

Dating *Félire Óengusso*: A Review of the Historical Evidence

In 1908, following the publication of Stokes' 1905 re-edition of *Félire Óengusso*, Rudolf Thurneysen published his well-known critical review of the date of composition of *Félire Óengusso*. Inspired by Stokes' change of heart concerning the date of the language and unimpressed by his uncritical use of information from the prefaces, Thurneysen offered an evaluation of the date of the composition of the text based primarily on information concerning historical persons gleaned from the poem's prologue (THURNEYSEN 1908).¹ His analysis has not gone unchallenged, but has by and large stood the test of time — a testament to Thurneysen's insightful work. In memory of his legacy, therefore, this article offers a review of the historical evidence concerning the date of *Félire Óengusso*, addressing also some of the methodological issues behind the scholarly arguments relating to the date.²

Arguments concerning the date of composition of this text generally draw on some combination of five sets of evidence: i) the prominence of Máel Ruain in the text and his connection to Óengus, ii) the obits of secular kings and secular places named in the prologue; iii) the obits of saints believed to have died in the period 797 x 829; iv) entries confirming the close relationship between *Félire Óengusso* and the *Martyrology of Tallaght*; and v) the evidence concerning Óengus himself — which is arguably most unstable — based on the twelfth-century prose Preface³ and paratexts such as the poem *Aibind suide sund amne*. Scholarship to date tends to incline towards one of two perspectives; one which follows Thurneysen's proposed date of 797 x 808 and one which follows Ó Riain's proposed date of c. 828 x 833, based on the obits of ecclesiastics mentioned in *Félire Óengusso* and the *Martyrology of Tallaght* (Ó RIAIN 1990). The latter date range has been criticized primarily by Liam Breatnach (1996) and David Dumville (2002), both of whom called into question some

¹ The poem known as *Félire Óengusso* (al. the Martyrology of Óengus) consists of quatrains for each day of the year, preceded by a prologue of 85 quatrains (plus one for the leap year) and an epilogue of 141 quatrains (plus *dúnad*). There is some uncertainty regarding the originality of a handful of quatrains, but this question will not be addressed here. The text itself does not identify the author, but it is generally accepted that there is no good reason to abandon the later tradition that its author was Óengus son of Oibléen. Citations from the text are according to convention by reference to the lines of the prologue and epilogue or the calendar date of the quatrain. Unless otherwise indicated, text citations are from Stokes' 1905 edition. The standard manuscript sigla are listed in the bibliography. This research has benefited from funding from the Irish Research Council, now Táighde Éireann — Research Ireland across different funding streams.

² There is no room here to also review the linguistic evidence; the author intends to return to this question elsewhere.

³ The date of prose preface, as also of the commentary are still uncertain; Pádraig Ó Riain (1999) has suggested that the commentary likely dates to the 1170s.

of the assumptions behind the proposed dating of the ecclesiastics discussed in that publication. Westley Follett, on the other hand, cautiously summarises that ›neither argument gives us cause to dismiss the *Félire* as being other than the work of someone not likely more than a generation removed from Máel Ruain’ (FOLLETT 2006: 121). While the broader historical framework, which suggests that there was a strong interest in liturgical activity and martyrologies in *Céli Dé*-affiliated centres in the first half of the ninth century, is unlikely to dramatically change in the absence of new sources, in this article I will highlight some different perspectives on the evidence, which perhaps offer room for further refinement.

Follett’s assessment is certainly fair, but it is in fact the underlying interpretation of generational relevance which sits at the heart of the scholarly argument concerning the obits of historical persons (notably those of the secular Irish kings) and which bears further exploration. Central to refining this argument is not merely the verification of the obits of deceased persons, but also the special relevance they may have held for Óengus and for his audience. It is on this point that different opinions arise regarding the potential *terminus post quem*. On one point, however, scholarship is generally agreed, that is, the internal evidence points to special affection for Máel Ruain, who may thus form the starting point for this discussion. Follet (2006: 120) himself builds on Thurneysen’s first argument in *Die Abfassung*, namely that Óengus refers to Máel Ruain, founder of the monastery of Tallaght (d. 792) as his *aite*, generally meaning ›tutor‹ or ›foster-father‹, in the epilogue: *dom-rairbera m’aite* ›may my tutor bring me‹ (Ep. 65). The entry for July 7 furthermore confirms that Máel Ruain has passed away by the time of composition, stating that *Máel Ruain adreth riched* ›Máel Ruain has attained heaven‹. That Máel Ruain held special relevance for Óengus – and presumably his audience – is also demonstrated by other references, such as the epithet *grían már desmaig Midi* ›the great sun on the southern plain of Mide‹ (Prl. 226) and the even grander epithet, given on his feast day, as *grían án inse Goídel* ›the splendid sun of the Gaels’ island‹ (July 7). Whether or not Máel Ruain had achieved island-wide fame at the time of composition is difficult to say,⁴ but the former entry suggests that in Óengus’ time his grave may have been visited frequently as a source of solace, which implies that Máel Ruain was venerated (at least locally) shortly after his death: *occa lecht ... íthair cnet cech*

⁴ Most of what we know about Máel Ruain comes from texts associated with the Tallaght community, on which see FOLLETT 2006.

crídi ›at his grave ... is healed the sigh of every heart‹ (Prl. 227–8). Finally, in the epilogue, which primarily sets out the liturgical framework, Óengus intercedes on his behalf for the King’s blessing for *Máel Ruain ria ndáinib* ›on Máel Ruain before all (other) men‹ (Ep. 64) and asks for his intercession in return (Ep. 65–8). No other Irish saint is referenced as often in the *Félire* as Máel Ruain.

From all this it follows, first of all, that Óengus likely had a personal relationship with Máel Ruain and that he therefore wrote within a generation of his death (FOLLETT 2006: 121). Exactly how long a period a generation could reasonably be reckoned to be, however, is much less certain. Unfortunately, we do not know the year in which Óengus died. We know from the *Martyrology of Tallaght* only that he died on 11 March (BEST and LAWLOR 1931: 22), and if we can believe the poem *Aibind suide sund amne*, he died on a Friday; this suggests 819, 824, or 830 as potential years, although theoretically 813 and 841 are not impossible either (STOKES 1905: xxvi; DUMVILLE 2002: 27). Dumville offers an example from the Annals of Ulster demonstrating the difficulty of estimating the viability of a generational period and the reliability of the sources on this matter: the entry for 870 refers to *Comgán Fota ancorita Tamhlactae, daltae Maele Ruain* (DUMVILLE 2002: 28). This suggests Comgán died in his late eighties (at the earliest), if he was indeed an actual (rather than metaphorical) pupil of Máel Ruain, as this could only have happened in his early youth, and he would likely have been at least seven years old when first joining the monastic school. If we bear in mind that Óengus had established a close relationship with Máel Ruain, however, it seems unlikely that he could have lived that long, and a date in the first half of the ninth century seems most likely.

In addition, the nature of the entries on Máel Ruain presuppose familiarity with him and his elevated status among Óengus’ audience, lending credit to the statement in the Middle Irish prose preface that the text was finished in Tallaght.⁵ The high praise accorded to Máel Ruain across the work is all the more noteworthy for what it does *not* mention: Óengus sees no need, for instance, to explain what Máel Ruain’s position or location is, yet accords him a

⁵ The transmission of the prose preface is somewhat unstable, consisting in the main of two recensions and a third version (MS *B*) which amalgamates both; but they agree at least that the text was completed in Tallaght, e.g. from MS *Lb*: *Loccus huius artis Cuil Bendchuir a Muig Reicheat hí crích hUa Fhailge ar ái thindsetail. Hi Cluain Eidnech immorro a ermor, hi Tamlachtu Libren a fhorbu uile. ut. alii, ›The place of this work of art is Cúil Bennchuir in Mag Rechet, in the territory of the hÚi Failgi, as regards its commencement‹. In Cluain Eidnech, however, the greater part of it; in Librén’s Tallaght the completion of it all, as some say.‹ (STOKES 1905: 7, slightly amended).*

position of significance on multiple occasions and in different degrees. The text radiates Máel Ruain's influence outwards, as it were, from close to Óengus himself, to the plain of Mide, to the entire island of Ireland. If these references were considered especially meaningful in their own right, as they certainly would be to the community of Tallaght, then it stands to reason that his rhetorical opponents in the text, the ›wrathful Donnchad‹ and ›victorious Bran of the Barrow‹ who formed the other branch of Thurneysen's argument for a *terminus post quem*, were also selected because they held special relevance. Their pairing furthermore forms an access point for the interpretation of the structure of the prologue as a whole, which is to a large degree concerned with the contrast between royal and spiritual power.

I have already mentioned that the presumed contemporary relevance of these kings for the intended audience is central to conflicting interpretations in the scholarship of the date of composition vis-à-vis their obits. Thurneysen identified *Donnchad dric rúad rogdae* ›Donnchadh the wrathful, ruddy, chosen‹ (Prl. 221) as Donnchad mac Domnaill (d. 797), king of Mide (Clann Cholmáin) and later king of Tara (THURNEYSSEN 1908: 7), as also noted in a gloss in *Lb*. He concurs with the conclusion of the author of the (likely twelfth-century) prose preface that the text must therefore have been written in the reign of his successor as king of Tara, Áed Oirdnide (Cenél nÉogain), who is not named in the *Félire*:

IS hi immorro aimser i ndernai Oengus in félire .i. aimser Æda Ordnige maic Neill Frassaig. ar is e rogab rige nErenn i ndiaid Dondchudu maic Domnaill. uair ticc Oengus isin broluch thoisiuch in féliri le bas Dondchada. (Prose preface, *Lb* f. 75ra)⁶

This, however, is the time when Óengus made the martyrology, that is, the time of Áed Oirdnide son of Niall Frossach, for it is he who took the kingship of Ireland after Donnchad son of Domnall, since in the first prologue of the martyrology Óengus mentions Donnchad's death. (CAREY 2000: 182, slightly amended)

Thurneysen (1908: 7) adds that it would not have made sense to refer to Donnchad during the reign of later kings, the reference being to a grave that is still fresh, as it were.

