Early Irish Monasteries and their Dynastic Connections[1]

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With the introduction of Christianity, kings were quick to use their patronage of the Church to influence political relationships within their kingdoms and those of their neighbors. In a similar fashion, Church leaders from dynastic kindreds were quick to use their family connections to promote their monastery's goals. Although the number of kings found in Ireland during the Medieval period has been a source of differing opinions (Byrne 2001, 7; Ó Corráin 1978, 10-11), it is clear that at any one time there were several competing dynasties. Each of these royal dynasties could in turn split off into several branches (Charles-Edwards 2000, 14). With so many kings ruling throughout the land, it would only make sense for each to look for something to strengthen their position. Thomas Charles-Edwards in his *Early Christian Ireland* observes that even though it might have been impossible for some dynasties to maintain their royal standing, there were still other ways for them to maintain a high status. One such way was to control a monastery. Through the dynasty's control of a monastery and its connection to that monastery's saint, the dynasty could gain a potent focus for displaying its power, as well as providing a focal centre for its people (Charles-Edwards 2000, 14). The purpose of this article is to explore both primary and secondary literature concerning the history of Ireland to discover the strategies employed by both dynasties and ecclesiastical elites to promote their own objectives. As an exploratory piece this work covers individuals, events and relationships which stretch from the 5th to possibly as late as the 12th century. By focusing on the ways in which a dynasty could control a monastery and different ways in which a dynasty and monastery could find mutually beneficial ties, this article will contribute to the wider academic community by focusing on specific avenues for future exploration and suggest existing opportunities for using this information as part of a larger look at similar patterns employed by the neighbours of the Irish within the British Isles.

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1. Gifts of land for monasteries (5th to the 7th century)

Examples of ruling dynasties working with early missionaries can be found throughout Ireland. In Leinster during the 5th century the Dál Messin Corb, Uí Bairrche and Dál Chormaic dynasties all played the role of patrons to early Christian missionaries (Smyth 1982, 20). *AU*, under the year 574, records Conall mac Comgaill's grant of land to St Columba for establishing Iona (*AU*, 574.2). This gift may have been an effort by Conall to maintain control over Cenél Loairn lands (Foster 1996, 81). Conall's grant shows the underlying assumption that an over-king could distribute land belonging to a client-king (Charles-Edwards 2000, 298). By distributing the land of his client-king to the Church, Conall had removed the possibility of that land providing an outlet of wealth and power to a rival kindred (Charles-Edwards 2000, 293). In showing the layering of over-king and client-king, Charles-Edwards observes that Columba's journey to found a new monastery outside Ireland could have been timed to coincide with the strong political backing his Uí Néill cousins could give him, because it was 'unlikely [that Conall would] wish to offend them' (2000, 296). Another example of an over-king granting the land of his client-king for the foundation of a monastery can be found in the case of Durrow. Áed mac Ainmerech's [d. 598] dedication of Durrow to his kinsman St Columba effectively limited the power of the Cenél Fíachach (Charles-Edwards 2000, 555; Herbert 1996, 32-33). Other examples of land grants can be found throughout the annals and saints' lives and will be discussed further on in this article.

The close ecclesiastical and political connections and similarities between Ireland and Northumbria have long been recognized by modern scholars. For the purposes of this article, similarities between the interactions of Irish dynasties and monasteries will be compared with those of their Northumbrian neighbours. This is done in an effort to highlight the similarities and interaction between the two groups. In doing so the goal is to suggest future avenues for research and discussion, as well as draw to attention those actions which were not unique to the Irish.

Not far away from Iona, Northumbrian kings are well documented in their grants of land to the Church (Alcock 2003, 48). In the 7th century, Oswald granted the island of Lindisfarne to found the Irishman Aidan's episcopal see (Bede, III.3). In return for his success in battle over the Mercian king Penda, on 15 November 655, Oswy 'dedicated his daughter to the Lord as a holy virgin ... and twelve small estates to build monasteries' (Bede, III.24). The *Life of Ceolfrid* records Ecgfrith's gift of land to Benedict Biscop, the abbot of Monkwearmouth (*Life of Ceolfrid*, 7). Another example of land grants in Northumbria comes from Alchfrith, sub-king of Deira, who gave Wilfrid 'a monastery of forty hides in the place called Ripon' (Bede, III.25). When mentioning the latter two figures from Northumbria, both Wilfrid [*c*.634–710] and Benedict Biscop [*c*.628–689] came from noble families

(Bede, V.19). These men like Columba and Adomnán, used the power they held as noblemen, to advance the cause of their monasteries and families. This aspect of monastic leaders using their power as nobles and members of royal kindreds will be discussed below.

