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Philosopher-King: Nechtan mac Der-Ilei

Without doubt one of the more famous events in the progress of the controversy over the dating of Easter which chronically vexed the churches of Britain and Ireland between the late sixth and the late eighth centuries is the transferral of his kingdom by Nechtan or Naiton, who was king of the Picts roughly between 706x713 and 729, to the so-called ‘Roman’ system of calculating the date of Easter. It is famous partly because Bede devotes a great deal of attention to it, and we will return to his story shortly. For advocates of the confrontational narrative of seventh- and eighth-century insular church history, it also forms a climactic final episode. After the struggles and insults of the ‘Synod of Whitby’ in 664, Bede’s Naiton brings an end to the tale, spurning the Columban church, kicking them and Celtic Christianity out of his kingdom, and embracing the Roman system, with all its attendant evils. The Columban church, now isolated, has no option but to change also.

This explanation is dramatically satisfying, but historically less so. Like so much of the history of the early church in Scotland, it is bound up with modern political and religious factionalism. Was Naiton an English imperialist flunky? A Romanist stooge, allowing the authority of the Pope and St Peter into his realm? Or, conversely, a Pictish nationalist, rejecting the insidious Irish influences of the Celtic church? Or was he more a creation of Bede’s exegetical mind bringing an ‘end to history’ in a biblically satisfying way? This article does not set out to assess the effect of his actions on the church, or their motivations—that will have to await a separate occasion. Rather, it examines the king and his background, in order to get a firmer sense of the context, genealogical, cultural and political, in which his reform took place.¹

Nevertheless, it is well worth first looking at Bede’s testimony concerning Naiton for what it says. Bede’s description of the king, both in his own words, and in the words he quotes from his abbot, Ceolfrith’s

¹ The core argument of this article has been known in the Scottish early medievalist community for some time, owing to seminars given by me in 1996 and 1997, and earlier drafts have been used by several scholars in building subsequent arguments. It first made an appearance in K. Veitch, ‘The Columban church in northern Britain, 664–717: a re-assessment’, *PSAS*, cxxvii (1997), 627–47, at 635 and n. 6; and the central thesis of the present article was expertly summarised in A. Woolf, ‘Pictish matriliney reconsidered’, *Innes Review*, xlix (1998), 147–67, at 149–50. It is no fault of any of the scholars who have heard or read drafts of this research over the years that publication is so long delayed, and I am especially grateful for the comments of John Bannerman, Dauvit Broun, Nicholas Evans, Katherine Forsyth, James E. Fraser, Simon Taylor and Alex Woolf. I should register once more my gratitude to James Fraser for the gentle persuasion which has produced this revised version.

letter to Naiton, is easily one of the most attractive of any royal figure in the whole work.² Naiton is depicted as an avid student of scripture, and indeed, of Bede's favourite subject, *computus*: we are told that his mind was changed concerning the proper dating of Easter even before contacting the abbot of Wearmouth-Jarrow because he was 'convinced by his assiduous study of ecclesiastical writings'.³ He is depicted as a king who makes informed theological choices, and has the means to carry them out throughout his manifestly Christian kingdom. It is in such a context that Ceolfrith addresses Naiton as a 'philosopher king', paraphrasing Plato:

As a secular writer very truly said, the world would be in the happiest possible state if kings were philosophers or philosophers were kings. And if a man of the world could make a true estimate of this world's philosophy and judge rightly about the state of this world, how much more is it to be desired and sincerely prayed for by the citizens of our heavenly home, who are pilgrims in this world, that the greater any man's position in this world, the more he should exert himself to obey the commands of the supreme judge, and by his example and authority induce those committed to his charge to follow him in observing them.⁴

This paragon of Christian scholarship and kingship, appearing as he does almost at the end of Bede's great work, might easily be interpreted as something of a literary *topos*: as Bede draws his narrative to a close, Christian unity is advanced by—*mirabile dictu*—a learned king of the northern barbarians! However, literary placement and rhetorical heightening notwithstanding, Naiton is one of the kings in the work of whom Bede must have had fairly detailed knowledge, since the communication on the Easter dating, the receipt and dispatch of messengers, and the sending of architects north all happened through Bede's monastery, during his lifetime residency there. Bede's portrait of Naiton should thus be taken fairly seriously, and this Christian scholar and king needs to be placed in his proper context.

The time is thus ripe for a re-examination of Naiton. He has been cast in some dubious settings in the recent past. Kathleen Hughes saw him as the very first real Christian Pictish king, crediting Bede's description of him, but believing that his Christian court was a seminal and still somewhat benighted one.⁵ Professor Duncan suggested that all the influence

² The whole of this encounter takes place in the long chapter 21 of Book V of his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*; I have used the edition and translation in *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, ed. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969) [hereafter *HE*, with references as *HE* v.21]. As the chapter is long, I include also references to the pages in Colgrave and Mynors for convenience, immediately following the book and chapter reference.

³ *HE* v.21; 532-3.

⁴ *Ibid.*; 534-5.

⁵ K. Hughes, 'Early Christianity in Pictland', in *eadem*, *Celtic Britain in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. D. Dumville (Woodbridge, 1980: originally the Jarrow Lecture for 1970), 38-52, especially the final sentence.

for change in Naiton's court came through a Northumbrian, Ecgberht,⁶ and Ecgberht has been further credited with a virtually one-man mission throughout Pictland by Raymond Lamb in two recent articles.⁷ Indeed, Naiton's parentage and singularity were called into question by Duncan, followed in this by Ben Hudson.⁸ On the other hand, Simon Taylor has suggested that his role (and his brother's) in changing the church, while certainly pivotal, is culturally more complex than has been appreciated, and Kenneth Veitch followed him in trying to complexify the political and ecclesiastical forces at work during this period.⁹ Both Taylor and Veitch would hold that not only the southern influences described by Bede, but also Gaelic and Pictish ecclesiastical personnel were seemingly involved in bringing about Naiton's church reform. These latter issues will not be treated directly here, but an examination of some key aspects of this king's background will clear the way to a more nuanced debate on the nature and influences of his reform.

Nechtan mac Der-Ilei

Naiton has been a bit of a conundrum to scholars, partly because of uncertainty about his parents' names, but as I hope to show, we are in fact better informed about his descent and relations than about any other Pictish king. *Nechtan*, as his name appears in all sources except Bede,¹⁰ is known from both Irish annals and the Pictish king-lists. He appears in both of these sets of sources as the son of someone called *Derilei*.¹¹ He was thus the brother of Bruide (or Bridei) son of Derilei who

⁶ A.A.M. Duncan, 'Bede, Iona and the Picts', in R.H.C. Davis and J.M. Wallace-Hadrill (eds.), *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays presented to Richard William Southern* (Oxford, 1981), 1-42.

⁷ R.G. Lamb, 'Carolingian Orkney and its transformation', in C. Batey, J. Jesch and C. Morris (eds.), *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic* (Edinburgh, 1993), 260-71; *idem*, 'Pictland, Northumbria and the Carolingian Empire', in B.E. Crawford (ed.), *Conversion and Christianity in the North Sea World* (St Andrews, 1998), 41-56.

⁸ Duncan, 'Bede, Iona and the Picts', 36, n.1; B.T. Hudson, *Kings of Celtic Scotland* (Westport, Connecticut, 1994), 23-6.

⁹ S. Taylor, 'Place-names and the early church in Scotland', in B.E. Crawford (ed.), *Scotland in Dark-Age Britain* (St Andrews, 1996), 93-110; Veitch, 'Columban church'. For a neglected but important contribution, see D.P. Kirby, 'Bede and the Pictish church', *Innes Review*, xxiv (1973), 6-25.

¹⁰ Though with variations in spelling: *Nechthon* (M.O. Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* [rev. edn, Edinburgh, 1980], 248); *Nechtan* (List D, *ibid.*, 263); *Nectan* (List F, *ibid.*, 273); *Nectan* (*The Annals of Ulster, to AD 1131*, ed. S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill [Dublin, 1983], hereafter AU, followed by corrected year and number of entry in edition: e.g., 726.1). Ceolfrith calls him *Naitan*. For Bede's form of the name and its implications for Pictish historical phonology, see K. Jackson 'The Pictish language', F.T. Wainwright (ed.) in *The Problem of the Picts*, (Edinburgh, 1955), 145, 164-5; K. Forsyth, 'The Ogham Inscriptions of Scotland: An Edited Corpus' (Ph.D., Harvard University, 1996; Ann Arbor Microfilms, UMI no. 9631492), 416-17.

¹¹ Again, with variations. The name appears only in the genitive: *Derili* (AU 706.2, 713.4, Anderson, *Kings*, 273 [List F]); *Deirile* (AU 726.1); *Derilei* (*Cáin Adomnáin*: M. Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The guarantor list of the *Cáin Adomnáin*, A.D. 697', *Peritia*, i (1983), no. 91; Anderson, *Kings*, 263 [List B]); *Derelei* (Anderson, *Kings*, 248 (*bis*), 263

reigned from *ca* 697 to 706, and is explicitly named as such in several of the king-lists.

