

**Máire Herbert**  
**'Observations on the Life of Molaga'**

First published in *Cín Chille Cúile* (Essays in honour of Pádraig Ó Riain) (Celtic Studies Publications, 2004), ed. J. Carey, M. Herbert and K. Murray, 127-140.

Published here with permission of the author.

# Observations on the Life of Molaga

Máire Herbert

RESEARCH on Irish hagiography is indebted to Pádraig Ó Riain in innumerable ways, and the present study is no exception.<sup>1</sup> The general obscurity surrounding the Munster saint, Molaga, is illuminated from a variety of angles by Professor Ó Riain's work. We find stimulating thoughts on the prehistory of the saint's cult, as well as discussion of the manuscript transmission which the Life of Molaga shares with the early vernacular Life of Finbarr.<sup>2</sup> Information concerning the pedigrees in the Life is provided by the indispensable *Corpus* of saints' genealogies.<sup>3</sup> The range of Pádraig Ó Riain's studies, moreover, provides insight into the multi-layered character of the saint's remembrance. A brief survey cannot encompass the whole of this subject. I have chosen, therefore, to focus on the content of the only known Life in the saint's hagiographical dossier, the vernacular *Betha Molaga*.<sup>4</sup>

Molaga's Life does not fit the conventional hagiographical mould. Indeed, the seventeenth-century cleric, John Colgan, felt obliged to change the order of the text for the inclusion of a Latin version in *Acta sanctorum Hiberniae*.<sup>5</sup> Canon

---

1 Academic footnotes, however, cannot adequately acknowledge a wider indebtedness to Pádraig for generous support and friendship throughout our years as departmental colleagues.

2 'Traces of Lug in early Irish hagiographical tradition', *ZCP* 36 (1977) 138–56; *Beatha Bharra, Saint Finbarr of Cork: the complete Life*, ITS 57 (London, 1994) 40–52.

3 *CGSH* §§217–9 and introduction, §20.

4 Unless otherwise stated, reference is made throughout to the published text, 'Betha Molaga' ed. J.G. O'Keefe, *IrT* 3 (1931) 11–22. The text is that of Brussels MS 2324–40, ff 130–4, with variants provided from BFer. ff 60a–61c, and RIA MS A iv 1, 41–52.

5 J. Colgan, ed. *Acta sanctorum veteris et majoris Scotiae seu Hiberniae . . . sanctorum insulae*, I (Louvain, 1645; repr. Dublin, 1947) XX Ianuarii, 145–51. Colgan's remarks preface the notes at 148, col. 2. Micheál Ó Cléirigh, scribe of the Brussels copy, was himself unsure whether the work was complete, stating at the end: *má atá nísá mó do bethaid ag Molaga ní fhuarusa ní*

O'Hanlon, in the nineteenth century, appeared equally uneasy with the transmitted work, and preferred Colgan's revised order of narration to that of the original.<sup>6</sup> Is the text as imperfect and incomplete as its hagiologists imply? We have no means of knowing if anything was lost. However, what remains may be read as a coherent piece of advocacy.

The opening chapters of *Betha Molaga* contain standard hagiographical matter, details of the saint's genealogical background, the circumstances of his conception and his pre-natal fame (§§1-5).<sup>7</sup> The narrative of Molaga's baptism follows, as expected (§6). However, the text then passes directly to episodes of the saint's adulthood. Molaga's ability to resuscitate the dead is the subject of §§7-8, the latter also establishing his close links with powerful Munster rulers. We see the saint intervene on behalf of the Munstermen in dissuading a king from retirement. In return, Molaga's lands were freed from secular imposition. Moreover, Molaga obtained the king's submission and generous offerings, reciprocated by the promise of spiritual rewards for Munster rulers (§§9-10). The king of Gabra who trespassed on Molaga's territory was confronted by the angry saint and brought to abject submission (§11). Inhabitants of Corcu Baiscinn were saved from a plague which had devastated much of the population (§12).

A distinct turning-point in the Life is evident in the following chapters. Molaga's kinsman and local secular ruler, Cuanu mac Cailchín, challenged to a demonstration of generosity by three druids of Guaire, king of Connacht, granted them their demand, namely, the goods of Carn Cuillenn, which was Molaga's premier ecclesiastical settlement. Not only did the intruders take what was granted, they razed the site and killed its inhabitants, save one pregnant woman whose unborn child was to be Cuanu's slayer. Verse, purportedly a druidic prophecy of the destruction, reiterates the event. We are then told how vengeance was visited on Cuanu's territory of Liathmuine. Infernal lightning ignited the land, and would continue for a long time, until peace was made with Molaga (§§13-15).

As a result of the destruction, moreover, Molaga quit his home territory, and went to Ulster, and thereafter to Alba, demonstrating his wonderworking in both areas (§§16-17). After punishing a disrespectful servant at St David's, the Irish saint commemorated his friendship with David by assuming the name of the

---

*budh mó ina so san seinliubar* (see *IrT* 3, §20, n. 6).

