RÍOCHT NA MIDHE

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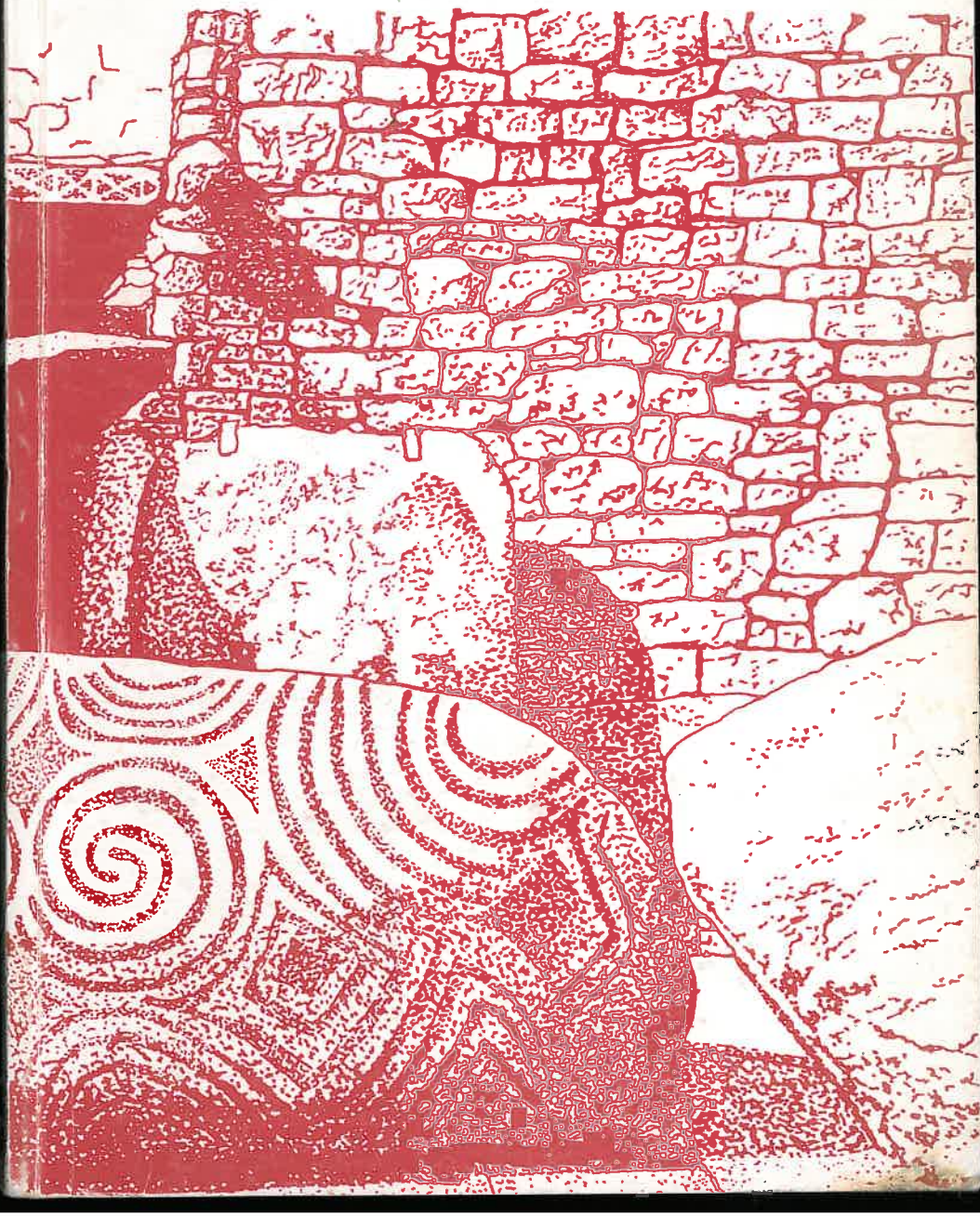

Ríocht na Midhe

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Review Article

Tara: A select bibliography

by Edel Bhreathnach
(Discovery Programme Reports 3, Dublin 1995)
Pp ix + 173. Hardback £9.95 IR

CATHY J. SWIFT

In this volume Edel Bhreathnach has compiled a bibliography of all references to Tara, both primary texts and secondary literature, with short notes describing the content of each text cited. This is prefaced by an introduction in which she summarises current and past interpretations of the role of Tara in Irish kingship, the association of certain saints with the site, and the archaeological, topographical and placename lore connected with the landscape in which the surviving monuments are found. Four indices, entitled "authors", "sources", "proper names", "place-names and tribal names" and "monuments at Tara", respectively, facilitate the enquirer who seeks to focus on specific aspects of Tara's past.

