

## EARLY MEDIEVAL IRISH GRAVE-SLABS AND THEIR INSCRIPTIONS

by Catherine Swift

One of the most extensive categories of early medieval artefact from pre-Norman Ireland are the decorated grave-slabs, generally ornamented with some form of cross. A minority of these slabs have inscriptions: most commonly bearing the prayer *Ór(ait) do X* 'a prayer (is asked) for X'. They are limited in distribution and tend to be found in clusters – they are particularly prominent in the central midlands of Ireland, for example, and in the Irish colonies of the southern Hebrides; in contrast they are relatively rare both in the north-east and south of Ireland. Where grave-slabs do occur, very large numbers can be found on individual sites. There are approximately 700 now known from the single site of Clonmacnoise, 200 odd from Gallen, 80 or so from Iona, 63 from Inishealra and proportionately smaller numbers from such sites as Glendalough. For an archaeologist of the early Irish church, therefore, they are crucially important tools in attempting to identify the geographical extent of Irish Christianity, both in terms of contacts with other regions in the British Isles and in terms of the impact of Christianity on local Irish communities. If we could date these monuments or if we knew what social classes were commemorated in this fashion, we would be in a position to make some pertinent observations on the distribution and affiliations of many medieval Irish Christian communities. I propose to confine myself for this paper to the problem of the identification of the social categories of people being commemorated on these monuments.

Remarkably, despite their importance, there has been little analysis of pre-Norman Irish grave-slabs. I suspect this is basically a reflection of the tiny field which is Irish Christian archaeology; it is hardly surprising that the few researchers in this area have felt drawn to more visually exciting artefacts such as the high-crosses. The situation is not helped by the fact that there is no easily available corpus of the grave-slabs; even in his own day, Macalister's 1949 corpus (otherwise known as CIIC) was not a complete record of the known stones and many subsequent discoveries are published only piecemeal in local history journals where they are published at all. More relevantly, no major assessment of our methodology for studying these monuments has taken place since the days of Petrie's pioneering visits to Clonmacnoise in 1822. (The results of those visits were subsequently published by Margaret Stokes in 1872-1878 under the title *Christian Inscriptions of Ireland*). The most detailed discussion in the modern period, that by

Father Pádraig Lionard in 1961, is still heavily influenced by Petrie's views.

This is particularly obvious in Lionard's construction of a chronology which, unlike sculptural studies elsewhere, is only very loosely based on archaeological or art-historical criteria. Instead, Lionard placed great emphasis on identifying those individuals whose names are inscribed on the slabs with figures of the same name whose obits occur in the annals. In this way, he was able to put forward a typological sequence of grave-slab design which was tied to historical dates. As I have pointed out elsewhere, however, this approach owes everything to Petrie's early nineteenth-century linking of these two very different sets of data (Swift 1995).

The most recent discussion of the Clonmacnoise grave-slabs, by Ragnall Ó Floinn, follows a similar line of argument to Lionard while using the limited evidence of excavated slabs to back up his suggestions. A crucial element in the dating of what he calls type A slabs, for example, is the proposal that a slab dedicated to *Ailill aue Dunchatho* can be identified with an Uí Fiachrach Muaide king of north Connacht, *Ailill aua Duncadha*, whose death is recorded in the *Annals of Ulster sub anno 764* (Fanning & Ó hÉailidhe 1980, 7; Ó Floinn 1995, 252). Similarly, Ó Floinn's type B slabs are anchored in time by the existence of inscriptions referring to Suibne mac Maile-Umai and Odrán Ua Eolais. Men with these names are recorded as having died in Clonmacnoise in 887-92 and in 995 respectively (Ó Floinn 1995, 254).

Ó Floinn's identifications are rather stronger than Petrie's or Lionard's in that he limits himself to three of the extremely rare examples of slabs with patronymics (i.e. both the name of the individual and that of a progenitor, either a father or a grandfather/more remote ancestor are cited.) On the other hand, it has to be said that neither of the two names Ailill or Dunchad are rare in Old Irish and the use of the genitive form *Dunchatho* on the slab represents an Early Old Irish spelling normally seen as earlier than the late eighth century; the obit in the *Annals of Ulster* uses the later -d(h)- at this point. Furthermore, there is no very obvious association between an Uí Fiachrach Muaide king from the Moy estuary in northern Mayo and either Athlone on the Shannon – where the slab was found – or Clonmacnoise, east of the Shannon where Ó Floinn suggests the slab originated. If Ailill was buried at Clonmacnoise, he was the only known member of his dynasty to have been



