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# Derbforgaill: twelfth-century abductee, patron and wife

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**ABSTRACT.** *This paper explores the themes of abduction, patronage, female wealth and marital relationships through their intersection in the life of Derbforgaill (d. 1193), whose abduction in 1152 sparked a chain of events that contributed to the English invasion of Ireland. Derbforgaill is also remembered for her donations to Mellifont in 1157, during the consecration of its ‘church of the monks’, and to the construction of a nuns’ church in Clonmacnoise in 1167. Focusing on the broader political context of these donations offers strong grounds for reconsideration of both Derbforgaill’s and other women’s experiences. Among the wider implications of this study must be the reconceptualisation of female political importance as functional through or in concert with marriage partners, rather than the natal family.*

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Derbforgaill (d. 1193), daughter of Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn (d. 1153) king of Meath, and wife of Tigernán Ua Ruairc (d. 1172), king of Bréifne, is arguably the most famous medieval Irish woman. Her fame derives chiefly from an incident in 1152, when she was taken from her husband by the king of Leinster, Diarmait Mac Murchada, during an invasion. She returned to Ua Ruairc soon after, but it was many years before he was able to avenge the insult. In 1166, Ua Ruairc finally turned the tables and drove Mac Murchada out of Ireland, with the ousted king procuring overseas assistance for his return. These events led directly to the English invasion of Ireland, the conquest of several Irish provinces and the lasting interest of the English crown in Ireland; consequences for which contemporaries and later commentators alike blamed the 1152 episode and its participants, especially Derbforgaill.

Derbforgaill is also famous for two donations to churches, made in the period between her abduction and Mac Murchada’s return to Ireland. She endowed Mellifont in 1157, during the consecration of its ‘church of the monks’.<sup>1</sup> Mellifont was Ireland’s first Cistercian house, established by Máel Máedóc Ua Morgair (St. Malachy) in 1142 on a site granted by Donnchad Ua Cerbaill, king of Airgíalla: the introduction of the order represented a contribution to the pan-European ecclesiastical reform movement in Ireland for Ua Cerbaill and Ua Morgair alike. Mellifont had seven daughter houses in Ireland by 1153, a number

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<sup>1</sup> Ann. Tig. 1157.3: ‘Tempuill na Manach’.

that eventually grew to twenty, as the campaign to bring Ireland's allegedly non-conforming church into line with the continent gathered pace.<sup>2</sup>

Derbforgaill's second major donation was made to a female religious community at Clonmacnoise in 1167. While her first contribution had been comprised of gold and materials, on this occasion she sponsored the construction of a nun's church. Unlike Mellifont, Clonmacnoise belonged to an early generation of Irish ecclesiastical centres; it was founded in the sixth century and became one of the most important monasteries on the island. As will be shown, this donation has nonetheless been regarded as a further contribution to the reform agenda through its supposed association with nuns of Arrouasian observance, another twelfth-century import.

Derbforgaill is, therefore, an exceptional figure for her involvement in the background to the invasion, and her status as an attested donor of ecclesiastical patronage: one of few and the only female. Church reform in general is one of the most popular topics for historians of Ireland in the twelfth century, and Derbforgaill has frequently drawn attention. Even so, consideration of the political context has been lacking. Modern historians have argued that Derbforgaill was a political hostage whose capture constituted Ua Ruairc's submission to Diarmait Mac Murchada, and that these donations reflected either Derbforgaill's assertion of independent authority or support of her natal family, the Uí Máel Sechlainn. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that the capture of Derbforgaill was an abduction (and did not establish Ua Ruairc's submission to Mac Murchada). It also suggests, as will be argued here, that Derbforgaill's donations represented support of her husband Tigernán Ua Ruairc and his political ambitions.

In the past, despite acknowledging their limitations, historians have relied heavily on Anglo-Norman sources in their assessment of Derbforgaill's agency in 1152. Accounts of the episode appear in Giraldus Cambrensis's *Expugnatio Hibernica* and *The song of Dermot and the earl* (now renamed *The deeds of the Normans in Ireland*), the two most accessible and best known of this category. Both agree that Derbforgaill had a hand in her own capture, with Giraldus stressing Mac Murchada's love of Derbforgaill, and *The deeds* the obverse — Derbforgaill's love of Mac Murchada.

Since the purpose of such accounts was patently to justify the actions that led to the English invasion, a reassessment is overdue. To set both the events of 1152 and the later donations in their appropriate political context and recapture their contemporary meaning, it is necessary to rely on the Irish annals to a much greater degree. The various collections of annals are all compilatory to some extent, incorporating information from each other and other now-lost works, so the appearance of an identical entry in two or more sets should not necessarily be taken as independent verification. They are also generally only extant in manuscripts of a later era, though this has little impact on the quality of the information they contain.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Colmán Ó Clabaigh, 'Mellifont' in Seán Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Ireland: an encyclopedia* (London, 2005), p. 325.

