Introduction

This history of the Irish between the fourth and the ninth centuries, from the beginning of the historical period up to the Vikings, follows only one of many possible approaches to the period. It is, in the first place, a history of the Irish people, and not just of the inhabitants of Ireland. What the Irish did in Britain, Francia and Italy is as much its concern as what they did at home. Secondly, although it gives a major place to the Church, it is a history of a people rather than of books or artefacts. Some surviving texts cannot be given a clear historical context; they are anonymous, only vaguely dated and not attached to any particular institution. Some of them may be of great intellectual importance, but I have deliberately preferred to concentrate on those for which I could propose an historical context.[1] For that reason, the main illustration of Irish artistic production occurs within a chapter on Columba and Iona, while the main discussion of intellectual debate is in the chapter on the paschal question.

Another principle limiting the range of topics covered was that there should be themes connecting one chapter with another. The effect has been to divide the book into three parts, beginning with an introductory section in which the Ireland of *c.* 700 is presented, first in a discursive manner, through the journey made by Bishop Tírechán's Patrick, and, secondly, more analytically, in the two chapters on Irish society. The first chapter has been written for those who like maps and are not afraid of strange names; those who do not fall into this category may wish to pass fairly rapidly on towards chapter 2. The hope, however, is that from the first chapter the reader will acquire a sense of the mental as well as of the political and ecclesiastical geography of the northern half of Ireland, while chapters 2 and 3 will show how Irish society worked. These

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[1] I have taken this course with an easier conscience because of the clear and authoritative guidance given by D. Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland, 400–1200* (London, 1995), chaps. 7 and 8.

chapters present a relatively static picture based on exceptionally rich sources from a comparatively short period, approximately 650–750. The written sources for the century and a half from 650 to 800 have become more numerous with the important demonstration that a group of saints' lives in a fourteenth-century manuscript (the 'O'Donoghue Lives') belongs to the eighth century.[2] One of the functions of chapter 4, on Ireland and Rome, is to address issues of long-term change and so redress to some extent the bias towards static description in the previous chapters.

The second and central part of the book is devoted to the early Irish Church. Chapter 4 on Ireland and Rome was also conceived as necessary background to the history of the conversion of Ireland to Christianity in chapter 5, while the theme of conversion leads to the question of how the Irish Church was organised once it had been consolidated, a topic discussed in chapter 6. The theme of conversion remains prominent in chapter 7, on Columba, Iona and Lindisfarne, but it extends into a broader topic, the contribution of the Irish to the formation of Latin Christendom, the forerunner of the Western Europe of today. Insular art as it developed after the conversion of the Picts and the Northumbrian English from Iona illustrates how an international cultural province could be created by a shared religion. The career of Columbanus (chapter 8) in Frankish Burgundy and Lombard Italy helped to redirect an old monastic tradition and to make both monasticism and missionary work central concerns of Frankish rulers for the first time; without those developments the Carolingian reforms would have taken a quite different form. Columbanus' career also gave a quite new urgency to an old dispute about the date of Easter. This was to offer opponents of the Irish, whether in Francia or in England, a weapon with which to undermine their influence; and it divided the Irish Church at home into 'Roman' and 'Hibernian' camps. The Easter debate, however, also offers an opportunity (in chapter 9) to appreciate how complicated and intellectually difficult such an issue could become, and how serious the obstacles were to any satisfactory resolution. Chapter 10, on Armagh, Kildare and Canterbury, sees how these controversies generated rival conceptions of authority in the Irish Church.

On the secular side I have concentrated on the related issues of the Uí Néill and the kingship of Tara (chapters 11 and 12). This is partly because the evidence is relatively good, partly because these topics offer

[2] R. Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1991), esp. chap. 10.

