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Luigne Breg and the origins of the Uí Néill

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Abstract: This paper explores the enigmatic kingdom of Luigne Breg, and through that prism the origins and nature of the Uí Néill. Its principle aim is to engage with recent revisionist accounts of the various dynasties within the Uí Néill; these necessitate a radical reappraisal of our understanding of their origins and genesis as a dynastic confederacy, as well as the geo-political landscape of the central midlands. Consequently, this paper argues that there is a pressing need to address such issues via more focused analyses of local kingdoms and political landscapes. Holistic understandings of polities like Luigne Breg are fundamental to framing new analyses of the genesis of the Uí Néill based upon interdisciplinary assessments of landscape, archaeology and documentary sources. In the latter part of the paper, an attempt is made to initiate a wider discussion regarding the nature of kingdoms and collective identities in early medieval Ireland in relation to other other regions of northwestern Europe.

Introduction

Luigne was an identity claimed by numerous groups scattered throughout Ireland, records of which – sometimes substantial, but often mere echoes – are preserved in annals, hagiography, genealogies and ogham. Two discreet territories of Luigne are known from the midlands (below) and north Connaught (barony of Leyny, Co. Sligo), where, in both cases, Luigne were settled adjacent to an equally exiguous and scattered people: the Gailenga, settled in the baronies of Corann (Co. Sligo) and Morgallion/Clankeen (Co. Meath; Fig. 1). Other cognate groups are hinted at elsewhere by ogham inscriptions (*cf.* Lacey 2012), whilst in origin myths Luigne were genealogically linked to Gailenga, Saithne and Cíannachta (see Ó Corráin 1986; Byrne 2009). Together, these somewhat nebulous peoples feature in historical narratives normally regarding their putative role in establishing a midlands Uí Néill polity during

the 5th–8th centuries; there is a lively and long-lived debate regarding whether the territories of these groups in Mag Breg (Meath, north Dublin and south Louth: see Bhreathnach 2005b) were the product of a pre-Uí Néill conquest and consolidation of midlands territories by north Connaught-based polities, or rather, as their origins myths and genealogical schema intimate, polities employed by the pseudo/proto-Uí Néill in their reputed midlands conquests during the 5th–7th centuries (Byrne 1973, 69; Ó Corráin 1980, 157; 1986; MacNeill 1935; Charles-Edwards 2000, 466–8). The latter possibility seems favoured in recent discussions (e.g. Charles-Edwards 2000, 465–8), but both hypotheses are fundamentally predicated upon a traditional narrative of the origins and genesis of the Uí Néill. Yet, that narrative has been steadily eroded in recent years by revisionist scholarship (Bhreathnach 2005a; MacShamhráin 2000; Lacey 2006; Swift 2009), that makes matters now much less certain.

According to the traditional model, the Uí Néill were an off-shoot of the *gens* of Connachta: their founder and eponym, Níall Noígíallach, fathered (at least) eight sons: Coirpre (Cenél Cairpre), Fiachu (Cenél Fiachach), Máine (Cenél Máine), Lóeguire (Cenél Laegaire), Énda (Cenél nÉnda), Éogain (Cenél nÉogain), Conall Gulban (Cenél Conaill), and Conall Éirr Breg/Cremthainne. The latter's son, Ardgall, was the ancestor of Cenél Ardgall, but from two sons of his grandson, Diarmait mac Cerbhaill, sprung Clann Cholmáin and Síl nÁedo Sláine (TABLE 1). Thus, Níall's sons are envisaged as sweeping out of Connaught to conquer the midlands and northwest of Ireland during the 5th–6th centuries, wresting Mide and Mag Breg (including Uisneach and Tara) from the hegemony of a 'greater Leinster' (Byrne 1973, 48–105; Charles-Edwards 2000, 441–68; MacShamhráin 1996; Smyth 1982). These achievements were supposedly recorded retrospectively by the so-called *Chronicle of Ireland*, which preserves a (problematic) record of Coirpre, Fiachu and their descendants conquering the midlands c.490–535 (Charles-Edwards 2000, 441–68; 2006, e.g. 485, 494, 495, 497, 499, 510, 516 and 535). These midlands territories, however, were ultimately dominated by Clann Cholmáin and Síl nÁedo Sláine, descendants of Diarmait mac Cerbhaill, and groups who ultimately eclipsed Cenél Fhiachach and Cenél Cairpre. Of the myriad problems with this model, the absence of a clear understanding of the mechanisms by which a nascent 'northern Uí Néill' (i.e. the *cenéla* of Conaill Gulban, Éogan and Énda), conquered the northwest Cos. of Donegal and Derry) proves the most problematic. As Brian Lacey (2006) highlights, what little evidence we do have rather suggests Cenél

Conaill and Cenél nÉogain were pushing south from Inishowen and central Donegal during this period. Building on a radical suggestion by Ailbhe MacShamhráin (2000), that Diarmait mac Cerbhaill was a member of Cenél Conaill and not a descendant of Conall Cremthainne, Brian Lacey (2006) has moreover argued that neither Cenél Conaill, Cenél nÉogain, nor Diarmait mac Cerbhaill's own dynasty (perhaps distinct: Bhreathnach 2005a) were originally descended from Níall Noígiallach. Instead, Lacey suggests, they were adopted into that dynasty c.700 through a wholesale genealogical revision. Likewise, although there is some possibility that Coipre and Fiachu mac Néill were supported in their endeavours by scions of Máine, Lóeguire and Conall Cremthainne (Charles-Edwards 2000, 441–68), these latter's Uí Néill credentials have also been seriously questioned (Bhreathnach 2005a; Byrne 1984; Kelleher 1971). While these revisions are not without their problems, they together undermine the notion that the Uí Néill were a single dynasty, and may reduce the real Uí Néill to Cenél Cairpre and Cenél Fhiachach alone (TABLE 2): the groups most clearly implicated in annalistic accounts of the midlands conquests. In light of this it becomes less plausible to explain the distribution of Luigne, Gailenga and Cíannachta territories in the midlands as a by-product of Uí Néill expansion. Scholars like Cathy Swift (2000; 2004; 2009) have provided cogent accounts of how the reputed descendants of Conall Cremthainne became established in Mag Breg. Nonetheless, when, why and by what means these various, seemingly unrelated, groups coalesced with descendants of Níall Noígiallach to form the dynastic confederacy that scholarship conventionally refers to as the Uí Néill, constitutes a pressing question.

These studies demand a sea-change in our understandings of the early Uí Néill but their implications have not yet filtered through to more general accounts of early Irish politics, territoriality and society. Our sources of evidence for the 5th, 6th and early 7th century are all retrospective (e.g. annals, hagiography, genealogies), and thus inherently problematic; they construct an image of that past through the prism of later geo-politics and ideological agendas. This means we can never write a true history of this period, but can only present models that pick out inconsistencies in the evidence and attempt to posit plausible narratives for how confederacies like the Uí Néill *may* have formed. Some scholars appear less convinced than others by Brian Lacey's (2006) account of the Cenél Conaill, for example. Although certainly problematic in a number of respects (further below), his arguments serve an important purpose by highlighting

the degree to which our evidence is capable of multiple divergent readings. Lacey's interpretation, though ultimately unverifiable, may seem no less plausible than the traditional account of the genesis of the Uí Néill. Steadfast resistance to these and other revisionist arguments (e.g. O'Flynn 2011; Swift 2009), however justified, seem partly also predicated on the fact that, if we set our traditional narrative of the genesis of the Uí Néill aside, then we are left with a geo-political chasm for the 5th–8th centuries in the northern half of Ireland, where other polities (e.g. Luigne, Gailenga and Cíannachta) drift un-anchored and purposeless, and where the inherent problems of our source materials *prima facie* preclude the construction of any certain narratives. Much as denying these polities political agency belies the evidence that they were formidable and recalcitrant throughout the period, likewise, in the absence of a focused rejoinder to revisionist histories of the Uí Néill, our traditional narrative of the latter's genesis cannot now be adhered to. Whether one agrees with all aspects of their arguments, the conclusions of scholars like MacShamhráin, Lacey and Bhreathnach allow us to begin to unshackle the patchwork of midlands kingdoms, peoples and hierarchies from orthodox and traditional understandings, as we seek out more dynamic narratives of political structures and evolutions.