⁶ The attribution to Óengus ›oengus in félire‹ only occurs in MSS *LbFB*, being omitted in *LR²C*; likewise the phrase ›maic neill fhrassaig‹. After ›Dondchudhu maic Domnaill‹ BC add the clarification *rí mide*, which in *Lb* is added as a gloss. Finally, ›le bas‹: om. *FR²C*, \tar/ L, ar B. Word division and capitalisation of names and places is editorial. It is noteworthy that C and L add a gloss to Donnchad identifying him as the twelfth-century Donnchad Ua hÁnluain of the Uí Nialláin, demonstrating active interaction with the text in that century.

Bran búadach Berbae ›victorious Bran of the Barrow‹ is identified as Donnchad’s brother-in-law Bran Ardchenn mac Muiredaig (d. 795), following the glosses in *Lb*, and by the same logic, it is proposed that the text must have been written during the reign of his successor, Fínsnechta Cetharderc mac Cellaig of the Uí Dúinchadha, who had violently murdered Bran and his wife, violating church sanctuary in the process (*AU* 795.1; *AFM* 790.7). A few years later Fínsnechta was deposed and relegated to a monastery by Áed Oirdnide (d. 819), king of Tara following Donnchad, while Áed divided the kingdom between Fínsnechta’s cousins, Muiredach mac Rúaidri and Muiredach mac Brain (*AU* 805.7; *AFM* 800.15–16). Fínsnechta returned and defeated both of them only a year later, but died a natural death in 808. The conclusion is thus that the text was certainly written after 795/797 and likely written before 808, as Fínsnechta does not appear.

Ó Riain on the other hand, in his 1990 review, first takes issue with Thurneysen’s conclusion – and thus with the prose preface – that the reference here is to ›fresh graves‹, because it would not have made sense otherwise to refer to specifically these kings here (THURNEYSEN 1908: 7). Rather, he states that neither king ›was succeeded by a member of his own family‹ and concludes that ›it stands to reason, therefore, that until such time as the kings were succeeded by members of their own families, their graves are unlikely to have had any great symbolic significance‹ (Ó RIAIN 1999: 37). What is more, for Ó Riain this requires a period where both ancestral lines of succession coincide again in the kingship. As we have seen, Donnchad was succeeded as high king of Tara by Áed Oirdnide of the Cenél nÉogan, before the kingship reverted to Clann Cholmáin, to Donnchad’s son Conchobar (d. 833).⁷ Due to Áed’s interventions, the Leinster kingship was held again by a son of Bran from 805, but Muiredach son of Bran died in 818, and the next son of Bran to hold the kingship (during Conchobar’s reign) was Cellach (r. 829–34). Ó Riain thus concludes that *terminus ante quem* must be 833–4 (Ó RIAIN 1999: 37; Ó RIAIN 2006: 96). This approach attracted criticism from Breatnach (›unconvincing‹, 1996: 74) and from Dumville, who pointed out that the analysis only concerns overkingships, while acknowledging the difficulty of attempting to reconstruct the historical record for lower levels of rulership which would have been familiar to Óengus’ audience (DUMVILLE 2002: 29). Ó Riain (2006: 94–6) subsequently amended his analysis slightly to include two further arguments: the first refers to Prl. 221–8,

⁷ In fact, Áed Oirdnide had divided Mide between Donnchad’s sons Conchobar and Ailill after the death of Muiredach mac Domnaill in 802, but this arrangement did not last long and Conchobar killed Ailill in 803 (*AU* 802.2, 803.5; see also BYRNE 2004: 160).

in which the folly of visiting the graves of Donnchad and Bran is compared to the solace provided by a visit to Máel Ruain's grave.

Donnchad dric rúad rógdae	Donnchad the wrathful, ruddy, chosen
nó Bran búadach Berbae	or victorious Bran of the Barrow;
ní beir díim sním lobrae	it does not take weariness of weakness from me
athigid a mmemrae	to visit their tombs.
Máel Ruain iarna goiri	Máel Ruain after his pious service,
grían mór desmaig Midi	the great sun on the south of the plain of Mide;
occa lecht co nglaini	at his grave with purity
ícthair cnet cech cridi	is healed the sigh of every heart (DUMVILLE 2002: 22)

Linking this to the above point on symbolic significance, he argues that it would have made ›made little or no sense for those associated with the immediate successors of the two kings named in the text to visit their graves, because they neither belonged to the same families nor even to the same dynasties‹ (Ó RIAIN 2006: 94).

Two separate ideas must be unpacked here. The argument assumes that the special significance of naming these specific kings in the text can only resonate with contemporary kings who are direct descendants rather than immediate successors and the successors are not family in any relevant way. Yet, certainly within the Uí Dúnlainge dynasty of the Leinster kings, the kingship continuously passed from one family member to another (though not necessarily peacefully): Fínsnechta is Bran's nephew and the eighth ruler in a series of successions that began with Dúnchad mac Murchadha (d. 728) and more or less regularly moved from cousin to cousin across the Uí Dúnchadha, Uí Fáelán and Uí Muiredaig lineages until we reach Cellach (see Fig. 1). The complicated and violent family dynamic, in which cousins continuously rivalled one another and kinslaying was rife, seems too dramatic for close family relations within and across dynasties to be insignificant. In fact, it is likely that Fínsnechta's motivation for killing Bran was that he had allied himself with Clann Cholmáin through his marriage with Eithne, daughter of Domnall Midi – the relations between these two dynasties also often vacillating (BYRNE 2004: 156–60; *ECl*: 575–8;

MACSHAMRÁIN 2009b). While members of Clann Cholmáin and Cenél nÉogain would not at first glance be considered family, they were certainly related through marriage: Donnchad's daughters Euginis and Gormlaith both appear to have been married to Cenél nÉogain rulers, to Áed Oirdnide and his son Niall Caille respectively (MACSHAMRÁIN 2009d). One might imagine that to Áed, if he heard the poem, a reference to this predecessor, rival, and father-in-law would resonate in any number of ways. Based on the arguments given, therefore, it seems implausible to me to rule out that Fínsnechta or Áed could have been an intended audience.

<Insert fig. 1 here or before the previous paragraph (as suitable). Appendix is fine too, if preferred. Caption: Fig. 1: Dynasties of the Kings of Tara and Leinster>

Ó Riain adds that it would – indeed – be highly improbably that Fínsnechta would seek solace at the grave of the man he had murdered, whose grave might rather be considered a shrine (Ó RIAIN 2006: 95). While I support the sentiment, this argument moves away from considering the significance of the specific citation of Bran in the text of *Félire Óengusso* for its audience (royal or otherwise) and presumes that the comparison of graves in these quatrains could be taken as a literal suggestion that a rival might seek out a grave, something which I do not think is borne out by the text itself. To grasp the nature of the comparison, it must be situated within the overarching framework of this part of the text, which centres on the contrast between military power, of which Óengus is highly critical, and spiritual power, which is divine and everlasting (see further below). The effect of visiting the graves of the deceased on visitors, which is what is being compared, is healing in the case of Máel Ruain as he represents spiritual power, mediated as intercessor from his heavenly seat, as discussed above (Ep. 65–8). The implication of the comparison is that no spiritual benefit may be obtained from visiting the graves of Donnchad and Bran, because their power was steeped in wrath and blood and perished with them: *In gormríg ro múchtha* ›The famous kings have been stifled‹ (Pr1. 233). If Óengus specifies a hypothetical visitor to these graves at all, it is himself in l. 223 *ní beir díim* ›it does not take from me‹, and a non-committal, potential ›everyone‹ in l. 228: *cnet cech cridi* ›the sigh of every heart‹. Furthermore, read as political commentary, the contrast between the two quatrains points to a place of prominence for Máel Ruain, and by extension Tallaght, over and above the

dynasties of Donnchad and Bran. This is indeed also the general message of Prl. 233–6, a few lines down:

In gormríg ro múchta	The famous kings have been stifled,
in Domnaill ro plágtha	the Domnalls have been plagued;
in Chiaráin ro rígha	the Ciarán's have been crowned,
in Chrónáin ro máirtha	the Cronán's have been magnified.

As Dumville has previously noted, the name Domnall is common in the Uí Néill dynasty (2002: 23). Both Donchad's father and son (d. 799) were named Domnall. On the other hand, Ciarán and Cronán are well-represented as saints' names (DUMVILLE 2002: 23). The reference may have been to any of them as saints in general, or to any of the well-known saints of that name, such as Cronán (Mo-Chua) of Tech Mo-Chua (who had a military career before entering the church), and Ciarán of Clonmacnoise (*DIS*: 168, 233). At any rate, the overarching message is clear: only spiritual power lasts.