brought south in this fashion; where we can identify the religious affiliations of this dynasty they are patrons of the Columban or Patrician churches, together with their own local establishments at Killala and Kilmoremy. (One should note, however, Byrne's suggestion, quoted by Ó Floinn, that Ailill was fostered amongst the Medraige of Galway Bay (Byrne 1973, 249; Ó Floinn 1995, 252). I do not believe that this entirely resolves the problem: Galway Bay is still at some considerable distance from Athlone and the only eighth-century figure at Clonmacnoise from this area is a possible but by no means definitely identified member of the Conmaicne of Dunmore, Co. Galway who died as abbot in 740 (Kehnel 1997, 250).)

The identification of *Ailill aue Dunchatho* on the slab with an Uí Fiachrach king raises another issue. Both Petrie's and Lionard's identifications drew on the obits for ecclesiastical personnel and secular dynasts to an equal degree. They felt free to do so on the basis of three poems of late Middle Irish or Modern Irish date which refer to the burial of kings at Clonmacnoise. Of these, one is identified in a note by the seventeenth-century John Colgan as the work of a Clonmacnoise churchman, Mael-Pátraic who died in 1027 (Stokes 1872, 76–78). A second is ascribed to the bard Conaing Buidhe O'Mulconry writing some time before 1224 (Stokes 1872, 81; Best 1905). The third is by Enoch O'Gillan whose work post-dates the association of Ua Ruairc with an early twelfth-century tower at Clonmacnoise – an association which is recorded in the fourteenth-century *Registry of Clonmacnoise* but apparently not earlier (Petrie 1970, 391–3; Kehnel 1997, 232–3). This last refers to the association of a number of the later medieval families of the Roscommon area with Clonmacnoise; people such as the O'Flynnns, the O'Flahertys, the O'Mulroonys and the MacDermots (Stokes 1872, 5–7). The Mael-Pátraic poem, which is apparently the earliest, appears to be limited to kings who died before the later ninth century; where these can be identified they include members of the Uí Briúin Aí of Roscommon; Áed Allán mac Fergaile of the Cénel nÉogain who died as high king of Tara in 743; Guaire Aidne, an early king of the Uí Fiachrach Aidne of Kilmacduagh who died in 663; Áed mac Brénnain and other kings of Tethbae in Longford; members of the Cénel Cairpri possibly from the Granard region. Áed mac Colgen, king of Int Airthir in Co. Armagh; Cathal mac Ailello, probably of the Uí Maine in east Galway who died in 846 and Mael-Sechnaill of the Clann Cholmáin, said to be the first Uí Néill high-king who managed to take hostages from south Munster and who died in 862.

Some of these individuals are also listed elsewhere as having been buried in Clonmacnoise: Áed mac Colgen, for example, is recorded as having died on pilgrimage to Clonmacnoise in the *Annals of Ulster* in 610 and Mael-Sechnaill, as Ó Floinn has pointed out,

is recorded as having been buried at Clonmacnoise in the tenth-century text, *Baile in Scáil* as was his son Flann Sinna (Ó Floinn 1995, 254; Meyer 1918, 234–5). The same text also refers to the burial of Áed Allán at Clonmacnoise (Meyer 1918, 233) while the *Annals of the Four Masters* *sub annis* 886, 914, 921, 926 indicates that Mael-Sechnaill's wife and his two daughters, Lígach and Muirgal were interred on the same site.

Therefore, even though we do not have independent corroboration in all cases of Mael-Pátraic's statements, it seems reasonable to suppose that Clonmacnoise was known in the pre-Norman period as a cemetery in which kings might be buried and that for the most part, such kings were from the great dynasties of the midlands with occasional exceptions such as the king of the Cénel nÉogain (in Cos. Derry and Tyrone), the king of Int Airthir (from Co. Armagh) or the king of Knowth in Co. Meath. It has to be said, however, that this is not quite the same thing as saying that the monuments which we now call grave-slabs necessarily reflect burial markers for the graves of those same kings. We have no idea of the appearance of a royal mausoleum in the pre-Norman period and Petrie, Lionard and Ó Floinn's assumption that they were buried under grave-slabs of the type under discussion is simply an assumption.