Inevitably, space does not permit us to consider all aspects of the broader debates touched upon in this paper. In particular, issues that impinge upon the present analysis, but that remain beyond its scope, include the existence of a 'greater Leinster', from which the plains of Meath, Westmeath and north Co. Dublin were annexed by the conquering Uí Néill during the 5th century AD (see MacShamhráin 1996); the mechanisms through which Síl nÁedo Sláine established themselves as *primus inter pares* amongst the 7th-century 'Uí Néill' (see Bhreathnach 2005a; Swift 1994; 2000; 2009); and, the nature and significance of the kingship of Tara (Bhreathnach 1995; 1996; 2005). These are fundamental issues, touched on tangentially below, but they feature only fleetingly. Before proceeding however, it is salient to highlight that much of the evidence marshalled in support of a 'greater Leinster' thesis is fundamentally predicated on the now outmoded understandings of the Uí Néill and the antiquity of early Ireland's provincial structure. In fact, evidence for 'Leinster'(-based) groups pressing interests north of the Liffey (Smyth 1974; 1975) can equally be read in the light of 6th- to 8th-century geo-politics in an *emerging* borderland between a crystallising Uí Néill confederacy and proto-provincial Uí Dunláinge overlordship of the

Kildare/Dublin/Offaly region (see Swift 2006; *cf.* Gleeson and Ó Carragáin 2016). Likewise, the present author would respectfully disagree with the prevailing scholarly consensus that the Hill of Tara was vested with an exceptional or unusual type of kingship much before the mid to late 7th century (*pace*, for example, Bhreathnach 1996; Charles-Edwards 2000; Doherty 2005). The significance attached to a kingship of Tara by the Uí Néill, for instance, may owe much to the role that this institution played in the emergence of a Cenél Conaill and Síl nÁedo Sláine hegemony in the midlands and northern half of Ireland during the 7th century (on which: Bhreathnach 2005a; Lacey 2006; Swift 2009). Furthermore, no documentary evidence unimpeachably ascribes exceptional significance to Tara prior to these developments, and of that which *may*, from the very late 7th century, none is independent of Síl nÁedo Sláine propaganda (e.g. Muirchú: Bieler 1979, 74–5; *cf.* Swift 1994). Tara may, indeed, only have begun to emerge as a regional centre during the late Iron Age and early centuries of the early medieval period (Newman 2005; 2011; Dowling 2015), while only during the 7th and 8th centuries do we have evidence for the hill itself becoming actively implicated in ceremonial through the construction of monuments like *Tech Cormaic* and the insertion of burials into the Rath of the Synods (see Mapping Death database; Grogan 2009, 141–8; Newman 1997, 83–6; further Gleeson in prep.). Some of the foregoing points may seem overly dismissive of some of the foundational tenets on which modern understandings of early medieval Irish society have been built. They are developed at greater length elsewhere (Gleeson in prep.), but in the present context they form the backdrop to the main subject of this paper: the nature of Luigne Breg and the genesis of the Uí Néill

The core conviction of this paper is that focused analysis of local kingdoms and dynasties, whose histories and traditions were suppressed, actively forgotten and re-shaped by the 7th- to 8th-century synthetic historians, can provide a platform for framing new narratives. These will be tentative and speculative, but nonetheless present an avenue for thinking through the considerable historiographical impasse regarding the Uí Néill and midlands geo-politics of recent decades. The nature of Luigne, Gailenga and Cíannachta is of considerable importance to understanding the Uí Néill confederacy – as we must now call it – as well as the nature of their formative regional power structures from c.600. Furthermore, these polities form a cogent case study through which to explore key themes in relation to the formation of kingdoms and

political communities in Ireland and elsewhere, as this is an increasingly lively discourse in scholarship regarding early medieval Europe. First and foremost, we will explore the nature, extent and identity of a kingdom of Luigne in Mag Breg; rather than assess the veracity of Luigne's putative role in establishing Uí Néill authority, the following attempts to posit some new approaches that facilitate re-framing such questions. By focusing on the Luigne in wider context, the following hopes to contribute a more nuanced understanding of a seminal aspect of early Irish proto-history: the origins and genesis of the Uí Néill confederacy.

The nature of Luigne

Exactly what the term Luigne means is a pertinent, if intractable, starting point. It has been suggested that Luigne derives from **luek*, Old Irish *luag*, meaning 'an oath' (Wagner 1972; cf. O'Rahilly 1946, 391–4); that understanding is also perhaps applicable to other like-named polities of proto-historic Europe, including examples known from Iberia, and perhaps the Lugi placed in modern-day Scotland by Ptolemy (Ahlqvist 1976). Wagner (1972) postulates that **luek/luag* may be connected with Lug – often understood to connote 'the bright/shining one – the supposed sun-god and patron of kingship referred to in so many accounts of later prehistoric Europe (see MaCana 1968, 24–5). Although later genealogists confidently traced the Luigne from an eponymous Leae/Lóe, probably a euhemerised mythical ancestor (Ó Corráin 1986), an etymological derivation from *luag*, 'oath', may suggest that to claim a Luigne identity was to claim membership of a community that hinged upon the swearing of an oath: an allegiance to particular sets of beliefs/values, possibly cultic and cosmological (i.e. a cult of Lug?), but also secular and civil (i.e. a political identity/community). Importantly, this would allow that peoples claiming a cognate ethnonym but scattered in different regions throughout Ireland and abroad, need not necessarily be ethnically or tribally related. Rather, they describe communities constituted around a common cultural practice and identity, whether that was an allegiance centred on ritual oath-swearing, or the veneration of a specific shared cult. The latter might be considered analogous to later Christian practices, where groups venerated common patron saints (e.g. Cíanán amongst the Cíannachta: Byrne 2000). Similar expressions of common but divergent articulations of collective solidarity, for instance, may be intimated in earlier centuries when Ptolemy located polities named Brigantes and Gangani in Ireland, Wales and England (O'Rahilly 1946, 10).

With such considerations in mind, clearly the Luigne of Connacht and Meath need not necessarily be related; indeed, a Luigne identity was claimed elsewhere in 4th- to 7th-century Ireland, as suggested by ogham stones from Co. Waterford intimating a cognate polity (*cf.* Dál Luigne in the *Expulsion of the Déisi*: Meyer 1901; Bhreathnach 2014, 43–4), or by the name Síl Lugdach in northwest Donegal (Lacey 2012). That being said, as most scholars imply, the idea that the Luigne of counties Sligo and Meath were somehow related remains plausible, not least considering their co-location with Gailenga in both areas. By contrast, the argument that the Cíannachta of Co. Derry and east Meath/Dublin too were an off-shoot of a Connaught-based polity, settled hereabouts by the Uí Néill, has markedly less to commend it. Tuathal Máelgarb seemingly still had to conquer Cíannachta Breg during the early 6th century, for example (Charles-Edwards 2000, 466); the links between Cíannachta Breg and Cíannachta Glinn Geimen might as plausibly be attributed to commonalities in cultural or religious practice. Moreover, early elite identities of Síl Mescain and Uí Enechglais are known from annals and (6th-century) ogham stones within the district of Cerna that probably formed the centre of the kingdom of Cíannachta Breg along the east coast (AU 618.2; Bhreathnach 2005b, 418–21; Charles-Edwards 2000, 453–4; Ó Corrán 1971). That these elite identities are distinct from the later ruling line of Uí Cinn Fáelad supports the possibility that Cíannachta was a relatively heterogeneous and synthetic identity. That possibility is equally intimated by sept nomenclature: the abstract suffix *–acht* in Cíannacht(a) is only found elsewhere amongst the Connachta and Éoganachta – both confederacies indubitably composed of discreet unrelated groupings (Sproule 1984; for the Éoganachta: Gleeson in prep.).

An intriguingly intimate relationship between Luigne and Gailenga is attested not only by genealogical schema (see Byrne 2009; Ó Corrán 1986) and co-location (Fig. 1), but also by the fact that they act in concert in the annals. In 847 (AU 847.3) Maelseachnaill mac Mael-Ruanaid destroyed *Inis Loch Muinremair* (Loch Ramor, Co. Cavan), from which a *fíán* of Luigne and Gailenga were plundering the surrounding districts ‘in the manner of the heathens’. That Lough Ramor may have been a royal seat either of Luigne or the polity that they together formed with Gailenga, is suggested by the presence of Enagh townland adjacent to the southeastern shore of Lough Ramor. Enagh here likely preserves *óenach* rather than *eanach*, intimating an assembly place within a

broader royal landscape, for which the crannog (?) that Maelseachnaill destroyed in 847 perhaps functioned as a caput (Fig. 2). That close relationship is further testified by a frequent relationship between kings of both groups in annals and Kells charters, as well as their territories often being described as if they comprised a single lordship (e.g. AU 1018.3; Byrne 2009, 79–83; MacCotter 2008, 203–4; MacNiocall 1990, 155, 159 and 162). Of course, this late evidence cannot be read uncritically, and may provide a context for the close genealogical relationship mooted by the synthetic historians. Nonetheless, evidence for co-location in both Connaught and the midlands does suggest a more ancient relationship, as does the genealogical doctrine that Gailenga, Luigne, Saithne and Cíannachta were all descended from Tadhg mac Céin (TABLE 3: see Byrne 2009; on date: Ó Corráin 1986). Despite being collective group names, Gailenga, Luigne and Saithne were said to branch-off through Tadhg's son Cormac Gailenga, with Luigne derived from Loé mac Cormac, and Saithne from Cormac Gaileng's son Gaileng (O'Brien 1962, 169–70 and 246; Ó Corráin 1986, 153–6). The possibility that the relationship between these polities was never strictly speaking biological but moreso the product of a political concord appears likely. The antiquity of that political concord is crucial to many pertinent questions. Before considering this further, let us first examine the actual extent of Luigne's midlands territories.