There has been some discussion of the gender of the person named *Derilei*,¹² with the balance of opinion favouring its being a feminine name. This deserves to be investigated more fully before we proceed. It should be compared with a series of Gaelic names for women beginning with the element *Der-/Dar-* which has been shown to be a Gaelic cognate of the English word ‘daughter’, derived from a reduced form of the Proto-Gaelic **ducht(a)ir*.¹³ A close cognate of this word, a derivative of the Indo-European word for ‘daughter’ (the English word is itself a descendant of the Germanic derivative), has now been attested in the continental Celtic language Gaulish as *duxtir*.¹⁴

It was a mainly poetic or onomastic word in Gaelic, and is found in a sort of petrified form in female personal names, such as *Der-Luigdech*,¹⁵ *Dar-Í*,¹⁶ *Der-(b)Fáil*, *Dar-Óma*.¹⁷ It will be familiar to Scottish historians as the first element in the name *Der bForgaill*, Latinised as ‘Dervorgilla’, the Lady of Galloway, foundress of Sweetheart Abbey, and mother of John Balliol. These are female equivalents to male forenames in *Mac-N*, e.g.,

¹¹ (*continued*) [List B]); *Derelei* (Anderson, *Kings*, 248 (*bis*), 263 [List B]). I adopt the form *Derilei* and later, *Der-Ilei* as neutral forms that incorporate a variety of the problematic features of the second element, but without determining what the second element is (see below); this is only an interim orthographical decision, not a linguistic one. Ní Dhonnchadha notes, pertinently, that on the basis of the endings ‘One cannot say whether it is an *io-* or an *ia-* stem.’ Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Guarantor list’, 214.

¹² See esp. Anderson, *Kings*, 175-6, where *Derilei* is accepted as a woman, though with caution; cf. the more confident statement in A.O. Anderson and M.O. Anderson, *Adomnán’s Life of Columba* (Edinburgh, 1961), 60.

¹³ See Royal Irish Academy, *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (compact edn, Dublin, 1983) [hereafter *DIL*], under *der*; M.A. O’Brien, ‘Der-, Dar-, Derb- in female names’, *Celtica*, iii (1956), 178-9. The first to identify this as the initial element in *Derilei*, as far as I can determine, were the Andersons, first in *Adomnán’s Life of Columba*, 60; later M.O. Anderson in *Kings*, 175. A. Ross, ‘Pictish matriliney?’, *Northern Studies*, xxxiv (1999), 11-22, is wrong in supposing Ní Dhonnchadha to be the origin of this observation, and also in his formulation of the linguistic argument.

¹⁴ Supplying the form postulated by earlier scholars as the antecedent to Gaelic *der*: O’Brien, ‘Der-, Dar-, Derb-’; E. Hamp, ‘**dhugHter* in Irish’, *Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft*, xxxiii (1975), 39-40; K.H. Schmidt, ‘Zum Plomb du Larzac’, in A.T.E. Matonis and D.F. Melia (eds), *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture: A Festschrift for Eric P. Hamp* (Van Nuys, California, 1990), 19-25; P.-Y. Lambert, *La langue gauloise* (Paris, 1995), 61; F.J. Byrne, ‘*Dercu*: the feminine of *mocu*’, *Éigse*, xxviii (1995), 42-70. In the inscription, $\chi = /x/$. For a convenient edition, see J.T. Koch with J. Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales* (Aberystwyth, 2000), 3-4.

¹⁵ The successor of Brigit; she appears as *Darlugdach* in the Abernethy foundation legend: Anderson, *Kings*, 247.

¹⁶ On *Dar-Í*, see P. Ó Riain, ‘A misunderstood annal: a hitherto unnoticed *cáin*’, *Celtica*, xxi (1990), 561-6.

¹⁷ See also M.A. O’Brien, ‘Old Irish personal names: M.A. O’Brien’s “Rhys Lecture”’—Notes, 1957 edited by Rolf Baumgarten’, *Celtica*, x (1973), 211-36, at 230. Further examples, culled from P. Ó Riain, *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1985) [hereafter *CGSH*], include: *Dar-Aíne* (§§191.1.2; 612, etc.), *Darbiled / Derbiled* (§§662.78), *Dar-Erca* (§§98.1, 125.2, etc.), *Dar-Cairthinn* (§§62, 247, 708.20, etc.); *Dar-Froich* (§47, etc.), *Dar-Nisa* (§124, etc.), *Dar-Tinne* (§670.70), *Deir-bFind* (§397, etc.), *Der-Inill* (§§162, etc.), all, from context, plainly women.

Mac-Cuill, of which many are known, *Mac-Bethad* (MacBeth) being only the most famous.¹⁸ The presence of a form of this word in Gaulish means that it is possible that a cognate was in use in Pictish as well, though there is no other clear evidence of it.¹⁹ There are occasional, though much fewer, masculine names beginning with an element *Der-* or *Dar-*, but in these cases it is a compositional form of *dair*, ‘oak’.²⁰ It is not impossible that *Derilei* is such a masculine name with the ‘oak’ word as its first element,²¹ but the comparative infrequency of such names makes it less likely. On balance *Derilei* would seem likely to be the name of the mother of Bruide and Nechtan, and its first element most likely to be *Der-* ‘daughter’. What must remain unclear is what language their mother’s name belongs to. The comparanda would suggest that it is Gaelic as we have it, but we should not rule out that it might be Pictish.²² Given the pattern of such names (‘daughter of X’, with stress on the X), it would be useful to adopt an orthography to match, and henceforth I will employ the form *Der-Ilei*.²³

¹⁸ O’Brien, ‘Old Irish personal names’, 227, calls *mac(c)* the ‘most troublesome name [element] to deal with’. See, e.g., *CGSH*, p.251-2 for a long list. *Mac-* names which parallel names in *Der-/Dar-* include: *Mac-Cairthinn*, *Mac-Ercca*, *Mac-Find*, *Mac-Í*, *Mac ind Fhiled*, *Mac-Luga*, *Mac-Nise*, *Mac-Tinne*. O’Brien, ‘Der-, Dar-, Derb-’, notes these parallels as well, and adds from unpublished sources *Der-Draigen* and *Mac-Draigin*.

¹⁹ Though it might be suggested that the -DATRR- on the Bressay Cross represents the Pictish form of this word. However, the Bressay cross is suggestive in other ways of Norse influence, and this may simply be a version of the Norse word *dottr*. See K. Forsyth, ‘Ogham Inscriptions’, 131; the possible implications of the Gaulish form *duxtir* were not at that point widely appreciated.

²⁰ See *DIL*, s.v.; Jürgen Uhlich, *Die Morphologie der komponierten Personennamen des Altirischen* (Witterschlick/Bomm, 1993), 224-5, who discusses in detail the examples *Dairbran*, *Dairchell*, and *Daurthecht*. Further examples are *Dawgabal*, *Dars(h)aegal*: see entries in *DIL*. There is at least one Welsh name of this sort, *Derbiu* (W. Davies, *The Llandaff Charters* [Aberystwyth, 1979], 159, and locations there cited), the second element presumably being the word for ‘life, living’, as in the names *Collbiu*, ‘hazel-life?’, *Bledbiu*, ‘wolf-life?’ (*ibid.*, 150, 156, and locations cited). The Gaelic *Dars(h)aegal* and Welsh *Derbiu* would thus mean substantially the same thing. On *Dar-Í*, see Ó Riain, ‘A misunderstood annal’.

²¹ The name could perhaps be explained as Gaelic *Derili* < **Der(fh)ili* ‘oak-poet’, but it seems an unlikely name, and in any case we would then expect the genitive to be **Der(fh)iled*. The attested name *Derbiled*/*Darbiled* (see note 17 above) is undoubtedly *Der-bFiled* ‘daughter of poet’, cf. the masculine equivalent *Mac ind Fhiled*, *CGSH* §§334, 662.200 (for the intrusive ‘eclipsis’ of second elements in *f-* after *der-*, see O’Brien ‘Der-, Dar-, Derb-’, where he points out that this is actually the retention of historical initial /u/ after a historical final -r rather than eclipsis). At any rate, we should not dismiss out of hand the possibility of a masculine (and Celtic!) name, *pace* Anderson, *Kings*, 175 (following Jackson, ‘Pictish language’, 144). Note also the curious name *Derir*, which must be that of a man, as he is described as *nepos Collae*, AU 722.5. Is this ‘oak-passion’ (*dair* + *ír*), ‘lasting oak’ (*dair* + *ír*), or ‘oak-truth’ (*dair* + *(fh)ír*)?

²² There is no *a priori* reason to suspect it of not being Celtic. In light of the foregoing, it seems difficult to understand Jackson’s inclusion of the name in his list of Pictish forms that are ‘not clearly Celtic at all...and...quite possibly therefore pre-Celtic’: Jackson, ‘The Pictish Language’, 144. On Jackson’s analysis generally, see K. Forsyth, *Language in Pictland* (Utrecht, 1997).

²³ For a discussion of the second element in this name, see Appendix A.

Nechtan mac Dargarto

As noted above, there is more than linguistic evidence to support the view that Der-Ilei was the mother of Bruide and Nechtan, rather than their father: this is also confirmed by the fact that we know the name of their father, and his ancestry. This has hitherto gone unnoticed, and led to problematic alternative solutions.²⁴ In a number of sources, all seemingly deriving ultimately from some item in the hagiographic dossier of St Serf of Culross, such as the Life of St Serf, the Loch Leven *notitiae*, and Wyntoun's Chronicle, a Pictish king Bruide is mentioned, with a father *Dergart* or *Dargart*. His father also appears in this form in two king lists (D and K, again, deriving this form from records relating to St Serf).²⁵ The main chronological stabiliser for these documents, some of which have serious anachronisms embedded, is the linkage between Adomnán, abbot of Iona 679–704, and Serf, and on this basis there is little doubt that the king intended in these references is Bruide son of Derilei (697–706).²⁶ It has generally been assumed that *Dergart/Dargart* is a mistaken form of *Derilei*.²⁷ This is an odd argument, presumably dependent only on the deceptive similarity of the first elements in *Derilei* and *Dergart*, and, one would guess, on the supposed non-existence of a name *Dergart* or similar.²⁸ However, a contemporary person of just this name does exist. He was the father of a *Nectan m. Doirgarto* (AU 710.4) and a *Congal m. Doirgarto* (AU 712.4); and his own death is noted at AU 686.3 and 693.6.²⁹ There is no reason, then, to reject the witness of these other sources to Bruide's father's name, especially as *Derilei* seems on balance

²⁴ For example, Anderson, *Kings*, 176, who proposes Drostan for the father of Bruide, Nechtan and Ciniod, for which see below.

