⁸⁴⁰ See fn. 363.

⁸⁴¹ See 31-32 & 226.

⁸⁴² For legitimisation see the interactions between Diarmait mac Cerbaill and Columba, 175-76.

serves as an allegory for an Irish Moses, calling down fire upon his enemies; he is not the same man who penned the *Confessio* and acknowledged his own moral challenges. Similarly, a historical Niall, if he ever existed, is not the same person who becomes an allegorical figure for the political ambitions of the Uí Néill Dynastic Framework. The historicity of these figures is therefore not particularly relevant, because, as these Dynastic Frameworks ebb and flow with the tides of history, they evolve beyond more than just a declaration of shared ancestry. They become a more sophisticated political unit, using their ancestor as a means to promote their agenda, and as a means to unite disparate peoples under a common figurehead. The frequency and manner in which these ancestral figures are used for political allegory is a testament to the developed political system that was present in Ireland and predicated upon ancestral claims and authority.

By developing a better appreciation for Irish Dynastic Frameworks as political institutions characteristic of the society in which they were conceived, rather than taking them at their word as expressions of strict genealogical kinship, we may begin to better understand Irish society. If we peel back the colonialist/modernist superiority implicit through terms such as ‘tribal’ then we may begin to appreciate that Irish society took the privileges of birthright, present throughout Europe at this period, to an extreme, where more people than any other system in Europe are provided a legitimate chance at rulership. The construction of Dynastic Frameworks was rooted in the literary compositions of Ireland’s finest authors. It also benefitted its septs politically, and provided a place for each of its members within a proud people claiming descent from mythical heroes of their past. The Dynastic Framework, as outlined in this thesis, was a method of political advancement as well as an arena for political struggle. It is logical that early medieval Irish society, which was so concerned with kinship and genealogies, would have a system of governance and political expression predicated upon these concepts. The Dynastic Framework is, in this sense, an inalienably early medieval Irish political entity.

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