Defining Luigne Breg

Some common misconceptions would appear to underpin most accounts of the extent of Luigne Breg, and, for that matter, the arguments in favour of the traditional Uí Néill mythos being historical. For example, it is often implied that Luigne, Gailenga and Cíannachta were settled throughout Mag Breg (effectively Cos. Meath, north Dublin and south Louth) by the early Uí Néill in territories which were thereafter encroached upon by these nascent overlords' emerging dynasties: principally Clann Cholmáin and Síl nÁedo Sláine (TABLE 4; Byrne 1973; MacNeill 1935; Ó Corráin 1980). Scholarship often implies that Luigne held lands around and to the south of Tara (see Bhreathnach 1995, 127; 1999; *cf.* 2014, 43–4; Clinton 2000). However, evidence for these groups holding territories south and east of the rivers Boyne and Blackwater is exceedingly slim. Mainly, it seems that this perception stems from the erroneous derivation of the barony of Lune, Co. Meath, from Luigne; in fact, Lune rather preserves Luaigne: an altogether different polity (Fig. 1; Knott 1946; MacNeill 1911, 73 n.2; MacCotter 2008, 206; *cf.* Bhreathnach 1995, 127–9; Wagner 1972). Luaigni

Temrach were an archaic but equally obscure polity, perhaps synonymous with, or closely affiliated to, Colomain na Temrach (see Knott 1946; AFM 842; *cf.* CS 844). *Colomain* derives from Latin *columna*, a ‘column’, such that Colomain na Temrach (‘the columns of Tara’) would suggest a militaristic imperative. This equation of Luigne with Luaigne and Colomain na Temrach has arguably further compounded the idea that the Luigne originate in military settlements by the early Uí Néill ‘kings of Tara’ (*pace* MacNeill 1935). Luaigne’s neighbours were Cenél nArdgal and Cenél Laegaire (Clinton 2000; Swift 2009; Walsh 2003), groups who apparently did have an Uí Néill filiation, though some have questioned this (*cf.* Bhreathnach 2005a; Swift 2009; Byrne 1984). However this may be, Lune barony bears no implication for Luigne Breg’s origins and extent, and thus Luigne Temrach (i.e. a ‘Luigne of Tara’) are a chimera.

More tangible and earlier evidence suggests rather that the territories of Luigne were focused on the lands west of Morgallion barony, northwest Co. Meath. The aforementioned annal of 847 intimates a territory centred on Lough Ramor, a lake elsewhere explicitly placed ‘in Luigne’ (Hogan 1910, 507). Likewise, an ogham stone from Castlekeeran just west of Kells reads COVAGNI MAQUI MUCCOI LUGUNI (Macalister 1996, 46; Newman 2005, 381). Strengthening a putative link between the midlands Luigne and those of north Connaught, ogham stones of a broadly similar date are known from Leyny barony, Co. Sligo, that also commemorate members of a *gens* of Luigne (Moore 2001). That the Castlekeeran ogham stone may in fact have been demarcating the southernmost extent of Luigne patrimony is hinted by the fact that a major territorial boundary hereabouts is intimated by the positioning of a number of barrows, as well as an excavated inhumation burial at Drumbaragh that is broadly contemporary in date with the Castlekeeran ogham (AD 442–659: Cahill and Sikora 2012, 110–1; *cf.* Bhreathnach and O’Brien 2011 on *ferta*). Indeed, it is entirely plausible that this was a boundary that actually necessitated definition at this period due to the ascendance hereabouts of the descendants of Diarmait mac Cerbaill in the late 6th to early 7th centuries (see Bhreathnach 2005a; Swift 2000; 2009). That this area around Kells was the south/southeasterly border of Luigne and Gailenga patrimony may be implied by later 11th- and 12th-century charters recording land-grants in the vicinity of Kells (MacNiocaill 1990, 155, 159 and 162). Perhaps more pertinent to assessing the early significance of this area amongst the Luigne, is the discovery of what can plausibly be identified as a prehistoric regional ceremonial centre at the Hill of Lloyd

just east/southeast of Castlekeeran by Ger Dowling and *The Discovery Programme's LIARI Project* (Dowling 2015, 11–6; Fig. 2). Here, a massive trivallate enclosure surrounding the hilltop sits within a much larger hillfort-like enclosure, while a number of smaller enclosures and ring-ditches identified through geophysical survey suggest a ritual and funerary role probably during later prehistory. Thus, the Castlekeeran ogham stone may indicate the articulation of a Luigne identity relative to a ceremonial landscape that was regionally significant during later prehistory (Dowling 2015; cf. Newman 1998).

Notwithstanding such possibilities, the early centuries of the historic era witnessed the ascendance of Clann Cholmáin and Síl nÁedo Sláine, a development which was detrimental to the patrimony and autonomy of Gailenga and Luigne. This is testified indubitably by the fact that the earliest evidence for the title *rí Luigne*, ‘king of Luigne’ was accorded to a dynast of Clann Cholmáin in the early 8th century (MacShamhráin 2000, 85; Ní Dhonnchadha 1982, 213). Similarly, for a variety of reasons it seems likely that both Mugdorna (Co. Monaghan, and around Nobber/Donaghmore Co. Meath) and more particularly Uí Moccu Uais (west central Ulster) acquired small territories in counties Meath and Westmeath (see MacCotter 2008, 199 and 204) through the patronage of Síl nÁedo Sláine, and that these territories were principally carved from Luigne and Gailenga patrimony.

Both of Uí Moccu Uais’ midlands territories were relatively small lordships: the Mide branch were settled adjacent to Uí Tigernáin (Magheradernan/*Machaire Ua dTigernáin*, Co. Westmeath) who claimed descent from a son of Áed Sláine, while the Mag Breg branch around Kilshine, Co. Meath (Walsh 2003, 81-3), occupied a rump of territory nestled between the Síl nDluthaig and Uí Chonaing branches of Síl nÁedo Sláine (TABLE 4; Swift 2000, 112). Likewise, Mugdorna Breg’s territories in the district of Cremthainne (north and east) were more extensive, but clearly fluctuated during the 8th century due to internecine feuding amongst Síl nÁedo Sláine (Swift 2000; 2009; on Mugdorna’s association with Cremthainne: MacCotter 2008, 255, n. 53; for this feuding, see Charles-Edwards 2002). Gailenga Breg had two major divisions: Gailenga Móra and Gailenga Béc. Gailenga Móra were principally concentrated in Morgallion barony (from *Machaire Gailenga*), encompassing all of Sliab Guaire and Clankee barony, where the latter also contained a polity of Saithne in the *túath* of *Fidh*

na Saithne (MacCotter 2008, 204; Hogan 1910, 609). The royal seat of Gailenga hereabouts is perhaps around Kingscourt/Dunaree, meaning ‘Fort of a King’, in Eniskeen parish. This parish also contains Ervey crannog, which, although unexcavated, has produced a quantity of high-status early medieval metalwork suggestive of royal status (Fig. 2; Dooley and Rice 1999; cf. Warner 1994). Regarding Gailenga Béc, these have sometimes been taken as identical with Gailenga Collumrach in north Co. Dublin, in turn, considered synonymous with Uí Áeda Odba (derived from Áed Odba ob. 701: AU 701.5). The Middle Irish narrative introduction to *Cáin Adomnáin* mentions an *Áth Drochait ind-Ūaithniu i nHōib Áedha Oduha i ndescert Breg*, ‘Áth Drochait in Uaithni in Uí Áeda Odba in southern Brega’ (Meyer 1905, 6). Rather than Drogheda, Co. Louth, however, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha (pers. comm.) reads *Drochat ind Ūaithne* as a placename in its own right, with a ford (*áth*) presumably nearby. Nonetheless, this passage clearly locates the territories of Uí Áeda in Deiscert Breg (‘southern Brega’). Some have suggested that Odba should be identified with Mallahow (*Mullach Uamha*: Hollywood parish) north Co. Dublin (Hogan 1950, 556; Morris 1937, 186–9; see also Dowling 2015, 63–70; Bhreathnach 1999, 3), but Diarmait Ó Murchadha (1993; 1997, 141) is surely right to identify Odba with Moathill outside Navan, Co. Meath (Fig. 2). Considering the geo-political landscape hereabouts, a territory of Uí Áeda centred on Odba/Moathill is unlikely to have been much more extensive than Navan and perhaps Liscarten parishes, at least by the 8th century: encircling this rump of land were Mugdorna Breg, Uí Chonaing, Síl nDlutháig, Cenél Ardgál, Dál Chonchubhair and Cenél Laegaire, amongst others. Within such a context it is easy to appreciate how Uí Áeda could be considered Gailenga Béc: ‘the small/little [kingdom of] Gailenga’. A putative more easterly location for Odba, around Navan, is crucial for Uí Áed’s identification with Gailenga Collumrach, as the latter were named for the district of Collomair, north Co. Dublin. However, other polities variously associated with this district include Saithne, Túath Tuirbhe and Cíannachta Midi (AU 903.3; P. Byrne 2000; Byrne 2009; Hogan 1910, 284). There are clear inter-relationships and genealogical overlaps between these groups, but the primary, 8th-century identity of the local polity hereabouts would seem to be that of Cíannachta, designating a group from whence these other identities perhaps sprung (Byrne 2009, 77 and 83; Gleeson in prep.). Adomnán, for instance, refers to the district between the Delvin and Dublin as *Ard Cíannachta* earlier still, during the late 7th century (Sharpe 1999, 156–8). Indeed, an ascendant Gailenga hereabouts is not

hinted before the late 9th century when a king of Gailenga Collomair was killed in battle by Gailenga Móra (AU 884.7). By about 900, the latter was one of the principal powers in southern Mag Breg (see Bhreathnach 1999). Thus, Gailenga Collumrach may have emerged through a re-fashioning of an earlier collective identity that was now outmoded.