The result is a book which will do much to help clarify views, not only about Tara, but also about medieval Irish kingship and specifically Irish notions of "sacred place". As Breathnach points out (page 27), Tara is placed in a primary position in the twelfth-century *Dindshenchas*, being the subject of five poems and three prose accounts in this collection of Middle Irish legends which purport to explain the origin and background of certain important locations in Ireland. In the bibliography, the stories associated with specific monuments and sites within the Tara complex are outlined (pages 31-33 and index 4 for details) and the archaeological evidence for human activity on the site summarised (pages 131-139). Elsewhere (pages 4-7), she notes the association with Tara of the omni-competent god, Lug, and the sovereignty goddess, Medb, who is thought to have symbolised the land itself and whose offering of ale or of marriage (or both) legitimised new kings.

As Breathnach shows (pages 5-6, 110-113), interest in this mythic pairing between goddess and king is long-standing in Irish scholarship. Much of this secondary literature is based on two tales in particular, *Echtra mac nEchdach Mugmedóin* (details

in *Bibliography*, pages 97-98) and *Baile in Scáil* (pages 50-51). The former is an account of how Níall Noígíallach – Níall of the Nine Hostages – gained the kingship of Tara by lying with a hag who transforms herself into a beautiful woman and reveals herself as Sovereignty, promising eternal rule for both himself and his descendants. *Baile in Scáil* tells how Conn Cétchathach – Conn of the Hundred Battles – finds himself in the Otherworld where he meets Lug seated on a throne and accompanied by a beautiful girl who offers him ale from a golden cup. Lug then announces the list of future kings of Tara, all of whom are Conn's descendants and all of whom will be offered ale by his companion.

An article which has clearly influenced Breathnach in her own interpretation of these two texts is a recent discussion of the sovereignty goddess by Professor Máire Herbert of University College, Cork (Herbert 1992, *Bibliography*, 5, 15, 51). In this, Herbert stresses the fact that the last king in the *Baile in Scáil* sequence is Maél Sechnaill II, the late tenth- and early eleventh-century Uí Néill king who was forced to cede supremacy to the upstart Brian Boru. She sees this tale as an attempt by the Uí Néill propagandists to counteract the achievements of the Munster newcomer by appealing to long-established rights. The earlier version of *Echtra mac nEchdach Mugmedóin* was also produced under the aegis of Maél Sechnaill and Herbert suggests that the transformation of the hag symbolises the prosperity enjoyed in Ireland while under Uí Néill rule. For the first time, the eleventh-century context of both these texts has been stressed with obvious consequences for the discussion of the Irish sovereignty goddess and the role which she is envisaged as fulfilling in the early history of the kingship of Tara. At the same time, Herbert draws attention to a fascinating account of the foundation of Marseilles, said to date to the fourth century B.C., where a Gaulish princess, in the act of proffering a symbolic libation to her intended spouse, bestows the drink on a newly-arrived foreigner instead. This would suggest that some aspects of the Irish goddess may stem from an extremely early period.

Irish gods and goddesses tended to favour the high ground and the importance of Tara's hill-top location emerges on a number of occasions in the *Bibliography* (pages 6, 27, 34, 69, 111-114). A late Old Irish glossary derives the early name of Tara, Temair, from *grec rotruaillned and téomoro .i. conspicio* (a corrupt form of Greek meaning to observe), stressing the notion of a height from which there is a fine view (Meyer 1912, 105). Another text, of approximately the same date, tells how Érimón, ancestor

of all important dynasties from the northern half of Ireland, built a fort for his Theban wife on the loveliest hill in Ireland (O'Daly 1960). This was Tara, the name of which is said here to have originated as *Tebe-múr* or "wall of Thebes". Heinrich Wagner sees Temair as a hill-top goddess whose name originally meant the "Dark One" and whose original function was that of earth-mother with jurisdiction over life and death (1975, 1977, 1979, 1981).

In 1962, Máire MacNeill published a book entitled *The Festival of Lughnasa*, which provided a modern counter-point to these beliefs. The book is a compilation of accounts, drawn mainly from eighteenth-century and later sources, dealing with harvest assemblies in rural Ireland. Many of these assemblies took place in early August or late July and MacNeill interpreted the associated festivities as the remnant of what she identified as the Celtic festival of Lughnasa. A feature of many of these assemblies, and one which she discusses at length, was their hill-top location.