In point of fact, when we look at those few inscriptions which give us some indication of the careers of those commemorated, we have two explicit references to the commemoration of kings (*rí*):

CIIC No. 798 – CIL 170 (Clonmacnoise): *Or do Aed mc Bibria mc Caidg Hui Cellaich ca rig humane*

CIIC No. 930 (Roscrea, Co. Tipperary): *... do U Cherbaill oro do rig ele*

In neither case does the stone survive but if we can accept the testimonies of the nineteenth-century antiquarians, neither slab was ornamented with a cross. Instead the slabs were entirely plain. Furthermore, the slabs are extremely unusual in that each gives a community name; *hu Mane* (Uí Maine) in one place or *ele* (Éle) in the other. Not only are these stones unique – so far as we know – in referring to the commemorated man as a king; they are also entirely different in style from the majority of the grave-slabs. To assume therefore that a high percentage of grave-slabs with crosses but without community affiliations or titles also commemorate kings is allowing the later medieval documentary sources to dominate our interpretation.

Of the other slabs where the person being commemorated is further identified, four refer to explicitly clerical personal: three commemorate bishops and a fourth is a priest (CIIC Nos. 620, 640, 897, 899). In his edition of *Uraicecht na Ríar*, Liam



Breatnach has pointed out that the inhabitants of ecclesiastical settlements are grouped into three major classes in the vernacular texts: the *gráda ecalsa* or clerics (men such as bishops, priests, deacons, lectors, exorcists); the *gráda uird ecalsa* or service personnel (men such as millers, gardeners, cooks, stewards and door-keepers) and the *gráda ecnai* or scholarly grades (Breatnach 1987, 84–5). Our four slabs thus commemorate members of the *gráda ecalsa* as they are defined in the vernacular law-texts.

A fifth slab commemorates a leader of a community identified merely as *ap* (CIIC No. 539). As Colmán Etchingham has pointed out, the leaders of early medieval ecclesiastical communities could hold various titles: clerical titles such as that of bishop; alternatively lay-administrators such as *airchinnech* or *comarbae* (coarb), or monastic titles such as that of abbot (Etchingham 1994). The title *ap* or *ab* (Irish spelling could vary here) – or *abbas* in Latin sources can be used of all such leaders indiscriminately. It is, therefore, impossible to say precisely whether Tomas *ap* of Temple Breacan, Co. Galway, the man commemorated on this slab, was a member of the *gráda ecalsa* or of the *gráda uird ecalsa* – he could have been a lay administrator, a cleric or an abbot or any combination of these.

Two more slabs refer to the individual's personal background; Coscrach is identified as a *Laignech* or Leinsterman while Mócnach is entitled *aite* or foster-father (CIIC No. 891, 887). This does not help us in identifying the social class to which these people belong. Nor does the slab referring to a woman (CIIC No. 46); such a woman could be a holy woman who had taken vows, the wife of an ecclesiastic of any category or a secular woman.

Thus we can identify five churchmen, including three bishops commemorated on the grave slabs in addition to other individuals who may or may not have been part of the personnel of an ecclesiastical settlement. This makes it clear that a number of prominent churchmen (a category about which the later medieval poems are entirely silent) are commemorated on these grave-slabs. Moreover, the theory that many ecclesiastics were honoured with decorated grave-slabs can be corroborated by looking at the names on many of the slabs. Amongst the people commemorated in the inscriptions from Clonmacnoise, for example, are Marcus (79), Stefan (108), Thomas (277, 570), Benedict (298), Daniel (364), Martin (590) – people with names which derive from the international Christian tradition and which are not used by secular Irish nobility in pre-Norman genealogies. (These numbers refer to the current OPW catalogue of Clonmacnoise slabs.) There are also names which begin with the element *mael* – a word which often means 'tonsured' followed by the name of famous saints; these include four examples of Mael Ciaráin

(151, 181, 266, 332) two examples of Mael Muire (20, 324), three examples of Mael Brigitte (289, 348, 350), three of Mael Michéil (318, 327, 476) and two of Mael Pátraic (199, 351). In addition, two names beginning with *gilla* are listed – a word which means servant and which becomes common in the Norse period; *Gilla Giaráin* (sic) 'servant of Ciarán' (CIIC 739) or *Gillu Christ* (CIIC 738). It seems most plausible to understand these various names as belonging to churchmen rather than to secular warriors. Thus the evidence of the slabs themselves, where diagnostic, is far more heavily focussed on ecclesiastical personnel than on royalty.