6 J. O'Hanlon, *The Lives of the Irish saints*, 10 vols (Dublin, 1875-1903) at January 20, vol 1, 336-56.

7 Reference is made to the chapter numbers of published text. The spelling of personal names has been standardized. I have chosen to refer to the saint as 'Molaga', the most consistently-used version of the name.

Welsh servant, Molaga, instead of his original name Láichín (§18). Having received a bell from David in token of their alliance, Molaga set out for Clonmacnoise, on the instructions of an angel. He landed in Dublin, where he healed its ruler, receiving tribute in return, as well as the grant of the church of Lann Bechaire in Fine Gall (§19).

Molaga's Fir Maige kin learnt of his arrival in Clonmacnoise, and sought his return with promises of large offerings. Delegations from men and from youths did not succeed, but the women came, bared their breasts, and promised the fulfilment of all that had been offered already, along with their additional offering of fifty cows yearly, and a scruple on behalf of every individual. The final part of the Life tells of the saint's return, accompanied by the women. The Fir Maige Féne assembled at Tulach Míin to meet him, affirming that they would deliver all that had been promised to Molaga and to his successors forever (§20).

The Life reflects the reciprocal relationship between saint and society, especially that between the saint and the people amongst whom he had established his churches. In return for services as intermediary with the supernatural, the saint was entitled to the support of the secular community. In practical terms, this support was most usually demonstrated by physical protection of ecclesiastical interests, and by payment of dues and tribute to the saint's contemporary successors. Such interaction between saint and society is an important aspect of Irish vernacular hagiography of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. However, *Betha Molaga* is unique in its dramatic focus on the breakdown and restoration of relations between the local patron and his people. The first half of the Life establishes Molaga's genealogical links with the Fir Maige Féne and his associations with prominent Munster leaders. It demonstrates the saint's miraculous power to bring succour or punishment. Thereafter, the destruction of Molaga's site through the capitulation of the local ruler brings physical retribution on the land, as well as the loss of the saint himself. Only after a period of exile, and a process of entreaty, humiliation, and offerings, does Molaga consent to return.

Throughout medieval Europe, in a situation in which ecclesiastical communities lacked other means of enforcing secular co-operation, punishment or withdrawal of favour by the saint was commonly invoked as a means of redress. Liturgical expressions of saintly disfavour are attested in various continental sources, particularly in the period from the late tenth century to the end of the twelfth century.<sup>8</sup> In Ireland, there is evident promotion of a similar

---

8 P. J. Geary, 'Humiliation of saints', in Geary, *Living with the dead in the middle ages* (Ithaca & London: Cornell U.P., 1994) 95-115.

understanding that saints were quick to chastise offenders. As well as hagiographical statements of punishment through saintly curse, we have instances in contemporary annals of the eleventh and twelfth centuries where violent deaths of malefactors are interpreted as the outcome of curses of outraged saints.<sup>9</sup> Continental rituals of *clamor* and of humiliation of relics reflect disapproval of secular offence by withdrawal of access. Liturgies involving removal of saints' relics and denial of approach to their shrines are not attested in Ireland.<sup>10</sup> However, the theme of the holy man's withdrawal is certainly articulated through another medium in *Betha Molaga*.

The perspective of the Irish hagiographer is evidently that of a partisan of Molaga's interests. His particular focus is on the saint's interests in Munster. Asserting the reciprocal obligations of those who benefited from Molaga's presence or intervention, the hagiographer sets out the entitlements of his subject in a quasi-legal manner. When the freeing of the saint's ecclesiastical domain from secular imposition is demanded of the Munstermen, the extent of the privileged area is specified by boundary clauses, and guarantors of the transaction are nominated from church and state (§9). Alms to Molaga from the king of Munster are detailed in the form of yearly payments, and precedence is asserted for the claims of Molaga's bell over all others save that of Patrick (§10). The Life thereby depicts a contractual relationship between church and state. The saint fulfils his duty of care, but when the corresponding obligation of protection is abrogated by the secular power, punishment by saintly withdrawal follows (§§16-19). Restoration of relations at the close of the Life is signalled by another formal agreement, with specification of the yearly dues payable by the saint's Fir Maige kin to Molaga and to his earthly representatives forever (§20).

*Betha Molaga*, therefore, functions as a kind of cartulary, incorporating records of the prerogatives of the saint's community, and of the sanction that follows secular default. Yet it is also the work of an author well versed in hagiographical and literary lore. The ordering of the text, viewed as defective by later scholars, appears rather as deliberately designed to convey authorial purposes. It is characteristic of many Irish saints' Lives that their subjects are represented as founding churches in various locations, and forging relations with other saints. Such narratives thereby document saints' cult sites and ecclesiastical alliances. In addition to its Munster focus, *Betha Molaga* contains narratives reflecting its

9 See, for instance, W. Stokes (ed.), *Lives of saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford, 1890) ll.1940-53, 2309-29, 2647-7; C. Plummer (ed.), *Bethada náem nÉirenn*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1922; repr. 1968) 17.31, 40.82-41.83; *AU* 1007.8, 1015.7, 1035.4, 1109.7, 1123.2; *ATig.* 1065, 1103, 1114, 1120, 1130, 1131; *AI* 1108.4, 1121.7.