<sup>3</sup> The order in which the annals are referenced in the footnotes here goes towards the relevance of each entry to the point raised. In the absence of any special relevance, a particular order will be followed (A.F.M., Ann. Tig., Chron. Scot., A.U., A.L.C., Ann. Conn., Ann. Inisf., Misc. Ir. Annals, Ann. Clon.). The seventeenth-century Annals of the Four Masters is the latest and most compilatory collection and, for that reason, will be cited first. The Annals of Tigernach, which do not have any significant lacunae for the mid-twelfth century (unlike most collections), will be second in the sequence, and where appropriate their close

There is an often-noted absence of material relating to Leinster in the extant annals of the twelfth century. It may be presumed that annals were kept in Leinster but are now lost, so we may be missing information relating to Diarmait Mac Murchada and Derbforgaill. Other collections are notable for provincial bias: the Annals of Inisfallen are largely concerned with Munster affairs, and the Annals of Tigernach deal principally with matters in Connacht. It has been suggested that the latter was a ‘house chronicle’ of Connacht’s royal dynasty, the Uí Chonchobair, in this period.<sup>4</sup> This observation will be directly relevant to the present consideration of Derbforgaill’s donation at Clonmacnoise.

## I

The difference between abduction and the use of women as hostages is not always clear. In theory the two were very different phenomena, which ought not to be easily confused, but, as we shall see, recent research has proposed that the use of women as hostages was more widespread than is generally believed. Because of this, and a similarity of description between these different actions in various chronicles, there are now certain cases that occasion debate.

A close examination can go some way towards dispelling confusion. In the Irish context, abduction and hostage-taking must both be defined with reference to the law texts. There, abduction, ‘fochsal’ or ‘foxal’, followed by intercourse, was deemed a form of marriage, ‘lánamnas foxail’, and not rape, if consented to by the woman.<sup>5</sup> It is stipulated that such a union is formed with the consent of the woman but in defiance of her father or kin. This definition makes it clear that it is a single woman, unmarried or divorced, who is under consideration. However, the normative law texts are at odds with the political history of the annals. There, it is the married woman who is almost invariably the victim of abduction. The purpose of these abductions can be inferred on most occasions to be the humiliation of her husband. One law text, *Uraicecht na Ríar*, does show the married woman as a victim of abduction and it supports this interpretation. ‘For abducting his wife in disregard of him’, an aggressor would incur the largest possible penalty payable to an ollam.<sup>6</sup>

In 1162 the king of the Northern Uí Néill, Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, was advancing a claim to kingship of Ireland:<sup>7</sup> the Annals of Tigernach record that

relation *Chronicon Scotorum* will follow. The Annals of Ulster and Annals of Loch Cé, also closely related for this period, will be next in the sequence, followed by the Annals of Connacht, which are related to the Annals of Loch Cé at the beginning of their coverage (1224). The Munster-centric collections of Inisfallen and Mac Cárthaigh’s Book (the first part of *Miscellaneous Irish Annals*) will follow. Finally, the Annals of Clonmacnoise, which survive only in a seventeenth-century English translation, are typically cited first for a relevant piece of information, but otherwise will be cited last.

<sup>4</sup> Marie Therese Flanagan, *Irish society, Anglo-Norman settlers, Angevin kingship: interactions in Ireland in the late twelfth century* (Oxford, 1989), p. 259.

<sup>5</sup> Fergus Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law* (Dublin, 1988), pp 70–71; CIH i, 442.8–9.

<sup>6</sup> Liam Breatnach (ed.), *Uraicecht na Ríar* (Dublin, 1987), §3, pp 102–03: ‘ar thlenamain dia chuinn a chétmuintire’.

<sup>7</sup> The Northern Uí Néill encompassed the two major branches of Cenél nEogain and Cenél Conaill. Muirchertach belonged to the former, and, indeed, it was the Cenél nEogain who dominated the common kingship after the eighth century.

there was ‘a hosting by the son of Mac Lochlainn together with the men of Ireland to the Foreigners of Dublin to avenge his wife and her violation by them, but they separated without peace without battle’.<sup>8</sup> The circumstances under which the violation of Mac Lochlainn’s wife had occurred are not recorded and this is the only entry in any surviving collection that alludes to it. On this basis it is also reasonable to suppose, especially given Mac Lochlainn’s stature, that the record of many other such abductions has been lost over time or that they went unrecorded in the first place.