²⁵ *Dargardys sowne. The Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland by Androw of Wyntoun*, ed. David Laing, 3 vols. (Edinburgh 1872-9), ii, 39 (V.12, line 5199); *The Original Chronicle of Andrew of Wyntoun*, ed. F.J. Amours, 6 vols. (Edinburgh, 1903-14), iv, 80 (line 5205), 81 (line 5180). *Dargart*: A. Macquarrie 'Vita Sancti Servani: The Life of St Serf', *Innes Review*, xlv (1993), 140. *Dergard (Liber cartarum prioratus Sancti Andree in Scotia* (Bannatyne Club, 1849) [*St.A. Lib.*], 113; List D, Anderson, *Kings*, 266). *Dergert* (List K, Anderson, *Kings*, 287). For discussion of forms and sources, see *ibid.*, 100.

²⁶ Though in the Loch Leven *notitiae* he is described as the last king of the Picts, suggesting some conflation with a Bruide who may have died *ca* 843; the note has other chronological headaches, and is not worth untangling too carefully. Skene's suggestion that this is meant to be Bruide mac Derilei is doubtless correct: see A.C. Lawrie, *Early Scottish Charters prior to 1153* (Edinburgh, 1905), 228-9 for discussion.

²⁷ Anderson, *Kings*, 64, 100, see also 176, where the father is proposed as Drostan; Macquarrie, 'St Serf', 148 n.6.

²⁸ As Woolf, 'Pictish matriliney', notes, *Derilei* cannot be a hypocoristic form of *Dergart*, or if it were, it is not a hypocoristic ending elsewhere attested.

²⁹ In 686.3 his death is noted alongside one Rothachtach; in 693.6, it is alone. The 686 entry is also found in the Annals of Tigernach (ed. and trans. W. Stokes, *Revue Celtique*, xvi (1896), 6-33, 119-263, 337-420; xviii (1897), 9-59, 150-97, 263-303, 374-90; reprinted in 2 vols, Felinfach, 1993) and thus was in the Chronicle of Ireland, and hence is probably correct. The 693.6 entry was probably entered at a later stage in the development of AU, and the absence of Rothachtach and the orthography of *Dargart*'s name (see below) both indicate that it was taken from a different source. In both 686 and 693, *Dargart*'s death is linked to an event in the life of King Bruide mac Bili (686, *recte* 685, his victory at Dunnichen; 693 *recte* 692 his death), and it may be this linkage that has confused the editor who entered the death of *Dargart* at 693.6.

to be a female name. The case for Bruide's parents being respectively a father, Dargart³⁰ and a mother, Der-Ilei, seems strong.

Thus, Bruide is attested both as son of Der-Ilei and son of Dargart; and further as the brother of Nechtan. That Dargart was likewise Nechtan's father seems to be confirmed by AU 710.4, noting the death of two sons of a *Nectan m. Doirgarto*. Though one might cavil and argue that this need not be the same man as Nechtan son of Der-Ilei, the successive links to Bruide his brother and thence to Bruide's parents seem to cement the case: in any case, it would be an extraordinary coincidence to find two sets of brothers called Bruide and Nechtan, one set sons of a Dargart, the other sons of a Derilei, both sets living during the same period and noticed in the same relatively constrained set of Scottish oriented annals. We should accept, then, that Nechtan and Bruide shared both father and mother, and that their father was called Dargart. The first element in this otherwise very rare name,³¹ incidentally, is not *der-* 'daughter', but *dair-* 'oak'; as with Der-Ilei, however, the second element is more problematic.³²

Cenél Comgaill and the sons of Dargart

We know some things about this Dargart, and can deduce still more. His death is recorded at AU 686.3: *Mors Rothachtaigh 7 Dargarto m. Finguine*, and is repeated (though presumably from a different source) at AU 693.6: *Mors Doergairt m. Finguine*. Alan Anderson suggested that 692 is the correct date, but did not give his reasoning.³³ On the other hand, the Annals of Tigernach have only the entry at 686, and this may be thought to be the original entry in the Chronicle of Ireland. Dargart's father is likely to be the *Finguine Longus (Finguine Fota)* whose death is listed at AU 690.3; sons have been known to considerably predecease their fathers, so this does not help us decide between the two dates of death available for Dargart.

³⁰ I adopt the orthography of AU 686.3, which provides a satisfactory compromise between the annalistic sources and the later ones, whilst respecting the etymology, for which see below.

³¹ By 'very rare', I mean that the son of Finguine, the father of Nechtan, the father of Congal (†712) and the putative father of Bruide are the only four attestations of the name, and all relate to an individual or individuals whose floruits were between 680 and 720, a fact which is suggestive, in itself, that these refer to the same person.

³² The Gaelic name *Dargart* is composed of a compound of *dair* 'oak' and a second element, see the examples cited in note 20. Unfortunately, the annals are inconsistent in their declension of the name. AU 686.3, 710.4, and 712.4 have gen.sg. *Dargarto*, *Doirgarto* which suggests that the second element is *gart*, 'generosity, open-handedness, honour' (cf. *DIL*, *gart*), giving a name meaning 'oak-honour', or 'generosity of oak', or one could even say 'oaken-hearted'. AU 693.6, however, has *Mors Doergairt*, which would suggest *gart/gort*, 'enclosure, field' (*DIL*, see under *gort*). On the whole, the majority of the forms, as well as the logic of personal nomenclature, favours the former.

³³ A.O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History, A.D. 500-1286*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1922), i, 194. He may have been referring instead to the need here to 'uncorrect' the normal correction of AU dates, on the basis of dates synchronised with Bede and astronomical events. This is also true of 686, which should probably be 'uncorrected' to 685. See n.29 above.

Both his own and his father's name would appear to put Dargart firmly in a Gaelic context. As such, it is important that what is arguably the first annal reference to Nechtan, in AU 710.4, seems to discuss internecine strife amongst the Cenél Comgaill (incidentally, this is also the first annal reference to Cenél Comgaill as such). David Dumville has noted that this entry is inherently ambiguous: *Imbairecc apud genus Comghaill ubi .ii. filii Nectan maic Doirgarto iugulati sunt*. He gives the alternative translations: 'A conflict among the Cenél Comgaill in which two sons of Nechtan mac Doirgarto were killed' or 'A battle by Cenél Comgaill in which two sons of Nechtan mac Doirgarto were killed'.³⁴ There are other examples in AU of entries recording conflicts where *apud* is used with only one apparent party being involved, and in most of these an internal conflict would appear to be the best explanation. The closest parallel is the nearby entry for AU 712.8, recording *Bellum apud Laginenses de[x]terioroes, ubi Bran nepos Maele Duin et filius eius ceciderunt* 'a battle by the southern Leistermen, where Bran úa Maile Dúin and his son fell'. In this case we know that Bran was of the Uí Chennsalaig, the 'southern Leinstermen' of the entry.³⁵ Though the precise nature of the battle must remain unclear, the sense of the text still seems to be that the sons of Nechtan were members of Cenél Comgaill. Taking forward this reading of the annal entry, we can argue that the father of Nechtan and Bruide, our Dargart, was a member of Cenél Comgaill.

Armed with this information, we can go further. Anderson suggested an equation between Finguine Fota and the Fíngen son of Eochaid son of Loingsech son of Comgall recorded in the genealogy of Cenél Comgaill preserved in the text known as *Cethri Prímchenéla Dáil Riata*,³⁶ and this equation could apply as well or instead to Finguine, father of Dargart.³⁷ This set of genealogies, judging from their termini, was originally composed 697x719.³⁸ This would make Nechtan mac Dargarto the

³⁴ D.N. Dumville, 'Cethri Prímchenéla Dáil Riata', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, xx (2000), 170-91, at 189; for a discussion of *apud*, see *idem*, 'Latin and Irish in the *Annals of Ulster*, A.D. 431-1050', in D. Whitelock *et al.* (eds.), *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge, 1982) [reprinted in D.N. Dumville, *Histories and Pseudo-Histories of the Insular Middle Ages* (Aldershot, 1990) XVII], 320-41, at 324 n.11.

³⁵ Another good example, though marginally less clear-cut, is AU 719.5. I am most grateful to Dr Nicholas Evans for discussing these matters with me, and for access to his exhaustive study of the use of *apud* in the Irish chronicles, 600-900. There (pers. comm.) he notes: 'In AU 712.9 and 719.5, which are very similar to AU 710.4, those killed are in the same group as the word following *apud*; therefore it is very likely that in AU 710.4 the sons of Nectan mac Doirgarto were from Cenél Comgaill. However, I think that *apud* still means "by" rather than "among" in these cases, although "(done) by", rather than "(won) by".'

³⁶ Dumville, 'Cethri prímchenéla', 178-9.

³⁷ Anderson, *ESSH*, i, 194. An equation between Fíngen of the genealogy and Dargart's father Finguine does not depend upon the subsidiary equation with Finguine Fota of AU 690.3, though I think it likely that all three are the same person.

³⁸ The dates are from the analysis of Dumville, 'Cethri Prímchenéla', who gives a new edition; see further J. Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dabriada* (Edinburgh, 1974), 65-6, 108-10. The forms *Fíngen* and *Finguine* frequently alternate, although they are in origin different names. In particular, *Finguine* appears in place of *Fíngen* for the

great-great-grandson of the eponym of Cenél Comgaill. Bannerman has suggested, however, probably correctly, that the genealogy is one generation short, and that Conall son of Comgall has been missed out.³⁹ This would certainly give a somewhat more satisfactory time-span. Dargart and his sons would then be descended from the Conall son of Comgall who was king of Dál Riata at the time when Columba came to Iona, and who died *ca* 575. Fíngen's other descendant, Echtgach⁴⁰ son of Nechtan son of Ferchar, down to whom the genealogy in *Cethri Prímchenéla Dáil Riata* proceeds, was presumably the ruler of Cenél Comgaill (with its territory in Cowal) at some point during 697x719, and this ancestry thus makes excellent sense of AU 710.4. One interpretation might be that Nechtan's sons (alongside their father?) were aiming to cash in on their grandfather's ancestry, and died in a struggle for power among Cenél Comgaill.