There is further evidence which can be brought to bear on this problem. The really startling element in the grave-slab inscriptions is that so few of them bear patronymics. To date I have ten slabs bearing the name of the father, grandfather or community to which the individual belongs (CIIC 589, 704, 688, 776, 779, 798, 930, 934, 900; Fanning & Ó hÉailidhe 1980, fig. 2.2). I cannot offer precise statistics but it is clear that these represent a tiny percentage of the corpus of inscriptions as a whole. This feature distinguishes grave-slab inscriptions from those found on ogam stones where individuals are most commonly identified with patronymics. We know of only one ogam inscription which clearly identifies a cleric – the famous Arraglen stone from Co. Kerry. In this case the commemorand, Ronan, is identified both as a priest and as the son of Comogann (Macalister 1945, 140–1). No such details are given on other ogam memorials and it is thus impossible to know what percentage of these may commemorate ecclesiastical personnel. The most we can do is note the presence of Christian ideology on a minority of the ogam stones as indicated by the presence of crosses (Swift 1997). In contrast with Macalister's views that crosses were inevitably added subsequently to the inscriptions, Ann Hamlin argued in 1982 that only a minority of the cross-ornamented ogam stones showed evidence for a later addition of the cross and this seems borne out by my own investigation of the stones (Swift, forthcoming). Assuming therefore, that the majority of crosses are contemporary and indicate the Christian beliefs of the commemorand, it is clear that, on ogam stones, no distinction is made between the naming formulae used for overt Christians and those used for the rest of the population (Fig. 1).

The dark columns in the Figures represent ogam stones without crosses; the lighter columns represent those with crosses. In both groups, the name of both individual and father/grandfather/community is normally given. To what extent those whose ogam stones are marked by crosses were professional ecclesiastics rather than simply practising Christians remains, however, impossible to say.

If we look at the naming formulae for ecclesiastics



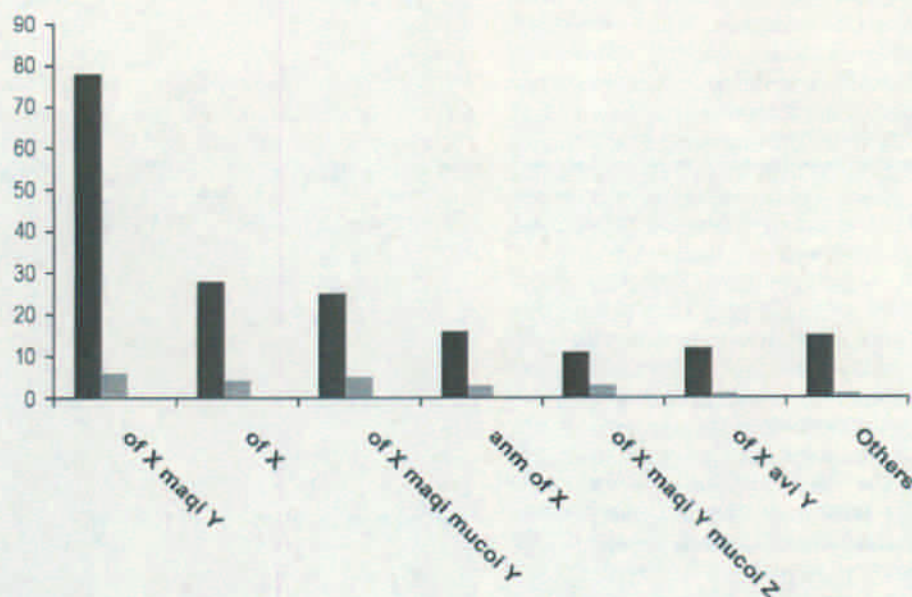


Fig. 1. Naming formulae used on Irish ogam stones

- of X maqi Y = of (named person) X son of (named person) Y
- of X = of (named person) X
- of X maqi mucoi Y = of (named person) X son of (a member of the named community) Y
- ann X = the name or inscription of (named person) X
- of X maqi Y mucoi Z = of (named person) X son of (named person) Y of the (named community) Z
- of X avi Y = of (named person) X, descendant of (named person) Y

in the annals, however, they are clearly distinguished from secular dynasts of the same period (Figs 2–3).

