

**Máire Herbert**  
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## *Rí Éirenn, Rí Alban*, kingship and identity in the ninth and tenth centuries

*Máire Herbert*

**T**he latter part of the ninth century retrospectively appears to have been a crucial era for the development of kingship in these islands. While there has been substantial illumination of the events and outlook of the era within the Anglo-Saxon world (for example, Nelson 1993; Wormald 1994; Foot 1996), contemporary developments within the Gaelic world have not received equally close attention. To an extent, this is because the evidence has appeared to be less tractable. Yet there are sources which are amenable to scrutiny, and their testimony merits re-examination. The present study focuses on kingship among the Irish and among their kinsmen in north Britain in the ninth and early tenth centuries. Relying as far as possible on Irish contemporary records, I have sought to examine a single coherent body of evidence rather than to synthesize materials of varied date and provenance.<sup>1</sup>

Annal evidence from the late eighth century in Ireland suggests that the larger provincial kingships were already accruing power at the expense of smaller political units. Leading kings appear in public roles at church-state proclamations of socio-legal measures and at royal conferences with their peers (AU 779.4, 783.9, 784.8, 793.3). Indeed, in the early part of the ninth century the Munster ruler, Feidlimid mac Crimthainn, embarked on a sustained campaign to extend the power of his kingship. Moreover, as Feidlimid's strategy involved aggression against the Uí Néill and inter-

<sup>1</sup> The main historical narrative is based on the combined evidence of the Irish annals. The frequency of reference to the Annals of Ulster (AU) reflects the status of that text as the best representative of the annal collections for the period. My interest in a comparative study of Irish and Scottish kingship has been greatly informed by Marjorie Anderson's monumental *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland*, and her scholarly focus on primary sources has been an outstanding example.

vention in Armagh abbatial succession, this seems to indicate a contemporary perception that concentrated power lay in these institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Uí Néill status as Ireland's leading royal dynasty was based on the ancient prestige of the Tara monarchy as well as on extensive authority in the north and midlands of the country (Byrne 1973, 94). Alternation of power between its northern and southern branches, however, meant that the dynasty's internal concerns could be an impediment to effective external engagement. Lack of co-ordinated response to the challenge of the Munster king, Feidlimid, is a case in point. In the realm of Irish ecclesiastical life, Armagh's claim to primacy in the Irish church had begun to gain substance from the late eighth century (Herbert 1988, 63-4). Yet the furthering of ecclesiastical ambition through association with strong secular power embroiled the community in the enmities of Munster and Uí Néill during the following century (AU 823.5, 827.2, 831.8, 836.3).

While Ireland's most important institutions in church and state were being discomfited, Viking activity became a further complicating factor, in particular from the 830s and 840s when the intruders moved inland and established a continual presence in the country. Yet by the 840s there was an Uí Néill revival. Máel Sechnaill mac Maíl Ruanaid, of the southern branch of the dynasty, successfully took on Viking and Irish opponents, and gained Uí Néill overkingship in the year 846, just before the death of Feidlimid, the Munster ruler (AU 841.2, 845.8, 847.1). In the wake of the latter's aggrandizing ambition, Máel Sechnaill, with a combination of force and diplomacy, sought to extend his own power. A measure of his achievement is indicated by an annal entry (AU 860.1), which states that he led an army comprising hosts from Leinster, Munster, and Connacht, as well as from his home territory.

Did Máel Sechnaill simply achieve an ambition framed by the Munster king? Clearly Feidlimid's career had extended the power-horizons of other Irish rulers. However, Feidlimid had sought an enhanced role for his kingdom within an Irish political framework which did not take cognizance of Viking presence in the country. The designation of Vikings simply as *gennti* 'heathens' in annals of the early ninth century (cf. AU 812.11, 821.3), reflects an initial Viking impact in the ecclesiastical sphere rather than in the political (Jaski 1995, 314-15). Yet by the second half of the century, as Máel Sechnaill gained power, Irish secular society had become more complex.