Arguably then, Nechtan mac Der-Ilei belonged through his father to a branch of the Cenél Comgaill, and it is striking that only in this entry is his father's name employed in the annals: the entry refers to events which happen with respect to his and his sons' rights on his father's side. This seems to confirm the long-suspected idea that both Bruide and Nechtan inherited the Pictish kingship through their mother's lineage, whilst demonstrating (less expectedly) that their patrimony was Gaelic.⁴¹ As we shall see, there are other factors that confirm this analysis.

To illustrate our conclusions thus far in genealogical terms, here is what is being suggested (Genealogy A). I have placed data taken from *Cethri Prímchenéla Dáil Riata* in italics; other data is from the annals and elsewhere (for a full genealogy, see appendix B).

Talorc(an) mac Drostain, his brother

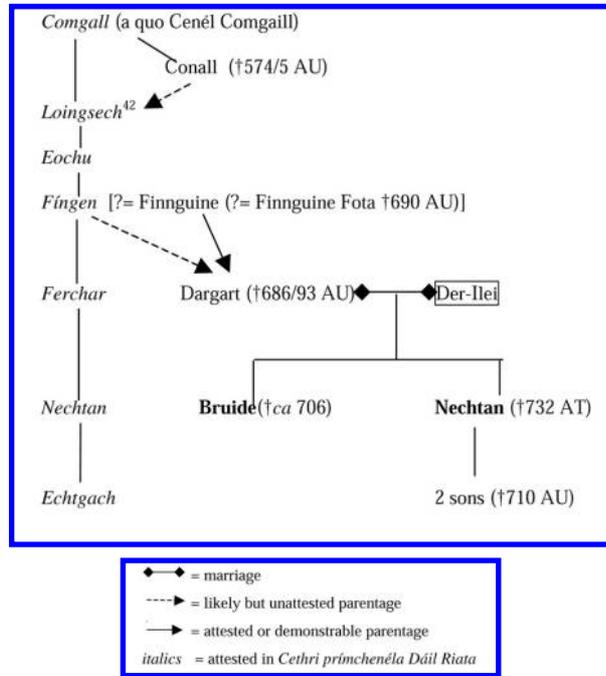
Confusing the picture of Nechtan's ancestry still further has been the entry for AU 713.7: *Tolargg filius Drostain ligatur apud fratrem suum Nectan regem*, 'Talorc son of Drostan was bound by his brother king Nechtan'. Marjorie Anderson, taking Derilei as the mother of Bruide and Nechtan, but not having spotted Dargart as the probable father, was inclined to

³⁸ (*continued*) genitive of *Fíngen*, e.g., Fíngen mac Aedo Duib, king of Cashel, but his son Cathal mac Finguine. See also AU 619.3 *Mors...Fingin m. Fhiachrach*, vs. *Annals of Innisfallen*, ed. S. Mac Airt (Dublin, 1944), 621: *Mors Finguni m. F(h)iachrach*.

³⁹ Bannerman, *Studies*, 78 n.3, on the basis that the text he edited as *Senchus Fer nAlban* (which we are learning now to call *Míniugud Senchasa Fher nAlban*) gave Loingsech as a son of Conall, and gave Comgall only one son, Conall. See also, Dumville '*Cethri prímchenéla*', 184-5, who gives a further alternative.

⁴⁰ This is the form of the name as it appears in the genealogies, with minor variants: Dumville, '*Cethri prímchenéla*', 178-9. It is not a name that I have found otherwise attested, and could be a by-form of Eochaid (gen. *Echdach*); cf. however the names *Échtgal*, *Échtgus*: Uhlich, *Morphologie*, 238.

⁴¹ I am not here espousing Pictish matriliney: see below. I follow, for the most part, the view taken on this subject by Alex Woolf, 'Pictish matriliney', and A. Ross, 'Pictish matriliney?'; see also Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland AD 80-1000* (Edinburgh, 1984), 60-9.



Genealogy A

look to Drostan to fill the gap. On this analysis, Drostan would be the father of at least Nechtan and Talorc (who, we are told, were brothers), and perhaps also of Bruide, and of Ciniod mac Der-Ilei, who died in 713.⁴³ Archie Duncan went one further and created two separate kings, one Nechtan son of Derile and the other Nechtan son of Drostan; Ben Hudson followed him in this, and both took it that it was Nechtan son of Drostan who was the real correspondent with abbot Ceolfrith.⁴⁴ Unlikely in the first place, accepting Dargart to be the father of Nechtan mac Der-Ilei makes this ‘two Nechtan theory’ unnecessary. Talorc(an) son of Drostan is thus indeed Nechtan’s brother, as AU informs us, but more precisely he is his half-brother on his mother’s side, his uterine brother.

If, then, we are confident that Nechtan’s mother was Der-Ilei, we can be equally confident that she was Talorc(an)’s mother also, with Drostan being his father, though not Nechtan’s. It is probable that through his cognatic descent Talorc(an) was making a bid for the kingship in 713

⁴² Bannerman, *Studies*, 78, argues that a generation has been left out here, and that Conall was Loingsech’s father.

⁴³ Anderson, *Kings*, 176. Anderson conjectured that Drostan might be father of Bruide, Nechtan and Ciniod, with only Talorc(an) having a different mother. However, I think the argument merits starting from a more minimalist position.

⁴⁴ Duncan, ‘Bede, Iona and the Picts’, 36; B.T. Hudson ‘King and Church in Early Scotland’, *ante*, lxxiii (1994), 151. It is not clear to me whether Duncan’s argument proceeded from Anderson’s, or was independent.

when Nechtan captured him. Indeed, what may lie behind Nechtan's placing Talorc in captivity is the entry for earlier in that year, describing the killing of *Ciniod m. Derili* and the son of Mathgernan (AU 713.4). We may further suggest, based on the fact that we later find Talorc(an) son of Drostan described as king (*rex*) of Atholl (AU 739.7, also in *AT*), that Talorc's father was king of this region, or at least a member of its royal line.⁴⁵

Der-Ilei, in that case, seems likely to be a daughter from the line of the house of Fortriu, which at least by the reign of Bruide mac Bili (a.k.a. Bridei son of Beli, 672?–693), the victor of Dunnichen, seems to have become the lynchpin of the Pictish kingdom.⁴⁶ We should perhaps expect some continuity of the centrality of this region or sub-kingdom after Bruide's death. Indeed, the most logical explanation of the reigns of the sons of Der-Ilei is that her line of descent perpetuated the puissance of Bruide mac Bili, and on that basis we should probably take her to be either his daughter or, less likely, his sister. Bruide mac Der-Ilei seems to have taken the kingship by means of a putsch, expelling Bruide mac Bili's successor, Tara(ch)in, who later went in exile to Ireland. We do not know the nature of Tara(ch)in's claim to kingship; his father's name is given as *En(ti)fidech*, and is almost certainly the *Ainftech* whose death is noted at AU 693.5.

Regarding the decade following the death of Bruide mac Der-Ilei in 706, it may be suggested that the descendants of two different husbands of Der-Ilei were disputing their rights to the Pictish kingship, the might of each based on their respective patrilinear power-bases: one a son of Dargart, and the other of Drostan. Talorc was likely the younger of the two, given that he was still active enough to be worth holding captive and drowning in the 730s, and so we should probably deduce that Drostan was the second of Der-Ilei's husbands. That Bruide mac Der-Ilei had been king as early as 697 seems to confirm this.⁴⁷ If Dargart died in 686, and Drostan was taken as a husband by Der-Ilei thereafter, Talorc would be at most 11 years old when Bruide took the kingship. Alex Woolf has

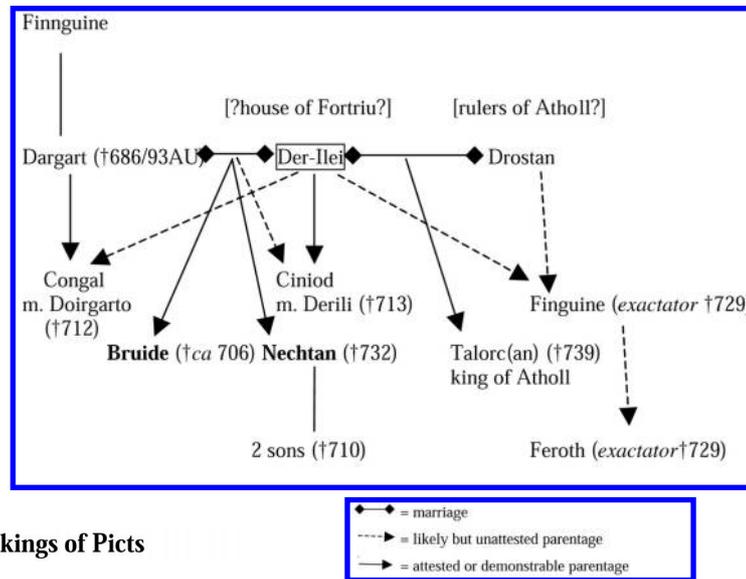
⁴⁵ Hudson makes Talorc(an)'s father Drostan the Drost mac Domnaill who was expelled from the Pictish kingship in AU 672.6 and died in 678.6. This is not impossible, and if it is so, has several ramifications for suggestions made below.