Figures 2 and 3 are made up of all names in the *Annals of Ulster* between the years 600 and 900, where the role of the person named is identified. It is very clear that the majority of notices of ecclesiastics refer to them by their name alone without the use of patronymic. In contrast, when one examines the names of secular dynasts in the same time frame, the vast majority are identified by name and patronymic. (The black column of single names amongst the secular dynasts is substantially accounted for by the annalists' habit of referring to current kings of Tara by their name alone. If these individuals are excerpted, the black column diminishes considerably.)

When one breaks down this data into smaller categories, it becomes apparent that the naming formula varies between different classes of ecclesiastics. Patronymics or other indications of dynastic descent are important in the case of leaders of the community; the names of just under half of such leaders include this information (Fig. 4). For clerical personnel or *gráda ecalsa*, in contrast, this percentage drops considerably. (I include anchorites in this list because,

although they are not listed in the vernacular tracts as members of this caste, their power is identified elsewhere as deriving from their dedication to Christian values) (Fig. 5). For *gráda uird ecalsa* or service personnel the percentage of patronymics rises dramatically (Fig. 6). My final chart represents those who I believe represent Latinised equivalents of the *gráda ecnai* or ecclesiastical scholars as listed in the vernacular tracts (Fig. 7). Here the percentage of names with patronymics is closer to that of the leaders of ecclesiastical settlements and represents just under half the total. It is not unexpected that dynasticism should play an important role amongst ecclesiastical leaders (Ó Corráin 1981, 327–333) but the relatively high percentage of patronymics amongst the scholars indicates that dynasticism was also a characteristic of the scholarly classes. Colmán Etchingham has drawn my attention to a passage published by E.J. Gwynn (1942, 32) and subsequently edited by Liam Breatnach (1987, 46). In this it is stated that

'he who is not the child of a noble, or a poet or a learned churchman (*egna*) sues for only half honour-price until he serve learning doubly'.



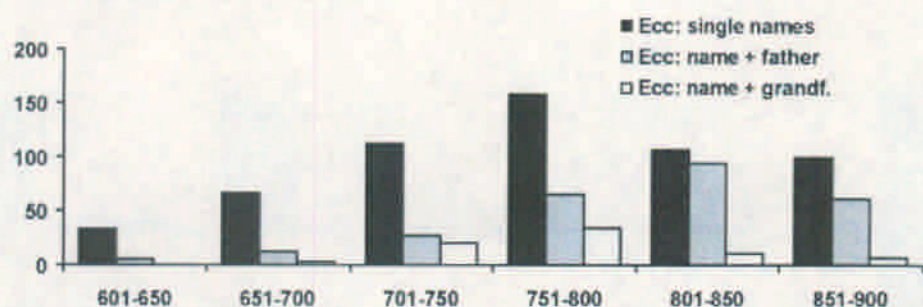


Fig. 2. The formulae used for naming Irish ecclesiastics in the Annals of Ulster between the years AD 600 and 900.

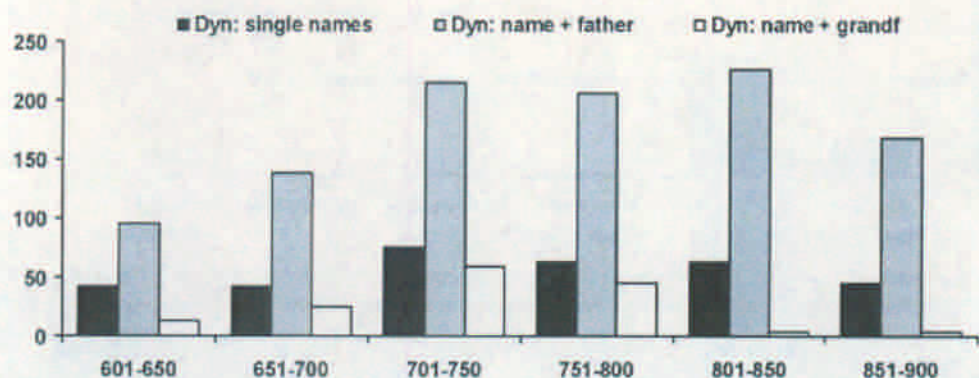


Fig. 3. The formulae used for naming Irish secular dynasts in the Annals of Ulster between the years AD 600 and 900.

This can be compared with a passage in *Uraicecht na Ríar* which states:

If he be not the son of a poet, however, or a grandson, only half honour-price goes to him, as Irish law says: 'ONLY HALF HONOUR-PRICE GOES TO SAGES - *SUID* - IF IT IS NOT TO A FAMILY (OF SAGES) THAT THEY ARE BORN (Breatnach 1987, 104-5).