As Vikings became component elements of the Irish population, the onomastic response in the annals is revealing. In the first place, ethnic spec-

<sup>2</sup> See AU between the years 823 and 847, and discussion in Byrne 1973 (211-29).

ification takes on new importance. The term *Góidil*, which originally had linguistic connotations (Charles-Edwards 1998, 76-9), is used as the Irish ethnonym, its oppositional term being *Gaill*, 'foreigners', a designation which had originally referred to Gauls. By the second half of the ninth century these terms are also being used compositely, so that *Gallgóidil* specifies those of mixed Viking-Irish parentage. Furthermore, Vikings resident in Ireland are differentiated from their overseas counterparts by the designation *Gaill Érenn*, 'the foreigners of Ireland' (AU 853.2, 856.3, 857.1).

Yet these ethnic designations are not necessarily indicators of political partisanship, for Vikings are already attested as acting in support of Irish rulers. Moreover, Máel Sechnaill himself is reported as having *Gallgóidil* in his army (AU 850.3, 856.3). How, then, could a political identity be characterized, since, in the case of Máel Sechnaill in particular, the affiliations of his followers transcended ethnic boundaries, as well as the boundaries of his own Uí Néill kingdom? In the year 858 the Annals of Ulster record an expedition by Máel Sechnaill *co feraib Érenn*, 'with the men of Ireland'. Thus, association with the island of Ireland bonded a heterogeneous royal following, and geography supplanted genealogy as a common identifier. That 'the men of Ireland' was a collective term applicable beyond the context of military hosting is attested, moreover, in an entry of the following year concerning a royal conference 'to make peace and amity between the men of Ireland' (AU 859.3).

Máel Sechnaill, the king represented as leader of 'the men of Ireland' is accorded the title *rí hÉrenn uile*, 'king of all Ireland', in his annal death-notice in the year 862. This acknowledges that his dominion extended beyond the traditional 'king of Tara' entitlement of his Uí Néill predecessors. Yet more than mere annalistic tribute is involved, for Máel Sechnaill is also styled *rí Érenn* on High Crosses in the Irish midlands. Indeed, the earliest known inscriptions on High Crosses in Ireland are those which record Máel Sechnaill's royal appellation together with his royal patronage. Thus, *rí Érenn* evidently represents the king's own approved designation, manifestly proclaimed on the country's most conspicuous Christian monuments (de Paor 1987, 140-43; Harbison 1994, 87-105).

Yet what Máel Sechnaill achieved at a personal level was not institutionally underpinned. Instead, established structure reasserted itself, as the northern ruler, Áed Finnliath, enforced the alternation of power between Northern and Southern Uí Néill by a show of force in southern lands, and by a symbolically-significant marriage to Máel Sechnaill's widow (AU 862.2; *Fragmentary Annals* 868, \*366).<sup>3</sup> In the course of his

<sup>3</sup> On the symbolic aspect, see Herbert 1992.

reign (862-79) Áed was successful against the Vikings in the north of Ireland, and he campaigned vigorously against Leinster. Yet interruptions in the annual holding of the Fair of Tailtiu, the principal Uí Néill assembly, reflect the king's lack of support from his Southern Uí Néill kinsmen (AU 866.4, 870.2, 873.6, 874.4, 876.3, 878.7). Internal rivalry within the dynasty was in tension with the concept of a greater kingship pioneered by Máel Sechnaill.

Indeed, after Áed's death Máel Sechnaill's son, Flann (Sinna) emphatically enforced Uí Néill alternation once more by an expedition into the north, and by marriage to Áed's widow Máel Muire (AU 882.1, *Banshenchas* 1930, 311). The contradictory impulses towards fracture and unity within the Uí Néill carried over into the ecclesiastical sphere. The head of the church of Armagh had been styled *caput relegionis totius Hibernie* (AU 874.3). Yet it is significant that this designation is recorded during the overkingship of Áed Finnliath, who had a royal dwelling at Armagh (AU 870.4). In effect, the community of Armagh was linked with Northern Uí Néill, and as such it was a target for attack by the Southern Uí Néill dynast, Flann, during his assertion of supremacy in the north (AU 882.1). The idea of an Armagh primacy of the Irish church, complemented by a powerful kingship over 'the men of Ireland' was undermined by dichotomous factors affecting both political and ecclesiastical institutions.