10 See Geary, 'Humiliation', 106-7.

subject's associations with Ulster, Fingal, and Clonmacnoise, and with St David's in Wales. However, the hagiographical presentation of Molaga's travels to all of these locations is not set within the expected frames of foundation circuit or pilgrimage. Instead, it is presented in a context of departure in high dudgeon from his homeland, bringing his saintly efficacy elsewhere. The narrative progress of the saint to various kingdoms and ecclesiastical sites is deliberately fractured to reflect a caesura, a breach in relations with Fir Maige Féne, Molaga's own people, amongst whom his chief church was sited. Thus, the Life cannot progress in linear fashion to the saint's death. Rather, resolution must be reached in the saintly stand-off with kin and homeland.

What sources did the author of *Betha Molaga* use in the creation of his narrative? Following the structure of the Life itself, the Munster episodes (§§11-15, 20) may be differentiated from those of the saint's self-imposed exile (§§16-19). Almost all the characters associated with Molaga in the Munster episodes are traceable in the historical record.<sup>11</sup> Some are also the subjects of important story-traditions evidently known to the hagiographer.<sup>12</sup> The figure who is absent from these sources is Molaga himself. The genealogical information of *Betha Molaga* establishes its subject as a younger kinsman of Cuanu mac Cailchín of Fir Maige Féne, whose death is recorded in the Annals of Inisfallen in the year 646. This association thereby places the saint in a well-documented seventh-century milieu. Yet we do not appear to have any independent historical or genealogical record of Molaga in this context. Thus, while *Betha Molaga* establishes its subject's credentials as a seventh-century saint of Fir Maige Féne origin, did this achievement owe more to the hagiographer's creativity than to historicity?

The primary genealogical data linking Molaga with Cuanu mac Cailchín (§1) not only provided social and historical context, but also brought important literary associations in its wake. The issue of central concern in *Betha Molaga*, the collateral damage to ecclesiastical interests from ill-judged royal generosity (§13), draws on traditions about the competing claims of Cuanu and of Guaire Aidne as outstanding gift-givers.<sup>13</sup> The story-cycle centred on Cuanu's seventh-century antagonist, Guaire, in turn seems to have played a significant role in the hagiographer's creative scheme. For example, the churchmen who prophesy the birth of Molaga, and who are subsequently central to the narrative of his baptism, Cuimmín(e) Fota and Comdán Mac Dá Cherda figure prominently in

11 Annal obits include those of Cuanu mac Cailchín(e) *AI* 646; Cathal mac Áeda, king of Munster, *AI* 628; his son, Cui cen máthair, *AI* 664, *AU* 665; Guaire (Aidne) *AI*, *AU* 663; Cumín(e) Fota *AI* 661, *AU* 662; Mac Da Cherda *AI* 645, *ATIg* 640.

12 S. Ó Coileáin, 'The structure of a literary cycle', *Ériu* 25 (1974) 88-125, at 122.

13 See, in particular, M. O Daly, 'Mesce Chúanach', *Ériu* 19 (1962) 75-80.

the cycle of tales linked with Guaire. Indeed, Séan Ó Coileáin has rightly called attention to the consistency of reference to a range of personnel from the Guaire cycle in *Betha Molaga*.<sup>14</sup>

It would appear, however, that the hagiographer was not relying solely on the story-material for his depiction of the seventh-century context of Molaga's career. For instance, he must have had some historical documentation to establish the names of seventh-century figures such as the kings and abbots who act as guarantors of the freedom of Molaga's territory (§9).<sup>15</sup> Perhaps his sources included succession lists in addition to, or instead of, annals. This might explain one significant lapse (§11) whereby Flann mac Eirc, king of (Uí Chonaill) Gabra, whose obit is recorded in the year 762, is brought in contact with the Munster king, Cui cen máthair, whose death occurred in 660s.<sup>16</sup>

Whether his characters are drawn from story or from history, however, the hagiographer skilfully draws on his evident knowledge of literary tradition to build up the narratives. For example, the genealogical data of the Life (§1) incorporates the tradition that Fir Maige Féne, the saint's kin, descended from Mog Ruith.<sup>17</sup> The hagiographer does not, of course, advert to Mog Ruith's legendary roles as pupil of Simon Magus, and participant in the execution of John the Baptist.<sup>18</sup> Yet traditions about these figures appear to be seamlessly transferred into the text. Thus, the circumstances of Molaga's birth, as the prophesied child of aged parents, recall the birth-story of John the Baptist.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the saint is depicted as a *seachtmbíosaidh*, a seven-month child, a designation also applied to Simon Magus (§§2-4).<sup>20</sup>

At times, early Irish storytelling provides narrative *topoi* unconnected with the *dramatis personae*. The motif of the king of Gabra's prostration before the saint's

14 Ó Coileáin, 'The structure', 94-108, 120-22.