Although the latter point remains conjectural, it seems reasonable to identify Gailenga Béc with Uí Áeda Odba based around Navan. This returns discussion to the idea that branches of Uí Moccu Uais and Mugdorna became settled in their midlands territories through the patronage of Síl nÁedo Sláine. The principle divisions of Uí Moccu Uais and Mugdorna lie further north, most likely contiguous with the areas from whence Diarmait mac Cerbhaill's descendants expanded into the midlands during the late 6th and early 7th centuries (Bhreathnach 2005a, 57–9; Lacey 2006, 165–6; Walsh 2003, 81–3). There is annalistic evidence that leading kings of Uí Moccu Uais were implicated in the realpolitik of Diarmait's kin already during the late 6th century (AU 598.2; below). More importantly, the midlands territories of these groups occupy the interstices of, and break up the lands of, what may legitimately be inferred to have been formerly dominant polities prior to the mid 7th century. Uí Moccu Uais Breg and Mugdorna Breg, for instance, separate Uí Áed territories around Navan from those of Gailenga Móra further north, and one plausible explanation for this is that the ascendance of Uí Moccu Uais Breg was responsible for the sundering of the Gailenga groups from each other. The fact that the earliest record of Odba in the annals is a record of the death of Conal Lóg Breg mac Áed Sláine (AU 612.2) may not be coincidental, though Gailenga are not mentioned. When considered alongside the Castlekeeran ogham stone, there is a good case to be made that the respective territories of Luigne and Gailenga stretched as far south as the river Blackwater prior to the 7th century, but not much farther.

Insofar as a boundary may have existed between Gailenga and Luigne themselves, the approximate course of the Moynalty/Owenroe river presents a plausible meeting, with ogham stones from Mullagh/Rantavan in Co. Cavan, and those discovered in a souterrain at Spiddal near Moynagh Lough perhaps manifesting the north/south limits of this same proto-historic polity (Newman 2005, 380–1; Eogan 1990). Interestingly, both groups of ogham could then also be associated with two 'royal' sites: (i) that on

the shores of Lough Ramor (above), and (ii) Raffin Fort, where an ogham stone was also found during excavations (Fig. 2; see Newman 1995b; 1998; Newman *et al.* 2007). Raffin Fort went out of use during the 6th century, but activity may have shifted to the (new?) nearby site of Moynagh Lough. Moynagh Lough is mentioned in the genealogies of Déisi Breg as being *hi tirib Mugdorna*, ‘in the land of Mugdorna’ (O’Brien 1962, 396; Bhreathnach 1998). From an archaeological point of view, however, there was a clear change in the use of the site between the 7th and 8th centuries; prior to this it seems to have been primarily a place of ritual but thereafter its main purpose seems to have been residential (Bradley 1991; 2012; Gleeson 2012, 3–6). Perhaps, this may be connected with geo-political developments, whereby Gailenga Mór were sundered from Uí Áed, and Mugdorna took over the surrounding landscape together with royal places such as Moynagh Lough. In light of the potential for Moynagh Lough to have played a significant role amongst the Gailenga of Mag Breg prior to this change in its archaeological character, it is suggestive that one of the more exceptional early finds from the crannog was a series of rare Merovingian glass vessels (6th to early 7th century in date) that are only paralleled in Ireland by a single sherd of glass from a souterrain in Mullaroe, Co. Sligo (Bourke 1994, 168–70). Whether it is accurate to imagine that the ogham stones from the wider Lough Ramor and Raffin/Moynagh Lough landscapes were respectively associated with centres of the Luigne and Gailenga, the Castlekeeran ogham at least attests to the use of this form of monumentality amongst the *gens* of Luigne. Correspondingly, considering the putative genealogical links between Cíannachta, Luigne, and Gailenga, the fact that ogham stones in Mag Breg more generally concentrate in territories that by the 8th century could be assigned to Luigne, Gailenga and Cíannachta is at least as revealing as the fact that Roman material describes a largely similar distribution (Newman 2005, 409). In fact, excluding the environs of Freestone Hill in Co. Kilkenny (on which, see Ó Floinn 2000; Bhreathnach and O’Brien 2011), *eastern* and *northern* Mag Breg is one of the few areas in Ireland where Roman material and ogham stones overlap. As Newman (2005, 381) suggests, this milieu provides a possible context for the monunmentalisation of ogham during the 4th–5th centuries.

Equally suggestive as an indicator of this district forming a politico-cultural entity during the later Iron Age, with perhaps some semblance of political and territorial unity, is the distribution of crouched inhumations of the 1st–3rd centuries AD. While

assigning burial rites to particular ethnic identities is highly anachronistic (*cf.* Halsall 2007), O'Brien (2003; 2009) has shown that this rite might plausibly be interpreted as an elite ritual introduced or developed in Ireland under influence from Britain (see McGarry 2010, 173–6). Notwithstanding issues surrounding the phasing and date of some examples that now appear to be early medieval rather than Iron Age in date, this rite was largely restricted in distribution to eastern and northern Mag Breg, being utilised at sites like Knowth and Platin that have later elite/royal associations. Knowth is famously associated with Síl nÁedo Sláine, though artefactual evidence suggests earlier high status activity (Ó Floinn in Eogan 2012, 225–7), while Platin Fort was likely the caput of Síl Mescain (see AU 618.2). Several other undated examples, assumed to be Iron Age, include specimens at Moathill/Odba, seat of Uí Áeda (Giacommetti 2011) and Laracor (Breen 2004), near Breemount/*Brí moccu Taidcni*: a site of possibly cultic significance associated with the mythical Tadhg mac Céin (Byrne 1968, 393 n.421). Virtually the only certain instance of this rite of burial outside of northern and eastern Mag Breg is from modern Culleenamore, Co. Sligo (McGarry 2010, 173–7). It would be rash to push the significance of such patterns too far, but, like the rare sherd of Merovingian glass from Mullaroe, Co. Sligo (above), there remains a distinct possibility that this concatenation hints at longer term material cultural and elite links between territories that later constituted the lands of Cíannachta, Luigne and Gailenga in northern Mag Breg and along the east coast. While we can only speculate as to whether this provides a background to these groups genealogical links, this pattern at least presents the possibility of a late Iron Age origin for any such hypothetical entity and/or affiliation. That possibility would itself constitute a powerful challenge to the historicity of traditional narratives of Uí Néill origins via conquest and colonisation.

Whatever of the antiquity of links between Luigne, Gailenga and Cíannachta in the east-central midlands, it is abundantly clear that these groups were detrimentally impacted by the the rise of Diarmait mac Cerbhaill's descendants, and the coalescence of an Uí Néill confederacy (Byrne 1973, 87–105 Bhreathnach 2005a; Swift 2009). The *cenéla* of Cairbre and Fiachú mac Níall must have annexed some of these territories during the 5th and 6th centuries, but so too were they clearly impacted by Uí Moccu Uais Breg and Mugdorna Breg. Whether this can legitimately be attributed to realpolitik by the 7th-century descendants of Diarmait mac Cerbhaill, the latter certainly usurped

the sovereignty of groups like Luigne and *Cíannachta*. Amongst *Síl nÁedo Sláine*, a nascent *Uí Chonaing* adopted the title *rí Cíannachta* (AU 662.2; 688.4; FA 98: 688; Sharpe 1995, 156–8; see also P. Byrne 2000, 125; Byrne 1968; Swift 2009), while their erstwhile kin, *Clann Cholmáin*, were complicit in usurping the wider midlands suzerainty of Luigne, with Bodchad Midi styled *rí Luigne* in the early 8th century (Ní Dhonnchadha 1982; MacShamhráin 2000). Although this may have been a temporary development (*cf.* Zumbuhl 2005; Etchingham 1996; AU 993.4), such strategies of overlordship amount to recognition of the territorial and strategic importance of these peoples, albeit now as subject polities. Indeed, during the early 7th century, defeats for the sons of Áed Sláine and Colmán Már respectively along the Boyne and Blackwater in central Meath could indicate that these groups were formidable (AU 612.2; 618.2).

More important for our immediate concerns, however, is the fact that the very use of the style *rí Luigne* by Bodchad Midi suggests that the authority of Luigne in the midlands stretched further south and west beyond of the Blackwater, Lough Ramor and Kells, into the plains of Asail and districts north of Uisneach. Dynasts of *Clann Cholmáin* adopted this title during a key period, when they fashioned for themselves a nascent kingdom of Mide centred on Uisneach (further MacShamhráin 2000; O’Flynn 2011; Zumbuhl 2004). That they felt it necessary to do this must be related to the power of Luigne, and perhaps specifically, their status as overlords of other midlands *túatha*, many of whom rather suggestively also have Connaught connections (e.g. Corcu Raíde, *Uí Beccon*, *Uí Fhiachrach* and *Grecraige*; below).

With the disintegration of *Síl nÁedo Sláine*’s regional hegemony during the 8th and 9th centuries – when they lost their strangle-hold on the kingship of Tara (Charles-Edwards 2002) – Gailenga and Luigne again re-emerged as significant semi-autonomous powers in the geo-politics of Mag Breg (Bhreathnach 1999; Casey 2009, 115–83). While it is plausible that in this they had a modicum of support from *Uí Chonaing*, a branch of *Síl nÁedo Sláine* who benefitted significantly from the squeezing of *Síl nDluthaig* and *Uí Chernaig* in northwest and south-central Mag Breg (further Gleeson in prep.), at least by the 9th century Gailenga and Luigne largely acted outwith *Clann Cholmáin* authority (*cf.* AU 847.3; 901.1; 993.4). It is this context within which we find frequent mention of *túatha Luigne* (‘the territories of Luigne’) in the annals (AU 993.5, 1018.3, 1070.12). This usage denotes an intriguingly similar terminology to an important passage from

the law tracts, which refers to a heretofore unidentified royal assembly place of Óenach Ualand (Dillon 1932, 62–3):

Ualand is a height in the upper part of Fir Chualann in the north of Brega, the boundary of Fir Chualann and Luigne (*ina uachter Fer Cualand i tuaiscirt Breag, cochrích do Feraib Cualand oculus do Luighnib*), a smooth beautiful hill, for the four territories of Luigne with their extra territory (?) are visible from it (*cethóra tuatha Luighne cona fortuathaib olchena*).