As mentioned above, much of the difference of interpretation of the potential date of composition of the text — of the *tempus ante quem* to be precise — hinges on the presumed contemporary relevance of the mention of these kings for the intended audience. Ó Riain's assessment is built on his assertion that the intended audience consisted primarily of an extremely narrowly defined set of royalty. Yet there is ample evidence elsewhere in the text, for instance, that it — or the body of it at least — was intended for recitation and intercession in a private or liturgical setting. Indeed, as a semi-historical martyrology, the *Féilire* by definition encompasses multiple layers of meaning, including the liturgical, commemorative, and sociopolitical.⁸ The question of audience is therefore unlikely to have a single answer. I do, however, agree with Ó Riain's observation that, where it concerns the Irish kings (and within the overall framework of the prologue), Óengus is concerned with dynasties (Ó RIAIN 2006: 94 n. 86), or rather, with the violent upheaval caused by dynastic politics. From this perspective, I would argue that Óengus intended the text to resonate, not just with direct descendants of the aforementioned, but with any of the contemporary kings of Tara and Leinster — though a case *could* perhaps be made that Áed Oirdnide was targeted

⁸ A historical martyrology is typically narrative rather than primarily a list of names. As a metrical martyrology, the *Féilire* occupies the space between these two types.

more specifically. Indeed, the aforementioned kings are hardly the only secular potentates mentioned in the text. Dumville (2002: 24–5) already discussed a second relevant pairing, namely that of Áed mac Sétnai alias Maedoc of Ferns and Bécc mac Eógain (Prl. 197–204). The second quatrain ends with the caution *ní mair Bécc macc Eógain, maraid Aed macc Sétnai* ›Bécc son of Eogan abides not, Áed son of Sétnai abides‹. The secular figure in this pair, Bécc mac Eógain, was a member of the Uí Fhelmeda, a smaller branch of the Uí Cheinnselaig, now indeed almost completely forgotten, as Carey concluded (CAREY 2000: 190; DUMVILLE 2002: 24). He is, however, mentioned in the hagiography of Maedoc of Ferns, in which he is described as a ›a man of great substance‹, whose female relatives wash their clothes in the stream Maedoc had miraculously created, much to the latter’s dislike. When the women refuse to cease this activity, Maedoc immobilises his daughter as if she were stone, and refuses to release her until Bécc promises ›himself, and the place, and his family in perpetuity to God and to Maedoc‹ (VSH: 151; BNnÉ: I.217–18, II.211). Alongside Bécc, Maedoc also takes on other high-placed figures, such as Brandub, son of Eochaid, king of the Uí Cheinnselaig. While the Life is of much later date than the *Félire*, some of these anecdotes may have existed in the eighth century and if so, may have formed the frame of reference for the mention of Bécc in the *Félire*. Though Dumville takes this suggestion as fact (2002: 25), in the absence of further evidence, it must remain speculative. Nevertheless, it would significantly substantiate the pairing. The intended message of the quatrain is clear, however: secular power is outlived by spiritual power. Such a warning is not likely to have been lost on local royalty.

In order to understand the significance of these quatrains more fully, it is imperative to assess them in the context of the rhetorical framework of the prologue as a whole. Close analysis of the structure of the prologue underscores that criticism of military kingship is a core feature of Óengus’ overarching argument that spiritual power is lasting, whereas secular power is transient. This is neatly encapsulated in Prl. 157–60:

In bith trúag hi táam	The wretched world in which we are
is duthain a ríge	its sovereignty is fleeting;
in rí con-ic aingliu	the King who rules over angels
is coimdiu cech thíre	is Lord of every land. ⁹

⁹ Slightly amended based on CAREY 2000: 189, as ›sovereignty‹ is the more correct translation.

The spiritual element of the message, the *Félire* being a text centred on obtaining intercession from the saints, is that one should rather focus on love for God (Prl. 145–8, slightly amended):

Is bréc bríg in domain	The might of the world is a deception
do chách dia mbí baile	to everyone whose abode it is;
is sí in bríg uile	this is all the might [there is],
serc mór do Macc Maire	great love for the Son of Mary.

Such messages punctuate the text at key intervals, framing the longer subsections. As I see it, the prologue consists of five thematic blocks (here numbered I–V for ease reference): I. the invocation (Prl. 1–20), II. the well-known section on the suffering of the martyrs (Prl. 21–60), III. a section on kings and saints from Biblical times (Prl. 61–140), IV. a section on the historical kings and saints of Ireland (Prl. 149–264), and finally, V. the closing section, in which Óengus beseeches the Lord for his favour and describes the arrangement of the *Félire* (Prl. 265–340). The overarching theme of sovereignty pervades all sections, which is evident from the fact that the Lord is generally invoked as the greatest King of all, surrounded by his *rígrad*, ›kingfolk‹ or ›royal company‹ as per previous translators (STOKES 1905; CAREY 2000). The prologue both opens and closes with a reference to Christ as Lord; as *rí gréne gile* ›King of the bright sun‹ in l. 4, and as *flaithem nóeb na nduille* ›holy Lord of Creation‹ in l. 337. It is the middle three sections that primarily concern me here, however.

The section on the suffering of martyrs opens with Óengus' announcement that he has commemorated the kingfolk and his plea that this may be of benefit to him (Prl. 21–8). The next seven quatrains describe the tortures which the martyrs have bravely suffered in expectation of a heavenly reward (Prl. 29–56). This section then closes by comparing the damnable fate of those who killed them with the everlasting life of those who suffered. It glorifies those who suffered for Christ, paying the ultimate price of martyrdom, and, in anticipation of the next section, establishes the general contrast between followers of Christ and their antagonists. In section III (Prl. 61–140) Óengus develops his rhetoric of contrast between secular and spiritual power. In this and the following sections, contrasting pairs are divided either over two couplets or two quatrains; in a few cases the comparison is

extended over four quatrains. These sets are often marked with chiasmic structures. Lines 61–4 open with the central premise: *Mórríg inna ñgente bithgolait i lloscud* ›the great kings of the pagans wail ceaselessly in the fire‹ while *slóig Íssu ... it fáilti iar coscur* ›the hosts of Jesus ... are joyous after triumph‹ (Prl. 61–4, slightly amended). Building on this, lines 65–80 juxtapose the soldiers who slayed the martyrs on behalf of secular kings long passed with Christ’s soldiers (the martyrs), who live on in triumph. Lines 81–4 serve as a transition: reverting the order of the previous quatrains, the first couplet refers back to the martyrs just discussed, while the second leads on to a section on the *ríg domain* (kings of the world), already anticipated in lines 61–2. In the remainder of this section, Óengus pairs infamous (secular) rulers from biblical times with representatives of the holy Church, as follows:

- ll. 85–92 Herod & Pilate¹⁰ — Jesus
- ll. 93–100 Nebuchodnosor¹¹ — Paul the Hermit¹²
- ll. 101–08 John the Baptist — Herod & his queen¹³
- ll. 109–16 The Apostle Peter — Nero & Nero — The Apostle Peter¹⁴
- ll. 117–24 Nero — Paul & Nero — Paul¹⁵
- ll. 125–32 Pilate & his queen¹⁶ — Virgin Mary
- ll. 133–40 Sons of Decius¹⁷ — the child Quiricus¹⁸

¹⁰ Herod Antipas, who executed John the Baptist, and Pilate, who tried Jesus, see: CDC s.v. ›Herod Family‹ and ›Pilate, Pontius‹. See also Blathmac, ll. 281–8, in BARRETT, 2017: II. 205. Herod and Pilate also appear in the *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis*, where they are suffering in Hell alongside the Rabbis Anna and Caiaphas; GUGLIELMETTI and ORLANDI 2018: 70. For the Biblical narrative of Jesus’ trial before Pilate see: *Lk* 22:66–23; *Jn* 18:28–19; *Mt* 27:11–26; *Mk* 15:1–15. In *Lk* 23:6–12 Pilate sends Jesus to Herod first. Stokes (1905: 426) in identified Herod as Herod the Great, but he does not fit the narrative as well as his son, Herod Antipas.

¹¹ Ruler of the Babylonian Empire, d. c. BC 562, see: SOUVAY, Charles, 1911. The reference is here likely to *Dan.* 4–5, in which the fall of Nebuchadnezzar and the extinction of his dynasty are described (as foretold in *Jer.* 25).

¹² *Al.* Paul of Thebes, d. c. 345, see also the entries for Jan. 19 and Ep. 251. See: ODS s.v. Paul the First Hermit.

¹³ For the biblical narrative concerning the death of John the Baptist, brought about by Herod’s scheming second wife Herodias, whom he married illegitimately according to John the Baptist, see *Mk* 6:14–29; *Mt* 14:1–12; *Lk* 3:19.

¹⁴ *Al.* Peter Simon, d. c. 64, see ODS s.v. Peter⁽¹⁾. The Roman Emperor Nero, d. c. 68, is believed to have martyred the Apostle Peter in Rome.

¹⁵ Paul the Apostle, d. c. 65, see ODS s.v. Paul⁽¹⁾, also martyred under Nero according to tradition.

¹⁶ The comparison between Pilate’s wife and the Virgin Mary is not as neat, as she is not a typical villain; contemporary apocryphal tradition attributes to Pilate’s wife the role of attempting to dissuade him from executing Christ, based on *Mt* 27:19.

¹⁷ The Roman Emperor Decius, d. 251, is best known for the Decian persecutions. His sons both died very early in their careers; see BUNSON 2004: 172, 256, 265–6.

¹⁸ A reference to the martyrdom of the child Cyricus, who was only three years old, when he and his mother Julitta were executed at Tarsus. See ODS s.v. Cyricus.

While this is not the place to go into details concerning these references, what they have in common is that a menacing secular figure from the Biblical times is contrasted with one of Christ or one of Christ's apostles or associates. This section ends with the above-quoted quatrain stating that the might of the world is a deception and that the only power that matters is great love for Jesus.