major themes that can be pursued through almost the whole period covered by the book. This decision has meant that some provinces of the island have received scanty attention. A difficulty here is that the uneven but considerable wealth of the evidence is liable to be overwhelming: the annals and the genealogies in combination enable something to be said about thousands of named individuals. Early Irish history is thus liable to become a morass of names; what is worse, often little can be said about the persons who bear the names other than what were their pedigrees and when, and sometimes how, they died. One purpose behind restricting secular history to a limited range of themes was to reduce the horrors of early Irish names for those who are unfamiliar with them. A further difficulty is that the distribution of evidence is so patchy. Most of it comes from the period after 650; that is why the first three chapters exploit the material dating from about AD 700 to give a picture of Ireland at that period. To understand patterns of change, therefore, it seemed wise to choose themes that could be studied over a long period. The last two chapters make some slight amends for the concentration on the Uí Néill by bringing evidence about the Éoganachta of Munster to bear on the general issue of the powers of kings. It is argued that there was a political alliance between the Uí Néill, the Connachta and the Éoganachta, created by hard fighting but kept in being also by a persuasive picture of the past history of Ireland, by origin-legends and genealogies. The conclusion looks at how this political order began to decay in the late eighth and early ninth centuries.

In spite of this thematic approach, however, many named persons will appear in this book. It may be some comfort to the reader, as it has been for the author, to know that the potentially off-putting effect of recording numerous names was already a problem in the seventh century. The Life of St Columba by Adomnán, abbot of Iona, written about 700, begins with a display of anxiety about names.[3] The Life – like this history – was intended for non-Irish as well as Irish readers, and Adomnán had no illusions about the likely reaction of the foreigners to Irish names of persons, places and peoples. *Vilis*, 'worthless', was likely to be their opinion of the language, and 'obscure' their judgement on the names. One solution to the problem might have been to avoid using Irish names whenever possible.[4] Adomnán, however, did not take this path; instead

[3] Adomnán, *VSC*, 1st Preface, pp. 2–3; and tr. R. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, 1995), p. 103.
[4] This seems to have been the policy of the author of the *Vita Prima* of Brigit.

he showed unusual care and discrimination in their use. It is for this
reason that he provides so good a point of departure for those who, sep-
arated from him not just by language but by some thirteen hundred years,
find Irish names even more of an obstacle than did Adomnán's non-Irish
contemporaries. His approach is all the more rewarding because names,
once their subtleties have been appreciated, can give us an impression of
what constituted personal identity in early medieval Ireland.[5] In chapter
1, as we are conducted around much of late seventh-century Ireland by
Bishop Tírechán, we shall meet many names, of individuals, dynasties
and peoples. It is hoped that once the reader has, so to speak, been depos-
ited in a very unfamiliar country, he may learn his way around with the
aid of Tírechán, Tírechán's later imitators and some maps.

We may begin with a story Adomnán tells in the second chapter of
Book 1. The subject is Finten son of Telchán (better known by his pet-
name Munnu) the founder of Tech Munnu, the modern Taghmon in
Co. Wexford. His standard name, Finten mac Telcháin, consists of a first
name, Finten, followed by a patronymic, *mac Telcháin* 'son of Telchán'. A
high proportion of early Irish names are of this form, similar to such Old
English names as Ælfred Æthelwulfing, 'Alfred son of Æthelwulf'.

Finten had decided to visit Columba when news came of the saint's
death. Nonetheless, he kept to his plan to sail over to Iona, where
Baíthéne was now abbot. Finten's name was not known to Baíthéne or
to the other monks and he was thus 'received with the hospitality appro-
priate to any unknown guest'. When he came before Baíthéne he was
asked for his *gens*,[6] his province, his name, his condition of life, and the
reason for his voyage. What Baíthéne was doing here is what the vernac-
ular texts sometimes describe as 'requesting *scéla* [news, tales] from
someone'. It seems to have been standard practice for the superior to ask
for *scéla* from his inferior, or for the host to ask them from the guest. So,
in the story of the death of Conaire the Great, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*,
Eochaid, king of Ireland, requests *scéla* from the woman he has seen by
the well of Brí Léith (Co. Longford). Because she is assumed to be infe-
rior, she has to identify herself first.