2. Dynastic connections to saints

There are many examples of dynasties placing importance on connecting themselves to saints. Both the Uí Máil and Uí Dúnlainge dynasty asserted a close connection with St Cóemgein of Glendalough (Mac Shamhráin 1996, xx); the dynasty of Dál Chormaic supplied both Sinchells to Killeigh and Colum to Terryglass; and St Brigit came from a branch of the Fothairt dynasty; the dynasty of Uí Bairrche laid claim to Ailella, St Columba's mother Eithne and Fiach of Sleaty (*CGH*, 120.a.6, 120.a.4, 128.b.7 and 121.bc.49). What these connections highlight is the extent to which the ecclesiastical elite were members of royal kindreds. Many of these associations were real, but some were contrived. Several examples of false associations can be found in the sources. One is the efforts by hagiographers to attribute the Uí Dúnlainge and the Uí Cheinnselaig with St Patrick (Smyth 1982, 19-20). Another can be found in the 9th-century *Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* where it claims that the seventh-century individuals Cóemgein of Glendalough, Mo-Chóeme (Kennoch) of Terryglass and Cóemán of Anatrim were brothers (Smyth 1982, 91; *MO*, 240).

3. Dynastic control of abbatial succession

One way for a dynasty to maintain control of a monastery and its *paruchia* was by restricting the abbatial succession to dynasty members. By upholding its control the dynasty could have access to revenues and resources outside of its immediate area (Mac Shamhráin 1996, xx), as well as limit those of its neighbours. Large ecclesiastical settlements like Kildare, Glendalough and Iona offered an expanded sphere of influence for those dynasties that asserted power over them. Although there are many examples of dynasties controlling abbatial succession, hagiographers gave differing views of the appropriateness of doing so. In his *Life of Wilfrid*, written in the first quarter of the 8th century, Stephan wrote that before his death Wilfred proclaimed his kinsman Tatberht as abbot of Ripon (Eddius Stephanus, LXIII), but in the *Anonymous History of Abbot Ceolfrith*, of the same century, Benedict Biscop instructs the monks of his monasteries, in keeping with the Rule of St Benedict and Pope Agatho, that the next abbot should not 'be chosen by hereditary

succession' (*The Anonymous History of Abbot Ceolfrith*, II.16). One of the most famous examples of dynastic abbatial succession would obviously be that of Iona. St Columba [c. 521-597] was a member of the Cenél Conaill, one branch of the Uí Néill (Charles-Edwards 2000, 282-283). All but two of Iona's abbots would come from the Uí Néill, with most coming from the Cenél Conaill branch. Although the monastery of Bangor lay outside the kingdoms directly controlled by the Dál nAraide (Charles-Edwards 2000, 99), genealogical tradition holds that St Comgall of Bangor and the abbots who immediately followed him were members of the Dál nAraide (Byrne 2001, 119; Mac Shamhráin 1996, 122). Charles-Edwards notes that it is because of Dál nAraide's ability in 700 to assert its influence outside 'any one túath' that it 'enjoyed a high status upheld by churchmen as well as by kings' (2000, 99). Even Dál nAraide's high status did not help it to maintain control over Bangor. Following the battle of Mag Roth in 637, Dál nAraide control over Bangor was replaced by that of the Dál Fiatach (Mac Shamhráin 1996, 122). Evidence of abbots with Dál Fiatach names shows that the abbatial succession of Bangor had been taken away from the Dál nAraide (Byrne 2001, 119).