A Christian text written in Latin from the second half of the seventh century provides us with the earliest known information about an Irish cult of mountain-tops. This is Tírechán's *Collectanea*, a compilation of the foundation legends of various churches who claimed St Patrick as their patron. The text was apparently written by a Mayo bishop whose see lay on the west bank of the river Moy but who was operating under the aegis of the Uí Néill dynasty controlling Tara during this period, the Síl nÁedo Sláine of modern Meath (Swift 1994). As Breathnach illustrates (page 60), Tírechán describes how Loíguire mac Néill, king of Tara, was told by his father, Níall Noígíallach, that he was to buried in the *cacumina* of Tara, facing the family's hereditary enemies, the Laigin of Leinster. Elsewhere Tírechán states that Loíguire lived in a *domus regia* (royal house) in the *civitas* (city?) of Tara and that many thousands were subsequently converted to Christianity and baptised on the site.

Cacumina, the plural of *cacumen*, is a word which is found on seven occasions in the *Collectanea*. Its classical meaning is defined as "extremity, end, peak, top, summits, peaks of mountains" (Lewis and Short 1879, 258). On one occasion, Tírechán explicitly links it to the word *mons* or mountain (Bieler 1979, 152) and on another, to a site known in Irish as *Brí Garad*[1] or the hill of *Gar (*ibid.*, 146, 226). In four instances (*ibid.*, 132, 136, 146, 156), he associates the word with sites from which one has a wide view over the surrounding countryside. Where we can identify the location with some degree of certainty, he is referring to areas

marked by prominent hills: Tara itself, Granard, Co. Longford, Oran, Co. Roscommon and Croaghpatrick, Co. Mayo. Together with Loíguire's burial, one of the seven instances involves the burial somewhere in Mayo, of an unknown woman who was buried *in cacuminibus aeclessiae* or "in the *cacumina* of the church". That early Irish ecclesiastics saw *cacumen* as having connotations both of hill-tops and of burial is indicated by the medieval translation of the *Collectanea* into Irish. This rendered the word variously as *mullach* (hill), *fertae* and *fert* (two apparently different forms of burial monument) (Mulchrone 1939, 48, 66, 83).

The most detailed account of the location of a *cacumen* occurs in the story of St Patrick climbing Croaghpatrick (Bieler 1979, 152). Like Moses, Elias and Christ, Patrick is said to have spent forty days fasting and he did so by the *cacumina* of the mountain. Birds surrounded him so that he could not see sea, sky and land. Meanwhile God told all the holy men of Ireland, past, present and future, to gather at the top of the mountain so that Patrick could see the fruit of his labours and bless the people of Ireland.

Tírechán's account of this episode appears closely modelled on the story of Moses climbing Mount Sinai, the holy mountain of Israel in Exodus 19. The biblical tale speaks of the Lord conversing with Moses on the mountain top, surrounded by a dark cloud so that the people waiting below could see nothing. It was then that the Lord made his contract with the people of Israel to treasure them above all nations and to make them a nation of priests, just as the Lord recognised Patrick as father over the *corus sanctorum omnium hibernensium* – the choir of all the saints of Ireland. The detail that Patrick was surrounded by birds rather than cloud adds a further touch of verisimilitude for in medieval Ireland, birds were harbingers of the Otherworld (Ross 1967, 234-96). For Tírechán, therefore, Croaghpatrick appears to have been the holy mountain of the Irish and he describes it in terms redolent of sacred tradition, both Christian and non-Christian. This sacred site is also seen as an assembly area for large crowds of people who have gathered to hear pronouncements relevant to the community at large.

This depiction accords with that of other locations in the *Collectanea* which share with Croaghpatrick an emphasis on physical height, sacred tradition and assembly areas. In addition, these sites also show a frequent association with both burial and royal power. A Connachta dynasty, the Uí Ailello of southern Sligo and Roscommon, are associated with three areas known as *Mons nepotum Ailello* (the mountain of the Uí Ailello), *Dumecha*

nepotum Ailello (the bank or ridge of the Uí Ailello) and *Brí Garad* (the hill of *Gar). Baptisms occurred on the mountain, which had a marvellous stone altar, and churches were founded on the ridge and hill respectively (Bieler 1979, 138-40, 146). The halls of the sons of Bríon, eponymous ancestor of the Uí Briúin of north Galway and south Roscommon, were located at Selca, known to the medieval translators of the *Collectanea* as Dumae Selcae or the mound of Selca (Mulchrone 1939, 66). There, according to Tírechán (Bieler 1979, 146-148), Patrick assembled with a crowd of attendant bishops; he baptised the sons of Bríon and wrote names on stones – a possible allusion to the existence of memorial pillars marking burials. An example of such a pillar is the early seventh-century monument from Inchagoill, Co. Galway, inscribed: *Lie Luguaedon macci Menueh* or "the stone of *L. son of *M." (Macalister 1945, 1-3).