15 These are named as Cuan mac Amalgaid, king of Áine Cliach (*AI* 641), Conaing ua Dairthil, comarba Ailbe (*AI*, *AU* 661), Cui cen máthair (*AI* 664, *AU* 665), Ruisine mac Lapai, comarba Bairri (*AI* 686, *AU* 687).

16 *AI* 762 (see also *AU* 763. 6) and n. 14 above. There is uncertainty about the form of the name of the Munster king Cui/Cú cen máthair. See, for instance, *AI* 664 (*Cui*) and *AI* 666 (*Con* as genitive of *Cú*). *Betha Molaga* (§8) makes a point of relating that the ruler was named from his cry as a motherless child, hence it is possible that *Cui* is the earlier form.

17 See also *CGH* 157.36, 326 e 26; D. Ó Corráin, 'Creating the past: the early Irish genealogical tradition', *Peritia* 12 (1998) 177-208, at 194-6, 208.

18 *CGH* 157.36-40; K. Muller-Lisowski, 'Texte zur Mog Ruith Sage', *ZCP* 14 (1923) 145-63; *eadem*, 'La légende de St Jean dans la tradition irlandaise et le druide Mog Ruith', *ÉrC* 3 (1938) 46-70

19 Luke 1.5-25.

20 *MD* iv, 186-7.

chariot as a sign of submission (§11) is attested elsewhere in hagiography,<sup>21</sup> but the primary exemplar in an Irish context is probably the scene of Cú Chulainn's submission to Fergus in *Táin bó Cuailnge*.<sup>22</sup> A further parallel increases the likelihood that the author of *Betha Molaga* was familiar with the material of the *Táin*. In the account of the appeals for the saint's return made by the Fir Maige Féne (§20), the tripartite nature of the episode, and the saint's submission when confronted by bare-breasted women, recalls the well-known account of the taming of Cú Chulainn's youthful frenzy.<sup>23</sup> Here the hagiographer subtly adapts the scene so that it reflects the intensity of the supplication rather than the disconcerting of the saint.

Over all, a combination of genealogy, narrative tradition, and quasi-legal documentation establishes Molaga's position as a seventh-century Munster patron to whom obligations were due from his native territory. Yet *Betha Molaga* also depicts a saint whose influence is shown as extending far beyond Munster. We have noted already how Molaga's travels are set in the context of his shunning of his homeland. Yet his destinations, the north of Ireland, Britain, Dublin and Clonmacnoise, do not appear to have been chosen fortuitously. Rather, they reflect information about the saint's cult which, to a degree at least, is validated by sources independent of the Life. The hagiographer's access to pre-existing traditions about Molaga is most strongly suggested by the content of these episodes (§§16-19). While inevitably bearing the imprint of the author's design and of the circumstances of his composition, this material appears distinct from the Munster material in the Life.

In the light of the Life's seventh-century Munster setting, the depiction of Molaga's visiting St David at Cell Muine (§18) presents a chronological difficulty.<sup>24</sup> The episode might be categorized simply as an example of the well-attested hagiographical *topos* of association between David and Irish churchmen.<sup>25</sup> A particular feature of the Molaga-David encounter, however, is the sealing of a pact of friendship between the two saints by a name-change. The Irishman, originally Láichín, assumed the name Molaga, which was the name of David's servant. Name-exchange as a sign of ecclesiastical friendship is not usual, and it may be significant that our other Irish example also involves the swapping of a radical form for a hypocorism, without any indication given that the names are

21 For example, in the *vita* of Áed mac Bricc in W.W. Heist (ed.), *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi* (Brussels, 1965) 167-81, at 170.9.

22 *TBCi*, ll. 1361-77.

23 *Ibid.*, ll. 810-21.

24 For David's obit, see *ATig.* s.a. 588, *AI* 589.

25 It is found, for instance, in Lives of Finnian of Clonard, Finbarr, Senán, and Máedóc.

formally related.<sup>26</sup> We can only speculate as to whether particular significance attaches to the Welsh context of the adoption of the hypocoristic form Molaga in our text. The narrative immediately following (§19), depicts the saint's onward travel to Dublin, where its ruler grants him the site of Lann Bechaire (Breemount, beside Balbriggan), a site associated with Modomnócc's transportation of bees from Wales to Ireland.<sup>27</sup> Molaga's commemoration is still well-attested in this area. Does the *Lann* name of Molaga's site, and its stated connection with Modomnócc, a disciple of David, offer further indication that Molaga's associations had a British aspect?<sup>28</sup>