Yet the thirty-six year reign of Flann allowed some respite (880-916). Continuity with the era of his father, Máel Sechnaill, is emphasized in Flann's designation as *rí Érenn* in inscriptions on publicly-displayed works of art made under his patronage, on the Cross of the Scriptures in Clonmacnoise, and on the now-lost shrine of the Book of Durrow (Harbison 1994, 84-87; *Thesaurus* 1903, 289). The poem *Flann for Érin*, 'Flann over Ireland', composed around the year 885 by Máel Mura, *righfile Érenn*, 'royal poet of Ireland' is a unique contemporary statement in another medium.<sup>4</sup> Flann is depicted as heir to the exploits of a legendary Uí Néill predecessor, Tuathal Techtmar. Yet the representation of the conduct of Tuathal's kingship reflects the actuality and aspiration of ninth-century Irish sovereignty. The ancestral king takes hostages from all the provinces of Ireland, and compels their leaders to loyalty to his line forever. Thus, poetic testimony supports annal inference that the 'kingship of Ireland' was not constituted by territorial rule over the island. Rather,

<sup>4</sup> Two copies of this unpublished poem are found in the Book of Lecan (8vb, 296va). I am grateful to my colleague John Carey who first brought the material to my attention. A brief note on date and content is published in O'Rahilly 1946, 154.

it involved overlordship over Irish provincial rulers, and the right to mobilize their followers collectively as *fir Érenn*, 'the men of Ireland'.

Máel Mura's poem on Flann creates a historical pedigree for the ninth-century political following of a 'king of Ireland'. Moreover, another poem by the same author (*Leabhar Breathnach*, 220-71) emphasizes the co-existence of a differently defined Irish ethnic community, the *Goídil*. The poem, which opens with the interrogative *Can a mbunadas na nGoídel*, 'Whence is the origin of the Gaels', traces the ancestral history of the people from biblical beginnings until their arrival in Ireland, and it goes on to specify the manner in which all the main Irish population groups share common descent from these Goidelic ancestors.<sup>5</sup> This poem affirms that genealogy defined the ethnic community, and unified them across political allegiances and territorial divides.

Overall, Máel Mura's compositions encapsulate socio-political attitudes of the late ninth century, when the histories of Irish kingship and of an embryonic kingship of the Scots intersected. It is evident that contemporary learned thought considered the descendants of Irish settlers in Dál Riata to be members of the extended ethnic family of the *Goídil*. But what was their association with the Irish political world, and with the kingship proclaimed in *Flann for Éirinn*? Before proceeding to address the question, developments across the Irish Sea will be reviewed through the lens of the same primary sources which document Irish developments.

Eighth-century annals record hostilities between Dál Riata and the neighbouring kingdom of Pictland in which the Picts were dominant in the early decades. Yet a subsequent Dál Riata offensive *i Fortrinn*, in southern Pictish territory, is noted (AU 768.7). Is this an indication of eastward movement by the Gaels of the western seaboard, a process intensified after the onset of Viking attacks on Dál Riata in the early ninth century? However persuasive the indications, the sources do not offer a conclusive answer. Nor do they permit firm conclusions to be drawn from the cessation of notices of kings of Dál Riata after Vikings had descended on the kingdom.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that Iona, the likely channel of Dál Riata information to Ireland, was too convulsed by attacks on its own commu-

<sup>5</sup> Six principal manuscript versions are extant. A new edition is being prepared by John Carey, to whom I am considerably indebted for detailed exposition of the text in seminar, for access to his unpublished paper on the poet, and for illuminating discussions. All responsibility for the present interpretation of the material is mine, however. It should be noted that Máel Mura follows earlier sources in his assertion that all of the Irish descend from the first Gaelic invaders (Carey 1994, 10-15). <sup>6</sup> The latest entry concerning a Dál Riata king is AU 792.4.

nity to concern itself with royal succession (cf. AU 802.9, 806.8, 825.17). However, the annals do record contemporary notices of rulers in Pictland, thereby continuing a pattern of consistent reporting of Pictish events in the Irish annals through the eighth century and into the ninth. This in turn implies communication between Pictland and the Gaelic world, very probably through Columban monastic channels. The annal evidence certainly seems to argue against severance of association with Pictland in the wake of dissensions over ecclesiastical observance at the beginning of the eighth century. Moreover, Pictish adaptation of ogam script from the Gaelic world (Forsyth 1998, 48-55) is a further indication that cultural interchange, evidently mediated by Gaelic-oriented clerics, was not short-lived within the kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