⁴⁶ Both Alex Woolf and James E. Fraser have in recent work encouraged us to think of Fortriu as a separate political entity, and to retrench from the 'big government' view of a Pictish kingdom stretching from the Forth to Shetland: Woolf, 'The Verturian hegemony: a mirror in the north', in M.P. Brown and C.A. Farr (eds.), *Mercia: An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Leicester, 2001), 106-11; Fraser, *The Battle of Dunnichen, 685* (Stroud, 2002). More detailed discussion is in Fraser's thesis, 'Ministry, Mission and Myth in Early Christian Fortriu' (Ph.D., University of Edinburgh, 2003). While I am not myself a proponent of the 'big government' paradigm, I am not yet entirely convinced of the claims made for Fortriu. See below for the current model I envisage. The present article, it should be noted, was written without the benefit of Woolf's recent, startling and, to my mind convincing reanalysis of the location of Fortriu. A proper reappraisal must wait on its publication.

⁴⁷ If Hudson's conjecture that Talorc's father Drostan was the Drost who died in 678 is correct, we would need to reverse this view. Bruide could easily have been king at the age of 18 or 19; Talorc easily worth drowning at the age of 61 or more. We might add to

suggested to me that Talorc's agnatic kin could have backed Bruide's kingship while Talorc was a minor, but expected Talorc's claims to be recognised after Bruide's death. Talorc's activities in 713 could be related to these claims. Talorc, as king of Atholl, would remain a potent problem for subsequent Pictish kings.

Given this understanding of the relationship between Nechtan and Talorc(an), we can fill out Nechtan's patterns of relationship still further (see Genealogy B). We know two of Nechtan's sons died in a struggle among Cenél Comgaill. His brother *Congal m. Doirgarto* died in 712. We do not know who Congal's mother was. It may well have been Der-Ilei, but there must then be some significance in the use of his patronymic. Nechtan's other brother through Der-Ilei, *Ciniod*, was killed in 713. Much later in Nechtan's reign we hear of the death of Nechtan's *exact(at)ores* at the battle of Monid Carno (AU 729.2), among whom were Finguine son of Drostan and Finguine's son Feroth. It seems possible that Finguine was a brother of Talorc(an); his position under Nechtan may imply that he was a more loyal half-brother who may have been awarded stewardship of Atholl. In this scenario, he may not have possessed the claims to the kingship through Der-Ilei that Talorc(an) did, making him a more trustworthy agent of government.⁴⁸ Feroth could be



Genealogy B

⁴⁷ (*continued*) this the fact that Drost was expelled from his kingship in 672, and could easily have been deprived of his wife at that point, as a mark of conquest; such things certainly seem to have happened later on in Ireland. This would make Bruide older on his accession; though the drowned Talorc(an) would be at the youngest a ripe 67.

⁴⁸ Employing the traditional reading of *exactator* here as 'tribute-collector, steward'; this is not the only reading, as forthcoming work by Alex Woolf will show.

unrelated. AU 711.3 notes the death in a battle in Manaw (*Mag Manonn*) of Finngwine mac Deile Roith, and it may be that he, rather than Finguine son of Drostan, was Feroth's father. Supporting this is the phrasing of the entry for AU 729.2, listing the *exactatores: Biceot m. Moneit 7 filius eius, Finguine m. Drostain, Feroth m. Finngwine 7 quidam multi*. If Feroth was the son of Finguine son of Drostan, we might expect it to read instead '7 *Feroth filius eius*'. Nonetheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that Feroth was also a relative of Nechtan's.

Something should be said here about the implications of the above analysis of the family of Der-Ilei for the date of Nechtan's accession to the Pictish kingship. Bruide mac Der-Ilei's death is recorded in AU 706.2. Ceolfrith's letter to Nechtan as king must have been written 709x716, and AU 713.7 makes Nechtan king, narrowing the range of dates for his accession to 709x713. A date of 710 for the letter is usually assumed, but this relates to Bede's placement of the episode of Ceolfrith's letter, which may not be precise. Archie Duncan has argued that the date of letter is better understood as *ca* 713/4, and whilst his reasoning is over-elaborate, the conclusion may be correct. David Kirby had earlier, and on other grounds, advocated a date of 715x716 for the exchange of letters.⁴⁹ Given the events of 713, when Ciniod, one son of Der-Ilei died, and another of her sons, Talorc son of Drostan, was held captive by a further son, Nechtan, can we be certain that it wasn't only on Ciniod's death and Talorc's successful quashing that Nechtan became king? We might even wonder about when (and where) he acquired the education that allowed him, in Bede's description, to study scriptures and *computus* assiduously. Was Nechtan, like his southern neighbour and older contemporary Aldfrith, a man not originally destined to be king?

Dargart and the aftermath of Dunnichen

Talorc(an)'s later status as king of Atholl makes it likely that his father's kindred were rulers there,⁵⁰ and that the power-base from which he operated in causing trouble in 713 was in Atholl. It has been argued above that Der-Ilei is likely to be of the 'house of Fortriu', and related to Bridei son of Beli. Whilst we have seen that the sons of Dargart belonged to a branch of Cenél Comgaill, it appears not to have been the branch then ruling in Cowal. We are certainly not, on the evidence available, entitled to think of Bruide and Nechtan's accession as a 'Dalriatan' conquest of the Pictish kingship, though no doubt it opened interesting lines of communication and cultural possibilities (for which see below). Where then, was the agnatic power-base of the sons of Dargart?⁵¹

⁴⁹ Kirby, 'Bede and the Pictish church', 19. The anonymous referee for the present article makes the cogent point that the arrival of Egberht in Iona in 712/13 may have given renewed impetus to the Easter question in northern Britain generally.

⁵⁰ Though this is not certain. Talorc and his kin could have been placed in Atholl by Bruide mac Der-Ilei; indeed, we cannot be entirely certain of Talorc's connection with Atholl until the notice of his death.

⁵¹ Kirby, 'Bede and the Pictish church', 24, suggested a special connection with the *Niduari* of Fife.

Information relating to Bruide mac Der-Ilei may give us some clues. If Nechtan was called ‘son of Dargart’ only in the case where his agnatic ancestry was important, might the same not be the case for Bruide? All the sources that refer to him as the son of Dergard/Dargart, either deal with his relationship with St Serf of Culross, and Bruide’s granting of land to him for monasteries at Culross and Loch Leven, or depend upon such material.⁵² Both Macquarrie and Taylor have made a good case for there being an actual historical connection between the establishment of Serf’s foundations and the reign of Bruide son of Dargart.⁵³ This suggests, perhaps, that the interests of Bruide’s father’s family were in the area of Culross, at least. There is other evidence to support this. In one reference to Serf, Culross is described as being located *i Comgell(g)aib*.⁵⁴ Alan Anderson suggested that this means ‘hostage lands’, but the word he derived this from is very poorly attested.⁵⁵ I would suggest rather that this derives from a population name based on the apical figure Comgall, perhaps a late *Comgellaig* (represented in the text in the dative plural) replacing or representing a variant on an earlier Cenél Comgaill.⁵⁶ Bruide’s patronymic is given in these instances, I would suggest, because the area from which he was donating lands was an area which his father’s people had taken over, rather than land which he controlled by right of his kingship of the Picts. That is why it is recorded in Serf’s dossier. Given that we have no precise dating information for Serf, moreover, it is not impossible that these episodes relate to a period before Bruide became king of the Picts, and after the death of his father, when his agnatic kin may have been of more relevance.

It is worth briefly examining the geographical context applied to Serf’s main monastery of Culross, and the territory called *Comgellaig*. In the passage in question, an aside in a tract on the mothers of saints, they are described as lying between the Ochils and the Forth, but as being ‘in Strathearn’. While in strict geographical terms this is impossible, Culross and Tulliallan, the neighbouring parish to the west, formed a detached part of Perthshire until 1891, when they were put into Fife, and the parish belonged to the diocese of Dunblane in the middle ages, the bulk of whose churches lay in Strathearn;⁵⁷ in the twelfth century the bishop of Dunblane was usually referred to as the bishop of Strathearn.⁵⁸

⁵² Macquarrie, ‘St Serf’, 140; Lawrie, *ESC*, 4.

⁵³ Macquarrie, ‘St Serf’, 132-3; Taylor, ‘Place-names and the early church’, 100-1.

⁵⁴ *CGSH*, §722.106; Macquarrie, ‘St Serf’, 124.

⁵⁵ Anderson, *ESSH*, i, 128. *DIL* lists one instance of *comgeill*, but it is not clear that this is not a scribal error for *congeill*, to which *DIL* refers us.

⁵⁶ For the spelling *Comgell* for *Comgall*, both in the nominative and the dative, see *Miniugud Senchasa Fher nAlban*, Bannerman, *Studies*, 41; Dumville, ‘Ireland and North Britain’, 201, §§8-9.

⁵⁷ Anderson, *ESSH*, i, 128; I.B. Cowan, *Medieval Parishes of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1967), 141; *Atlas of Scottish History to 1707*, ed. P.G.B. McNeill and H.L. MacQueen (Edinburgh, 1996), 352. I am grateful to Simon Taylor for clarification on these matters.

⁵⁸ I.B. Cowan and D.E. Easson, *Medieval Religious Houses: Scotland* (2nd edn, London, 1976), 204. Note that the earliest references to the bishop of this diocese in the twelfth century situate him in Muthill, with Dunblane only appearing as the main designation in the thirteenth century.

The relationship between Culross and Strathearn would thus appear to be an arrangement of some antiquity.