The significance of such requests for identification is illustrated by the
ninth-century account of the customs of Tallaght, the leading house in
the reforming group known as the *Céli Dé*, 'clients of God'. It is there

[5] B. Ó Cuív, 'Aspects of Irish Personal Names', *Celtica*, 18 (1986), 151–84; M. A. O'Brien, 'Notes
on Irish Proper Names', *Celtica*, 9 (1971), 212; M. A. O'Brien (ed. R. Baumgarten), 'Old Irish
Personal Names', *Celtica*, 10 (1973), 211–36.   [6] For the *gens* see chap. 2 (ii) (b).

said that 'As for those who came to converse with him [probably Máel
Rúain, a principal leader of the reform], it is not his usage to ask them
for news [*fachmarc scél dóib*], but to see that they profit in those matters
only for which they come.'[7] In terms of Baíthéne's questions, the custom
at Tallaght seems to have been to ask only for the reason for someone's
journey, not for name, *gens*, province, or even a person's condition of life.
Interaction with outsiders was to be kept to the austere essentials; a
person's worldly situation was irrelevant.

Names carry information. In Ireland, as in modern Europe, first
names were usually either male or female. They might also imply other
things, for example the kind of life a person was leading. Old Irish is rich
in pet-names. One type of pet-name, such as Mo Lua or Do Bécóc, is
apparently restricted to monks. Their affectionate quality is well demon-
strated by a story told of Díarmait of Killeshin, *alias* Mo Dímmóc: 'His
foster-mother said, while caressing him, "This is my [*mo*] Dímmóc."'[8]
These distinctively monastic names contain both British and Irish lin-
guistic features; similarly, they are attested in both Irish and Welsh texts
and were used for both Irishmen and Britons. Although they evidently
follow a convention established no later than the sixth century – when
interaction between Britons and Irishmen remained frequent – the
names, even in Wales, have at least one Irish feature.[9] They were a
common language of monastic charity developed in the Irish mission
field.

There were also other variations in names that were similarly expres-
sive. Baíthéne himself, the second abbot of Iona, is said to have had the
name Conin; it may be that Baíthéne, which means 'Foolish One', was
a pet-name given by Columba, his monastic foster-father and cousin.[10]
The extraordinary profusion of persons called Columbanus or Colmán
– based on the Latin word for a dove, *columba* – bore names which were
implicitly Christian. Columba himself was perhaps not given that name
at birth, but rather when he was destined for the monastic life.[11]

[7] *The Monastery of Tallaght*, ed. E. J. Gwynn and W. J. Purton, *PRIA* 29, C (1911), p. 127, § 2.
[8] *Fél*. 8 July, Notes. On this type of name, see P. Russell, 'Patterns of Hypocorism in Early Irish
Hagiography' (forthcoming).　　　[9] Lenition rather than nasalisation after *mo*.
[10] Adomnán, *VSC*, Appendix, says that Baíthéne was also called Conin.
[11] See *Adamnani Vita S. Columbae*, ed. W. Reeves (Dublin, 1857), p. 6 n.[k], where Reeves suggests
that Columba may have been his baptismal name alongside a secular name, Crimthann (for which
see the sixteenth-century Life by Manus O'Donnell, *Betha Colaim Chille: Life of Columcille*, ed. A.
O'Kelleher and G. Schoepperle, Urbana, 1918; repr. Dublin, 1994, c. 53); the associations of *columba*
would also be appropriate if the name was given when he was confirmed (in Irish called 'going
under the hand of a bishop', *CIH* 2129. 22).

The questions put by Baíthéne, apart from the reason for Finten's journey, give us some idea of what constituted personal identity in Ireland *c*. AD 700. The first name was distinct from the 'additional name', *forainm* or *cognomentum*, and from the paternal descent (usually a patronymic, 'son of X', but sometimes 'grandson of X').[12] A man used by Columba as a messenger is given the name Lugaid and the 'additional name' Laitir (*láitir* 'strong');[13] a guest is called 'Aidán by name, son of Fergnoe', thus distinguishing the name on the one hand from the patronymic on the other.[14] Paternal descent was a matter of wide significance in seventh-century Ireland: it was the starting-point of a full genealogy and thus, for a king, the basis of his right to rule; for the ordinary man, it established his right to inherit land. On this basis kindreds acquired names: the Uí Néill were 'the Descendants of Níall'; similar names were Cenél Loairn, 'the Kindred of Loarn' (hence Lorne in Argyll) or Cland Cholmáin, 'the Children of Colmán', the principal royal dynasty of Mide (Meath).