Other examples of dynasties controlling abbatial succession can still be found. The Uí Ségáin, associated with the Airthir, dominated the abbacy of Dunleer in County Louth (Byrne 2001, 118). At some point during the second quarter of the 7th century the Uí Dúnlainge began to oust the Uí Failge and the Fothairt from controlling the monastery of Kildare. This is highlighted by several annal entries in *AU*. Beginning c. 635, a member of the Uí Dúnlainge, Fáelan mac Cholmáin, ruled as king of Leinster (Smyth 1982, 28 & 66). An annal entry for 639 in *AU* records Fáelan's brother Áed Dub as being both a bishop of Kildare and a previous king of Leinster at his death (*AU*, 639). Family connections to Kildare continue on in following generations where genealogies show that Fáelan and Áed Dub's nephew Óengus also held the office of bishop and a distant cousin was abbot (*CGH*, 339; Byrne 2001, 152; Smyth 1982, 66). The takeover of higher offices was not the only activity that occurred for the Uí Dúnlainge during Fáelan mac Cholmáin's reign. Smyth suggests that Fáelan's marriage to Sárnát of the Mag Fea suited his efforts to gain control over the nunnery at Kildare (1982, 82).

The monastery of Glendalough is a clear and well documented opportunity to study the overlapping dynastic interests which a successful community could attract. Glendalough's abbatial succession was effectively restricted, in different periods, to the dynasties of the Uí Máil, Uí Dúnlainge, Uí Enechglaiss and Uí Bairrche (Mac Shamhráin 1996, xx). Glendalough's founder, St Cóemgein, belonged to the Uí Garrchon (Byrne 2001, 152), while the monastery was located in the territory of the Uí Máil, who closely portrayed themselves as having connections to St Cóemgein. The Uí Máil genealogies trace the dynasty's rights to this connection back to the ancestral figure Dimma son of Fiagni and his role in assisting the moving of the monastery into a lower valley in the 8th century (Mac Shamhráin 1996, 128). By the end of the 8th century Uí Máil interests were recorded in St

Cóemgein's Latin and Irish Lives, promoting Uí Máil rights to abbatial succession (Mac Shamhráin 1996, 127). In his *Church and Polity in Pre-Norman Ireland*, Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin notes that by the 9th century, the dynasty perceived their connection to St Cóemgein to such an extent that the name Máel Cóemgin began to appear 'among the descendants of Crimthann Cualann' (*CGH*, 125.a.43; Mac Shamhráin 1996, 128).

With all this being said, by the mid-7th century, the Uí Dúnlainge dynasty had achieved direct control over Glendalough (Smyth 1982, 52). This grasp of control by the Uí Dúnlainge in the mid-7th century limits the reality of Uí Máil claims. In the case of Glendalough, during the last decades of the 8th century, abbacies of short duration give the impression of conflict over control (Mac Shamhráin 1996, 132). Uí Dúnlainge interest in controlling the monastery is not surprising when taking into account the spread out of Glendalough's *paruchia*. Colmán Etchingham makes the observation that Glendalough's geographical associations show 'a heavy concentration within the Uí Dúnlainge hegemony of north Leinster' (1999, 42). The Uí Máil's attempts to closely portray themselves with the early success of the monastery appear to have not come to much in actual long term success. Glendalough's size and rich source base shows how control of a monastery within kindred territory was not always guaranteed.

4. Kings taking church office

Dynastic interests did not end with control of abbatial succession and monastic resources. Kings are recorded in several instances as having taken some level of church office. The king of Munster, Feidlimid mac Crimthainn, was bishop of Cashel and abbot of Clonfert [AD 838], while he was high-king of Ireland (Smyth 1982, 35; Byrne 2001, 224). The last entry concerning Feidlimid in *AU* notes that Feidlimid, 'king of Munster, the best of the Irish, a *scriba* and an anchorite, rested [i.e. died]' (*AU*, 847.1). As noted earlier, *AU* states that Áed Dub, of the Uí Dúnlainge, had been king of Leinster at some point before becoming bishop of Kildare (*AU*, 639). Another example of a king holding a level of church office can be found in Domnall mac Murchada, king of Clann Cholmáin. *AU* records Domnall as entering clerical life in the year 740 (*AU*, 740.1). The annal then notes Domnall's subsequent taking up the kingship of Tara in 743, but he then again goes into clerical life the following year (*AU*, 743.13 and 744.2). Later entries in *AU* continue to show him still actively ruling his kingdom. Under the year 753, he is recorded as promulgating 'the law of Colum Cille' (*AU*, 753.4 and 756.4).