The mound [hill?] is a meeting place for assemblies and fairs (*baile turchomraicc dála oculus aénaigh in tulach sin*). Neither heather nor furze nor forest grew upon it. Heather and roughness on that mound was a misfortune, on account of the multitude of choice flowers which used to grow on it. It is the same with the free and unfree classes. It is not right to mix them nor to mingle them.

The first challenge in relation to this passage is that Fir Chualann, ‘the men of Cualu’, refers to the branch of Uí Máil who controlled the district stretching from the River Liffey south to the Dublin-Wicklow foothills; there is no evidence to suggest that this group controlled a territory in northern Brega. Morris (1937), no doubt influenced by ideas of a ‘greater Leinster’ in the proto-historic period (e.g. MacShamhráin 1996; Smyth 1974; 1975; Byrne 1973), suggested that this passage showed that Cualu had originally encompassed the lands north of the Liffey as far as the Boyne/Blackwater confluence. This is improbable. It is unlikely that Ualand could be located hereabouts: Lune barony preserves Luaigne and not Luigne, and therefore has no bearing, whilst if Odba is Moathill, Navan (following Ó Murchadha 1993), then the surrounding district was still firmly in southern Brega (above). One solution, though admittedly speculative, is to suppose that *Fir Chualann* is either an error, corruption or embellishment of *Fir Cul*: the kingdom centred on the Blackwater Valley and ruled by Síl nDlutháig. This could very accurately be described as being within northern Brega, and probably did border Luigne territory.

If such an identification is acceptable, then Ualand’s exact location still remains to be determined. Two locations present reasonable possibilities: (i) Bruse hill on the southeastern shores of Loch Ramor, Co. Cavan, and (ii) the western slopes of the Lough

Crew passage tomb cemetery in Co. Meath. In the case of the former, as noted, the annal for 847 referring to a raid on *Inis Loch Muinremair* may suggest a royal site of Luigne on or around the lake. A prominent hill named Bruse overlooks the southeastern lakeshore, and is adjoined by a townland to the southeast by Enagh, a name which, in this case, probably signifies an *óenach* ('assembly') place. That possibility is enhanced by the fact that the adjacent townland to the east is Fartagh, derived from *ferta* ('burial ground') and forming the parish's eastern boundary (*cf.* Bhreathnach and O'Brien 2011). While very likely to be an assembly of Luigne Breg, this landscape is still an unlikely candidate for Ualand. For one thing, Bruse Hill (180 OD) seems not nearly high enough for four *túatha* of Luigne to have been visible from it, notwithstanding uncertainty regarding the exact extents of their territories.

Alternatively, we may look to Lough Crew, the dominant peak of which, Sliab na Calliagh, has previously been identified as *Sliab Monduirn* (Byrne and Francis 1994, 100). Although an identification further north, for instance, Ughtyneill Hill, seems more probable (*cf.* also Bhreathnach 2005b, 414), it does seem likely that Sliab na Calliagh was important in the early medieval period. Loughcrew itself derives from *Lough Craobh*, 'lake of the tree' (Logainm.ie), and several *bíleda* are associated with assembly places (e.g. Magh Adhair: FitzPatrick 2004). The townland of Loughcrew itself is situated below the western slopes of Sliab na Calliagh in the shadow of Carnbane. It is adjoined on the south by Dromone, from *Druim Eamhna* (Placenames Database of Ireland), and on the north by Rahaghy, which the Monasticon Hibernicum database associates with the early ecclesiastical site of St Foilen, *Raith Aige*; *aige* here perhaps denoting 'assembly/games', as used to describe Óenach Tailten by the 7th-century *Baile Chuinn* (Bhreathnach and Murray 2005, 84). Whether or not Rahaghy thus means 'the rath of the assembly', Ualand itself may conceivably have been any of the peaks of the Sliab na Calliagh ridge. The larger cluster of passage tombs. Carnbane West represents perhaps the principal candidate within the wider necropolis. At Cairn H, Eugene Conwell (1866) excavated an immensely important collection of fragmentary bone slips, over 4000. A number of these were highly polished and engraved with *La Tène* style decoration, one showing an antlered stag. Also within the assemblage were some comb fragments, glass beads and what may have been a compass/protractor of Roman origin (Coffey 1896, 29). The bone slips were found around the base of two orthostats in a context that suggests a votive deposit. A number have been dated to the 2nd–1st

centuries BC (Vejby 2013, 12–4), while the sheer quantity, along with the possible Roman item, suggests use of the tomb and passage over an extended period, most likely continuing into the later Iron Age. It should be noted that their decoration is of a type normally regarded as 1st century AD or later in date (e.g. Waddell 2011, 203), and it is also possible that some of them were already ancient relics when they were deposited (*cf.* Newman *et al.* 2007, which shows a skull similarly used and deposited as a relic). This material may indicate, therefore, that during the mid–late Iron Age, this passage tomb and wider complex was a focus of cultic practices, thus recalling patterns of Iron Age re-use elsewhere, most pertinently at Newgrange and Knowth (Ó Floinn in Eogan 2012, 226; Ó Floinn 2000).

The ceremonial focus of the wider Lough Crew landscape would appear to have lain on the northern side of the hill, where Newman (1995a) highlights a large L-shaped avenue that approaches several ringforts and embanked mounds. The traditional classification of this monument as a Neolithic ‘cursus’ is based principally on its proximity to and association with the passage tombs of Sliab na Callaighe. However, this has recently been questioned (Roughley forthcoming), and the similarity between this monument and a class of avenue monuments that is increasingly being recognised at major Irish royal landscapes, including Tara, Cashel and Knockainy (Gleeson 2012; Newman 2007), may support an Iron Age or early medieval date. The bone slips provide evidence for a mid to late Iron Age cultic focus that chimes with such possibilities, while a large bivallate ringfort situated within a larger bivallate enclosure also suggest a high status and potentially royal settlement hereabouts (Roughley forthcoming).

That being said, the identification of Sliab na Callaighe with Ualand specifically must rise and fall on whether it straddled the border of Luigne and Fir Cul. As far as Luigne’s territorial extent might be surmised from the foregoing, this people controlled the lands from Lough Ramor east/southeast along the Blackwater towards Kells/Teltown area (above). It seems probable that the majority of the 8th–9th century kingdom of Fir Cul was contained within the later *trícha cé*t of Caille Follamain, a sub-segment of Clann Cholmáin Bic whose heartland was the parish of Kinallon (from *Caille Follamain*: MacCotter 2008, 203; Walsh 2003, 77 and 238–9). With the decline of Síl nDluthaig and Síl nÁedo Sláine from the 9th century, Caille Follamain annexed territory to the

east, and their local over-lordship slowly subsumed the petty kingdom of Fir Cul (MacCotter 2008, 203). North of Kinallon, and immediately west of the lands we may plausibly assign to Fir Cul, is Kilskeer: a territory of Síl Fergusa Caéchain, reputedly descended from a brother of Níall Noígíallach. This group would seem to have lost any semblance of power by Tírechán's time (Bieler 1979, 137; Charles-Edwards 2000, 24–5); conceivably, they may have been subjected by a nascent Síl nDlúthaig c.700. If Fir Cul had thus extended northwest along the Blackwater as far as Kells, then westwards towards Lough Crew along a border with Luigne, this local kingdom could indeed be located within the later *trícha cét* identified and delimited by MacCotter (2008). This possibility is lent weight when we consider that Murchad Midi of Clann Cholmáin defeated and killed Flann Asail mac Áed of Síl nDlúthaig at Bile Tened (Billagh, near Kells) in 714 (AU 714.1; MacShamhráin 2000, 86). Assail connects Flann with the territory of Delbna Assail southwest of Kells, supporting the possibility of a westward extension of Fir Cul. Although tentative, this raises the possibility that Fir Cul did at one time border Luigne, and that Sliab na Callaighe was located approximately along that same border; it may, therefore, be tentatively but plausibly identified with Ualand. Hence, we might surmise that Luigne territory did extend southwest to Sliab na Callaighe, encompassing perhaps at a minimum the parish of Oldcastle. That it extended farther still may be suggested by the obit of Máel Finnia Ua hAenaig, described as the successor of Feichín of Fore (Co. Westmeath) and bishop of *túath Luigne* in 993 (AU 993.4). Thus, in the ecclesiastical sphere a bishopric of Luigne encompassed Fore and lands south/southwest of Sliab na Callaighe, perhaps extending to Lough Lene, Co. Westmeath (on bishops and their jurisdictions: Etchingham 1994). The placement of Domnach Mór Maige Echnach in Delbna Assail 'in Luigne' by the *Vita Tripartita* (9th–10th century; Mulchrone 1939, 49), moreover, lends further weight to the idea that Luigne was an extensive – even if not a continuous, co-extensive – polity in the central midlands.