The extent of the territory which we are told was under the aegis of Serf of Culross is outlined in another of the Serf texts. In the Life of Serf, the saint is told by Adomnán that his familia ‘will inhabit the land of Fife, and from *mons Britannorum* as far as the hill which is called Ochil’ (*habitant terram Fif, et a Monte Britannorum usque ad montem qui dicitur Okhel*).⁵⁹ It is uncertain what *Mons Britannorum* represents here, though I would reject both Macquarrie’s proposed emendation to *Mare Britannorum*, and also Anderson’s suggestion that it is Dumbarton.⁶⁰ More likely is that it represents either the plateau of Slamannan which forms the southern edge of Stirlingshire, or the massif comprised of the Gargunnoch Hills and the Campsie Fells, known in northern British sources as *Bannauc*, whence the Bannock Burn. Either of these may have represented, from a Pictish perspective, the limits at some stage of British power, and hence acquired the name *Mons Britannorum*. There is probably some support for taking it as *Bannauc*, as this also defined the west-south-western limits of the diocese of Dunblane. The territory of Serf, then, might have included Stirlingshire and Clackmannanshire.⁶¹ Discounting Fife, which seems an excessive claim on the part of the Life, this corresponds most closely to the likely borders of the British region (perhaps kingdom) of Manaw, noted in various seventh-century sources, and still being fought over during this period by Picts and Bernicians (e.g., AU 698.2, 711.3). It certainly has no precise equivalent in any later diocesan or secular arrangement (though it is not dissimilar to the diocese of Dunblane), and nothing else in Culross’s history is suggestive of such a wide sway.

One plausible context for the creation of an ecclesiastical territory of this nature is the aftermath of 685 and the defeat of Bernician hegemony around the Forth after Dunnichen. It has been suggested that Serf’s establishment of Culross was a deliberate replacement for the former Northumbrian bishopric at Abercorn, and there is much that is tempting about this hypothesis. Importantly, this territory is likely to have been sword-land after 685, and battles in 698 and 711 suggest that this status was a continuing one. We may want to imagine that the victory over Berhtrid Beornhæth’s son recorded in AU 698.2 encouraged the creation of an ecclesiastical hegemony in this ‘buffer zone’, given that only after such a victory might the land be secure enough.⁶²

⁵⁹ Macquarrie, ‘St Serf’, 140.

⁶⁰ I find it unlikely that Dumbarton Rock would be described as a *mons*, and note the description in the same passage of the Ochil massif as a *mons*.

⁶¹ But see Watson, *CPNS*, 207-8.

⁶² Though in 711 the battle went the other way. At some stage the territory later called Calatria, between Avon and Carron, was hived off from the larger region of Manaw. Might this explain the absence of this region from the medieval diocese of Dunblane? Was this area, and Lothian generally, only briefly in the control of the kings of the Picts after 685? For discussion of this border area, and the family of the ‘Berhtingas’, see P.H. Blair, ‘The Bernicians and their northern frontier’, in H.M. Chadwick *et al.* (eds.), *Studies in Early British History* (Cambridge, 1954), 137-72.

This also provides a possible context for the name *Comgellaig* if, as I have suggested, it refers to territory established by a branch of the Cenél Comgaill. In the aftermath of Dunnichen, new lords would need to be planted in the sword-land, most acutely in the region of Manaw, which straddled the land-route to the north. It may be suggested that Dargart's branch of the Cenél Comgaill was the secular power invested in the domain in which Culross was subsequently founded. Whilst annals and chronicles view the conflicts of Northumbrian noblemen in the area as having been against Picts, the territory as a whole was no doubt under the overlordship of the kings of the Picts. In this context, it may be that the relationship between the area around Culross and Strathearn in Perthshire relates not just to Serf and his domain, but also to secular relationships between the lords of this area and the holders of Pictish kingship, with its royal power-base in Strathearn, from *ca* 697–729.⁶³

So far, so speculative. We are entitled to ask for corroborating evidence for Cenél Comgaill intrusion into these regions whether Manaw, the area around Culross, or Strathearn generally. Perhaps the most prominent signal of the influence of people from Cowal on these regions is the importation at some stage of the cults of various Cowal saints into Strathearn. It may be necessary to qualify 'Cowal saints' here: the saints in question belong to the fringes of the territory putatively ruled by Cenél Comgaill in Argyll, as well as to Bute, and to western Loch Lomondside. These include St Bláán (Blane) of Bute, also of Dunblane; St Cattán of Bute, also of Aberuthven; Mo-Chessóc (St Kessog) of Luss, also of Auchterarder, Comrie and Callander; and Modan of Glendaruel and Rosneath, possibly also of Falkirk.⁶⁴ It may be relevant to note also the putative St Glaisne or Glas of Kilmaglass in Strachur, who could be connected with the two Kinglassie parishes in Fife.⁶⁵ There are, of course, other possible scenarios that would see the transference of such cults from west to east, but the time of the ascendancy of the family of Dargart in the kingship of the Picts seems a highly likely one.

Clearly, there are some grey areas in between Cowal and the region around Culross and Strathearn. When did Gaels first move, we might wonder, into the area around Loch Lomond, and Menteith? There is certainly evidence of tension between Gaels and Britons in the Lennox (vale of Leven) in AU 704.1, at 'Lorgg Eccler' in AU 711.5, and at 'the stone

⁶³ Even if this is right, Dargart and his family were probably not the only families involved in the reclamation of Manaw, cf. AU 711.3 for Finguine mac Deile Roith; his brother Gartnait is noted at AU 716.2.

⁶⁴ Watson, *CPNS*, 273, 277-8, 289-90. With regard to Dunblane, Aberuthven, Auchterarder, Comrie and Callander, it is notable that these were parishes of Dunblane diocese in the middle ages (see Cowan, *Medieval Parishes*, s.n.).

⁶⁵ Watson, *CPNS*, 305, 320 for forms; also Taylor, 'Place-names and the early church', 106. Watson takes Kilmaglass as < *Cill mac Glass* 'the church of the sons of Glass', and the Fife examples as 'church of the burn'; Taylor concurs on the Fife names. I am less certain that we should rule out a saint named Glas or Glaisne: see *CGSH*, §705.140 for *Glaisne*. Note also a saint *Mac-Glais*, §710.11. This is especially true given the overwhelming predominance in Scotland of the pattern *cill* + saint's name in *cill*-place-names.

called Minuirc' in AU 717.5 and this could represent eastward movement from Cowal, though it need not. Three pieces of place-name evidence may be drawn in to support the idea of some form of Gaelic settlement in this area by Gaels from Cowal, though both could be interpreted in other ways. Two of these relate to Gaelic place-names, those in *both-* and those in *gart-*, which have a suggestively restricted distribution in the central belt, limited mainly to the area of the former kingdom of Manaw, and the Lennox (essentially Dumbartonshire, Stirlingshire and Clackmannanshire, with some in northern Lanarkshire), with some outliers. *Gart*, meaning an enclosed field, is a reflex of Old Irish *gort*. Place-names in both *gort* and *gart(an)* are known from Ireland, and also from Argyll; there are also a few in Galloway. Nowhere, however, is such a thick concentration of place-names employing *gart* as a generic found as they are in this region.⁶⁶ *Gart*-names appear to stop almost precisely at the border of medieval Fife and Kinrossshire, with what significance it is not clear. There are large numbers in the medieval district of the Lennox, and some spill over into northern Lanarkshire. Thus, while they do not carry on into West Fife, the distribution of this element would appear to coincide in large part to the region of Manaw, with many also in the zone in between there and Argyll and Dumbarton, the name(s) and political affiliations of which at this and preceding periods are unrecoverable.

Both- has a similar distribution in the central belt, though it is much less widespread there, and is also known in northern Scotland. Simon Taylor, noting its presence as an ecclesiastical term in Wales, and its use in north-eastern Scotland and in this region in the names of parishes, has suggested that the term has a Brittonic background. That said, ecclesiastical place-names in *both-* are known from Ireland, and the bulk of the saints associated with *both-* names in the central belt are Gaelic. There are several parish-names in *both-* in the immediate vicinity of Culross, and like *gart-* they then extend away west through Stirlingshire and into the Lennox. Like names in *gart-*, they do not extend across the medieval borders into Fife. Taylor has suggested some connection with the work of Serf here, and the above consideration of the supposed extent of the sway of Culross may support this, though clearly they go beyond the boundaries described above. *Gart-* and *both-* might, then, be secular and ecclesiastical remnants of some moment of change in settlement. I would suggest that Cenél Comgaill intrusion into the area in the late seventh/early eighth century provides one suitable set of circumstances to explain this distribution.

⁶⁶ For brief comments, see Watson, *CPNS*, 198. My observations are based on substantial unpublished detailed research by John Bannerman (for some comment on Monklands Parish, see Peter Drummond, *Placenames of the Monklands* [Monklands Library Services Department, 1987]). It is to be hoped that a full report on those researches will some day see print, as whatever one makes of them, the names in *gart-* are remarkable in their distribution, and of great interest as settlement names. Dr Bannerman's view was that these names derived from a Gaelic settlement in the area of considerable antiquity, earlier than I am suggesting. I am grateful to him for allowing me sight of, and use of, his work.