While some scholars like Gearóid Mac Niocaill (1972, 126) and Máire Herbert (1996, 64) agree that Domnall held both secular and ecclesiastical office jointly, others like Colmán Etchingham find the likelihood of Domnall serving as king and

holding church office jointly disputable (2006, 1). Unfortunately, it is impossible to definitively prove whether or not Domnall held the kingship while holding church office. Indeed, the last two annal entries clearly show Domnall in a secular role, but give none of the distinct titles provided by the 847 entry for Feidlimid mac Crimthainn (*AU*, 847.1). What is apparent is that church office was an acceptable role for a man who had or could hold a kingship. For a man that had been king, a career within the Church would be a way to maintain some sort of high status. If indeed Domnall was forced out of the kingship into the Church, comparisons could be made with the Pictish king, Nechtan son of Derile [*d*. 732], whose power struggles for the Pictish kingship with Óengus I, Alpín and Drust, quite likely lead him to retire to a monastery in 724 (*AU*, 724.2, 726.1, 728.5 and 729.3; Smyth 1984, 73-76; Clancy 2004, 143-145).

5. Kings retiring to monasteries

Other instances of Irish kings retiring to monasteries can be found in the sources. In the second half of the 6th century, Cormac mac Diarmata, the Uí Bairrche king of South Leinster, retired from his kingship to be a monk at the monastery of Bangor (Smyth 1982, 77). Dímma mac Áeda Croin, an early 7th-century king of Fothairt, retired to Taghmon to be a cleric (*Vita Sancti Munnu* 1997, 13, 8 and 21-23). The Munster king, Flaithbertach mac Inmainén is recorded as having retired to a monastery (*AFM*, 920.23). Colmán Etchingham believes that although it is not absolutely clear which monastery it was, Monaincha is the most likely since Flaithbertach would be seized by Vikings there in 921 (1999, 360). After 980, Óláfr Cúarán, king of Dublin, went into monastic retirement at the monastery of Iona (*AT*, 980). Whether for political or religious reasons, the practice of kings retiring to monasteries is not unique to the Irish. As already mentioned, there are examples to be found from among their neighbours, and indeed if it was within the scope of this article, examples could be found further abroad.

6. Churchmen using their connections with kings

The control or association with a particular monastery, its saints and *paruchia*, was not just beneficial for royal dynasties. Churchmen used their connections with kings to create mutually beneficial ties. As mentioned earlier, Church leaders such as Columba, Adomnán, Wilfred, Benedict Biscop, Brigit, and Patrick all came from noble families. St Columba and Adomnán had well documented friendships with kings both in and outside of Ireland. Rhydderch Hael, the king of Dumbarton, was one of Columba's many friends (Adomnán 1995, I.15), while Adomnán was close

to Aldfrith, king of Northumbria. Adomnán's friendship with Aldfrith, no doubt, played a role in Adomnán bringing back hostages from Northumbria to Ireland on two occasions (*AU*, 687.5 and 689.9). Both churchmen and kings alike used the promulgation of laws to further reinforce their control over particular regions. These laws were frequently proclaimed during times of unrest in the regions they covered. Adomnán had close connections with Bruide mac Derile, king of the Picts. These connections can be seen in Bruide's being one guarantor of the Law of Innocents (Taylor 1999, 58). Máire Herbert notes that Adomnán's 'ideal model for Irish society would seem to have been a Christian kingship held by Uí Néill rulers, with the successors of Colum Cille, their kinsmen and allies, exercising a beneficent influence over them ... [the 'Law of Innocents'] celebrated the memory of the great saint of the Uí Néill' (1996, 52). Another example of the promulgation of laws can be found in 793, when the king of Munster, Artrí mac Cathail, was linked with the *Cáin of Ailbe* (*AU*, 793.3).