The fourth section (Prl. 149–264) shifts focus to the transient nature of worldly power in the contemporary world by citing a series of royal sites and secular rulers whose power has waned, in contrast to the everlasting glory of the Irish saints and their monasteries. Echoing the opening of the previous section (*Mórríg inna ngente*), it opens with the phrase *Cit móir rí in domain ... fo chét cét it uaisliu amsáin ísil Íssu* ›Though great are the world's kings ... a hundred hundred times nobler are Jesus' lowly soldiers‹ (Prl. 149–52). Likewise, this section closes with a reference to the love of Jesus: *ar is ed as úaisliu, caram uili Íssu* ›since ›tis this that is nobler, let us all love Jesus!‹ (Prl. 263–4). Following the quatrains on the theme of Christ's lowly soldiers who will be raised on high, comes the declaration of Prl. 157–60 (cited above) that the sovereignty of this world is fleeting, even though there is one, even in our world, who has preached to us (Prl. 161–4). I take this line to anticipate the mention of St Patrick and the champions at Armagh in the next two quatrains (Prl. 165–72), where they are paired with his opponent Lóegaire and the royal seat of Tara. These references require little explanation, as the legend of St Patrick's triumph over Lóegaire mac Néill, and with it the symbolic triumph of Christianity over pagan traditions, is well-known from Muirchú's *Life of Patrick*, Tirechán's *Collectanea*, the *Córus Bésgnai* and the Pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már*, among others. The legend was certainly in existence by the second half of the seventh century, though it seems to have circulated in slightly varying versions reflecting different political situations or concerns, especially where relations with Munster were concerned (CHARLES-EDWARDS 2021: 28–9). Nevertheless, the supremacy of Patrick as apostle of the Irish was well established and became a core element of the Armagh propaganda machine as well as the promotion of the *Senchas Már* as the law of all the peoples of Ireland (CHARLES-EDWARDS 2021). The significance of Tara as a centre of political authority, particularly associated with the Uí Néill, is also well established in contemporary writings, and Óengus' claim that it represents a perished fortress which had its prime in Lóegaire's time is deliberately anachronistic (BHREATNACH 1996; *ECl*: 469–73). Tara is likewise deliberately associated with pagan times by Muirchú and Tirechán and it is

noteworthy that Muirchú too draws from the stock of pagan kings in the Bible to compare Lóegaire to Nabuchodnosor and Herod and Tara to Babylon (BIELER 1979: 84–5, 86–7). The rhetoric, therefore, reflects Armagh’s contemporary claims to spiritual authority over the Uí Néill, as set out in the Patrician material, as much as it serves to illustrate Óengus’ general argument of the triumph of spiritual over secular sovereignty.

In the seventh and eighth century, however, Tara, as a symbol of royal power, was also the location of important synods, so that the black-and-white contrast proffered in the *Féilire* between Armagh and Tara as religious and secular is too simplistic. As recent as 780, during the reign of the Clann Cholmáin ruler Donnchad mac Domnaill cited by Óengus, an important synod took place in Tara, described as a *congressio senadorum Nepotum Neill Laginentiumque* ›meeting of the synods of the Uí Néill and the Leinstermen‹, at which also many anchorites and scribes were present, led by Dublittir (d. 796, *AU* 780.12), abbot of Finglas and close associate of Máel Ruain. The initial impetus for the meeting was likely Donnchad’s invasion of Leinster earlier that year and the *congressio* may thus have been a peacekeeping exercise (see below). The *congressio* in fact followed a decade of intense military aggression by Donnchad against the Leinstermen as well as the Munstermen, the Cíannachta, the community of Clonard, the Síl nÁedo Sláine and the Cenél Conaill, during which Donnchad sought to establish his overlordship as king of Tara (*AU* 770.8; 774.7; 775.5; 775.6; 777.3; 777.6; 778.1, 779.10, 780.7; *ECI* 576–8). In this respect Donnchad was notably different from his father, Domnall Mide, who never attacked the Uí Dúnlainge of Leinster, and his predecessor Niall Frossach (d. 778), whose reign was known for its relative peace and prosperity (BYRNE 2004: 156–7). Both of them also had notable religious inclinations; Domnall seems to have been in clerical orders during this kingship, likely in Durrow (*AU* 740.1, 744.3; MACSHAMRÁIN 2009c), whereas Niall abdicated sometime between 772 x 777 and retired to Iona (*AU* 778.7; *ECI*: 577). Donnchad’s rise to power therefore marked a significance change to the political climate. Notably, it was only when Bran Ardchenn, Donnchad’s son-in-law, took over the Uí Dúnlainge kingship in 785, presumably with Donnchad’s backing, that the Uí Dúnlainge were temporarily spared from aggression (MACSHAMRÁIN 2009b). While the annals do not explicitly attribute the significant number of church burnings in this period to Donnchad, it would seem that the Leinster churches — especially those in the border areas — also suffered from the pressures of the increased military disturbance. Against the backdrop of these dynastic struggles in Leinster in the late

eighth century, then, the mention of Tara — certainly in combination with the prominent place given to Donnchad (and Bran) as opponent of Máel Ruain further on in the text — had a more complex frame of reference than Óengus' straightforward pairing might suggest.

The next series of quatrains continues to pair places associated with sovereignty — though Óengus presents them as if they were military fortifications — with prominent monastic cities and here too, the political reality offers a more complex reading of the frame of reference to which the *Félire* ascribes. The places of sovereignty Óengus cites, Crúachú, Ráth Ailline, and Emain Macha are all ancient, pre-Christian sites which became provincial seats of kingship and Óengus draws on this association in order to project their significance as seats of kingship back into the pagan past (*ECI*: 577).¹⁹ Lines 177–8 portray Ráth Crúachain (Rathcroghan) as a place of former significance, from the times of Ailill and Medbh. Following directly after a line which associates *ráths* with ›guilty pagans‹, the implication is that Ráth Crúachain is one of those sites (see also Prl. 205–8). While it certainly has an ancient history, in the eighth century it was known as the seat of the kings of Connacht and a place for the promulgation of synods. During the reign of Donnchad Midi, in 783, a noteworthy synod took place there, presided over by Tipraite mac Taidg and Dub-dá-léithe, abbot of Armagh, which was otherwise allied with the Cenél nÉogain (*AU* 783.9; *ECI*: 566).²⁰ Lines 189–90 describe *Borg Aillinne úallach* ›Aillenn's proud burgh‹ as ›perished‹. In fact, Ráth Ailline (Knockaulin) was the ›Tara of Leinster‹ (*ECI*: 577). Consequently, the place carried great significance not only for the kings of Leinster, but for the entire region and historically significant battles took place there, such as the battle of Allen (AD 722), at which Murchad mac Brain of the Uí Dúnlainge (d. 727) killed Fergal mac Maíle Dúin of the Cenél nÉogain, King of Tara, as punishment for his humiliation of the Leinstermen a year earlier (*AU* 721.8, 722.8, *AT* 721.5, 722.7).²¹ Likewise, in more recent times, Donnchad Midi routed the place for a full week in 770 and appears to have burned all its surrounding land (*AU* 770.8). Finally, lines 193–4 mention Emain Macha, capital of Ulster, another of the ancient seats of

¹⁹ It is noteworthy that Cashel, the fifth, is absent.

²⁰ Politically, this was not an insignificant move by the abbot of Armagh. The then King of Tara, Donnchad mac Domnaill, generally favoured the *familia* of Columba and had sponsored the law of Colum Cille together with Bresal, abbot of Iona, only a few years earlier (*AU* 778.4).

²¹ In the context of the contrast with Brigit and Kildare, it is perhaps noteworthy that the Middle Irish saga *Cath Almaine*, which purports to recount this battle, describes how St Brigit appeared above the army of the Leinstermen, striking terror into the Northern host, after which they were defeated, owing their triumph to Brigit. Whether parts of this legend were circulating before the tenth century is unknown to me. Ó RIAIN, 1978: § 10.

kingship. This site, sitting right next to Armagh in the north-east, is also connected with the affairs of kings and religious dynasts in the Leinster and Armagh areas in complex ways. Within memory of Óengus' time of writing, in 759, it was the site of a battle between the Ulaid and the Uí Néill resulting from discord concerning the succession of the abbacy of neighbouring Armagh (*AU* 759.2, *AT* 759.2). It seems that following the death of Céle Pétair, of the Uí Bressail, in 758, Airechtach (d. 794), also of the Uí Bressail, was intent on succeeding him in the abbacy, but he was passed over in favour of Fer-da-Chrích of the Uí Niallán (fl. 758–68), and again in favour of Cú Dínaisc son of Cú Fásaig (fl. 768–72) and Dúbdaléithe mac Sínach (fl. 772–93). He finally became abbot for a year in 793 (*MACSHAMRÁIN* 2009a). In 759, however, this conflict led to violence. Fiachnae son of Áed Rón (*Dál Fiatach*), overking of the Ulaid, intervened in the dispute and was victorious while a prominent Uí Néill dynast was slain. This unusual and violent intervention in the abbatial succession is yet another historical detail that contributes to a complex contemporary frame of reference for Óengus' prologue, encompassing affairs that comment on the fragile power balance between secular dynasts and monastic houses.