It may well be countered that there are later contexts in which Gaelic movement into this area could be envisaged, or that there are other ways in which the restricted distribution of *gart*-names could be explained (suitable topography, social change, etc.), and I would not disagree. Nonetheless, the place-name record clearly indicates that substantial Gaelic settlement in this region happened at some point. The final piece of place-name information seems to me to indicate that at any rate some sort of Gaelic settlement had begun prior to Bede's time. This is the name he gives to the end of the Antonine Wall, *Peanfahel*, which must represent a combination of British *pen(n)* 'head, end' and Gaelic *fál* 'wall', in the genitive *fail* 'end of the wall'. This is now Kinneil, a fully Gaelic version of the name (< *cenn f(h)áil*) for which we also have the fully British version represented in other sources (*Penguaul*).⁶⁷ No very satisfactory explanation has been given to date of Bede's 'hybrid' place-name,⁶⁸ but I believe a context in which Gaelic settlers had become ensconced in the region around the Forth is a plausible one. It may be worth noting the gesture of land-claim made in the Life of St Serf: standing at Kinneil, Serf throws his crosier across the Forth, and it lands and bears fruit in Culross.⁶⁹

What I am suggesting, then, is that both Bruide and Nechtan, kings of the Picts from ca 697 to 729, were descended on their father's side from Cenél Comgaill; the evidence for this seems good. It is further suggested, more tentatively, that their branch of the family had been part of a settlement into sword-lands in the central belt, including the lands in which Culross lay, lands which were thereafter granted to Serf by Bruide mac Der-Ilei as part of the ecclesiastical reorganisation occurring in the region sometime after the end of Bernician hegemony. The evidence for this is highly inferential, but it helps to explain certain facets of both later developments and the consolidation of Pictish power after 685. Further speculation may be built on these conclusions, but it seems as well to cordon off what is solid evidence from what is more speculative. I would stress that, even if the idea of an eastern settlement of Cenél Comgaill be discarded, as I have no doubt it will be by some readers, we still must account for a situation in which two successive sons of a Cenél Comgaill side-branch had the power to control the Pictish kingship for

⁶⁷ D.N. Dumville, 'The eastern terminus of the Antonine Wall: 12th- or 13th-century evidence', *PSAS*, cxxiv (1994), 293-8.

⁶⁸ Though see Jackson, 'Pictish language', 143. It is notable that he states that 'The upper Forth had been in Gaelic hands for more than a century by Bede's time, and the presence of Gaelic settlers on the lower Forth north of the Wall in the early part of the eighth century is by no means unlikely.' I am not sure on what basis he made the first part of this statement, though I suspect he was thinking of the Life of St Berach, in which Aedán mac Gabráin is depicted at Aberfoyle (Watson, *CPNS*, 225). Aedán mac Gabráin's victory over the Miathi, probably of the region of Manaw, and Domnall Brecc's death at Strathcarron certainly indicate some form of tributary relationship or overlordship by Dál Riata in the sixth and seventh century, but need not imply settlement.

⁶⁹ Macquarrie, 'St Serf', 140.

three decades. In the case of Nechtan, if we credit Bede's evidence, his power, articulated through the church, was impressive.

Both Bruide and Nechtan, then, were part Gaels, and this has clear ramifications for the way in which we read the history of the early eighth century. It is no longer possible (and it was never advisable) to view the resolution of the Easter controversy in Pictland through ethnically-tinted spectacles. The expulsion by Nechtan in 717 of the *familia Iae* cannot have been an act of Pictish nationalism, driving Gaelic influence out from his kingdom: Nechtan was himself a Gael. Equally, however, it is possible that Bruide and Nechtan's ancestry was a conduit for church influence from the west, albeit Nechtan ultimately turned to Ceolfrith in search of a resolution. Certainly the fact that Bruide and Nechtan were on their father's side from a family long Christian means that there is even less reason than previously to reject Bede's description of Nechtan as a paragon of Christian kingship.

Nechtán's Reign

There is much that still needs to be investigated about Nechtan's reign, but an understanding of his ancestry should at least prevent one or two potential blind-alleys. The relationship between Adomnán and Bruide, and Dúnchad, a successor of Adomnán, and Nechtan have been invoked in the past.⁷⁰ There is much still worth exploring in this, and despite the exorcising here of the phantom 'Nechtán son of Drostan', the connection between Atholl and the various parties in Pictland is an intriguing and problematic one.⁷¹

That Pictland was a factionalised region is made clear by the four-way round-robin contest for the kingship that began in 724, perhaps a decade into Nechtan's reign. In that year he would appear to have retired to a monastery; Bede's description of him encourages us to consider whether it was a religious and self-motivated decision rather than a political decision made for him by one of his rivals. It was not a long career as a monk, or if it was, Nechtan managed to reconcile it with returning to an active role in the kingship, presumably out of dismay at the way things had gone. The story has been detailed before, but it may be worth returning to it once more, following AU's chronology, and retaining, for the moment, AU's variant spellings of names:

724 (AT) The entry into religious life⁷² of Nechtan, king of the Picts. Drust reigned afterwards.

⁷⁰ For instance, Taylor, 'Place-names and the early church'; Veitch, 'Columban Church'.

⁷¹ On this relationship see S. Taylor, 'Seventh-century Iona abbots in Scottish place-names', in D. Broun and T.O. Clancy (eds.), *Spes Scotorum, Hope of Scots: Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1999), 35-70; *idem*, 'Columba east of Drumalban: some aspects of the cult of Columba in eastern Scotland', *Innes Review*, li (2000), 109-30.

⁷² *Clericatus*: see D. Dumville, 'On editing and translating medieval Irish chronicles', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, x (Winter 1985), 67-86, at 74-5, for discussion of this problematic term.

725 (AU 725.4) Simul son of Drust is imprisoned.⁷³

726 (AU 726.1) Nechtan mac Deirile is imprisoned by king Drust.

(AT) Drust was cast from the kingdom of the Picts, and Elphin reigned in his stead.

728 (AU 728.4) The battle of Monidchroibh (Moncrieffe Hill) between the Picts themselves, in which Oengus was the victor, and many were slain on the side of king Eilpin. A woeful battle was fought between the same parties near Castellum Credi, where Elpin was put to flight.

AT: 'and Nechtan son of Derile took the kingship of the Picts'.

729.2 The battle of Monid Carno near Loch Loogde between the hosts of Nectan and the army of Oengus and Nectan's *exactatores* fell, i.e. Biceot son of Moneit, and his son, and Finguine son of Drostan, Ferroth son of Finguine and many others; and the adherents of Oengus were triumphant.⁷⁴

729.3 The battle of Druim Dergg Blathuug in the territories of the Picts between Oengus and Drust king of the Picts, and Drust fell.

(AT) 732 Nechtan mac Derile died.

There are some features highlighted by this account that are worthy of comment. We do not know the nature of the competition for the kingship, but it may well be that it continued the sort of competition between the sons of Der-Ilei suggested above. Thus, claimants from different power-bases may well have been staking their claims. Unfortunately, the chroniclers give us much less to go on for the ancestry of the claimants other than Nechtan (and earlier, Talorc), and the place-names, all but one unidentified, do not help in establishing the geography of these conflicts. On the one hand, it may be that we are dealing with individual members of Nechtan's court or clients asserting claims as Nechtan's star waned—this would support the notion that it was Fortriu's dominance that continued into the eighth century. On the other hand, if we think of the Pictish over-kingship as one which could be claimed by rulers of individual regions or kingdoms, we may suspect that men with bases in regions such as Atholl, Angus, Mar, Ross, etc., were edging in on the kingship vacated by Nechtan. We might read this as indicating the underlying fractiousness of Pictish kingship, yet the ultimate victor, Oengus (in Pictish orthography, Unust son of Uurgust) held at least as consolidated, and much more aggressive a hold of that kingship than his predecessors.⁷⁵ Thus, we should perhaps rather see some sort of clear

⁷³ As has been noted before (Anderson, *ESSH*, i, 211), *simul* here may be Latin, and we should perhaps read something along the lines of 'likewise, the son of Drust was imprisoned'. However, *Simul* is a plausible name. Jackson derives it from Latin *Similinus*, K.H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), 483 n.3. In Jackson, 'Pictish language', 165, however, he seems to have considered it a native name, if I understand him correctly.

⁷⁴ As noted above, a drastic and convincing reinterpretation of this entry is forthcoming from Alex Woolf. I retain the traditional reading here.

⁷⁵ See Woolf, 'Verturian hegemony'.

line of succession (from the house of Fortriu?) coming to an end, opening up a competition that could only be resolved by force.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the treatment of the chronicles from 724 to 729 is that it sharpens our sense of the chroniclers' interest in Nechtan and his family; the above-noted paucity of witness even to the fathers of most of the other claimants stands in direct contrast to the detailed listing of Nechtan's *exactatores*. Thus, even during the contest for the kingship, the interest in Der-Ilei's sons and their relatives and adherents continues.

Loose ends

This leads us on to several historiographical 'loose ends' that this study may help to clarify. The first is the interest in Nechtan's family of the chroniclers, just alluded to, almost certainly to be assigned to the compilers of the Iona Chronicle. The connection of all these people with Nechtan also explains why their deaths and names are recorded in the annals.⁷⁶ This family was of supreme interest to the annalists on Iona, not just because they were the family of the Pictish king, but also because they were Gaels. Equally, whatever one makes of the 717 *expulsio*, Nechtan's reign was an influential one for the progress of ecclesiastical practice in Iona.

Most especially in this context, Nechtan's ancestry may help to explain the tradition recorded in the eighth century by Iona annalists, that Conall son of Comgall, king of Dál Riata, had granted the island of Iona to Columba (though it may in any case have been true).⁷⁷ This tradition is then also no longer substantially in conflict with Bede's testimony that Bridei son of Meilchon, king of the Picts, granted Columba the island, at least in terms of the contemporary message each may have been trying to encode. It may be argued that both Bede and the Iona chroniclers were making similar political statements by ascribing to the predecessors of Nechtan mac Der-Ilei the granting of Iona. The annals achieved this by ascribing it to the Cenél Comgaill king of Dál Riata,⁷⁸ a genealogical predecessor, while Bede ascribed it to Nechtan's predecessor as king of the Picts. It should be noted, however, that both in so doing were implicitly connecting Nechtan with the patronage of Iona.

The above understanding of Nechtan's background also helps to make some sense of two other features of Bede's testimony on the Picts. First, as I mentioned earlier, Bede's one stated Pictish place-name, *Peanfahel*, in fact combined of both Pictish and Gaelic elements, can now

⁷⁶ Nicholas Evans points out to me that during this period only kings of the Picts are simply termed *rex* in the Annals of Ulster, without stating their place of kingship: cf. AU 713.7, 717.4, 726.1, 728.4.