After a report of heavy Pictish losses in a Viking onslaught (AU 839.9), the next AU entry concerning Pictland records the death of Cináed mac Ailpin, *rex Pictorum*, in the year 858, the year in which Máel Sechnaill mustered 'the men of Ireland'. Yet while Máel Sechnaill's activity is highlighted by contemporary cultural indications, the significance of Cináed's reign is attested only in retrospect. Nor is it possible to establish whether his accession was facilitated by the Viking attrition on southern Pictish nobility in 839. Tenth-century evidence suggesting that he took the kingdom by force is likewise unverifiable.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, significance lies in the retention rather than in the attainment of the kingdom. In the following decades annal records of the succession of Cináed's brother and two sons as *rex Pictorum* witness to the foundation of a new royal dynasty (AU 862.1, 876.1, 878.2). That this meant the establishment of a dynasty associated with the Gaelic west in southern Pictland is a cumulative inference from later sources.

Genealogical evidence, in its present form no earlier than the tenth century, provides Cináed with an impressive pedigree (Bannerman 1974, 65-66). His ancestry is traced from Irish prehistory and the line of the legendary Conaire Mór, king of Tara, through Fergus son of Erc, founder-figure of the overseas kingdom of Dál Riata, and Áedán mac Gabráin, head of the line of Dál Riata kings. Moreover, Cináed's great-grandfather is identified as Áed Finn, the Dál Riata ruler reported as waging war *i Fortrinn* (AU 768.7). Thus, whatever the basis of Cináed's accession to

<sup>7</sup> See also Herbert 1999b, 3-5. <sup>8</sup> Irish evidence for the use of force may be noted in the statement in the *Vita Tripartita* of Patrick that Áedán (Cináed's surrogate in the text) took Alba *ar éicin*, 'by force'. However, this statement appears to be no earlier than the second half of the tenth century. See also Herbert, 1999b, 12, n29.

power, the genealogical heritage assigned to him encompassed ancient Irish kingship, Dál Riata migration, consolidation of the overseas kingdom, and its capacity to contend within Pictland itself.

Moreover, ecclesiastical as well as secular connections were invoked in the promotion of the new rulership. The association which dated back to Columba's day between Dál Riata kings and the saint's monastic community seems to have been re-created in Cináed's eastern kingdom. This move had more than mere propaganda value, considering the likelihood that Columban monasteries, established among the Picts since the seventh century, constituted an *in situ* support system for the advancement of Gaelic kingship as well as Gaelic culture (Herbert, 1999b, 3-7). The mobilization of this support is indicated, for instance, in AU entries for the year 865 which testify both to the presence of an Iona abbot *in regione Pictorum*, and also to the flourishing of Dunkeld, subsequently revealed as the prime Columban church of the new regime.

Yet internal promotion could not counter external threat, and an attack by Dublin Vikings (AU 866.1) highlighted the vulnerability of the new kingship. In the aftermath, the incumbent king, Cusantín, son of Cináed, (862-77) seems to have sought an active rather than an honorific link with Irish kingship through marriage alliance between his sister, Máel Muire and the Northern Uí Néill ruler, Áed Finnliath. Máel Muire belongs to the sparse category of royal women who have obits in the Irish annals, and her associations with Irish kingship are illuminated in the *Banshenchas*, a female-focused historical record compiled in the twelfth century, but evidently based on earlier sources.<sup>9</sup> The marriage of Máel Muire to Áed, incumbent holder of Uí Néill overkingship, clearly promised advantage for Cusantín's kingship. But did Áed have an equivalent interest? Common cause against the Vikings was probably an incentive, and Armagh, recipient of regular annal information from Pictland (Broun 1997b, 116-17), seems a likely channel through which the alliance was both urged and arranged.