7. The role of fosterage between dynasties and monasteries

Mutually beneficial ties can also be found in the fosterage of the members of royal dynasties at monasteries. Fosterage was an important part of early Irish life, building bonds that would last into adulthood. In the *Life of St Cóemgein*, it is written that Cóemgein was the foster-father of Fáelan mac Cholmáin (*Vita Sancti Coemgeni*, 31 and 33-37). St Columba himself had several ecclesiastical foster-fathers. Adomnán mentions two in the *Life of St Columba*; one was St. Finnbarr, the other Cruithnechán (Adomnán 1995, I.1, II.1 and III.4). In his *Life*, St Columba is also noted to have been a foster-father. One of his foster-sons was the layman Berchán Mes loen (Adomnán 1995, III.21). In the *Life of Munnu*, written in the 8th century, it states that two of the Fothairt king Dímma's sons were fostered at different monasteries. Cúan was foster-father at Airbre for Dímma's son Cellach and Munnu was foster-father at Taghmon for his other son Cillíne (*Vita Sancti Munnu*, 21; Charles-Edwards 2000, 116).

8. Royal properties and their links to monasteries

Another way in which churchmen made mutually beneficial ties with royal dynasties was their attaching their early missions to royal vills. Royal vills were the centre of territorial land units to which villages owed dues and services (Campbell 1982, 41). On his mission to Northumbria, Aidan used the royal vills as venues for his early church. Thomas Charles-Edwards sees this as Aidan's attempt to identify 'the new religion all the more closely with the authority of the king' (2000, 314).

In these cases of a close association between ecclesiastical settlements and royal establishments it is clear that the benefits would have gone to both religious and political interests. Bede notes that it was Oswald's interest in receiving religious guidance from the Irish which led to Aidan's mission from Iona (Bede, III.3). Not only did Oswald benefit from this aid, but Iona itself grew from the expansion of its *paruchia*. Aidan's efforts to link the new religion with the authority of the king should not just be restricted to that of Oswald's reign, but instead to the office itself. After Oswald's death, Aidan would go beyond their friendship to continue on in a close relationship with Oswald's enemy, King Oswine (Charles-Edwards 2000, 315).

Smyth notes the geographical association of monasteries in Ireland 'as royal chapels to the local tribal leader'. He goes on to explain that it was regional 'aristocracy who ruled these monasteries,' giving examples of 'the church of Slane with the palace of the kings of Northern Brega at Knowth; the church of Trevet with the nearby palace of the kings of Southern Brega at Lagore...the church of Ferns with the royal palace there in south Leinster; [and] the church of Kilranelagh with the palace of the Uí Máil kings' (Smyth 1982, 28). Indeed the feature of having ecclesiastical settlements within close geographical proximity to the political elites' power bases is not unique to the examples given in this article. Innumerable examples outside of the scope of this article can be drawn from all groups within the British Isles, as well as on the Continent, in the Medieval period. One example can be found in Anglo-Saxon Winchester where the Old Minster was founded c. 648 by King Cenwalh. Martin Biddle notes the likelihood that the church was founded to serve a royal residence, due to the fact that 'the first bishop of Winchester was not consecrated until' c. 660 (Biddle 1976, 333).

9. Monasteries founded for dynastic reasons

Some monasteries were founded specifically for dynastic reasons. An example of this can be found in the monastery of Downpatrick (Byrne 2001, 119). The earliest reference to a monastery at Downpatrick comes from the 8th century. Francis Byrne states that the monastery was most likely founded by Fiachnae of the Dál Fiatach dynasty or his father Áed Róin. With the dynasty's movement of its royal centre to Duneight, Byrne puts forth the view that the founding of Downpatrick was an attempt to keep the eminence of the old royal site out of Leth Cathail control (2001, 119-124). Byrne bases his ideas about the founding of Downpatrick on events listed in *AU*. The earliest entry to mention Downpatrick comes from the year 780. The annal notes that Macnio, son of Cellach, died as abbot of Downpatrick (*AU* 780.13). Twenty years after this entry, *AU* states that Macnio's uncle Loingsech son of Fiachna died as abbot of Downpatrick (*AU* 800.2). Further Dál Fiatach

connections with the abbacy can be found in later years. Loingsech's brother Cairell, king of Ulaid, was active in the monastery's affairs and two of Cairell's descendants are described as *airchinnig* of the monastery in the *AFM* (Byrne 2001, 124; *AFM*, 988.4 and 1083.1).