At the great centre of the Connachta known commonly today as Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon, Patrick and his bishops came to a well *in lateribus Crochan* (on the slopes of Cruachu). They were met by the two daughters of Loíguire, king of Tara, who asked if they were men from the Otherworld. Upon being reassured, the girls were baptised, but they died immediately afterwards and a *fertae* was built over their grave – because that was the custom of Ireland prior to the introduction of Christianity, according to Tírechán (Bieler 1979, 142-4). As noted above, Loíguire himself was said to reside at Tara, which was the scene of many thousands of baptisms and which had, in addition to his own burial in the *cacumina*, a stone which acted as a memorial to one of his druids (*ibid.*, 130-132). For this late seventh-century author, therefore, the features which marked out Tara were in no sense unique to that site but, instead, were part of the normal accoutrements of royal settlement throughout the northern half of Ireland.

This analysis of Tírechán's text provides a parallel for the conclusions of archaeologists such as Bernard Wailes and Richard Warner who, as Breathnach indicates (pages 29-30, 156) have sought to identify the distinguishing characteristics of "royal sites" in Ireland. In archaeological terminology the classic examples of this class are Emain Machae or Navan Fort, Co. Armagh, Dún Áilinne or Knockaulin, Co. Kildare, Cruachu or Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon and Tara itself. Their royal associations derive from their postulated historical role as centres for the provincial over-kingdoms of Ulster, Leinster, Connacht and the Uí Néill kings, respectively, although Warner includes

the site of Clogher, Co. Tyrone and Conor Newman has suggested that the multi-period but undocumented site of Raffin, Co. Meath, should also be considered as a member of this class (Warner 1988, Newman 1993, *Bibliography*, pages 155-6). The archaeological criteria include evidence of both ritual and residential activity, a probable pre-Christian origin and high-status artefacts. Using the *Collectanea*, one can now add evidence of burial, physical height and locations suitable for assembly to this list. Certainly, the widespread association with burial is corroborated both by the placenames from Tara itself and by the archaeological evidence for multiple barrows or tumuli associated with the site (Breathnach 1992, Newman 1992).

Other medieval texts corroborate the use of these "royal" sites as assembly areas. The saga text, *Fled Bricrend*, for example, identifies Cruachu as an area where horse-racing took place at an *óenach* or community gathering (Best and Bergin 1929, 268). The earliest version of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* opens with a description of troops congregating at Cruachu before setting off on their raid on Ulster. An eleventh-century entry in the *Annals of the Four Masters* (A.D. 1061) describes how Áed Ua Conchobhair killed Ruaidhri Ua Flaithbheartaigh and brought his head in triumph to Cruachu. Military activity such as this may help to explain a fact recently noted by Nicholas Aitcheson: that invading armies often occupied these "royal" sites for short periods as a demonstration of their victory (Aitcheson 1994, 103-4). At the same time, areas such as Cruachu could also be the backdrop against which laws affecting the community could be passed: *Cáin Patricii* (Law of Patrick) was promulgated at Cruachu by the over-king of the Connachta in 783 and the *Lex Quiarani* (Law of Ciarán) in 814. The Otherworldly associations of the site are manifest in the saga literature where mysterious women come as healers from *Síd Cruachan* (Otherworld mound of Cruachu) to cure the warrior Froích, a hanged man spoke, harbingers of doom emerged to warn of impending disaster and dangerous beasts in the shape of cats lurked in the vicinity (Meid 1974, 3; Meyer 1889, 216; Stokes and Windisch 1884, 245-7; O'Rahilly 1976, 2; Best and Bergin 1929, 265).

The best documented of these "royal" sites is, of course, Tara itself and not the least of the benefits of the *Bibliography* is the way in which it focusses attention on some of the less well-known aspects of Tara's medieval history. In her summary of annalistic material Breathnach highlights the holding of a synod there in 780, the cursing of the king of Tara by the community of Columba

in 817 and the military encounters which took place in 840, 980, and 1104 (*Bibliography* 1995, 48). A Middle Irish version of the tale *Cath Maige Tuired* identifies Tara as *Cnoc Gabála na nGiall* (the hill of the taking of hostages) and as *Tulach techtairechta na tromslúaigh* (the hill of the summoning of the great hosts) (*Bibliography*, page 83). An untranslated eleventh-century text states that all important kings of Tara had a *tech midchúarta* or banqueting hall on the site (*Bibliography*, page 57) but the late eighth- or early ninth-century *Félire Óengusso* states that Tara, Cruachu, Dún Áilinne and Emain were all deserted by that date (Stokes 1905, 24-5, *Bibliography*, page 67). In a more generalised account of kingship, the seventh-century *Audacht Mórainn* implies that the three essential components of an *óenach* were horse-racing, encampment and the ale-house (Kelly 1976, 8-10). These are attributes which, as Breathnach points out, would not necessarily leave visible traces today (*Bibliography*, page 78).