What of the Ulster connections represented in *Betha Molaga*? There are tantalising pieces of evidence which suggest that Molaga's hagiographer did not arbitrarily name *Coindre i nUlltoib*, Connor in County Antrim, as the saint's first destination after quitting Munster. Apart from being a prominent church in the furthest reaches of Ireland, Connor had southern associations, commemorating the patron of Lann Elo (Lynally, Co. Offaly) well into the eleventh century, as indicated by annal records of churchmen designated as successors of Mac Nisse and Colmán Elo.<sup>29</sup> Cult evidence of saints called Colmán in Molaga's Munster homeland cannot automatically be taken to refer to Colmán Elo,<sup>30</sup> nor are we given any clue as to the identity of the shadowy Mocholmóc (a hypocoristic variant of Colmán), who makes an unexplained cameo appearance in *Betha Molaga* (§8). However, even in the last century, one of Molaga's leading churches, Aghacross in north Cork (Carn Cuillenn in the Life), held its fairs on 20 January, Molaga's feast, and on 3 October, one of two feasts of Colmán Elo.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, there seem to be some onomastic indications of Molaga's northern presence. To the north of Connor, by Murlogh Bay, is a site called Kilmologe.<sup>32</sup>

26 See P. Russell, 'Patterns of hypocorism in early Irish hagiography', in J. Carey, M. Herbert & P. Ó Riain (eds), *Saints and scholars: studies in Irish hagiography* (Dublin, 2001) 237–249, in particular at 242 n. 24.

27 On the site, see O'Hanlon, *Lives*, 346–7, *Balbriggan: a history for the millennium* (Balbriggan & District Historical Society, 1999) *passim*. On Modomnócc, see J.W. James (ed.), *Rbigeysfarch's Life of St David* (Cardiff, 1967) §41; W. Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Óengusso céli Dé: the martyrology of Oengus the culdee* (London, 1905) at 13 February

28 See L. Mac Mathúna, 'Observations on Irish *lann* '(piece of) land; (church) building' and compounds', *Ériu* 48 (1997) 153–60.

29 *AU* 954, 956, 976, 1038.

30 The most prominent saint called Colmán in the area is, of course, the patron of Cloyne.

31 Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso*, 214, 220; J. Grove White, *Historical and topographical notes etc. on Buttevant, Castletownroche, Doneraile, Mallow, and places in their vicinity*, 4 vols (Cork, 1905–25) i, 11.

32 J. O'Lavery, *An historical account of the diocese of Down and Connor, ancient and modern*, 5 vols

There is no certainty about the identity of the saint commemorated here.<sup>33</sup> However, given that the subject of *Betha Molaga* is depicted as travelling directly from north-east Ulster to Alba (§17), the association of his cult with a site directly facing the Scottish coast is not entirely improbable.<sup>34</sup> In addition, Clonmacnoise, Molaga's final destination before returning to his home territory, also may be counted among sites having had cult associations, according to evidence noted by Pádraig Ó Riain.<sup>35</sup>

Cumulative indications, therefore, suggest that Molaga's hagiographer knew of commemorations in areas outside of Munster. It is a measure of his compositional skill that he manages to incorporate these traditions within the literary pattern of exile and return, so that the primacy of the saint's Munster connections always remains in focus. What do we know of the historical circumstances in which he worked?

Assessment of the text tradition of the Life suggests that the oldest witness, the copy in the fifteenth-century Book of Fermoy, was not the direct source of the copy made in the seventeenth century by Mícheál Ó Cléirigh. The latter's copy, in turn, was not that from which Domhnall Ua Duinnín made his version.<sup>36</sup> Each of the three witnesses is broadly similar, yet each also incorporates its own changes and modernizations to the text.<sup>37</sup> On consideration of the sum of evidence of the three manuscripts, my estimation is that *Betha Molaga* is a text of the twelfth century, which has been modified, in varying degrees, in each of its surviving copies.<sup>38</sup> We now need to turn to the internal evidence of the Life for further investigation of the context of its composition.

(Dublin, 1878) iii, 273–4; iv, 487–9.

33 See O'Lavery, *Down and Connor*, iv, 489; F. Mac Gabhann, *Placenames of Northern Ireland 7: County Antrim II* (Belfast, 1997) 186. The latter, however, does not refer to O'Lavery's work.

34 Note also the northern associations of Finnchú of Brí Gobann, a saint whose area of influence bordered on that of Molaga. See Stokes, *Lismore Lives*, 84–98, 231–46.

35 CGSH §707.882; Ó Riain, 'Traces of Lug', 144 n. 42.

36 The text is found in BFer. ff 60a–61c (F), Brussels MS 2324–40 ff 130–4 (B), RIA MS A iv 1 pp. 41–52 (A). For full discussion of scribal features and manuscript relationships in regard to their copies of the Life of Finbarr, see Ó Riain, *Beatha Bharra*, 40–52.