In this light, the identification of Sliab na Callaighe with Ualand has much to commend it; as one of the more imposing heights of the central midlands, the vast majority of any putative territory and/or overlordship of Luigne would have been visible from Carnbane West and East (Pl. 1). Alongside the evidence for a ceremonial focus on the northern slopes, the kerbstone of Cairn T, known as the Hag's Chair, is altered into the shape of a seat, or perhaps an altar (Pl. 1; FitzPatrick 2004, 135). While there is no evidence for

the use of this stone for inauguration or judgement during the medieval period, the close spatial association of inauguration places and assembly spaces might lend credibility to such a proposition (FitzPatrick 2004; Gleeson 2015).

‘Connaught’ peoples and the Uí Néill

If the foregoing argument represents an acceptable approximation of the territories of Luigne, then it seems that Luigne Breg’s territories were also bordered by an otherwise unparalleled concentration of peoples whose principal, or perhaps better known and like-named divisions were located in north, central and eastern Connaught. Branches of the Partraige and Corcu Fir Thrí/Urthri, for example, are placed around Kells by the *Vita Tripartita* and the *Táin* (Mulchrone 1939, 47; Walsh 2003, 243). The Conmaicne, ubiquitous in Connaught, also had related branches in Tethba near Granard and in Mide amongst the Cuircni (Byrne 1973, 236). Furthermore, a relationship between Cenél Maine and Uí Máine straddling the middle reaches of the Shannon seems highly probable; and hereabouts too were Delbna, a group similarly represented along both sides of this great river (see Byrne 1973, 92–3; Kelleher 1971). Perhaps most suggestive, however, is the fact that Luigne and Gailenga were bordered by branches of the Greccraige, Uí Fhiachrach and Cenél Cairbre in both Connaught and the midlands. Greccraige are known from Coolavin barony and the area around Lough Gara (MacCotter 2008, 147, 202 and 211; MacNeill 1964, 199). Uí Fhiachrach Cúile Fobair occupied territories around Coolure Demesne (see O’Sullivan *et al.* 2007) and Mayne parish, stretching southwards along the north shore of Lough Derravarragh (MacCotter 2008, 202; Walsh 2003, 79, 202 and 304–5). They were closely affiliated with Uí Beccon who towards the end of the early medieval period were the principal polity in the barony of Fore, being settled in the area east/northeast of Uí Fhiachrach, and west/southwest of Greccraige. Later genealogies of the ruling line of Uí Beccon traced their descent as a collateral line of Clann Cholmáin, but an alternative pedigree specifies that the origin of Uí Beccon and Uí Fhiachrach lay amongst the powerful Uí Fhiachrach Muireasc, specifically the Uí Amolgnid of north Co. Mayo. This latter group were themselves neighbours of Gailenga and Luigne in north Connaught (MacCotter 2008, 202; Walsh 2003, 79; Byrne 1973, 234–53 for Uí Fhiachrach). While the relatively late date of this genealogical evidence cannot be relied upon for firm footings, an off-shoot of Uí Fhiachrach in the midlands does lend credence to the otherwise anomalous prominence of Nath Í and his son Ailill Molt in early (retrospective) annalistic records

(e.g. AU 476.1; 482.1) as well as in the prophetic king list, *Baile Chuinn* (Bhreathnach and Murray 2005, 77 and 82). Considered together, this concentration of peoples in the midlands is more than coincidence. It suggests developed links between the midlands and northern Connaught. That the traditional understandings of the Uí Néill can no longer be utilised as a mechanism for explaining this evidence is at least as significant as the likelihood that these connections are unlikely to be the product of a single historical event, migration or expansion, led by the Uí Néill or otherwise.

The origins of the Uí Néill

At this point it is worth reflecting upon the conclusions of MacShamhráin (2000) regarding the origins of Clann Cholmáin, and Lacey (2006) regarding the original, non-Uí Néill identity of Clann Cholmáin, Síl nÁedo Sláine, Cenél Conaill and Cenél nÉogain. Although these suggestions must inevitably remain contentious, the crux of these arguments is that we need no longer treat the Uí Néill as a monolithic, biologically related dynasty; we must rather engage with this entity as a malleable and constructed confederacy. The groups within that confederacy that now appear to have the best claims to an actual Uí Neill ancestry, however, namely descent from a figure that came to be identified with Níall Nóigiallach, are Cenél Cairbre and Cenél Fhiachach (*cf.* Charles-Edwards 2000, 441–68). Carbury barony in Co. Kildare acquired its association with Cenél Cairbre through the settlement of an Uí Chiarda ruling line no earlier than the 11th century (Byrne 2008, 20). This means that, while the annals retrospectively wove a narrative around early Uí Néill conquests which reinforced the idea of a ‘greater Leinster’ (see MacShamhráin 1996; Smyth 1974; 1975), the evidence that Cairbre and Fíachu mac Níall held lands south of the Boyne/Blackwater confluence, and perhaps even in the hinterland of Tara itself, is extremely slight. Other than the battle of Luachair (AU 535.2; supposedly won over the Cíannachta) there is little if any evidence for territorial interests of Cenél Cairbre or Cenel Fiachach in the 6th and 7th centuries in southern and eastern Mag Breg. This allows one to envisage that these dynasties perhaps acquired their midlands territories during the late 5th and early 6th centuries by creeping southeastwards from a northeast ‘Connaught’ base (i.e. Cenél Cairbre territory in Sligo, Leitrim and south Donegal), towards Granard and Co. Longford, before moving directly east into the Blackwater Valley. We might posit a similar route for the, probably earlier, acquisition of lands in this area by Luigne and Gailenga and it is suggestive that this route seems equally appropriate to the expansion

of Uí Brúin Bréifne during later centuries (see Ó Mórdha 2002; MacCotter 2014). Correspondingly, the process of conquest and expansion that saw Cenél Cairbre establish a kingdom stretching from Sligo through to the Blackwater/Boyne Valleys (*cf.* AU 539.2), probably provided the simultaneous vector through which a nascent Cenél Fhiachach branched southwards to annex the lands around Uisneach, which they lost to a rising Clann Cholmáin (Byrne 1973; Charles-Edwards 2000, 441–521; Gleeson in prep.; Smyth 1975).

A crucial piece of tangible material evidence for understanding the establishment of these groups as well as the apparatus of the Uí Néill confederacy, is the landscape of Óenach Tailten itself. I would follow MacNeill (1964, 192) in seeing Tírechán's late 7th-century account of St Patrick curing Coirpre mac Níall at Tailtiu (Bieler 1979, 132–3) as evidence that there was a sept of Cenél Cairbre hereabouts, albeit of much reduced status by the later 7th century. This landscape was almost certainly an important centre in later prehistory (Dowling 2015; Kelly 2002), but it would seem that it was consciously re-shaped and re-defined during the late 5th to early 6th centuries. Around the boundaries of this landscape, probably demarcating it as royal demesne in the 5th–6th centuries (see Gleeson forthcoming; Bhreathnach and O'Brien 2011), are a number of burials: a long cist recorded in the National Museum of Ireland's Topographical Files in Oristown that may be early medieval in date; a cemetery at Grange 2 (below Faughan Hill); and two burials associated with a linear boundary feature and a rectangular enclosure/structure – possibly a shrine or 'sanctuary' – at Kilmainham (see entries in Mapping Death database; Walsh 2011). The latter two, Grange 2 and Kilmainham are securely radiocarbon dated to the late 5th to 6th centuries (Fig. 3), raising the possibility that the purpose of these sites was to (re-)define the landscape of Tailtiu during the 5th–6th centuries. If so the radiocarbon date ranges suggest that such definition through interment at such sites did not persist long after the mid- to late 6th century (Grange 2: 424–573; Kilmainham: AD 434–599; see Mapping Death database). Very possibly, these burials represent nascent members of the *cenéla* of Cairbre and Fiachu mac Níall establishing a foothold and royal landscape for their regional over kingship at Tailtiu in Mag Breg. It would seem hardly coincidental, therefore, that Grange 2 sits in the shadow of *Ocha*: Faughan Hill, revered in myth as the burial place of Níall Noígiallach (Kilpatrick 2011 303), but a place that Ger Dowling (2015) has shown to have been a major ritual focus in later prehistory. If the burials from the Tailtiu landscape are to be

connected with the Uí Néill derived from Cairbre and Fiachu, then the fact that, on current evidence, such practices did not persist past the late 6th century is highly significant.

While this re-imagining of the Teltown landscape may embody a proclamation of authority by an ascendant dynasty, one of the more perplexing aspects of the later rise of Diarmait mac Cerbhaill's descendants is the fact that, as we see their rise in the annals, their opponents were mainly not descendants of Níall Noígiallach or scions of Coirpre and Fiachu. Aside from the highly embellished accounts of their travails with dynasts of Uí Failge, Uí Dunláinge and Uí Chennselaig, the annals remain frustratingly silent regarding the identity of their opponents within Mag Breg itself (*cf.* Smyth 1974; 1975). As will be clear from the foregoing, the present author would plumb for dynasts of Luigne, Gailenga and latterly Cenél Cairpre. Whether or not one agrees with the reassessments of the Uí Néill discussed above, the absence of evidence for Cenél Cairpre defending their putative gains in later 6th- and earlier 7th-century Mag Breg against emerging lineages of Síl nÁedo Sláine and Clann Cholmáin is telling. Alongside the possibility that Cenél Cairpre's territories did not extend beyond the Boyne/Blackwater Valleys, could it be that the polity which these scions of Níall Noígiallach carved out *c.*500 had already become subject to the rising Cenél Conaill and the house of Diarmait mac Cerbhaill by the late 6th century? This would provide a highly plausible explanation for the apparent cessation of burial in the Tailtiu landscape in the latter half of the 6th century, for instance. Similarly, the career of Brandub mac Eochu (AU 590.3; 598.2; 605.1; 605.2) may provide another avenue through which Cenél Cairbre, leading the 'Uí Néill', became adversely effected within the eastern midlands. This may have provided a 'distraction' that allowed Cenél Conaill, Diarmait mac Cerbhaill and his descendants to gain an ascendance throughout the north/northwest that helped them to acquire interests within Mag Breg.