The *sul* or sage is identified as a member of the *gráda ecnai* or scholarly grades in the vernacular tracts and appears to represent the same category of person as is indicated by the Latin word *scriba*. According to *Uraicecht na Ríar*, therefore, it is only if one is born into a learned family that one is automatically entitled to full honour-price. In contrast, according to the first passage, you could also reach full honour-price if you performed outstandingly as a scholar. Clearly this is a somewhat subjective criterion (consensus on such matters being notoriously difficult to obtain) and it may have been more flexible than it appears; it is impossible to tell how many scholars may have

attained full honour-price through recognition by their peers. For the lawyers, at any rate, the more normal route to high status as a scholar appears to have been membership of an academic clan. It therefore makes sense that the ancestry of such men was often indicated in their death-notice.

This makes the two slabs with patronymics identified by Petrie with personnel known to have died at Clonmacnoise particularly interesting. The first is that commemorating Suibne mac Maile Umai whom Petrie identified with a churchman whose fame was such that he was recorded not only in the Irish annals (AU 891, AFM 887) but also in the *Annales Cambriae* of Wales *sub anno* 889 and by Florence of Worcester in 892 where he is identified as 'the most learned doctor of learning amongst the Irish' (Stokes 1872, 39-40). Unfortunately this slab is now lost but a second slab, that of Odrán Ua Eolais, is currently on exhibition in the Clonmacnoise Heritage Centre. A member of the Muintir Eolais of Conmaicne Maige Réin in Co. Leitrim with this name has a death-notice in AFM 994

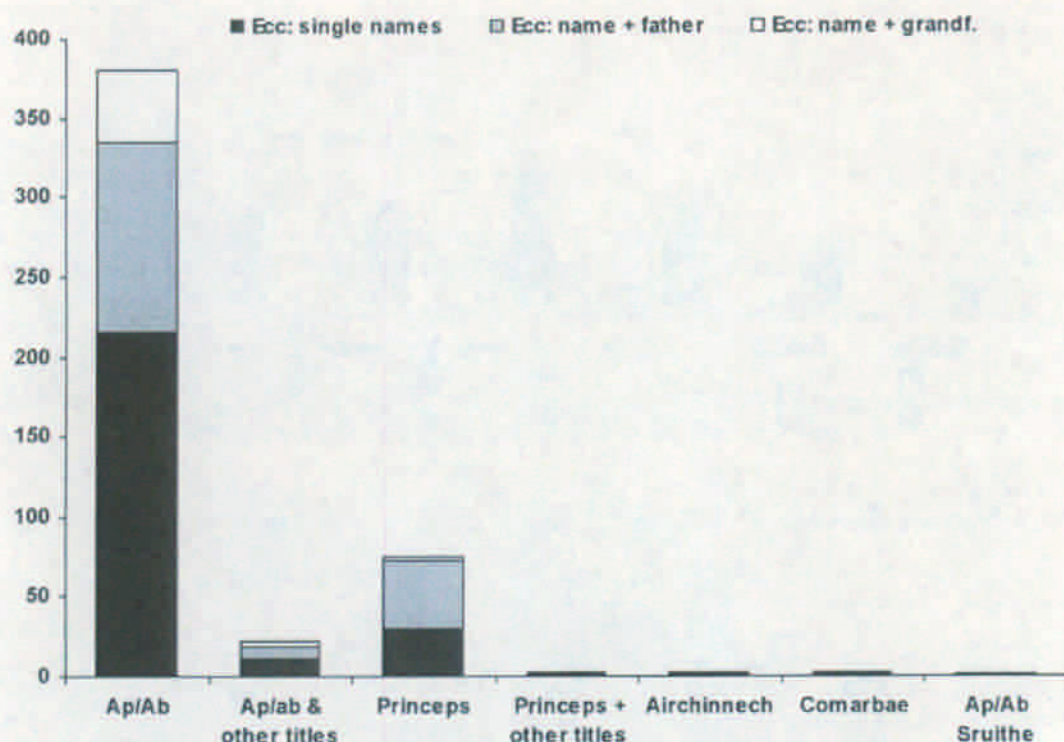


Fig. 4. The formulae used for naming leaders of ecclesiastical communities in the Annals of Ulster between the years AD 600 and 900. The exact translation of these titles is a matter for debate and since their precise significance is not of issue in this paper I do not translate them here. All should be viewed as simply varying ways of designating the leader of a religious community.