The monastic cities named by Óengus, Clonmacnoise (Prl. 178–84), Kildare (Prl. 191–2), and Glendalough (Prl. 195–6), were also powerhouses in their own right. Clonmacnoise, sitting on the border of Leinster and Connacht, had ties with the kings of either and promulgated the ›law of Ciarán‹ in Connacht between the mid-eighth and early ninth century (e.g. *AU* 744.9, 788.9, 814.11). Kildare, Brigit's ›multitudinous monastic city‹ (*a rrúam dáalach*; *DIL* s.v. 1 *rúam*), was in the heartland of the Uí Dúnlainge, which dynasty also provided many of its abbots and abbesses, particularly from the lineage of Cellach son of Dúnchad (see Fig. 1; *MACSHAMRÁIN* 2011: 196). It is safe to say, therefore, that the black-and-white contrast painted by Óengus between the perishable secular sovereignty of the kings of Allen and the everlasting divine sovereignty of Brigit is at least a half-truth in political terms. However, the same *topos* is also attested in the Old Irish poem *Slán seiss, a Brigit*, otherwise known as *Hail Brigit*, ascribed to Orthanach úa Cóilláma, bishop of Kildare (d. 840), which at least places it within the period of Óengus' presumed lifetime (*MEYER* 1912; *IRELAND* 2022: 94–5).²² Finally, Prl. 195–6 refer to multitudinous Glendalough, another monastery linked to the Uí Dúnlainge. The *Vita Sancti Coemgeni* (c. 800) gives details of the various dynasties

²² Orthanach was a contemporary of Óengus; I am not aware of any evidence which suggests that the poem pre-dates the *Félire*.

associated with Glendalough and contains an anecdote placing Fáelán son of Colmán of the Uí Dúnlainge in fosterage at Glendalough. The Life also contains a prophecy that Fáelán will be a great king as well as progenitor of great kings (MACSHAMRÁIN 2011: 197). Áilbhe MacShamráin dated the Uí Dúnlainge link with Glendalough, as expressed in the Fáelán episode, to the time of Cellach (d. 775, see Fig. 1), or at least his son Fínshnechta (r. 795–808), in the context of their eastwards expansion (MACSHAMRÁIN 2011: 199).

Reading these references against the background of the complex dynastic networks and political instability in contemporary Leinster leads me to conclude that the selection is not random, and may well have been aimed directly at the leading sovereign figures of Óengus' time. While the seats of kingship would be relevant at any period for the kind of contrast that Óengus creates, the sites mentioned are all associated with the kings of Leinster or Tara in one way or another. This does not change Dumville's observation that this places the author in a location where the politics of Leinster and Mide (and Uí Néill territories more broadly) were important and in a time when there would have been some point in referring to Kings Bran and Donnchad (DUMVILLE 2002: 25). The specific mention, however, embedded among more rhetoric about pagan cities and earthly kings contrasted with the kingdom of Christ, of Donnchad and Bran (as Máel Ruain's opponents no less) and the Domnalls of Prl. 234, points to special significance of Donnchad's reign (Bran being his ally). As mentioned above (p. 00), Donnchad's reign represented a period of significant turmoil; so much so that a special joint synod was called, possibly at least in part instigated by local churchmen, to intervene. The fact that Dublittir apparently led this cohort seems significant, considering that *céli Dé* in general appear to have kept themselves at a distance from politics (or at least tried to). The underlying question, which Ó Riain likewise sought to answer, is then to whom – in addition to the community of Tallaght, whose prominence in the text is not in doubt – would this signposting be most relevant?

Here I think it is significant that Donnchad's reign has a some parallels in the reign of Áed Oirdnide, who continued Donnchad's aggressive stance towards the Leinster kings. When Áed Oirdnide came into power after the death of Donnchad, he asserted his dominance by killing two of Donnchad's brothers and by devastating Mide (AU 797.3, 797.5). A few years later he intervened in Mide again by breaking up the territory and dividing it between two sons of Donnchad, Conchobar and Ailill (AU 802.2) – much like he would do with Leinster

in 805. His attempt to create division did not last as he intended, however, but led Conchobar to murder Ailill soon after (*AU* 803.5). Áed subsequently lay waste to Leinster twice in one month (*AU* 804.5), presumably to deter Conchobar from challenging him regarding the kingship of Tara. The annals record that, shortly after, he attended a joint synod²³ of the Uí Néill in Dún Cúair, presided over by Condmach of Armagh (d. 807): *Congressio senadorum Nepotum Neill cui dux erat Condmach, abbas Airdd Machae, i n-Dun Chuaer* (*AU* 804.7). This synod is worded almost exactly the same in the annals as the entry concerning the joint synod organised in 780 and presided over by Dublittir. A joint synod was a rare event and while Charles-Edwards thinks that this reflects Áed's authority as *rex Temro* (*ECI*: 278), I think that, on balance, it is more likely that this synod too was organised in an attempt to curb military aggression, at least where its effects on the local churches was concerned.²⁴ It seems to me that this interpretation is supported by the use of the term in the annals: in all instances recorded in the Annals of Ulster, with exception *only* of the two instances cited here, referring to the synods of 780 and 804, the term refers to a military encounter. In my opinion, then, the term was chosen deliberately in reference to the fact that these were special synods held to deal with conflict, which would have warranted them being included in the annals. Indeed, it is tempting to think that both these events were initiated on the authority of the churchmen who presided over them, effectively exercising their moral authority over the local sovereign, in parallel to Óengus' literary motif. If so, the implied criticism in the *Féilire* on ›wrathful, ruddy‹ Donnchad, a king deserving of such a synod, can by extension reflect on a contemporary king whose behaviour is broadly similar, and who likewise attended a special synod, presided over by local churchmen, such as Áed Oirdnide.

At this point it is necessary to consider an entry in the Annals of Ulster which would reinforce this impression. The annals for 804 record that at this synod Áed accepted the judgment of Fothad na Canóine, freeing clergy from partaking in expeditions and hostings:

²³ There is some uncertainty as to the exact interpretation of the phrase *congressio senadorum*, as it is listed under *AU* 804.7, where it is translated as a ›meeting of the synods‹ (cf. *AU* 780.12). Donnchad Ó Corráin holds that the term should be read as *senatores*, referring to a plurality of noble men rather than to two synods; he maintains, however, that its purpose was to resolve conflict between the northern and southern Uí Néill (Ó CORRÁIN 1996: 252).

²⁴ Francis J. Byrne cites Binchy as having suggested that Áed may have been ordained by Condmach on this occasion, in the manner of continental kings of the late eighth century (BYRNE 2004: 159), but to my knowledge there is no evidence that the epithet ›oirdnide‹ was contemporary. In *AU* he is Áed Ingor ›the undutiful‹ (*AU* 791.5).

Isin bliadain-si dano ro saeradh cleirich h-Erenn ar fecht & ar sluaiged la h-Aed Oirnigi do bhreith Fhathaidh na Canoine ›This year, moreover, the clerics of Ireland were freed by Aed Oirdnide, at the behest of Fothad of the Canon, from the obligation of attendance on expeditions and hostings‹ (*AU* 804.8). However, the entry appears to be a later addition by Cathal Mac Maghnusa (d. 1498), compiler of the Annals together with his main scribe Ruadhri Ó Luinín (d. 1528), according to the editorial sigla. This is especially tantalising evidence since Thurneysen, in *Die Abfassung*, noted that the author of the prose preface, which also records this tradition, had conflated two annal entries – that concerning Fothud’s judgment listed under 804 and that describing Áed’s 805 hosting to Dún Cúair, on his way to Leinster (THURNEYSSEN 1908: 8). From the resulting confusion Thurneysen concluded that the composer of the preface, who had identified Bran and Donnchad with the help of the annals, may also have invented the encounter between Fothud and Óengus related in the prose preface. As it happens, Ruadhri Ó Luinín is also the scribe of MS *F* of the *Félire*, which contains a (now only partly legible) copy of the prose preface, and which he wrote for his patron Cathal Mac Maghnusa (*F*, f. 47v). It is therefore entirely possible that the borrowing was the other way around, namely that Cathal added this annotation to his copy of the Annals of Ulster based on the prose preface he found in MS *F* or the exemplar it was copied from. That being the case, the origin of this information is uncertain and could indeed be no older than the composition of the prose preface.²⁵ At most, it tells us that a twelfth-century commentator considered it plausible that the clergy were freed from hosting by Áed Oirdnide at the meeting at Dún Cúair.

Whatever the details of the meeting at Dún Cúair may have been, Áed appears to have been on good terms with Armagh in the years following this event, as he promulgated Patrick’s law two years later and defended their interests in battle against the Ulaid after they had violated Patrick’s shrine (*AU* 806.5, 809.7). A further incident, however, bears consideration in light of the text’s special affiliation with Máel Ruain. In 811, Áed violated the sanctuary of Máel Ruain’s Tallaght:

AU 811.2

²⁵ Compare also the longer entry in the Annals of the Four Masters, which likewise does not contain anything that could not have been drawn from the prose preface.

Derbaid aige Dia Sathairnn oinigh Tailten conna-recht ech na carpat la Aedh m. Neill, id est muinnter Tamlachta dod-rorbai iar sarugad termainn Tamlachtai Maele Ruain du U Neill, & postea familiae Tamlachtae multa munera reddita sunt.

The fair of Tailtiu was prevented from being held on Saturday under the aegis of Aed son of Niall, neither horse nor chariot arriving there. It was the community of Tamlacht who caused the boycott after the Uí Néill had violated the sanctuary of Tamlacht of Mael Ruain; and many gifts were subsequently made to the community of Tamlacht.

Needless to say, Áed would not have been favoured much by anyone in the community of Tallaght following this incident. It is of course difficult to whether this event had any bearing on the composition of the *Félire*, as conflicting arguments can be presented. If one follows the conservative date of 808 on the basis that Fínshnechta is not mentioned, this episode is of no real value other than to confirm that there were evidently grounds for concern about royal aggression. On the other hand, if one postulates that the *Félire* may have been completed after this date, the episode provides suitable context for the criticism of military sovereignty by one of the community of Tallaght. The episode raises more questions than answers. Nevertheless, I would argue, contra Ó Riain, that there are good reasons for considering Áed Oirdnide's reign appropriate context for the references concerning kingship in the prologue. It remains to be said, though, that it is not absolutely necessary to single out one specific ruler as the target audience for this part of the text: it can easily be understood as critical of aggressive sovereigns without the need to single out one of them in particular. Consequently, it could be said to be critical not just of Áed, but also of other dynasts, such as Fínshnechta, who, after all, became king through kinslaying. In the context of the overarching argument of the text, the fact that only Donnchad and Bran are directly cited, together with the dynasty of Domnalls, rather than a long line of offending contemporary kings, must be taken as significant. All other references are to rulers of the past or else potentially indirect by reference to seats of kingship. This points to a critical attitude, not only to these kings personally, but through them, symbolically to the kingship of Tara and of the Uí Dúnlainge. As Fínshechta was also a member of the Uí Dúnlainge, he could be considered to be included in this frame of reference through Bran.