Some names, such as Áed, were very common and this made it more usual to use 'additional names'. A leading king of the Southern Uí Néill had the name Áed Sláne, with a *forainm* which associated him with a major site within his kingdom, the modern Slane on the River Boyne. Brothers might bear the same first name, rendering an additional name, a *forainm*, essential: Áedán mac Gabráin, the most powerful of the early kings of Dál Ríata in Argyll and Co. Antrim, had sons called Echoid Find and Echoid Buide ('the Fair' and 'the Yellow-Haired'), both alive at the same time.[15] The primary name, therefore, was the first name; *forainm* and paternal descent were adjuncts, sometimes treated as part of the name, sometimes not.

There are very few demonstrably foreign names. One of the few is Artúr, borrowed from the Britons; it was borne by a son of Áedán mac Gabráin and by a member of a Leinster dynasty, the Uí Máil.[16] The first of these examples may point to friendly relations between the Irish settlers in Argyll and their British neighbours of Strathclyde; similar links may explain the Leinster examples.[17] Other exceptions tend to cluster at

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[12] Cf. *ainm ndíles = nomen proprium*, the first name, as in *Fél.*[2] clxix.1. Patronymics yielded later surnames of the MacMurrough type; identifications as 'grandson of so-and-so' yielded names beginning in Ó (O), such as Ó Ceallaigh, O'Kelly.

[13] 'Lugaidum nomine, cuius cognomentum scotice Lathir dicitur', *VSC*, ii.5; 'Lugaidus nomine cognomento Laitirus', ibid. ii.38.   [14] Ibid., i.26.   [15] Ibid., i.9.

[16] Ibid., i.9; *CGH* i.78; Irish had a rich set of native names based on *art* 'bear': Art, Artgal, Artrí etc.

[17] A. S. Mac Shamhráin, *Church and Polity in Pre-Norman Ireland: The Case of Glendalough* (Maynooth,

the beginning and at the end of the period. The early inscriptions in the ogam alphabet, probably of the fifth century, reveal a higher proportion of Latin names in Ireland than one would expect on the basis of later sources.[18] The names are not distinctively Christian and probably indicate the prestige of Rome and the links established by the Irish settlements in western Britain. In the eighth and ninth centuries, however, there was a new wave of Latin names, only these were Christian, such as Elair from Hilarius (the saint of Poitiers). These names were borne by churchmen, and predominantly by reformist monks such as the *Céli Dé*. They may be placed alongside other names that cannot have been given at birth, such as Dublittir, an anchorite and scholar who was one of the main early leaders of the *Céli Dé*; his name means 'Black Letter'. When one remembers that the *Céli Dé* leader Máel Rúain avoided the practice of 'asking for news', that is for self-identification, one can see that the *Céli Dé* were concerned to make the transition between world and monastery into a sharply defined boundary. Even the personal identity carried by a name could be left behind, because the life of the monk was a new beginning; it was not (as they thought it was for all too many of their unreformed brethren) a continuation of secular life by other means. Put another way, the problem was that personal identity included much background, such as descent, native kingdom and *gens*, that belonged to a secular world not to the monastery. This was especially true of paternal descent, and one can see from annalistic obits that among churchmen some were more likely to be given patronymics than others.[19] For some, the descent which attached them to a secular kindred was to be set aside, just as the monk should not be buried in the paternal cemetery, but in one belonging to his church.[20]

1996), p. 82.
   [18] *CIIC* nos. 16, 188 (both MARIANI; cf. Welsh Meirion < Marianus), 20, 56, 166, 265, discussed by C. Swift, *Ogam Stones and the Earliest Christians*, Maynooth Monographs, Series Minor 2 (Maynooth, 1997), pp. 90–6.   [19] See below, chap. 6.   [20] *Hib*. xviii.3.