37 Note, for instance, variant readings from the final sentence of §3: *at umbal do Dia* F; *at umbla do Dhia iatt* B; *is umal do Dia iad* A. The original must have read *at umla do Dia*.

38 Diagnostic features (based on the sum of evidence from the three main versions) include retention of occasional infixed pronouns, e.g. *notsaerad* (§3), the usage *it bé* as a third person plural form (BFer. §9), agreement of plural copula and adjective (n. 34 above), and *dianat umla* §9; appropriate use of *ro* and *no* throughout. Final conclusions, however, can only be reached in the light of full editorial treatment of all manuscript witnesses.

As regards a *terminus ante quem*, the depiction of local Munster politics in the Life initially suggests a date of composition preceding the period of Norman intrusion.<sup>39</sup> We may tentatively go further. *Betha Molaga* represents Fir Maige Féne under local dynastic rule, represented by Cuanu mac Cailchín, whereas annal evidence suggests that, by the year 1161 at least, the territory had come under the lordship of Uí Chaím, the dynastic family descended from the Éoganacht of Glendomain.<sup>40</sup> The ecclesiastical politics of the Life, moreover, seem to indicate a date earlier than the Synod of Kells in 1152. In the diocesan arrangements of that synod, the territory of Fir Maige became part of the newly-created diocese of Cloyne, having previously been assigned to Emly at the Synod of Ráth Breasail in the year 1111.<sup>41</sup> While *Betha Molaga* is unconcerned with matters episcopal, it does reveal an orientation towards Emly,<sup>42</sup> whereas no reference is made to Cloyne.

The Life represents the kingship of Dublin in terms which suggest that its holder was Christian, and either Irish, or Irish-approved (§19). This indicates that *Betha Molaga* is unlikely to have been compiled earlier than the eleventh century, a dating further supported by the location of Molaga's Balbriggan site in Fine Gall, the onomastic term attested from the eleventh century onward for the area of Viking settlement in north county Dublin.<sup>43</sup> Such awareness of Viking Dublin, allied with the Munster orientation of the Life, suggests that a likely *terminus a quo* for *Betha Molaga* is the late eleventh century, the beginning of a period of Munster dominance of the kingship of Dublin.<sup>44</sup>

Indications thus far, therefore, suggest that the hagiographical work reflects a historical context generally compatible with the twelfth-century composition date already posited. *Betha Molaga* seems to be a product of turbulent times, which demanded a strong statement of the saint's rights. At its core is the destruction by Connacht agency of Molaga's prime church-site at Carn Cuillenn, through the

39 On Anglo-Norman establishment in the area see, for instance, P. MacCotter and K. Nicholls (eds), *The pipe roll of Cloyne* (Cloyne Literary and Historical Society, 1996) *passim*.

40 AFM 1161: *Aodb Ua Caoimh, tigherna Fer Muighe*. Note also MIA 1201: *Finghuini Ó Caim, ri Fear Muidhi*. See also D. Ó Corráin, 'Cathréim Chellacháin Chaisil: history or propaganda', *Ériu* 25 (1974) 1-69, at 16-18.

41 For discussion, see H.A. Jefferies, 'Desmond: the early years, and the career of Cormac Mac Carthy', *JCHAS* 88 (1983) 81-99, at 83-4.

42 One of the sureties for the freedom of the *termann* of Molaga is *comarba Ailbe* (§9).

43 The term *Fine Gall* is first attested in the annals in *AI* 1013. Irish domination of the kingship of Dublin begins with the reign of Diarmait mac Máel na mBó, who was killed in 1072. See, in particular, S. Duffy, 'Irishmen and Islesmen in the kingdoms of Dublin and Man 1052-1171', *Ériu* 43 (1992) 93-133, at 94-101.

44 *AI* 1075. See Duffy, 'Irishmen and Islesmen', 101-16.

culpability of the local ruler of Fir Maige Féne.<sup>45</sup> In twelfth-century terms, the many Munster incursions of Toirdelbach Ua Conchubair, king of Connacht, especially in the decade from 1118 onward, provide a likely context for the hagiographical representation.<sup>46</sup> The annals do not name all the churches which suffered in these incursions, but they record, for instance, that some seventy churches were plundered between Cashel and Tralee in the year 1121.<sup>47</sup> In the same year also, a notice of the destruction of the house of Ua Cáim by the Blackwater places the Connacht leader in the area of Molaga's ecclesiastical interests.<sup>48</sup>