Nonetheless, here we must confront a problem with the recent revisionist accounts of the Uí Néill. Though unverifiable, Brian Lacey's arguments about the non-Uí Néill identity of Cenél Conaill, Cenél nÉogain, Diarmait mac Cerbhaill and his descendants constitute *one* plausible interpretation of the evidence. Lacey's (e.g. 2006, 289–319) reluctance to accord these groups an 'Uí Néill' identity much before *c.*700 is less convincing, however. Insofar as Brandub mac Eochu's career may be important, for

instance, the annals clearly title his opponents ‘Uí Néill’ in 593 and 605 (e.g. 590.3; 605.1). Between these two encounters, Áed mac Ainmuire of the Cenél Conaill – following Lacey (2006), a kinsman of Diarmait mac Cerbhaill – was defeated and killed by Brandub at Dún Bolg (AU 598.2). Despite Lacey’s reluctance to relate Brandub’s travails with the Uí Néill to Áed’s defeat then (e.g. Lacey 2006, 203), the conclusion that Áed was in fact leading a polity which included the Uí Néill is difficult to avoid. Likewise, the idea that Muirchú had Cenél Cairpre or Cenél Fhiachach in mind when referring to conflict between the Uí Néill and Ulaid in the late 7th century (Bieler 1979, 120–1), seems equally improbable. One ‘Uí Néill’ group for whom such Armagh-based propaganda would have had contemporary resonance is Síl nÁedo Sláine (see Swift 1994; 2004). Furthermore, the fact that the *Annals of Ulster* name Bec mac Cuanu, king of Uí Moccu Uais, amongst the fallen alongside Áed in 598 lends some support to the hypothesis detailed above: that Uí Moccu Uais acquired their midlands territories through the ascendance of Diarmait mac Cerbhaill’s descendants. In any case, if Áed mac Ainmuire was leading the Uí Néill in 598, then the title ‘king of the Uí Néill’ given to Óengus mac Colmán Már in 621 (AU 621.2) need not be fictitious or interpolated. The key point here must be that the use of the title Uí Néill by non-‘Uí Néill’ groups need *not* imply actual kinship or biological affiliation. As throughout post-Roman northern Europe, so too in Ireland were collective identities actively constructed and malleable; the language of kinship speaks to realpolitik and contemporary concerns, as much as actual ancestry. By comparison, for instance, in a sub-Roman context, Gildas speaks of Romans as a *gens*, in a sense clearly denoting a political community of *cives*, ‘fellow-citizens’, rather than tribal or dynastic community, much as it was customary to acknowledge the authority of Byzantine rulers by referring to them as ‘father’ (Charles-Edwards 2013, 228 and 237; cf. Muirchú’s description of Cogitosus as *patris mei*, ‘my father’: Bieler 1979, 62–3). Thus, while one might follow Lacey (2006), MacShamhráin (2000) and Bhreathnach (2005a) in questioning the credentials of Cenél Conaill, Cenél nÉogain, Clann Cholmáin and Síl nÁedo Sláine as actual descendants of Níall Noígíallach, their membership and leadership of a polity constructed around that identity by at least the 7th century, is neither incongruous with early medieval realpolitik, nor is it an implausible reading of the available evidence. Indeed, it is in this context of a crystallising Uí Néill identity and expanding hegemony, that the role of Luigne, Gailenga and Cíannachta power during the 7th century can be seen as a formative force underpinning the genesis of the classical Uí Néill polity.

Thus, if we were to follow Lacey (2006) in seeing Cenél Conaill and Diarmait mac Cerbhaill as originally distinct from the Uí Néill, then, I would suggest, we must conclude too that the descendants of Diarmait mac Cerbhaill had already adopted the title ‘king of the Uí Néill’, as well as some semblance of an identity commensurate with the same, by *c.* AD 600. The most pressing reason to do so was likely to legitimise their usurpation of a midlands hegemony carved out or adopted by the *cenéla* of Coipre and Fiachu mac Níall. That this was an acceptable political strategy, borne of necessity and the nexus of fictive consanguinity and *imperium*, is also testified by the practice which saw members of this same dynasty adopting the titles of *rí Cíannachta*, *rí Luigne*, or indeed *rex Corcu Sogain* at crucial geo-political junctures during subsequent centuries (*cf.* Byrne 1968; AU 742.7 and 816.1). Much as the title ‘king of the Uí Néill’ might have been used as a *namensitel* (following Bhreathnach 2005a, 65–8; Lacey 2006, 166) indicative of an exceptional political power, so too the use of the titles *rí Luigne* or *rí Cíannachta* did not imply that Bodchad Midi or members of Uí Chonaing claimed biological membership of a *gens* of Luigne, Cíannachta or the Corcu Sogain; rather, these were emblematic of the subjection, dominance and control of the polities for whom that identity and title was meaningfully constituted. Given the foregoing, these polities were likely formidable, extensive and anciently established within the midlands. In this guise, the genesis of the Uí Néill, as traditionally understood by scholars, can be seen to have as much to do with contemporary 6th- and 7th-century geo-politics articulated through the language of kinship, as the exceptional ability and success of a 5th- and 6th- century family descended from Níall Noígíallach in establishing their scions throughout the northern half of Ireland.

Conclusions

The extent, development and historical significance of the midlands kingdom of Luigne has been occluded by traditional narratives of early Irish geo-politics. Contrary to the tendency to imagine Luigne, Gailenga and Cíannachta as devoid of agency and subject to the machinations of an all-powerful Uí Néill hegemony, the evidence for Luigne assembled here raises many questions. It offers the basis for a more nuanced – if necessarily messy – understanding of the origins and genesis of this people, as well as the basis of their territorial power in the 5th–9th centuries. This, in itself, contributes to a re-framing of the geo-political make-up of the east and central midlands of Ireland

during this formative period. This is important, not only for our understanding of the genesis of the Uí Néill, but also of the creation of a patchwork of local identities and polities that thoroughly conditioned the remainder of the early medieval period.

Yet, as regards the long-standing debate about whether the Luigne and Gailenga of Mag Breg originate in (i) a pre-Uí Néill expansion from Connaught, or (ii) as clients and subjects settled in the interstices of an ascendant Uí Néill confederacy carved out via 6th- and 7th-century hegemony, the evidence heretofore discussed may seem incapable of resolving the debate either way. If the alternative conception of the genesis of the Uí Néill advocated above is followed, however, then even framing the evidence in just such terms seems inherently anachronistic. For all its problems, there can be no denying that what textual evidence we do have hints at other formerly dominant peoples in the midlands, whose connections and identities hint too that the 'Uí Néill' were only one of a series of peoples whose interests spanned north Connaught and the midlands on the cusp of Irish history. Indeed, an expansion from further north that gave rise to Síl nÁedo Sláine and Clann Cholmáin seems not altogether dissimilar (as intimated by Bhreathnach 2005a), and neither does the later ascendancy in exactly the same areas, of Uí Bríuin Bréifne. The concomitant possibility that Luigne and Gailenga were long established in the midlands independent of conquests by the early Uí Néill seems very real. Although their genealogical links with Cíannachta could have emerged during the 7th or 8th centuries, perhaps within the context of opposing or adapting to Síl nÁedo Sláine's developing regional hegemony, the possibility that the *territories* inhabited by Luigne, Gailenga and Cíannachta had a cultural and perhaps socio-political unity earlier still, during the late Iron Age, is intriguing. Although it cannot be substantiated, this allows one to consider the possibility of an earlier supra-regional polity composed of these peoples.