The descriptions in the medieval sources suggest that we should be wary of limiting the medieval function of these sites. Their predominant role appears to have been as assembly areas where the community could enact legislation, hold communal games and gather together military hosts. They may have been the sites of royal residences and they certainly provided foci for burial. Legends abounded about the monuments visible on the sites and many were seen as the location for encounters with the Otherworld, either Christian or pagan. Despite the conversion to Christianity, these sites would seem to be as much sacred as they were royal to the early Irish, while the ritual that was practised there included a mixture of Christian and non-Christian elements. The concatenation of practical social institutions and fantastical tradition about the site's prehistory which emerges from the *Bibliography*'s summary of early sources on Tara is certainly equally valid for Cruachu and it seems probable that only lack of sources prevents us from writing similar accounts for "royal sites" all over the country.

Re-evaluating the sacred nature of the "royal sites" in medieval Irish tradition leads one to the consideration of the role of *rí Temro* or the king of Tara. Breathnach's discussion of the sacred role attributed to this king (pages 1-9) is particularly useful in clarifying the historiographical development. She identifies one of the earliest known exponents of a priest-kingship at Tara as Josef Baudiš in 1916. His conclusions were based on the account of the taboos and ordeals facing the mythological king, Conaire Mór mac Éterscelae, in ninth-century saga, and on the inaugur-

ation ritual described in the Old Irish text *De Shíl Chonairi Móir*. In this, the king of Tara is defined as the man who could control a chariot drawn by two horses never before harnessed and who was big enough to fill the king's mantle kept in the chariot. The text then continues:

> There were two flag-stones in Tara: 'Blocc' and 'Bluigne'; when they accepted a man they would open before him until the chariot went through. And Fál was there, the 'stone penis' at the head of the chariot course(?); when a man should have the kingship of Tara, it screeched against his chariot-axle so that all might hear. But the two stones 'Blocc' and 'Bluigne' would not open before one who should not hold the sovereignty of Tara and their usual position was such, that one's hand could only pass sideways between them; also he who was not to hold Tara's kingship, the Fál would not screech against his axle (Gwynn 1912, 139; *Bibliography*, page 2).

Baudiš's conclusions were accepted by Professor Daniel Binchy who argued that the Tara monarchy had a special significance, "doubtless religious in origin'. Professor Francis John Byrne included both the taboos and the *De Shíl Chonairi Móir* account in his wide-ranging analysis of the ritual aspects of the monarchy and concluded that while all kings were sacred, the kings of Tara were "cultic and priestly in a special sense" (Binchy 1970, 11; Byrne 1973, 57; *Bibliography*, page 1). Other narrative material dealing with sacred kingship in general has been brought to the fore by Professor Kim McCone (1990, 107-137). I have argued elsewhere that the account in *De Shíl Chonairi Móir* has resonances in Tírechán's description of Cruachu and appears to relate in some sense to the Irish ideology of inauguration and, in particular, to the ceremony known as the *ban-feis* or woman-feast, when the king was said to marry the land, depicted as a virgin awaiting her spouse (Swift 1993, 34-5).

Other aspects of inauguration were also seen as sacred. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh in his discussion of the semantics of *síd* has suggested that the two meanings 'Otherworld hill or mound' and 'peace' are etymologically related. He argues that prehistoric tumuli were often seen as gateways to the Otherworld and used as locations for inauguration. Legitimate kingship was seen as having its source in the Otherworld and the reign of a righteous king would be marked by peace and plenty on earth (Ó Cathasaigh 1977/9, *Bibliography*, page 3, 112; see now Swift, 1996, for the

argument that prehistoric tumuli were also used as locations for legal ceremonies under the auspices of a king). This concept of *fir flathemon*, or the justice of a ruler which brings prosperity, is widely promulgated, most notably in the seventh-century text, *Audacht Morainn*, which identifies the qualities of a successful king (Kelly 1976, *Bibliography*, page 3, 78).