How one interprets these references naturally has bearing on the proposed date of composition. Ó Riain reasoned that composition during Fínsnechta's reign (making him the *de facto* audience) makes little sense because he was not the progeny of his predecessor; an assumption which I think needs revision in light of his place in the dynasty. Thurneysen argued that the absence of any mention of the successor places the date of composition in that reign. This presupposes that he would certainly have been included in the text, if he had already passed away, though this is far from certain. Because the references to contemporary kingship in the *Félire* are so selective, this method of deduction simply does not work as well here as in other case, such as in the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, where an unbroken line of abbots of Iona which terminates with Cilléne suggests that the Iona phase in the compilation of that text ended at that time (see below). To my mind, neither of these approaches offers a foolproof *terminus ante quem*. Furthermore, if it is accepted that Áed's reign provides a suitable frame of reference, it follows that the date of his death in 819 must be taken into account as a potential *terminus*. However, while I think it highly probable that the text was composed during his reign, it may never be possible to arrive at an indisputable *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the prologue on this basis.

The foundation for scholarship on the question of the date of composition tends to rest on the identification of datable persons — a tradition going back to the middle Irish compiler of the prose preface. This method provides a solid *terminus post quem*, but inherently leaves room for doubt regarding the *terminus ante quem*. Two potential solutions present themselves in this case: reinterpreting the existing evidence, or attempting to find further evidence offering a historical date. In his review of the date of composition of the Tallaght martyrologies, Pádraig Ó Riain, who has done much to elucidate the transmission history of the Irish martyrologies for us, has valiantly attempted both, and in the majority of his chapter in fact takes up the challenge of identifying saints whose obit fell in the ninth century, contra Stokes' original statement that ›no saint or other person who certainly died in the ninth century was mentioned‹ (STOKES 1905: xxxviii). He adduced evidence pertaining to fourteen saints found in the *Martyrology of Tallaght* whose deaths fall after 800, three of which he also identified in the *Félire*. On the basis of this evidence, he concluded that neither of the Tallaght martyrologies ›can in fact have been composed before about 828‹ (Ó

RIAIN 1990: 25; Ó RIAIN 2006: 81).²⁶ Before turning to a discussion of the datable saints in the *Félire*, however, the relationship between the Tallaght martyrologies needs to be briefly considered, as it pertains to the question of dating them.

The *Martyrology of Tallaght* is different kind of martyrology to the *Félire* in that it is a recension of the Hieronymian martyrology. It is in effect a loosely-organised list of saints names (arranged according to the calendar year) which would have been used for the commemoration of the saints during the liturgy. As Ó Riain has shown, the underlying Hieronymian exemplar must have come to Ireland via Northumbria (Ó RIAIN 1993; 2006: chap. 2). From internal evidence it is clear that in the course of its transmission, the underlying archetype had a phase in Iona, until at least 726,²⁷ possibly in Bangor, and at Tallaght, until at least 812, after which time no further references to members of the community of Tallaght are found in the text (DUMVILLE 2002: 40–3; Ó RIAIN 2006: 71, 76–7). From this stage of the transmission, at which it accumulated the Tallaght material, the text is referred to as the *Martyrology of Tallaght*. It is generally assumed that both this martyrology and the *Félire* were written by Óengus at Tallaght at about the same time and that the *Martyrology of Tallaght* served as a source for the *Félire* (Ó RIAIN 2006: chap. 5).

At present the *Martyrology of Tallaght* is extant in two incomplete recensions contained in manuscripts dating from the twelfth and seventeenth century, and it is here that the difficulty lies in dating both the *Martyrology of Tallaght* itself and in evaluating its relationship to the *Félire*.²⁸ The conflict between Ó Riain's dating and that of Thurneysen and Breatnach — who follows the 797 x 808 date — arises first and foremost out of different methodological approaches to the sources and their transmission. The interpretation of internal information provided by the texts, such as the saints mentioned in them, must at all times be subject to an awareness of the transmission of the text and the history of textual

²⁶ For ease of reference I will primarily cite from the revised chapter in *Feastdays*, except where the CMCS chapter gives a different reading.

²⁷ This is not the place to discuss the transmission history of the Hieronymian *Vorlage* of the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, but suffice it to say that the last Iona abbot recorded is Cilléne. Unfortunately there were two Cilléne's who held the abbacy in succession, Cilléne Fota (d. 726) and Cilléne Droichtech (d. 752), so that it is unclear which was intended. The next abbot in the succession, Sléibíne, died in 772. Since he is absent from the text, which otherwise lists an unbroken record of succession, it is argued that the *Martyrology* must have left Iona before then (Ó RIAIN 1993: 12–13; DUMVILLE 2002: 43–4; Ó RIAIN 2006: 58–9, 62). Whether it was at Iona, Tallaght, or potentially an in-between stop that the *Vorlage* was expanded with Irish names of saints, resulting in its distinctive two-layered form, is still an open question.

²⁸ The now detached section of the Book of Leinster, Dublin, University College, MS Franciscan A 3, and Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, MS 5100–5104.

criticism pertaining to it, but that does not preclude scholars from drawing different conclusion about that transmission or about the relationships between the text. Ó Riain's reason for dating the *Martyrology of Tallaght* and the *Félire* jointly is that, since latter is based on the former, it must needs follow it, or at least date to the same time. The problem is that the hypothetical *Martyrology of Tallaght* to which Ó Riain refers in this scenario is that which was current in the early ninth century, when the *Félire* was written, which is not the same version that survives today.²⁹ Yet the text of the *Martyrology of Tallaght* in its present form – supplemented with entries from the *Martyrology of Gorman* – is used to date both. It is for this reason that Breatnach (1996: 74) and Dumville (2002: 29–33) rightly reject the use of saints from the *Martyrology of Tallaght* (especially those not otherwise found in the *Félire*) to date the *Félire*. In other words, referring briefly to Dumville's schematic synopsis, if the *Martyrology of Tallaght* represented by ›T (at Tallaght, 774 x 825)‹ is the version contemporaneous with Óengus, it must be treated as a now lost version, which we can largely, but not fully reconstruct, since the extant versions, the manuscript copies *T(l)* and *T(b)*, both contain evidence for various stages of alteration over the course of the transmission of the text (DUMVILLE 2002: 35).³⁰ It is necessary therefore to consider the transmission and date of the *Martyrology of Tallaght* separately from the *Félire* and abandon the concept that the date of the former determines the date of the latter. It is also unhelpful, with a text such as the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, to consider it as a ›fixed‹ text with defined origin, after which it is reworked. Its known history makes abundantly clear that this is the kind of text that invites continuous accrual of information, much like the annals invite accrual of new information over time. Therefore, while it is accepted that at one point in time the *Martyrology of Tallaght* formed a source for the *Félire*, it is highly probable that the text afterwards continued to grow and new saints continued to be added. To my mind, therefore, it is more helpful to think of the *Martyrology of Tallaght* as a text which has likely had many versions or stages, e.g. an Iona version and a Tallaght version, some of which we can reconstruct, and some of which we cannot. The presence in the *Martyrology of Tallaght*

²⁹ There is ample evidence that the *Martyrology of Tallaght* was reworked at various stages in its transmission, including that presented by Ó Riain himself in the form of saints dated later in the ninth century, see DUMVILLE 2002: 37–9. The text of *T(l)* seems to date to the tenth century at the earliest.

³⁰ A significant part of the discussion furthermore concerns the definition of additions to an ›urtext‹ of the *Martyrology of Tallaght*. If it is assumed that the *Martyrology of Tallaght* originated c. 808, then it follows that any saints of later date in that text must be considered later additions; if the text is dated to c. 828, only entries made after that time are considered additions. Dumville also reasons the other way: since it cannot be proven absolutely that the saints dating to the ninth century or later were not part of the *Martyrology of Tallaght* when it was first written down, ›an origin ca. 800 cannot be presumed outright‹ (DUMVILLE 2002: 37).

of saints dated to the 820s or 830s, then, should form no objection to dating the *Félire* to an earlier decade.