⁷⁷ AU 574.2; see also Anderson, *Kings*, 20-2; Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1991), xxxi.

⁷⁸ Who may have been Nechtan's own ancestor, if it is taken that we should add Conall into the genealogy of Fíngen (see above).

be understood in terms of the hybrid and no doubt bilingual nature of the aristocracy of the very area in the early eighth century. That this was representative of *Pictish* language to Bede may indicate something about the most representative locales of Pictish communication with Northumbria during Bede's lifetime.

Finally, Bede's assertion that succession to the Pictish kingship was decided on during times of dispute by recourse to the female royal line is made utterly transparent if understood in the context of this period.⁷⁹ Notwithstanding any arguments about matriliney, this was precisely the situation for much of Bede's active career. Whilst Bruide mac Bili, whose mother was a daughter of Edwin, must have staked his claim to the kingship on his agnatic descent, during the 690s and straight through to 729 when Nechtan's defeat finally seems to have been secured, the kings of the Picts had inherited their position through the female line. Indeed, since much of the final portion of the Ecclesiastical History seems little updated from the perspective of the late 720s, and since Nechtan was still alive in 731, one could suggest that Bede here seems to support Nechtan's rights in the continuing struggle for the Pictish kingship.⁸⁰ It would not be the first time that Bede's monastery had given Nechtan's kingship literary support. On the other hand, Bede may here give us one brief ray of commentary on the struggles of 724–9. We may guess that Nechtan lacked offspring himself; the various claimants in this period may all, if we follow Bede precisely, have made better or worse claims through some chain of cognatic descent. At any rate, with the end of Nechtan's reign and the end of Bede's History, our brief window of detailed information on the Picts and their kings ends.

⁷⁹ Already noted in Woolf, 'Pictish matriliney', 149.

⁸⁰ This is also suggested by Ross, 'Pictish matriliney?', 17. Woolf's reinterpretation of AU 729.2 opens the possibility that Nechtan was still king when he died in 732.

Appendix A: The name *Der-Ilei*

If the first element is *Der-*, ‘daughter’, it would be useful to know what the second element was. Even more frequently than Gaelic names in *Mac-N*, names in *Der/Dar-N* have second elements which are suggestive of pre-Christian devotion (at least at the stage at which these names were first coined). This includes names of known gods (*Dar-Luga*, *Dar-Óma*, *Dar-Áine*), and other personal names, some with mythological resonances (*Der-Find*, *Der-Froích*, *Dar-Erca*, *Dar-Nisa*), names of trees, perhaps understood as in some sense supernatural beings (*Dar-Cáirthinn*, *Dar-Tinne*, *Dar-Í*), and perhaps in the case of *Der-(b)Fáil*, a reference to the flagstone of sovereignty at Tara. With regard to the ‘pagan’ pre-disposition of the names, we need not suppose that it was in any sense active in the minds of the namers, as Ó Riain (‘Misunderstood annal’, 562-5) appears to have done with respect to *Dar-Í* ‘daughter of yew(-tree)’ imagining that such a name precludes her being a nun! Most of the names given in note 17 above are found in lists of saints.

The forms noted above (n.11) allow the second element to be *-ile*, *-ili*, *-ilei* *-elei* (noting that these would all be genitive forms). *Der-* does not lenite, and the final *-r* allowed retention of historical initial /u/ in second elements that later developed to *f-*. Since apart from later king-lists the linguistic context of the appearance of the name is Gaelic, we may take the forms as we have them to be either Gaelic or Gaelicised. It is not clear whether writers took the second element (or the name in general) as an *io-* stem or an *ia-* stem, the fact that an *-ei* ending (a ‘moot’ ending as Ní Dhonnchadha has put it) appears in the king-lists that betray some Pictish orthography, and in the guarantor list to *Cáin Adomnáin*, where its ending is unique (*pace* Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán’s Life of Columba*, 60), may suggest that the second element was, or was thought to be, non-Gaelic.

The Andersons made some guesses in *Adomnán’s Life of Columba*, 60, describing it as ‘an Irish name, meaning “daughter of the Isla” or “daughter of Islay”’, but they seem to have wisely abandoned this view later on. While it is true that the island-name *Íle* supplies a reading of the second element, and that comparison with the pattern of names above might allow for a (personified?) island-name in this position, its first vowel is long, and some of the variant forms in *-eli*, *-elei* seem to militate against a long *i*. Anderson’s other suggestion connects it with the River Isla, one of the major rivers in Pictland, but its earliest forms seem to represent it as *Ilef* (Watson, *CPNS*, 513), and there is no trace in the personal name of a final consonant. D. Ellis Evans has discussed the problematic derivations suggested by Watson for both these place-names, in connection with Gaulish personal names such as *Il(l)ios*, *Il(l)iomaros*, etc., and has cast doubt on a derivation from a root **il-* ‘swelling’: D. Ellis Evans, *Gaulish Personal Names* (Oxford, 1967), 354-6. With memorable caution,

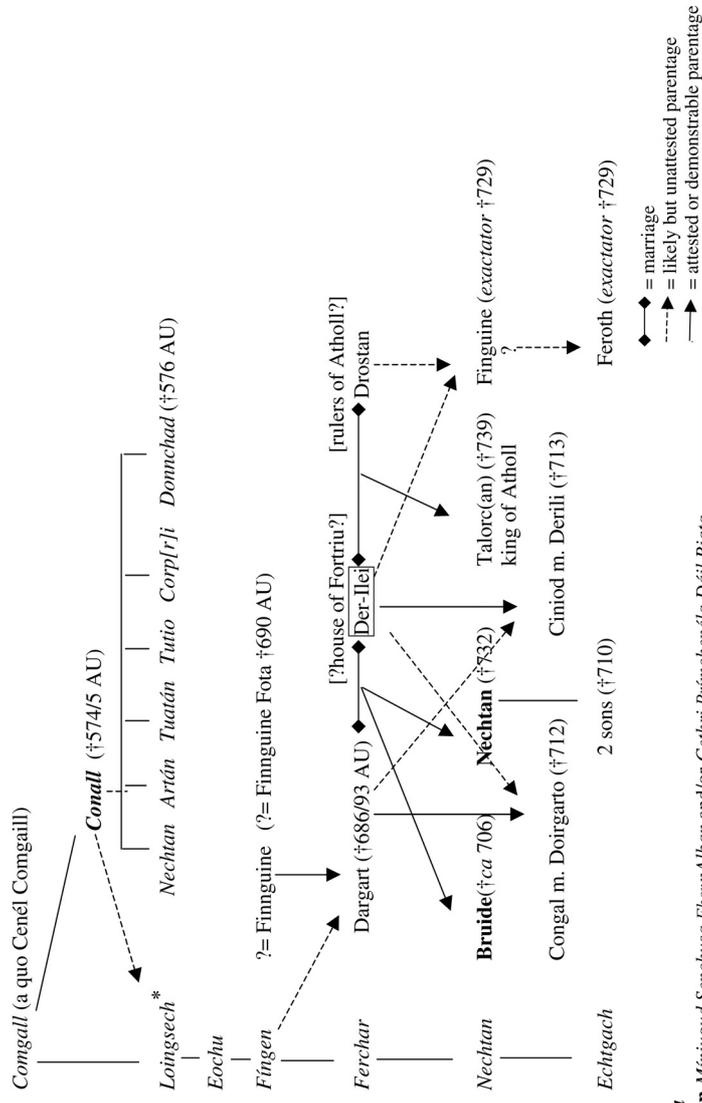
he concludes, 'I think we must accept the view that *il(l)io-* is one of a number of well attested Gaulish name elements which have no certain counterparts in insular Celtic at all.' We may in fact have in the second element of *Derilei* such a counterpart name-element, though this would still shed no light on its meaning.

Another element, attested in Gaulish names as *elu-*, and giving the Welsh prefix *el-* known from various place-names and topographic terms, is more promising (see Evans, *Gaulish Personal Names*, 347-9). It is cognate with the common Gaelic noun *il*, 'multitude'. In favour of this, perhaps, is the alternation noticeable in the sources between forms in *-elei* and *-il(e)(i)*. The precise meaning of the element would still prove elusive, however, and we could instead be dealing with a personal name based on Proto-Celtic **elu-*.

On the other hand, suitable personal names, probably not derived from either of the above roots, are known from Welsh. The names *Eli* and *Ili* are well attested in the Llandaff charters (Davies, *Llandaff*, 162, 174). The 'vultures of Elei' (*wytheint Elei*, MS reads *vythneint*) are mentioned in the Welsh poem *Pa wr yw'r porthor* in the Black Book of Carmarthen, in an Arthurian context which otherwise contains northern references, as to Cei's battles with dogheads on the mountain of Edinburgh: A.O.H. Jarman, *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (Cardiff, 1982), §31, l.10, and see p.114 for emendation; for a translation, see P. Sims-Williams, 'The early Welsh Arthurian poems', in *The Arthur of the Welsh*, ed. R. Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman, B.F. Roberts (Cardiff, 1991), 38-40, and p.63 n.28 for brief discussion of name, which is there taken to be the river name, now the Ely in Glamorgan.

It is difficult to come to any final decision about these possibilities, and all of them may be wrong. For what it is worth, the king-lists with the most appreciably Pictish orthography represent the second element as *-elei*, and I would on balance favour a derivation of the second element from a Pictish cognate of the Welsh *Eli*, *Ili*. However, the name overall seems to be Gaelic, as we do not otherwise have any sign of the personal nomenclature represented by *Mac-N*, *Der-N* names in the Brittonic languages. We could thus propose a Gaelic name of the *Der-N* variety, where the *N* was a personal name, perhaps of some mythological importance, of Pictish vintage.

Appendix B: The Genealogy of Nechtan, King of Picts



* Bannerman, Studies, 78, argues that a generation has been left out here, and that Conall was Loingsech's father