In the context of Irish regnal politics, marriage exchange of royal daughters evidently facilitated smooth alternation of power between Northern and Southern Uí Néill, while the taking of a predecessor's wife seems to indicate forced rather than consensual alternation. Around the mid-ninth century Máel Sechnaill had made a strategic marriage alliance

<sup>9</sup> Máel Muire's obit is in AU 913.1. On the *Banshenchas*, see Ní Bhrolcháin 1982. I date the wedding alliance in accordance with evidence in the Irish *Fragmentary Annals* that Áed Finnliath was still married to Land, daughter of the king of Ossory in the year 868 (*Fragmentary Annals*, 133).

with Ossory rather than an expected Northern Uí Néill marriage (*Fragmentary Annals* 854, 858, \*\*246, 260). But Áed Finnliath's reassertion of Northern right of succession involved marriage to Máel Sechnaill's widow Land (see *Fragmentary Annals* 868, \*366) in a symbolic taking of the sovereignty as well as a restoration of north-south equilibrium. Áed's subsequent remarriage to Máel Muire, however, seems to have been designed to further the interests of his own dynasty rather than those of Uí Néill alternation.

Whether either side gained in the short term from the marriage is unclear, though Niall Glúndub, the son born to Áed and Máel Muire would later inherit his father's kingdom. After Áed's death, however, Máel Muire's status as royal wife led to her being taken in marriage by the Southern Uí Néill ruler, Flann (Sinna), concomitant with his enforcement of alternating succession. Thus, not only did the association of Cináed's dynasty with Uí Néill kingship extend into another reign, but it also gained an institutional dimension in the wake of Máel Muire's implicit designation as bearer of Irish regality. What were the consequences? Cináed's grandson, Domnall son of Cusantín, whose reign coincided with Máel Muire's marriage to Flann, has his death noted in the Irish annals (AU 900.6). The title he is given, however, is not that of *rex Pictorum* accorded to his predecessors, but rather he is styled *rí Alban*. What does this signify?

The evidence suggests that Domnall's title was directly analogous to the title *rí Érenn*, the contemporaneous designation of Flann. As the latter expressed leadership of *fir Érenn*, an omnibus term for a diverse royal following, so also the designation of Domnall seems to have connoted leadership over *fir Alban*, an identification which was more inclusive and expressive of the ethnic mix of his following than was the former designation *rex Pictorum*. While the term *fir Alban* is not attested in the annals prior to the king's entitlement as *rí Alban*, this may be due to a lack of discursive entries in the period. In fact, when first attested (AU 918.4), *fir Alban*, 'the men of Alba' does denote a military collective which waged battle against the Vikings on Tyneside.

As in the Irish analogue, therefore, the island name *Alba* evidently provided a geographical common denominator for a politically-defined grouping which transcended other affiliations. The kingship of *rí Alban* did not originally have a territorial connotation, but was founded on an aggregation of people. The new representation of ruler and ruled was reinforced, moreover, by continued association with Irish kingship. Cináed's daughter, Máel Muire, married to two successive Uí Néill kings, was also close kin to two subsequent holders of the title of *rí Érenn*. Her

son by Áed Finnliath, Niall Glúndub, held the distinction after Flann's death in the year 916 (AU 917.3, 919.3). Moreover, Lígach, her daughter by Flann, was mother of Congalach, ruler of Brega, whose family had long been excluded from Uí Néill overkingship, but who had gained power in exceptional circumstances between the years 950 and 956 (*Banshenchas* 1931, 186-8; AU 956.3; see Ó Corráin 1972, 118-19).

Thus, internal Uí Néill alternations fortuitously extended the connection of Cináed's dynasty with Ireland, a connection in which the personal and the political were intertwined. Though the 'kingship of Ireland' was, in reality, a bone of Uí Néill contention at home, it offered affirmation and prestige to the overseas kingship through the adventitious affiliation of the royal dynasty with various incumbents of the Irish institution over an extended period. Through the first century of its history the title of *rí Alban* itself alternated between the descendants of Cináed's two sons, Cusantin and Áed. Whether this arose simply from the succession of both sons to their father's kingship, or whether it involved adoption of Uí Néill practice, cannot be determined. Nor do the annals provide any contemporary insight into the internal workings of the system. There are some intimations, however, that links with Irish institutions were common to both branches of Cináed's dynasty. As well as shared royal kinship, the descendants of Cusantin had ecclesiastical connections with Ireland through their patronage of the Columban church of Dunkeld. Indeed, the family's Columban affiliation is signalled by the popularity of the personal name Máel Coluim (signifying 'follower of Columba') within the royal line (Herbert, 1999b, 7). Yet the family of Áed is also shown to have cultivated its Irish affiliations. Among the many pilgrims to the church patronized by the dynasty of Áed, Cenn Ríg Monaid (St Andrews), was Áed mac Máelmithig, brother of Congalach, *rí Érenn*, and great-grandson of Cináed, whose death in St Andrews is recorded in *Chron. Scotorum* in the year 963.