Just as the sacred nature of the "royal sites" is indicated in the texts by a mixture of Christian and non-Christian attributes, so too the sacred character of early Irish kings is illustrated by authors who drew on both traditions to create a composite ideology. The titles given to Irish kings in early medieval texts include such phrases as *rex regum* or king of kings, used by Tírechán (Bieler 1979, 138, 142) and *rí ro dealbh Domhan* or king who has created the world, in *Udacht Athairne* (Ó Corráin et al. 1984, 421) which are drawn from Christian sources. As Wendy Davies has stressed, this type of terminological overlap is typical of much Christian thought in the medieval period (Davies 1982) and was fostered by the explicitly regal language often used in the Vulgate. So, for example, the Book of Daniel 7: 27 foretells the coming of the Messiah as a supreme king who will rule an everlasting kingdom where all kings will obey and worship him. This is quoted verbatim in Muirchú's seventh-century account of the coming of Patrick, where Loíguire is warned by his druids that his kingship is going to be undermined by the new religion (Bieler 1979, 86).

The overlap is best illustrated by the use of two terms stemming from Irish rather than Christian tradition which are yet used as titles for both kings and God. These are *ruiri* and *ard-rí*, superior king and high-king respectively. In praise-poems written in honour of Columcille by a seventh-century author, Bécán mac Luigdech, God is described as "a *ruiri* who rules over thousands" and elsewhere: "It is the blessing of the *Ruiri* which will be upon me" (Kelly 1975, 82, 1973, 21). In an extract from *Bretha Nemed*, a kenning for Saint Paul is given as *caomtectaid Rurech* – companion of the *Ruiri* (Breatnach 1984, 449). In a speech written in the riddling verse style known as *rosc*, the poet Dubthach moccu Lugair is credited in the Old Irish *Prologue to the Senchas Már* with describing God as *Ard-Rí* (McCone 1986, 7). Likewise, in the *rosc* passage in *Aided Chonchobuir* Conchobar mac Nessa expresses his sorrow that he never met Christ, the *Ard-Rí* (Corthals 1989, 47).

In 1973, Professor Byrne asserted that the term *ard-rí* was not very old, and was not found in legal texts, and he was fol-

lowed in this by Binchy (Byrne 1973, 42; Binchy 1976, 18-19; *Bibliography*, page 12). In 1986, however, Professor Liam Breatnach noted that the term, in an early form *airdrí*, did in fact occur in a seventh-century law-tract *Cáin Fhuithirbe*, where it appears to refer to Loíguire mac Néill, king of Tara (Breatnach 1986a, 192-3; 1986b, 49). Elsewhere, however, as Byrne points out, the term is used of a wide variety of kings, both provincial and non-provincial, and appears to carry no more specialised meaning than simply "over-king". According to Binchy, it is only in Geoffrey Keating's seventeenth-century *Forus Feasa ar Éirinn* and later sources that the word is consistently used to refer to heads of the Uí Néill confederation (1976, 19). In the original hand of the *Annals of Ulster*, *ardrí* as a title for pre-Norman Uí Néill over-kings is used in only four death-notices: of Domnall ua Néill (died in 980), Máel Sechnaill m. Domnaill (died 1022), Domnall Ua Lochlainn (died 1121) and Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn (died 1166). As Byrne notes (1973, 256), it is also used of the Munster king, Brian Boru. It may be significant that three of these five were members of northern Uí Néill dynasties; it is possible that this rare use of the title represents interpolation by Cathal mac Maghnusa, the fifteenth-century Ulster redactor of the surviving compilation (Gwynn 1957/9).

Up until this point, I have been discussing the sacred nature of the role of *rí Temro* or king of Tara; the thorny problem of his more mundane role in the secular world still remains. The historiography of what is known to modern scholars as the "high-kingship of Ireland" and the extent to which that high-king was king of Tara and/or wielded real power is discussed at some length by Breathnach (*Bibliography* pages 10-20, 118-124). She believes that the idea of a high-kingship was fostered from an early period by propagandists who promoted the cause of the Uí Néill and that the rise of Armagh also contributed to Uí Néill claims. The annalistic records do not bear out their claims to have authority over all Ireland from the seventh century, for their position was threatened on occasion by kings of Munster and their propagandists. Tara was a potent symbol whose sacred past was regenerated at times to boost the claims of ambitious and weak kings alike (*Bibliography*, page 118).

As Breathnach herself indicates, this view is based upon the work of Byrne (*Bibliography*, pages 11-12). It was Byrne who, in 1962-3, pointed out the connections between the claims of Armagh and the concomitant establishment of a high-kingship over all Ireland (Byrne 1962/3, 264, *Bibliography*, page 120). (Binchy