It would not be justifiable, however, to focus on one particular set of events in a period in which there were recurrent Connacht incursions into Munster. Yet throughout the text of *Betha Molaga* there is a consistency in the manner in which events of the early twelfth century appear to be subsumed into hagiographical narratives. For example, the Life's representation of a Munster king, struck down by illness in the midst of his reign, and contemplating pilgrimage (§9) finds analogues in annal records of the reign of Muirchertach Ua Briain, king of Munster.<sup>49</sup> From the period of Muirchertach's reign we have reports of disease and famine, such as may be mirrored in §12 of the Life.<sup>50</sup> The hagiographical scenario of Molaga's departure from his homeland as a gesture of protest (§16) finds a parallel in the account of the departure of the bishop Máel Muire Ua Dúnáin from Munster in requital for the ousting of the ailing Muirchertach Ua Briain from his kingship.<sup>51</sup> The specification of *Fertas Chamsa* near Coleraine in connection with Molaga's northern travels (§16) recalls the specification of the same site in connection with a northern expedition of Muirchertach Ua Briain.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the careful calibration of Viking Dublin tribute as *pinginn gacha sróna*

45 As regards identification of the site, *Betha Molaga* §3 mentions travel 'go hAth Cairn Chuilind, risa n-abar Ath Cros aniu'. Moreover, *Ath Cros Molaga* (Aghacross) is named as church of the *tuath* of Uí Chúsraid in the tract known as *Cricbad an Chaoilli*, for which see J.G. O'Keeffe (ed.), 'The ancient territory of Fermoy', *Ériu* 10 (1926–8) 170–89, at 174.6; P. Power (ed.), *Cricbad an Chaoilli* (Cork, 1932) at 47, 52, 83–9.

46 *AI*, *AU*, *ATig.*, *MIA* 1118 and following entries; for discussion, see J. Ryan, *Toirdelbach Ó Conchubair 1088–1156* (Dublin: O'Donnell Lecture, 1966); Jefferies, 'Desmond', 85–92.

47 *AU* 1121

48 *MIA* 1121.

49 *AU*, *AI*, *ATig.* 1114, *AI* 1116.

50 *AI* 1113, *ATig.* 1114, *AU* 1116, *MIA* 1117.

51 *MIA* 1117.

52 *AU* 1101. The location is previously cited in relation to Brian Bóruma's northern travels, *AU* 1006. See also O'Lavery, *Down and Connor*, iii, 419–20; iv, 154.

(§19) shows awareness of Norse usage,<sup>53</sup> and it parallels similar usage in connection with Viking tribute in *Lebor na Cert* and in *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib*, both of which texts have been assigned to the reign of Muirchertach Ua Briain.<sup>54</sup>

Cumulative evidence, therefore, suggests that the era of hagiographical concern coincides with the latter years and aftermath of the reign of Muirchertach, a period which saw sustained Connacht intervention in Munster. The compilation of *Betha Molaga* may be set in the context of the instability which began with the king's illness and attempted deposition in the year 1114, and continued with succession struggles after his death in 1119. We have seen that hagiographical indignation is particularly roused by the fact that a Fir Maige Féne ruler gave *carte blanche* to Connacht despoilers of the property of their kin-saint. While the Fir Maige were evidently not sufficiently significant to merit notice in twelfth-century annals, the annals do reflect situations in which collusion of Munstermen with Connacht might be envisaged. For example, the Connacht king, Toirdelbach Ua Conchubair, himself sent ambivalent signals when he came south in the year 1118, purporting to take the part of the Munster ruler, Muirchertach Ua Briain, but instead making a treaty with his Meic Cárthaig rivals.<sup>55</sup>

The Life's resentment at local Fir Maige Féne authority, which had failed to protect the saint's interests, is balanced by a positive attitude to greater overlords, represented in the text by seventh-century Éoganacht Glendommach rulers. Molaga is shown as being particularly involved with the fortunes of Cui cen máthair, whose accession to Munster kingship is attributed to the saint's blessing (§8). The saint acts as intermediary for the men of Munster to ensure the king's continuance in office, and agrees to be the royal spiritual advisor, in return for grants and tribute (§§9-10). The hagiographer's focus on Éoganacht Glendommach rulers who had achieved the kingship of Munster was, of course, pertinent and flattering to their early twelfth-century representatives, the dynastic family of Ua Cáim.<sup>56</sup> There are indications that the Éoganacht of Glendomain may, indeed, have sought alternation of power in return for supporting Mac

53 The Old Norse term is *nef-gildi* (*DIL* s.v. *srón* (c)). See also J. H. Todd (ed.), *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaib: the war of the Gaedhil with the Gaill* (London, 1867) introduction ciii, n. 3.

54 M. Dillon (ed.), *Lebor na Cert*, ITS 46 (Dublin, 1962) ll. 1731-2; Todd, *Cogadh*, 50-51. For recent discussion of the dating of the texts, see M. Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib: some dating considerations', *Peritia* 9 (1995) 354-77; A. Candon, 'Barefaced effrontery: secular and ecclesiastical politics in early twelfth-century Ireland', *Seanchas Ard Macha* 14/2 (1991) 1-25.

55 *MIA* 1118. See Jefferies, 'Desmond', 85.