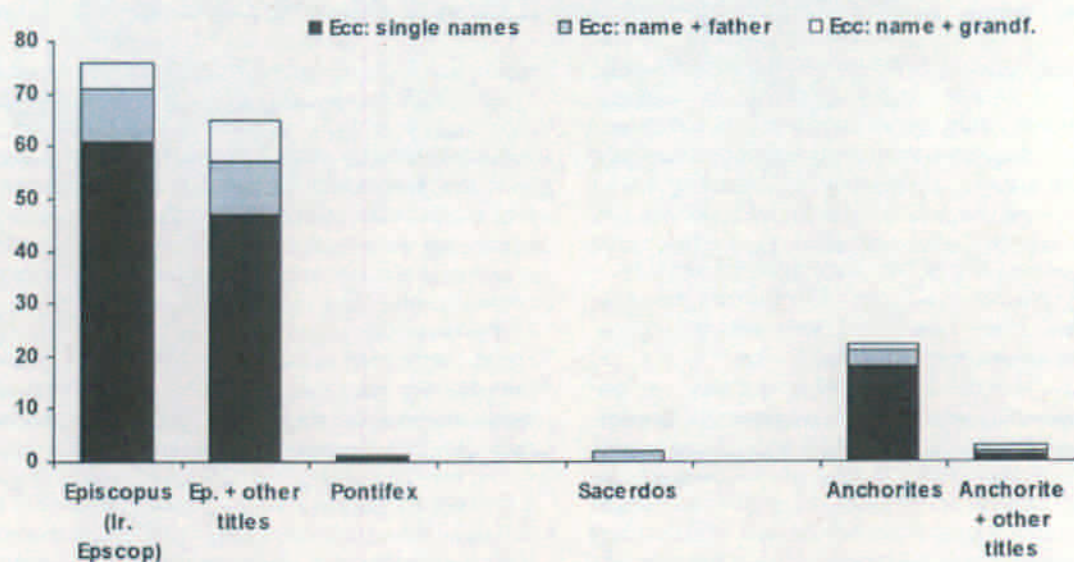


Fig. 5. The formulae used for naming members of the professional clerical grades (*gráda ecclasa*) and anchorites in the Annals of Ulster between the years AD 600 and 900

- Latin *episcopus* or Irish *epsco* = bishop
- Latin *pontifex* = bishop
- Latin *sacerdos* = priest



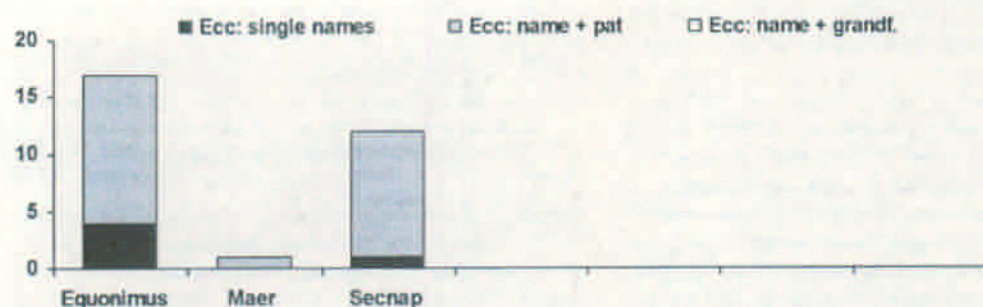


Fig. 6. The formulae used for naming members of the ecclesiastical grades of service personnel (*gráda uird ecalsa*) in the Annals of Ulster between the years AD 600 and 900

- Latin *equonimus* = steward
- Irish *maer* = steward
- Irish *secnap* = assistant leader and/or ? prior.