made a similar suggestion in his 1962 article on Patrick's biographers, but without giving any reasons for his view (1962, 61, 68, 170, *Bibliography*, page 63). In his monograph, *Irish kings and high-kings* (1973), Byrne further developed his ideas and the importance of the Columban connection as well as that of Armagh was stressed (1973, 97, 257-260). In his seventh-century life of Columba of Iona, Adomnán refers to a sixth-century Uí Néill dynast, Diarmait mac Cerbaill, as *regnator totius Scotiae* (ruler of all Ireland) and Byrne links this to death-notices of Cenél Conaill kings, who are given the title of *rex Hiberniae* in annals which appear to have been written on Iona. He points to four texts stemming from the last quarter of the seventh century (including Adomnán's life), all of which advocate an Uí Néill monarchy over Ireland, but argues that this must have been ambition rather than reality, since none of the provincial powers – the Ulaid of eastern Ulster, the Laigin of Leinster or the Éoganachta of Munster – were under Uí Néill jurisdiction at the time (*ibid.*, 254-5). (Since an Uí Néill king was killed by the Connachta in 704, they could also be included in this list.) He suggests that the original kingship of Tara as a priestly or cultic institution may have been a national one, for it was open to people other than the Uí Néill, and may ultimately have derived from the flourishing Boyne culture of the Neolithic (*ibid.*, 57-63). He agrees with Binchy that the rise of the Uí Néill transformed that original sacral kingship into a new type of over-lordship, based on dynastic principles (*ibid.*, 86-94; Binchy 1970, 37).

Byrne further suggests that the most reliable of the early annals, the conservative *Annals of Ulster* whose redactor alone refrained from modernising the language of his source, were reluctant to admit candidates for the high-kingship. The norm was to refer to supposed high-kings only by their name and patronymic or with the addition of the title *rí Uí Néill* (king of the Uí Néill) or *rí Temro* (king of Tara). It was only the later annalists, influenced by the doctrine of the Middle Irish schools (of ninth to twelfth-century date) who glossed these death-notices with the title *rí Érenn* "king of Ireland" (*ibid.*, 256). This accords with Byrne's view that it was only in the ninth century that attempts were made to realise the long-held theoretical position of the Uí Néill as monarchs of all Ireland (*ibid.*, 53, 257-261).

As Byrne indicated in 1973, the evidence of the annals provides our only real hope of disentangling any potential distinction between the titles *rí Temro* and *rí Érenn*, between sacral and non-sacral kingship. It has to be said that this evidence is

extremely confused, not least because a single source is thought to lie behind the coverage of the five major compilations which survive today. This source was identified by Kathleen Hughes through an exact comparison of the present compilations and she called it the *Chronicle of Ireland*. The part that was copied runs from the fifth century to the early tenth (Hughes 1972, 100-115). In addition to the core text, each compilation has undergone a prolonged process of revision in which entries were added, subtracted and apparently re-written at various periods. In the words of Gearóid Mac Niocaill, "annals grow... by a process of interpolation and intercalation, the physical traces of which disappear when the text is re-transcribed" (1975, 14). Thus, attempting to identify chronological patterns in the use of titles used in the annals becomes almost an impossibility. One possible approach is to identify titles which appear to have been used in the *Chronicle of Ireland* since there is at least some reason to believe that these stem from a period prior to 911 – 913 when the *Chronicle* entries disappear from the present compilations (Hughes 1972, 107, 115; Grabowski and Dumville, 1984, 54-56).

The first thing to emerge in attempting such a task is that the *Annals of the Four Masters* is largely useless in this particular instance for, as has been already indicated by Byrne (*ibid.*, 256), its references to kings of Ireland were too extensively edited by the seventeenth-century compilers to provide us with any information today. Uí Néill kings are only rarely given titles in the Munster compilation, the *Annals of Inisfallen*, until the mid eighth century but from that point on, their record appears complete. The *Annals of Tigernach* are missing the relevant entries from A.D. 766, while *Chronicon Scottorum* has no record of the years 718 to 804. Even the investigation of the titles in the postulated ancestor-text, the *Chronicle of Ireland*, is fraught with difficulties.

The first king to be given a title common to two or more texts is the Cenél Conaill king of Tara, Báetán mac Ninnedo. His death-notice in the *Annals of Ulster* in A.D. 586 refers to him as *rex Temro* (king of Tara) – corresponding entries in *Annals of Tigernach* and *Chronicon Scottorum* use the Middle Irish equivalent, *rí Temrach*. (The redactors of these last two compilations modernised the language of their source so that the distinction between Old and Middle Irish forms has no chronological signficance.) Áed Allán mac Domnaill, the Cenél nÉogain king of Tara who died in A.D. 612, is also entitled *rex Temro* in the *Annals of Ulster* and *rí Temrach* in the *Annals of*