56 See Ó Corráin, 'Cáithbrím', 16-18.

Cárthaig, of the line of Éoganacht Chaisil, in the Munster succession struggle.<sup>57</sup> *Betha Molaga* asserts that alliance with the saint had been instrumental in the seventh-century success of Éoganacht Glendomnach. By implication, the saint's goodwill could pave the way for renewed success in the twelfth century.

Had the hagiographer read the signs that ambitious neighbours had designs on Fir Maige Féne? The Life of Molaga appears to be deliberately open-ended. Its final scene is that of the saint's rather reluctant homecoming, after promises of substantial annual tribute from his Fir Maige kin. Yet the Life also describes an alternative relationship with Éoganacht rulers. For those who uphold the saint's twelfth-century legacy, protection of ecclesiastical interests evidently takes precedence over sentimental family attachment. The hagiographer ensures that Molaga's earthly representatives are well placed to take advantage of shifting political circumstances. Fir Maige Féne are accorded an opportunity to regain favour with the saint, but Molaga's followers already have an exit strategy in place.

Indeed, Molaga's main churches are expressly associated with Éoganacht Glendomnach interests by the twelfth-century reviser of the tale *Cath Almaine*.<sup>58</sup> Here, Cathal mac Finguine, an eighth-century king of the dynasty, is represented as bestowing charitable offerings on the poor of Molaga's churches of Áth Chros (Aghacross), and Tulach Míin.<sup>59</sup> Thus, a statement from the perspective of the secular power asserts that these churches stood to benefit from the generosity of rulers of Éoganacht Glendomnach descent.

The political *fait accompli* of Éoganacht Glendomnach dominance of Fir Maige Féne seems to be reflected in a further twelfth-century document. This is the civil survey known as *Cricbad an Chaoilli*, a text apparently occasioned by 'some fundamental change in the political organization of the district'.<sup>60</sup> In fact, the onomastic title may be taken as describing a new political entity under a new, neutral, territorial designation.<sup>61</sup> Within the organizational structure described in the text, those of the line of Éoganacht Glendomnach are accorded primacy,

57 A. Bugge (ed.), *Caitbréim Cheallacháin Chaisil* (Christiana, 1905) §§5, 7; Ó Corráin, 'Caitbréim', 16; Jefferies, 'Desmond', 85

58 P. Ó Riain (ed.), *Cath Almaine*, MMIS 25 (Dublin: DIAS, 1978) ll. 184–6.

59 On Aghacross, see n. 45 above. There is no certainty about the location of Tulach Míin, identified in the Life as the place of the saint's education (§3) and the place where he was greeted by his kin on his return to his homeland (§20). Tulach Míin has been equated with Baunanooneeny by Grove White, *Historical and topographical notes*, 1, 243. On the site, see D. Power, *Archaeological inventory of county Cork*, 4/2 (Dublin, 2000) [14465].

60 O'Keefe, 'The ancient territory', 171. For details of both editions of the text, see n. 45 above.

61 Thus, topography rather than population is taken as the defining factor. On the name *Cricbad an Chaoille* see Power, *Cricbad*, 6–7, 56.

while Fir Maige Féne are never mentioned by name.<sup>62</sup> The *Crichad* text names Áth Cros Molaga as the chief church of Molaga's native *tuath* of Uí Chúsraid, now implicitly under changed lordship.<sup>63</sup> The destruction of this church (originally named Carn Cuillenn) had been a key concern of *Betha Molaga*. What was its subsequent history? Architectural remains from Aghacross bear witness to a building programme, including a Romanesque doorway, dated around the middle of the twelfth century.<sup>64</sup> Survivals of stone rather than of text, therefore, allow us to conclude that the Life of Molaga did, indeed, achieve a fitting sequel.

---

62 Power, *Crichad* §I; O'Keeffe, 'The ancient territory', §§2–3. Mention is made of Mog Ruith's association with the land, but those who claimed descent from him are not specified. Instead, the text goes on to discuss Éoganacht Glendomnach as 'the noblest' of the *tuatha*.

63 Power, *Crichad*, §III'; O'Keeffe, 'The ancient territory', §6.

64 T. O'Keeffe, *Romanesque Ireland* (Dublin, 2003) 231, 321. A full account of Aghacross church site is given in K. Hanley, M. Weaver & J. Monk, *An archaeological survey of St Molaga's church, Aghacross, Mitchelstown, Co. Cork* (Cork, 1995), incorporating O'Keeffe, 'The Romanesque portal' at 24–7. It is worth noting that a number of other north Cork churches have twelfth-century Romanesque features, including that of Killeenerner, equated with *Cell Aenambna*, chief church of Éoganacht Glendomnach (O'Keeffe, 'The ancient territory'; §3, Power, *Crichad*, §I; MacCotter and Nicholls, *Pipe roll*, 182 n. 106); Power, *Archaeological inventory*, [13882]. Is this building activity a demonstration of the contemporary power and patronage of the Éoganacht Glendomnach / Uí Chaim?