Yet despite its formative associations with Ireland, the kingship of Alba ultimately followed a separate path. While the reasons are manifold, one consideration seems particularly important. At the close of the ninth century Gaels and Picts had been assigned a common political identity as followers of *rí Alban*. While they both had separate histories, collectively, as *fir Alban* they could shape a single future. A change of name for both marked a departure from the past, and proposed an identity which was prospective and without predetermination. On the other hand, contemporary Irish overkingship was enmeshed in established Uí Néill political structures. The retrospective mode of its ideological expression, evident in the poem *Flann for Érin*, cannot be dissociated from social practice. The past acted as a constraint on realization of the present.

In Ireland, moreover, perceptions of common descent, as well as of linguistic and legal uniformity, already projected a 'national' self-awareness (Ó Corráin 1978, 5-7). The rationale for a distinct political articulation of identity was, perhaps, less than clearly perceptible in the face of social and cultural solidarity. On the other hand, the establishment of the kingship of Alba answered an evident need to create a unifying structure which harmonized social and cultural dissonances. The creation of a political identity laid the groundwork for the definition of further communal bonds.

A brief view of documentary reflections of political and social change serves as a coda.<sup>10</sup> *Senchus fer nAlban*, the tenth-century Irish revision of a seventh-century survey of Dál Riata (Bannerman 1974, 39) betrays a perceptible anxiety to accommodate past and present, and to fit the new overseas identity into an established pattern of relationship among the *Góidil*. The designation of the text as 'the history of the men of Alba' simply equates the latter with Dál Riata, and implicitly views the tenth-century political community as continuous with that of seventh-century Dál Riata. Moreover, the text's emphasis on people rather than on territory reflects continuing preoccupation with a genealogical definition of the extended family of the *Góidil*.

Yet by the eleventh century the royal designations of *rí Érenn* and *rí Alban* had become associated with a physical realm. This is reflected in the manner in which Irish historical mythology is reframed. *Lebor Gabála*, 'The Book of Invasions', focuses its narration on the settlement of the island territory (Carey 1994, 17-24). Moreover, kingship over the island is depicted as an institution continuous from primordial time (see Herbert, 1999a, 94). Across the Irish Sea, Alba had come to denote the particular area of the island of Britain ruled over by *rí Alban*. Moreover, the kingdom's own historical mythology is set out in the *Duan Albanach*.<sup>11</sup> Dauvit Broun (1997a, 9, n. 25) has perceptively styled the poem as *Lebor Gabála Alban*, since it traces the settlement of the land of Alba, and its rule by a continuous succession of kings. Moreover, the poem's declaration that Alba was first taken by the eponymous *Albanus* reflects the manner in which the kingdom had begun to forge an identity which was neither exclusively Gaelic nor Pictish but *Albanach*. The origin-legend affirms

<sup>10</sup> I have dealt in more detail with this aspect in Herbert, 1999a. <sup>11</sup> Edited as 'A Eolcha Alban uile' (see primary source-list; translation and commentary in Jackson 1957). I am not persuaded that the poem originates in Ireland rather than in Alba. Jackson's argument (1957, 129) is based on one word *anoir*, which is capable of broader meaning than that which he specifies.

that *Fir Alban* now have a homeland and communal identity which extends beyond the political.

In retrospect, therefore, the ninth-century assumption of the title of *rí Érenn* was a first step towards the definition of a national kingship and a territorially-based Irish realm. Yet change only gained ground after the stranglehold of Uí Néill power-structures was broken in the eleventh century. In the case of Alba, the changes initiated around the close of the ninth century involved more than merely political realignment. The re-naming of a kingship by the assumption of the title of *rí Alban* engendered a new self-perception which shaped the future definition of a kingdom and of its subjects. The observation that names may 'turn chance into destiny' (Davies 1995, 9) seems in this instance to be amply affirmed.