CHAPTER ONE

Ireland in the seventh century: a tour

In the 640s, Agilbert, a Frank who was to end his days as bishop of Paris, lived for some years as a student in Ireland.[1] His visit is striking because in 640 the Franks were still the most powerful people in Western Europe, while Ireland was considered to lie at the end of the world. Yet he was only the first of several foreign visitors to Ireland to be mentioned by the Northumbrian English historian Bede.[2]

Agilbert's journey to Ireland was a consequence of an earlier journey in the reverse direction, from Ireland to Francia: a pilgrimage by a Leinsterman, Columbanus. This pilgrimage, or *peregrinatio*, was not a pilgrimage in the sense of a visit to some shrine, such as to the Holy Places in Palestine, or to the tomb of St Peter in Rome or to St James of Compostela; it was not a journey to a holy place where prayers were said and the pilgrim then returned home.[3] Such pilgrimages were common in the early Middle Ages, but Columbanus' was not one of them. His was a journey with no return, a journey not to a shrine, but away from family and native land. The result was the foundation of three monasteries in northern Burgundy: Annegray, Luxeuil and Fontaine.[4] From these bases Columbanus gained the position of the pre-eminent holy man of the Merovingian kings and their aristocracy in the early seventh century – an uncomfortable and controversial holy man, it is true, but

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[1] Bede, *HE* iii.7.

[2] Other named persons who spent some time in Ireland include Æthelhun (Edilhun), Æthelwine (Ediluini) (*HE* iii.27), Chad (iv.3), probably Cedd (seems to know Irish, iii.25), Ecgberht (iii.27 etc.), Hygbald (iv.3), Tuda (iii.26), Wihtberht (v.9), Willibrord (v.10) and the two Hewalds (ibid.).

[3] K. Hughes, 'The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 11 (1960), 143–51, repr. in her *Church and Society in Ireland AD 400–1200*, ed. D. N. Dumville, Variorum Reprints (London, 1987), no. xiv; A. Angenendt, 'Die irische Peregrinatio und ihre Auswirkung auf dem Kontinent vor dem Jahre 800', in Löwe (ed.), *Die Iren und Europa*, 52–79; T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Social Background to Irish *Peregrinatio*', *Celtica*, 11 (1976), 43–59.

[4] Jonas, *Vita S. Columbani*, i.6 and 10, ed. B. Krusch, *Ionae Vitae Sanctorum Columbani, Vedastis, Iohannis*, MGH SRG (Hanover, 1905), pp. 163, 169–70.

indisputably holy.[5] Frankish bishops might be alarmed at the times at which he celebrated the movable feasts of the Church, but some of them sought him as their 'soul-friend' nonetheless.[6]

Agilbert was buried in the crypt at Jouarre, near Paris, a monastery which had been founded by one of the most influential families to give their support to Columbanus.[7] This Frankish nobleman's journey to Ireland is thus clear evidence that the links between Ireland and Francia created by Columbanus' *peregrinatio* had not been broken. Another *peregrinatio*, within a few years of Agilbert's voyage to Ireland, brought Aidan to Northumbria from Iona, a small island off the western tip of another, larger, island, Mull in the Inner Hebrides.[8] The repercussions of Aidan's mission were to bring Englishmen to Ireland in considerable numbers, both for study and for the monastic life. Bede distinguishes those going for the sake of study, who visited the houses of Irish teachers, from those whose purpose was training in the monastic life;[9] both received what, in modern terms, would be called their maintenance free; the students also had their teaching free.[10] Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury and later bishop of Sherborne, wrote *c*. 675 of boatloads of Englishmen going to Ireland to study.[11] For much of the seventh century, therefore, Ireland was not just a pimple upon the outer skin of the known world, as the Irishman Cummian described his native island in 632 or 633;[12] it was the resort of students anxious for advancement in the Christian Latin learning common to Western Europe, and also of young monks eager to gain knowledge of the monastic training which had produced Columbanus and Aidan.

It so happens, by a fortunate accident, that we can have some notion of the Ireland visited by Aldhelm's boatloads of Englishmen. About 690 Bishop Tírechán wrote a book whose purpose was to defend the

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[5] I. N. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450–751* (London, 1994), pp. 184–9; J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 63–73.