Yet, arguably the biggest impediment to appreciating the fluidity and dynamism of these regional midlands hegemonies has been the tyranny of a construct: the provincial narrative of territoriality in 1st-millennium AD Ireland. According to this narrative the 'province' of Connacht must have been distinct from the 'provinces' of Ulster and Mide until the Uí Néill initiated a new order by developing the concept of a unitary kingdom of Ireland (cf. Byrne 1971); no pre-Uí Néill polity could desecrate these ancient provincial divisions by fashioning a hegemony that spanned multiple regions on either

side of the great River Shannon. As the foregoing illustrates, the history of the Uí Néill themselves demonstrates the fallacy of this narrative and underscores the importance of moving beyond it. The urge to explain the co-location of peoples traditionally defined as being of ‘Connaught’ stock, in both Connaught and the midlands either through imperial policy of the Uí Néill, or via migration and political expansion, seems only necessary when dictated by the confines of that traditional, orthodox narrative of incorruptible and archaic provincial structures. Despite being outmoded (see Aitchison 1994; Gleeson in prep.), this notion of five provinces looms leviathan-like in the background of all debates about the nature and composition of Ireland’s 1st-millennium AD geo-political landscape. If we were unshackled of this construct, and concomitantly discounted the notion that the province of Connaught had any territorial or ideological cohesiveness much before the 8th century, then one reading of the evidence outlined above is that there were many complex and varied linkages between the midlands and north Connaught in, say, the 4th to 7th centuries. We might even countenance a supra-regional socio-political entity, over which Luigne and Gailenga, perhaps forerunners of Uí Fhiachrach, and the *cénela* of Cairbre and Fiachu mac Níall, were successive suzerains, a hypothesis, in fact, anticipated by several scholars (e.g. Byrne 1971; Bhreathnach 2005a; Swift 1994). Consigning a structural provincial division of early Ireland to the rubbish heap lends further credibility to the arguments outlined above, as does Catherine Swift’s (1994) analysis of Tírechán’s *Collectanea*, which led her to suggest that in the later 7th century Uí Néill overkings ruled from both Tara and Rathcroghan, respectively the premier ‘royal’ landscapes of Connaught and Ireland in Uí Néill-sanctioned mythology. Rather than a testament to the origins of the Uí Néill hegemony in an overlordship of Connaught then, it is equally feasible that we have in this duality of rulership further evidence for a socio-political entity spanning north Connaught and the midlands. Similarities between the mythic complex of both Rathcroghan and Tara, such as their enduring associations with Medb (e.g. Waddell *et al.* 2009; Newman 2007; 2011), need not necessarily have anything to do with later prehistoric territorialities (i.e. the provincial structure), nor common Indo-European inheritances (i.e. ideologies of sacral kingship). Rather, they may have arisen through the discourses played out *within* such a socio-political entity, discourses concerned not with the weight of traditional political structures, but with the possibilities represented by the dynamic societies of the 4th- to 7th-centuries in Ireland and Europe. These were undoubtedly political debates, regarding things like the forms and scale of collective

identity, rulership and supra-regional community through which the peoples of the midlands, north Connaught, and elsewhere, were constituted.

Though such issues stand alongside the adoption and adaption of Christianity as perhaps the most pressing ones faced by communities across Northern Europe in this period, they receive frustratingly little consideration in narratives of early medieval Ireland. Ireland is often contrasted with Britain, Scandinavia and northwestern Europe because its political structures seem so different, ‘Celtic’ and (relatively) ‘undeveloped’ (e.g. Binchy 1970; Hodges 1982, 193-5; Wickham 2005, 51 and 354–64). Thus, historians of 5th- to 7th-century Ireland speak of emerging lineages and consolidating dynasties who exercised a remarkable if precarious degree of control over nascent regional structures (Bhreathnach 2014; Byrne 1973; Ó Corráin 1972; Swift 2000; 2009), whereas colleagues elsewhere speak of ethnogenesis and the rise of kingdoms (e.g. Bassett 1989; Fraser 2009; Halsall 2007; Wood 1994; Yorke 1990). For all its problems, the richness of Ireland’s annalistic record seems partly responsible: it paints a dynamic picture of a political society at odds with the evidence available for other regions of northwestern Europe. That this is an issue of evidence rather than historical actuality seems likely; similar problems afflict the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which paints equally dynamic, if also synthetic, images of 5th- to 7th-century south-eastern Britain. Patrick Wormald (1986) questioned the degree to which politics and identity in Ireland, Wales and Scotland really did stand in contrast to that of Anglo-Saxon England. He suggested that these apparent contrasts reflected the nature of our sources as much as real socio-political differences. Thus, the survival of different forms of evidence apposite to the characterisation of each region (e.g. annals and detailed genealogies in Ireland, charters and royal laws in Anglo-Saxon England), combined with the willingness of scholarship of Ireland and Western Britain to paint a narrative of the 5th to 7th centuries using problematic sources and later propaganda exaggerates any apparent contrasts. Of course these sources are as tarnished by bias and interpolation as those like the *Chronicle* or Bede that Anglo-Saxonists astutely shun (Yorke 1990; 1999). Nevertheless, for better or worse, their richness has proved too tantalising to resist for those seeking to understand political developments in Ireland during the 5th to 7th centuries, including the present author. Scholarship relating to the origins of the Uí Néill is the best-known and most contested instance of this, but it is not the only one.

These historiographical and methodological issues come into sharpest relief when considering Luigne Breg. While they and the origins of the Uí Néill are worth pondering with regard to the place of Ireland within histories of early medieval Europe more generally, equally as cogent are the divergent ways in which kingdoms are conceptualised in Ireland and abroad. Scholarship on Ireland readily and frequently analyses how groups developed new identities and re-imagined ancestry in order to adapt to evolving political structures (e.g. Ó Corráin 1973; 1985; 1986; 1998), but a comparative discourse has been sorely absent when it comes to conceptualising and theorising these developments. F. J. Byrne characterised the ubiquity of kingship in Ireland, whereby hundreds of ‘kings’ existed simultaneously, as a ‘redundance of royal blood’ (Byrne 1973, 1). In England, in contrast, scholarship describes a ‘heptarchy’ of major kingdoms comprising a few major polities (Dumville 1997; Yorke 2009), but there is a strong case to be made that such entities were originally constructed and predicated on hierarchies of kingship not unlike those encountered in Ireland (see Campbell 1986, 85–98; Halsall 2014; Yorke 1990, 160–2). In a similar vein, Ireland’s ‘redundance of royal blood’ might encourage one to consider whether Anglo-Saxon England ever lacked kingdoms before AD 600, as implied by a discourse defined by the 7th-century ‘origins of kingdoms’. However, from an alternative perspective informed by scholarship on the origins of Continental polities, one might ask whether the process of consolidation and identity formation that characterised the emergence and crystallisation of confederacies like the Uí Néill or Éoganachta in Ireland might equally be understood as a process of ethnogenesis and kingdom-formation, with which scholars of Merovingian Frankia, southern Scandinavia as well as Anglo-Saxon England are so familiar (e.g. Halsall 2007; Pohl and Reimitz 1998; Wood 1994). Both processes were fundamentally predicated on myth-making, and likewise, what characterises the Uí Néill above all is an elite *dynastic* identity tied into a genealogical superstructure whereby all polities subject to their authority were hierarchically implicated. Is this really that different from royal houses elsewhere in Europe that were similarly structured around elite dynastic identities defined in relation to wider tribal, ethnic and geographical identities (e.g. ‘West Saxon’, ‘Mercian’ or Merovingian Frank), and claiming authority over equally synthetic nations of, for example, Angles, Jutes or Saxons? It was in this way that more generic ethnic identities – such as those of the Fení or Ulaid in Ireland, for example – were linked in their supremacy or

distinguished by their political inferiority (see Charles-Edwards 2000, 580–3). What these seemingly diverse early medieval polities all had in common, however, was the fact that *ethnic* superstructures encompassed and disguised heterogenous local identities.

True, there are important distinctions in scale, as well as cultural backgrounds conditioned by the Roman Empire that cannot be diminished. Yet, arguably there is more scope than has been admitted for examining similarities in practices of rulership and governance, as well as the identity work through which these were negotiated. With specific reference to the arguments presented above, the adoption of an Uí Néill identity by the non-Uí Néill descendants of Diarmait mac Cerbhaill, or the (temporary) usurpation of titles like *rí Luigne*, *rí Cíannachta* or *rex Corcu Sogain*, seems to have been as much about the practicalities of authority, rulership and governance, as it was about the re-imagining of collective identities to accord with contemporary geo-political actuality. While the foregoing model for how these strategies were negotiated and played out can undoubtedly be challenged via alternative readings of the available evidence, the case study of Luigne Breg outlined here highlights the importance of interrogating the relationship between local and regional power structures. This study presents one model for understanding that evidence. It is hoped, however, that its principal contribution will be to help initiate a debate about the nature of politics and society in early medieval Ireland, as well as its broader context in northwestern European society.

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Captions

TABLE 1: The traditional genealogical scheme for understanding the structure of the Uí Néill. (source: author)

TABLE 2: Hypothetical scheme for understanding the relationship of the ‘real Uí Néill’ to groups not actually descended from Níall Noígiallach (following MacShamhráin 2000; Lacey 2006). (source: author)

TABLE 3: Genealogical schema depicting the relationship between Luigne, Gailenga and Cíannachta, all descended from Tadhg mac Céin (based on Byrne 2009). (source: author)

TABLE 4: Genealogical scheme showing the inter-relationship of lineages within Síl nÁedo Sláine. (source: author)

Fig. 1: Map showing the baronies connected with the groups under discussion. Lune preserves Luaigne; Leyny preserves Luigne; Morgallion preserves Machaire Gailenga; Carbury preserves Cairpre, a quo Cenél Cairpre, though the more southerly of these two, in Co. Kildare derives from an 11th century settlement. (source: author)

Fig. 2: Map showing the principle places mentioned in text, as well as the baronies of Lune and Morgallion, and trícha cét of Caílle Follamain (after MacCotter 2008).

Fig. 3: Map showing the outline of a potential royal estate associated with Óenach Tailten (after Gleeson forthcoming) in relation to Ocha/Faughan Hill and places of 5th- to 6th-century early medieval burial. (source: author)

Pl. 1: Aerial photograph of Cairn T on Carnbane East, Sliab na Calliagh, looking east/northeast over Northwestern Mag Breg. (image courtesy of Dr Paul Naessans and Western Aerial Survey Ltd.)

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