Finally, then, it remains to consider the potentially early ninth-century saints recorded in the *Félire*. According to Ó Riain three of those he identified in the *Martyrology of Tallaght* certainly or possibly occur in the *Félire*: Airerán, Dímmán, and Flann (Ó RIAIN 2006: 81–3, 85–7, 91–2). The first of these, Airerán, is celebrated in the *Félire* as *Airerán necnai assa clú nád chelar* ›Airerán of the wisdom, whose fame is not hidden‹ (Aug. 11). Stokes mentioned two potential identifications of this Airerán; the successor of Máel Ruain, based on the glosses in the Commentary, which he edited from *Lb*, *F* and *R¹* (STOKES 1880: cxxx; 1905: 184), or Ailerán Sapiens (d. 664), in case the glossator was mistaken (STOKES 1905: xxxviii). The latter is, however, normally commemorated on December 29 (STOKES 1905: 255; BEST and LAWLOR 1931: 2). These conflicting identifications point to a difficulty in the text which Ó Riain also commented on, namely that there is some variation in the transmission of both the name and the glosses in the manuscripts. The name of the saint is recorded in the manuscript copies of the *Félire* as a Airennán in two instances: *airerán LbFB*, *eireran L*, *aireran Lb*, *erēnan P*, *airennan R¹*.³¹ It seems likely that this confusion arose sometime before the twelfth century as it is also found in the glosses, which moreover demonstrate that at least three competing traditions as to the identity of the saint circulated at that time. In all manuscripts containing the entry as well as in a gloss in the *Martyrology of Gorman* a proposed identification of Airerán as a person ›from Tech Airerán in Meath‹ is contradicted by one which suggests he was abbot in Tallaght.³² In *LbF* an additional note clarifies that the person in Tech Airerán is the scholar of Clonard (γ *fer legind cluana esium Lb* / γ *fer leginn cluana iraird F*), but a third option, *nó i cluain dolcain*, is also given. It is likely, however, that these initial identifications were derived from the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, which commemorates five persons called Airerán or Airennán, two of which are of interest here: January 5 *Airendani*, February 1 *Airennan .h. Foduibh*, February 10 *Airendani Ep. Tallac[h]ta*,

³¹ The variation between *r* and *n* can be explained in a number of ways, not least as the result of a scribe confusing short *r* with *n*, especially if the exemplar was copied out in a set minuscule such as that of e.g. the Schaffhausen Adomnán.

³² *Eireran .i. ó thigh airennain inm ecnai nó abb tamlachtan .i. maelruain L*; *Airennan nó erannan .i. o thigh erennen i mmide. nó abb tamlacta post máel ruain R¹*; *Erēnan .i. o thigh erenain imide nó o thamlachtain, quia ereran abas in ea fuit post P*; *Aireran .i. o thigh airerain a mide 7 fer legind cluana esium no icluain dolcain no abb tamlachtu maelruain Lb*; *Aireran .i. o thigh aireran i midhe 7 fer leighinn cluana iraird nó i cluain dolcain, nó abb tamhlachta post maelruain F*. In the *Martyrology of Gorman: ó Tigh Erennaín i Midhe, ocus ab Tamhlacta iar Máelruain* (STOKES 1895: 154).

October 27 *Airennain o Thig Airennain i mMidi*, and finally on August 11, *Airerain sapientis 7 abbatis tamhlachta post Mael Ruain* (BEST and LAWLOR 1931: 5, 14, 16, 85, 62).³³ It would appear, on this basis, that the gloss identifying Airerán as a person based in Meath actually belongs to the Airennán of October 27, and that the entry for August 11 in the *Félire* refers to the successor of Máel Ruain. In both his 1990 and 2006 chapters, Ó Riain allows Airennán as an acceptable spelling variant of Airerán and in turn considers this a variant spelling of Airfhinnán, allowing him to identify Airerán as the abbot of Tallaght who passed away in 803: *Airfhinnan, abbas Tamhlachtaí Mael Ruain, pausauit in pace* (AU 803.2; Ó RIAIN 1990: 26–7; 2006: 82–3).³⁴ Regrettably, there is no mention of an Airfhinnan in the martyrologies, and the annals do not give his feast day. Conversely, I have found no Airerán in the annals, and the only instance of an Airennán is as the father of Finán (AU 676.1). As Dumville argued, the evidence for identifying Airerán with Airfhinnán is therefore not conclusive, as we must allow that Airerán was abbot after Máel Ruain sometime in the period 792 x 803 (DUMVILLE 2002: 26), assuming, of course, that the entry in the *Martyrology of Tallaght* should be taken quite literally to mean ›directly after‹. Unfortunately, this conclusion is of no help in further refining the date of composition as, without further evidence regarding the year of his death, it does not conflict with established date range.

The identification of the next saint, celebrated on December 10 as *mo Dímmóc dáni*, ›my Dímmóc [Mo Dímmóc] the bold‹, is complicated by the fact that the equivalent entry in the *Martyrology of Tallaght* is missing due to the loss of a leaf. We are thus forced to turn to the *Martyrology of Gorman* and the glosses for a clue as to who might be intended. The obvious problem with this is of course that, since both texts date to a significantly later period, they can only offer speculative clues. The glosses to the *Félire* in LCR¹ indicate that the saint may have been from Clonkeen in Arad in Munster: *Cluain cáin Árad isin Mumain* (L, cf. R¹C), while F adds this is in Ros Conaill. This agrees with the gloss from the *Martyrology of Gorman* cited by Ó Riain (1990: 28; 2006: 85), but is contradicted by an entry in the *Martyrology of Tallaght* commemorating *Modímmóc Clúana Caín* on April 26 (BEST and LAWLOR 1931: 36). Ó Riain concedes the contradiction but notes that saints may be celebrated on multiple days, as can indeed be demonstrated by multiple examples in the *Félire*, and, after comparing the consistency of other borrowings, observes that there is great

³³ Under February 12 there is also Finani meic Airennáin (BEST and LAWLOR 1931: 16).

³⁴ Airerán does seem to be an occasional variant for Ailerán (AU 665.3 vs AI 666.5).

probability that Máel Muire Ua Gormáin drew on the *Martyrology of Tallaght* for his gloss (Ó RIAIN 2006: 86–7). This may well be case, though we cannot now tell whether the information was original entry in the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, or whether it was drawn from the correct place, since he clearly combined information from different dates, as with Airerán (see n. 32).³⁵ In the absence of further evidence, then, the information in the glosses could either belong to a MoDímóc who was celebrated on both days, or to a different saint also called MoDímóc who was celebrated on April 26. More importantly, however, Ó Riain (1990: 28–30; 2006: proposed that MoDimóc could be equated with Dímán of Arad, a Munster anchorite, who died in 811: *Dimman Arad, Muminensis ancorita, uitam feliciter fniuit*, ›Dímán of Arad, a Munster anchorite, ended his life happily‹ (AU 811.4); *Quies Dímáin Cille Drumman* ›Repose of Dímán of Cell Druman‹ (AI 811.2). While Ó Riain locates Dímán in Clonkeen or Kildromin in Limerick, MoDímóc is elsewhere located in the vicinity of Cashel in Tipperary (*MONH* s.v. Cluain Chaín [Arad]; *ONG* s.v. cluain cáin arad). There is unfortunately a plethora of sites named Clonkeen, which does not make identification any easier. In short, however, as Breatnach and Dumville have argued already, there is not sufficient evidence to either confirm MoDímóc’s location or to equate him with Dímán of Arad (BREATNACH 1996: 74; DUMVILLE 2002: 30).

The identification is of *Flann find fechnach* (Jan. 14) is likewise uncertain. The glosses in *L* and *P* identify Flann as a *combarba Patraic*; but the glossator in *F* wrote: *nescio ubi est hic flann sed alii dicunt conadh flann febla comharba patraig* ›I do not know where this Flann is, but others say that he is Flann Febla, successor of Patrick‹. If so, this refers to Flann Febla son of Scannlán, abbot of Armagh, who died in 715 (AU 715.1). Another tradition, found in the *Martyrology of Tallaght* and in a gloss to the *Martyrology of Gorman*, suggests that he is *Fland Find i Cullind i fail Chorcaigi* ›Flann find in Cullen near Corcach‹ (BEST and LAWLOR 1931: 8; cf. STOKES 1895: 16–17). Ó Riain suggests a third possibility, namely that is the same person as the Flann mac Fairchellach commemorated on December 21 in the *Martyrology of Tallaght* and in a gloss to the *Martyrology of Gorman* (BEST and LAWLOR 1931: 8; cf. STOKES 1895: 16–17). We thus have three competing traditions. The first of these is solely late medieval and could have been derived from the annals (as the glossators seem to have done on other occasions). The third belongs to a different feast day altogether, and has nothing in particular connecting it to the *Féilire* or to the Flann of Cullen in the *Martyrology of Tallaght*.

³⁵ See also Ó RIAIN 2006: 93 n. 82.

Though the identification as Flann of Cullen probably is the more credible by virtue of being included in the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, is it impossible to conclude anything for certain in this case.

A final two saints have been mentioned in the past as relevant to the potential date of composition of the *Félire*. These were discussed in this context only by Stokes (1905: xxxviii), though Dumville noted them in a footnote. These are not Irish saints, however, but the universal saints Joseph, father of Jesus (March 19) and Paul the deacon (April 13). According to Stokes, the inclusion of Joseph, commemorated in the *Félire* as *aite álaind Íssu* ›Jesus' pleasant foster-father‹, was proof that the text ›was not written *before* the ninth century‹ (1905: xxxviii). For this he referred to a comment by Bernard and Atkinson in the edition of the *Liber Hymnorum*, to the effect that ›the name of Joseph does not appear in Western Martyrologies until the ninth century ... Its occurrence here at least indicates for the piece in its present form a date not earlier than 850.‹ (BERNARD and ATKINSON 1898: 118).

Considering the established date range for the Tallaght martyrologies this seems unlikely, but fortunately we do not have to rely on this alone. *Joseph sponsus Mariae* is mentioned in an eighth-century calendar in Zürich, Zentralbibliothek, Cod. Rh. 30, which had an Irish *vorlage* and which was first used on the continent, in the Nivelles area, before c. 800; this not only suggests that the feast must have been known in Ireland in the eighth century, but also, as argued by Ó Riain, that the feast likely has an Irish origin (2006: 71; 2022: § 7). It is quite possible, as John Hennig already suggested, that the name was taken from the Hieronymian entry for the next day, March 20, which commemorates *In Antiochia natale Josephi*, and simply repurposed (HENNIG 1975: 136). This of course would be more likely to happen if the Irish were aware of a cult of St. Joseph, and Adomnán of Iona (d. 704) indeed provides us with that information. In his work *On the Holy Places*, Adomnán reports on the Franco-Gallic bishop Arculf's visit to the tomb of Joseph in Jerusalem: *alterum uero aequae iusti Ioseph sanctae Mariae sponsi et Domini Iesu nutritoris* ›The other [tomb] is that of the equally just Joseph, spouse of the holy Mary, and foster-father of the Lord Jesus‹ (Meehan 1958: 58–9). It is here also that we find reference to Joseph as Jesus' foster-father, as in the *Félire*. The textual history behind this entry, then, does not require pushing the date of composition into the ninth century.