[6] Columbanus, *Epistolae* i. 6 (ed. and tr. G. S. M. Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae ii, Dublin, 1957, pp. 8–9).

[7] Marquise de Maillé, *Les Cryptes de Jouarre* (Paris, 1971); J. Hubert, J. Porscher and W. F. Volbach, *Europe in the Dark Ages* (London, 1969), pp. 64–78.   [8] Bede, *HE* iii.5.   [9] Ibid., iii.27.

[10] This was not true for the natives: *CIH* 592.12–13 (*Berrad Airechta*, § 14: German tr. by R. Thurneysen, *Die Bürgschaft im irischen Recht*, Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Klasse, Berlin, 1928, no. 2, p. 8; Engl. tr. by R. C. Stacey in T. Charles-Edwards *et al.*, *Lawyers and Laymen*, Cardiff, 1986, p. 212).

[11] Aldhelm, *Epistolae* v (ed. Ehwald, *Aldhelmi Opera Omnia*, MGH AA xv, Berlin, 1919, p. 492; tr. M. Lapidge and M. Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, Ipswich, 1979, p. 163).

[12] Cummian, *De Controversia Paschali*, ed. M. Walsh and D. Ó Cróinín, *Cummian's Letter De Controversia Paschali and the De Ratione Computandi* (Toronto, 1988), p. 72 (line 110).

territorial authority of the community of Patrick, headed by his heirs, the bishops of Armagh, and to cement their alliance with the leading dynasty in the Irish midlands.[13] The framework of the book is a circular journey supposed to have been made by St Patrick himself around the northern half of Ireland, beginning on the east coast a few miles north of Dublin, travelling west across the great midland plain, over the River Shannon into Connaught, north into Donegal, round the northern coast to Co. Antrim, and then southwards again back to the midlands.[14] Such a circuit was an expression of lordship, ecclesiastical as much as secular. The Patrick portrayed by Tírechán is undoubtedly very different from the fifth-century original, but the story as he told it is very instructive about the mental as well as the political map of seventh-century Ireland. Patrick's journey implied that the political power of kings was subject to a higher power, that of the holy man and his heirs. Tírechán's Patrick is thus a political activist: each ancestor of a dynasty powerful in the late seventh century received a blessing that was claimed to be the foundation of that dynasty's greatness; each ancestor of a dynasty once powerful but by then declining was subject to the holy man's anger, and a curse which led inexorably to the collapse of its fortunes. Tírechán's primary concern was with the allegiance due from churches to the heir of Patrick, the bishop of Armagh, but this concern was inseparable from the attitude of kings. Too many of them were 'deserters and arch-robbers', who 'hate the jurisdiction of Patrick, because they have taken away that which was his, and they fear that, if the heir of Patrick were to investigate his rights of jurisdiction, he could vindicate for himself almost the whole island as his domain'.[15] Tírechán's book was just such an investigation into the rights of the heir of Patrick; it was his duty to search for the *paruchia Patricii*, by which he meant the rights of ecclesiastical lordship over churches claimed by the bishop of Armagh. His account of Patrick's circuit around the northern half of Ireland embodied the results of his investigation. As a conse-

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[13] Tírechán, *Collectanea*, pp. 124–63; for the date, see the Appendix to chap. 10. Note that the texts ed. Bieler, pp. 122–4 [II 1–4] and 164–6 [III 2–8] do not appear to have been part of Tírechán's original text; for strong arguments in favour of seeing Tírechán as a promoter of the interests of two principal churches associated with Patrick, Donaghpatrick in Co. Meath and Domnach Mór in Co. Mayo, and also of Síl nÁeda Sláne, see C. Swift, 'Tírechán's Motives in Compiling the *Collectanea*: An Alternative Interpretation', *Ériu*, 45 (1994), 53–82.

[14] As a very brief appendage (*finito circulo*, 'after the circuit had been completed'), there is also an account of a journey *via* Leinster to Cashel in Munster, *Collectanea*, 51. The significance of this story is appreciated and countered by the eighth-century Life of Ailbe, c. 29 (ed. Heist, *Vitae*, p. 125).

[15] Tírechán, *Collectanea*, 18.