10. Abbots supporting their kindred

Abbots of major monasteries could also be important for the dynasties they belonged to in the promotion of their dynasty's cause. As in many other ways, this can best be seen in the example of Iona. The abbots of Iona would use their close connection with their Uí Néill kin to not only promote Iona's cause, but also those of the king. Máire Herbert notes that the 'assertion of the power of the saint's royal relatives ... seemed to have been matched by awareness on the part of the community of Colum Cille of its own identity and position in the ecclesiastical sphere' (1996, 43). Gilbert Márkus points out an example of this in Adomnán's tale about Columba and a crane (1999, 115-116). One day Columba sent one of his monks to the opposite side of the island to care for a crane. Columba said that;

at the end of three days, when the [crane] is revived, it will no longer want to stay as a pilgrim with us, but when its strength is recovered it will return to the sweet district of Ireland from which it came. This is the reason I am so solicitous you should do this, for the crane comes from my own homeland (Adomnán, I.48).[2]

Márkus sees the crane as a representation of Cenél Conaill interests. He believes Adomnán's writing of this tale and others that include animals in the *Life of Columba*, 'reveal a kind of mental map whose chief outlines are determined by the political geography of Scotland as seen by a monk on Iona' (1999, 115-116).

One of the earliest recorded concepts of Christian high-kingship came from Adomnán (Byrne 2001, 255). His *Life of Columba* contributes to the promotion of the dynasty, endorsing the view that his Uí Néill relatives had divine approval to the high-kingship of Ireland (Herbert 1996, 52). When relating the prophecy about King Diarmait's son, Áed Sláine, Adomnán relates that St Columba said to Áed 'you should take care, my son, for though God has predestined for you the prerogative of the kingship of all Ireland, you may lose it by the sin of a family murder' (Adomnán 1995, I.14). Adomnán was not the only abbot of Iona to support the claims of the Uí Néill dynasty. In his *Liber de Virtutibus Sancti Columbae*, Cumméne comments on Dál Riata's weakness after the battle of Mag

2   In his translation of the text Richard Sharpe uses heron instead of crane. I have chosen
     to insert crane for the sake of consistency. See n. 203 of Sharpe's edition for a discussion
     of the two words in this context.

Roth, claiming it as a punishment for its aggression towards the Uí Néill (Herbert 1996, 43).

11. Conclusion

In their bid to maintain their status, gain access to revenues and resources and prevent the latter from being used by rival dynasties, royal Irish dynasties controlled monasteries through claiming ties to saints, controlling abbatial succession and becoming patrons to early missionaries. Although these strategies are informative for contributing to our understanding of Irish culture, they are by no means restricted to the world of the Irish. Although many of the recorded relationships given in this article were real, others that are mentioned were not. Both kings and churchmen alike created mutually beneficial ties to promote each other's cause. As seen throughout this article, Iona gives one of the strongest examples of how kindred and monastery could work together to employ the strategies discussed. In the face of internal conflict kings are recorded as retiring to monasteries, while others made a conscious decision to grasp the office of bishop, abbot and king, to promote their own cause.

What becomes clear is that kings and dynasties were quick to deploy different strategies in their patronage of monasteries to influence political relationships within their kingdoms and those of their neighbors. Whether this was through; gifts of land, connections to saints, control of abbatial succession, dynasty members holding church offices or close ties between Church leaders and kings, what is clear is that all of the examples given in this article provide future opportunities for a detailed investigation of how effective these strategies were, how involved particular dynasties were involved in individual monasteries over specific time periods and how closely these relationships compared to other ethnic groups living within the British Isles.

Abbreviations

AFM   *The Annals of the Four Masters*. Comp. D. Ó Corráin and M. Cournane 1997-2004.
AT   *The Annals of Tigernach*. Transl. W. Stokes 1993.
AU   *The Annals of Ulster*. Transl., Intro. and Notes T. Charles-Edwards 2006.
CGH   *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*. Ed. M. A. O'Brien 2001.
MO   Félire Óengusso Céli Dé. *The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*. Ed. W. Stokes 1905.

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