Stokes also mentioned Paul the deacon, together with Airerán, as the most modern saints mentioned in the text (STOKES 1905: xxxviii). Paul is unmistakably commemorated as *Pól deochoin* ›Paul the deacon‹ on April 13. Stokes rightly noted that the author Paul the Deacon died (shortly) before 800, so that his death is potentially relevant for our *terminus post quem*. The death of Paul the Deacon is somewhat uncertain and usually dated to 797 x 799, with the consensus apparently leaning towards 799 (PANI 2006: 655–65). If the later date could be proven, this might have been significant for our purposes, but unfortunately there is an anachronism here which prevents this identification: the entry for Paul the deacon was borrowed from the Roman section of the Hieronymian martyrology and therefore cannot possibly refer to the author known as Paul the Deacon. The entry appears in the *Martyrology of Tallaght* as well as in the four oldest manuscripts of the *Hieronymianum*, the oldest of which, the Echternach martyrology, was copied c. 700 (BEST and LAWLOR 1931: 32; DE ROSSI and DUCHESNE 1894: 43). In this case, the martyrological tradition in fact records a corruption of the hagiographical tradition of three martyrs from Pergamena called Carpus, Papyrus and Agathonice. The Bollandists noted this in their bulletin in 1675, which was picked up by Best and Lawlor, though the information is buried in the notes at the back of the edition (HENSCHEN 1675: 120; BEST and LAWLOR 1931: 147).³⁶ With the origin of this entry in the Hieronymian text confirmed, the identification has no further bearing on the date of composition of the *Félire*.

More than a century has passed since Thurneysen proposed that the date of composition of *Félire Óengusso* should fall between 797 x 808. In that period, that conclusion has only been challenged once. While both Thurneysen and Ó Riain sought to build their arguments on the datable persons identified within the text, their approaches conflicted on the perceived relevance of these references. And where Ó Riain took the date of the *Félire* to be intrinsically aligned with that of *Martyrology of Tallaght*, Dumville highlighted the problem with doing so in detail. I hope to have demonstrated here that there is still room for further interpretation on at least one front. While I see no reason to amend the established *terminus post quem*, I do not consider the *terminus ante quem* as solid as previously presented. To my mind, the selective nature of the text precludes us from assuming *de facto* that Fínshnechta

³⁶ Though Stokes does not mention Papyrus in his 1905 edition, in his 1880 he already suspected the error, writing in the index: ›A martyr named Paulus is mentioned at this day by Boll. But he does not appear to have been a deacon. Can Oengus have intended Deacon Papyrus, martyred at Pergamus, and also celebrated on 13 Ap. ?‹ (STOKES 1880: ccciv). The corruption is also mentioned in ACHELIS 1900: 33, 132.

would be named instead of Bran, if the text was composed after his death. Likewise, there are solid grounds for accepting that Áed's reign provides a suitable frame of reference for the prologue, so that a potential *terminus ante quem* of 819 cannot be entirely ruled out. While we are fortunate to have more historical information about this text than we do for many, it is perhaps inherent in the tantalising brevity of the references in the *Félire* that much of what we do know remains uncertain and the date of composition is likely to remain a thorny question.

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SIGLA

- Lb* Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 1230 (olim 23 P 16, alias *An Leabhar Breac*)
- L* Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 610
- F* UCD OFM (olim Franciscan Library Killiney) MS A7
- P* Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 1242 (olim 23 P 3)
- C* Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G10 (formerly Cheltenham, Phillips Library, MS 10266)
- B* Brussels, Bibliothèque royale, MS 5100–4
- R*¹ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 505
- R*² Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 512
- T(l)* Dublin, University College, MS Franciscan A 3
- T(b)* Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, MS 5100-5104

ABBREVIATIONS

- AI* MAC AIRT, Seán, 1944: *The Annals of Inisfallen (MS. Rawlinson B. 503)*. Dublin: DIAS, 1944 (repr. 1988).
- AU* MAC AIRT, Seán and MAC NIOCAILL, Gearóid, 1946: *The Annals of Ulster, to A.D. 1131*. Dublin: DIAS, 1983.
- AFM* O'DONOVAN, John, 1848–51: *Annala Rioghachta Eireann: Annals of the kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters, from the earliest period to the year 1616. Edited from MSS in the Library of the Royal Irish Academy and of Trinity College Dublin with a translation and copious notes*. 7 vols. Dublin: Hodges & Smith, 1848–51.

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- CDC PATTE, Daniel, 2010: *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. DIAS Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies
- DIAS Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies
- DIL *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (2019 Edition): <https://dil.ie/>
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- MONH *Monasticon Hibernicum Project*, by Ailbhe MacShamhráin with Nora White and Aidan Breen, 2008: <https://monasticon.celt.dias.ie/index.php>.
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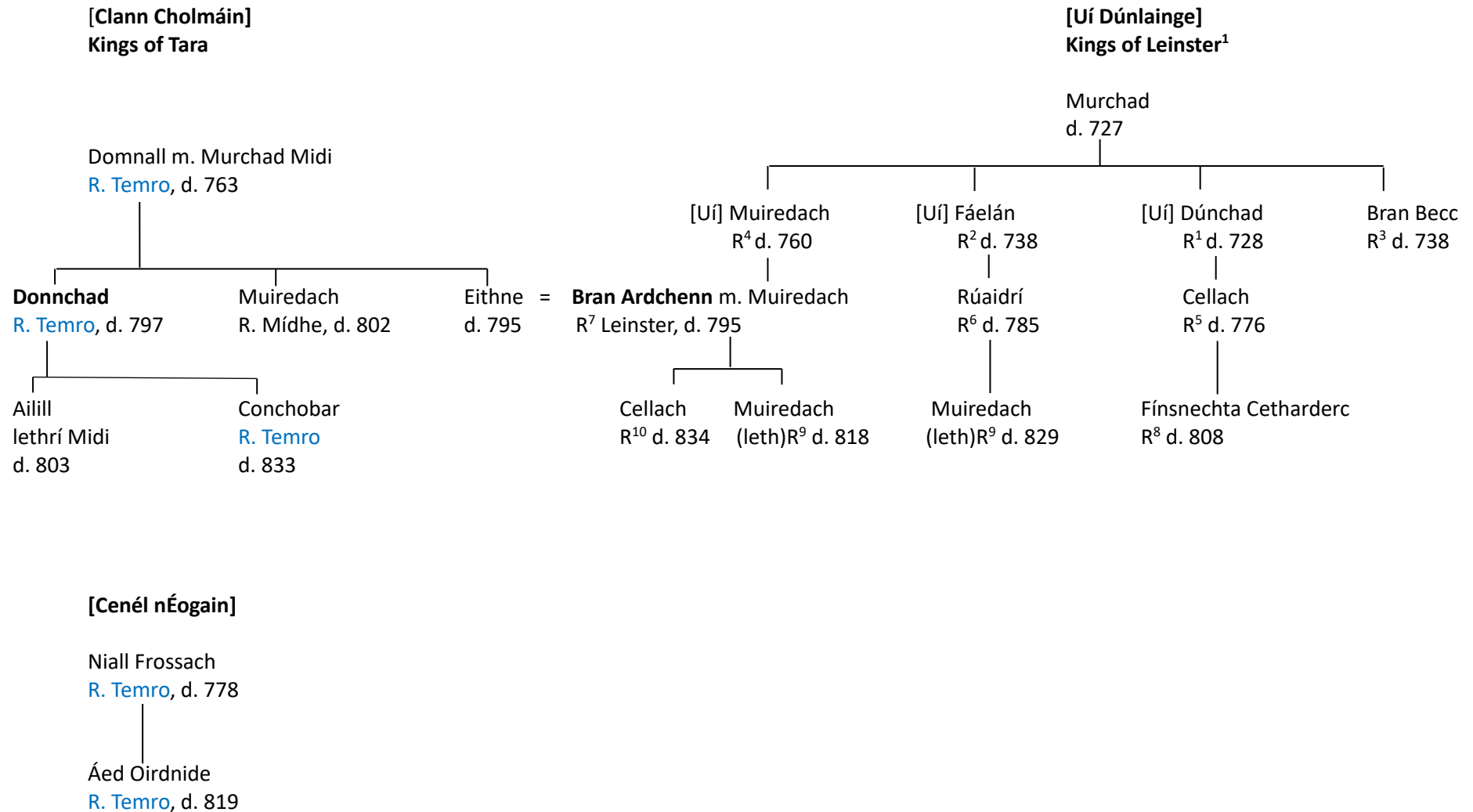
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FIG. 1 GENEALOGIES OF THE KINGS OF TARA AND LEINSTER



¹ Source: *ECI*, Appendix. The reign indicated by number 3 in fact appears to have been a joint kingship held by Áed m. Colggen, d. 738, of the Uí Chennselaig (see the Annals of Tigernach). Following the submission of Fínsnechta in 805, Áed Oirdnide divided the kingship among this cousins Muiredach son of Rúadrí and Muiredach son of Bran. [These genealogies are restricted to relevant family members.]