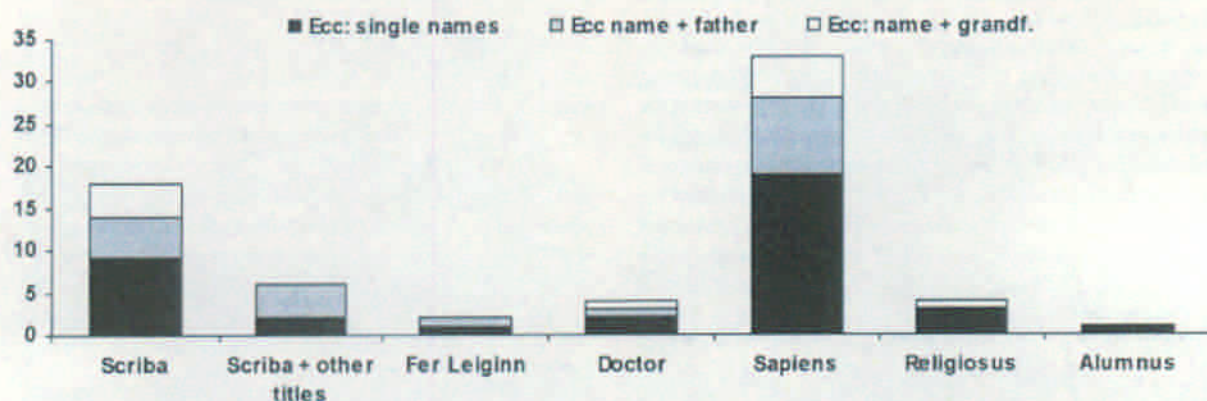


Fig. 7. The formulae used for naming members of the scholarly ecclesiastical classes (*gráda ecnai*) in the Annals of Ulster between the years AD 600 and 900.

- Latin *scriba* = scribe and/or lawman
- Irish *fer léiginn* = 'man of reading' = ? scholar of sacred scripture
- Latin *doctor* = expert in Christian teaching
- Latin *sapiens* = 'wise one'
- Latin *religiosus* = 'religious person'
- Latin *alumnus*

which refers to him as a *scribhuidh* (scribe) of Clonmacnoise. In the light of the pattern noted in the annalistic obits, it is surely particularly significant that, if we can accept the identifications, two of the extremely rare examples of grave-slabs bearing patronymics are associated with members of the *gráda ecnai* or scholarly grades.

In short, the vast majority of the slabs do not have patronymics. On the pattern of the naming formulae contemporaneously recorded in the *Annals of Ulster*, the most likely group to have been commemorated without listing patronymics are ecclesiastical personnel. Within this broad categorisation, the annal-

istic obits without patronymics are most commonly associated with membership of the *gráda ecalsa* or clerical grades, possibly including those with monastic or quasi-monastic grades such as the anchorites or the *ap/ab sruithe* (leader of seniors). This would agree with the very small number of inscriptions which indicate the role of the commemorand – where four of the ten commemorate members of the *gráda ecalsa* and a fifth commemorates an *ap*. However, it is also clear that all grades of ecclesiastical personnel in the annals can have obits without patronymics. Since at least two slab inscriptions may refer to members of the *gráda ecnai* (scholarly grades) the best explanation at



the moment seems to be that ecclesiastical personnel – of all categories – can be commemorated with grave-slabs. (Ecclesiastics of all grades – from slaves to bishops – are identified as a distinctive sector of society in contemporary documents – often being described as the tribe of Levi or Levites (Ó Corráin *et al.* 1984, 394–7).) It would appear that ecclesiastics, in general, tended to be almost exclusively commemorated without patronymics on grave-slabs – whatever style was adopted for their death-notice in the annals.

This examination of naming formulae in the annals has reinforced the conclusion made from the very limited evidence on the slabs – namely that there is little contemporary indication of the commemoration of secular dynasts on these monuments. This, in turn, strengthens the point that the later medieval poems on the burial of kings at Clonmacnois may be unduly influencing our interpretation of these artefacts. It also throws further suspicion on the practice of using annalistic obits of secular dynasts to date grave-slab styles – the methodology adopted by Petrie and Lionard and visible in Fanning, Ó hÉailidhe and Ó Floinn's linking of the *Ailill aue Dunchatho* stone to a later eighth-century king of Connacht. On the basis of the evidence outlined here, it would appear that the large numbers of grave-slabs found on sites such as Clonmacnois and Iona, as well as on the subordinate sites in their vicinity, should be seen as commemorating ecclesiastics almost exclusively. Such a conclusion has implications for the mixed secular and ecclesiastical settlements seen by many as being the norm for the larger Irish ecclesiastical settlements in the pre-Norman period (Swan 1983, 276–8; Swan 1985; Ó Corráin 1994, 31–2; Graham 1993, 23–36; Bradley 1998, 42–6).

*Scoil an Léinn Cheiltigh  
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Advanced Studies*

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