Tigernach and *Chronicon Scottorum*. A misplaced obit, *sub anno* 613 in the *Annals of Inisfallen*, which refers to him as *rex Hiberniae* can probably be disregarded as not deriving from the original *Chronicle of Ireland*. Domnall mac Áedo of the Cenél Conaill (died 642) is uniformly *rex Hiberniae* where he is given a title (it is omitted in *Inisfallen*). Sechnussach mac Blathmaic of the Síl nÁedo Sláine (died 671) is *rex Temoirie / Temoria* (using Latin forms of Tara) in *Annals of Ulster*, *Annals of Tigernach* and *Chronicon Scottorum*. Fínsnechta Fledach, also of the Síl nÁedo Sláine (died 695), is *rex Temhro* in *Annals of Ulster*, *rí Érenn* in *Annals of Tigernach* and *Chronicon Scottorum* and a mistaken *rí Laigen* in *Annals of Inisfallen*. Loingsech mac Óengusso of the Cenél Conaill (died 704) is *rex Hiberniae* in *Annals of Ulster* and its Irish equivalent, *rí Érenn*, in *Annals of Tigernach* and *Chronicon Scottorum*. Congal Cennmagair of the Cenél Conaill (dié́d 710) is *rex Temoriae* in *Annals of Ulster*, *rí Temrach* in *Annals of Tigernach* and *Chronicon Scottorum* and *rí Hua Néill* in *Annals of Inisfallen*.

From this point on, problems arise because of gaps in the compilations. The pattern of obits examined to date shows that the original *Chronicle of Ireland* itself was sparing of any title, be it king of Tara or king of Ireland. Four men are entitled king of Tara prior to A.D. 710 and they comprise two kings of the Cenél Conaill (from modern Donegal), one member of the Cenél nÉogain (from Inishowen and Tyrone) and one of the Síl nÁedo Sláine of modern Meath. In addition to the lack of geographical uniformity, no obvious chronological pattern can be detected. In contrast, two kings only are entitled king of Ireland and both of these are Cenél Conaill kings. Byrne's belief that the early use of this title was to be linked to medieval intelligentsia working in the Iona/ Cenél Conaill orbit is further substantiated by an examination of the *Chronicle of Ireland*.

More detailed investigation and possible explanations for the pattern of titles used in the annals must be left to another occasion. I hope I have shown, however, what useful information the *Bibliography* can provide for researchers. If Tara is seen not as a unique site but as the best-documented example of medieval Irish assembly areas, this in no way minimises its importance. These assembly areas could be used for horse-racing, communal games, enactment of legislation and military activity. They were associated with burial, and legends about their past, couched in both Christian and non-Christian vocabulary, were legion. Kings may have lived in proximity to these sites and it appears that

kingship itself had some of the sacral quality attached to the communal assembly area. In our texts, this too is attested in both Christian and non-Christian terms. The exact distinction, if any, between the cultic and political roles of medieval Irish kings and the way in which these might have changed over time have only barely begun to be investigated; the potential for future study is clear.

There are a small number of relatively minor quibbles which can be made about the *Bibliography*. The bibliographic abbreviations in the body of the introduction are expanded at the end of the introduction but this is not sign-posted in the table of contents. The unwary can thus be led to seek clarification in the indexes, often unsuccessfully. The comments on some works seem disappointingly short; four lines on the only monograph on Irish kingship is not really compensated for by the statement that "chapters 1-6 are of vital importance" (*Bibliography*, page 118). An index for common nouns would be a useful addition so that phrases such as "the oft-quoted argument" about the presence of *tumuli* on inauguration sites (*Bibliography*, page 112) could be investigated without reading the entire volume. A decision that "the most commonly used titles of texts" (*Bibliography*, page 44) is to be the standard has resulted in an inconsistent application of normalised and non-normalised Irish forms. The abbreviated titles used by Best in the indexes to his bibliographies (1913, 1942) is of great assistance to the reader searching for a specific article; the use of entry numbers alone means that each number must be looked up before one reaches one's goal. On the whole, however, these are details of organisation and presentation and merely represent counsels of perfection.

As Breathnach herself points out, a bibliography of Tara could easily become a bibliography of all sources for medieval Ireland, such is the importance of Tara in the history of this country (*Bibliography*, page 45). By compiling an index, not only of the primary sources which relate to Tara but also of the majority of the conclusions arrived at to date, Breathnach and the directors in the *Discovery Programme* have done major service to the field. *Tara: A Select Bibliography* will be one of the basic tools for researchers working on Tara, Irish kingship, and the notion of the 'sacred place' in Ireland, into the next millennium.

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1. The spelling of this placename is corrupt in the only surviving manuscript copy of Tírechán's text which reads *aeclessia Brer Garad*. The syntax of this phrase appears to be following the Old Irish grammatical rule that where two nouns come together, the second qualifies the first in the genitive. If this is the case, the most likely emendation is to correct *Brer* to *Breg*, the genitive form of *Brí*.

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