A similar abduction recorded in the annals took place in 1231, when Ua Domnaill brought away Cathal Ua Ragallaig’s wife as part of a general raid of the territory of east Bréifne.<sup>9</sup> Examples of abduction as a political stratagem also appear in the fourteenth-century record. For instance, in 1315 Máel Ruanaid Mac Diarmata and Gilbert Mac Goisdéib abducted the wife of a rival, Diarmait Mac Diarmata, as a part of a general raid of Mag Luirg in Connacht.<sup>10</sup>

Hostage-taking, by contrast, is a phenomenon with countless examples and one chiefly concerned with men rather than women. We should, therefore, be very cautious about attributing this categorisation to women on any given occasion. As pointed out by Lahney Preston-Matto, hostages were legally distinct from captives across Europe generally in the Middle Ages,<sup>11</sup> and this was also the case under Irish law.<sup>12</sup> In fact, different types of hostage were recognised in Ireland. Hostage may be a translation from ‘gíall’, ‘aitire’ or ‘brága’, depending on the context. In the inter-provincial political arena, a hostage was (almost always) a person given in guarantee of submission who could be killed, blinded or ransomed if that submission was breached.<sup>13</sup>

Some thought has been given to the legal distinction between ‘géill’ and ‘aitiri’, and it has been argued that the original meaning of aitire was a representative of high rank who did not signify submission or loss of status for the king or people for whom they acted.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, the yielding of géill by one lord to another did denote the submission of the giver and recognition of the authority of the latter. Nonetheless, it has also been acknowledged that whatever their semantic differences originally, these terms were becoming interchangeable by the tenth century.<sup>15</sup>

The term ‘brága’ (plural ‘braighde’) is also used for hostages in this period. It derives from a term for the neck or throat.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, it has been suggested that its increasing frequency reflects a growing trend towards the mistreatment of political hostages, but the usage of this term in the annals does not support such

<sup>8</sup> Ann. Tig. 1162.1: ‘Sluaghedh la mac Maic Lochlainn dochum Gall, co Feraib Erenn lais, do dighail a mna & a saraighthe forro, cor’ dedhladar cen t-sith, cen cath’.

<sup>9</sup> A.F.M. 1231.11; A.U. 1231.4; A.L.C. 1231.7; Ann. Conn. 1231.8; Ann. Clon. 1231.

<sup>10</sup> A.L.C. 1315.13; Ann. Conn. 1315.13; Ann. Clon. 1315.

<sup>11</sup> Lahney Preston-Matto, ‘Queens as political hostages in pre-Norman Ireland: Derbforgaill and the three Gormlaiths’ in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, cix, no. 2 (Apr. 2010), p. 143.

<sup>12</sup> This may be what is meant by Preston-Matto, but none of her subsequent examples refer to Ireland: Preston-Matto, ‘Queens as political hostages’, pp 143–4.

<sup>13</sup> Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, p. 174.

<sup>14</sup> Robin Stacey Chapman, *The road to judgement: from custom to court in medieval Ireland and Wales* (Philadelphia, 1996), pp 109–10.

<sup>15</sup> Stacey Chapman, *The road to judgement*, pp 109–10.

<sup>16</sup> T. F. O’Rahilly, ‘Some instances of vowel-shortening in Modern Irish’ in *Ériu*, xiii (1942), pp 129–30, n. 4.

a claim.<sup>17</sup> Brága appears in the sense of hostage as early as 882 in *Chronicon Scotorum* and 1059 in the *Annals of Tigernach*, though, of course, this may be due to the influence of later copyists.<sup>18</sup> It occurs under 1113 and 1120, and then becomes the dominant term for hostage from the mid twelfth century.<sup>19</sup>

Only one woman is explicitly called a hostage in the annals. That was the daughter of Eochaid Mac Duinn Sléibe, who was taken as a hostage by Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn in 1165.<sup>20</sup> She was recorded to have been a brága<sup>21</sup> (a *ingin féin i m-braightechus*), but elsewhere in the same entry she and other hostages are called géill,<sup>22</sup> again suggesting interchangeability. The circumstances of her surrender to Mac Lochlainn were exceptional. Donnchad Ua Cerbaill induced Mac Lochlainn to accept the return of Mac Duinn Sléibe as king of Ulaid, the latter having only recently been ousted by Mac Lochlainn. In return for acceding to this unsatisfactory arrangement, Mac Lochlainn demanded a son from every regional king in Ulaid and Mac Duinn Sléibe's daughter. In other words, the demand of a daughter as a hostage was exceptional, just as was the demand for a hostage from every regional king.

Anthony Candon has argued that the 1053 capture of Mór ingen Uí Chonchobair Failge from Gilla Pádraig, king of Osraige, by Conchobar ua Máel Sechlainn constituted an instance where a female hostage was concerned, rather than an abduction.<sup>23</sup> It was this argument that provoked a reinterpretation of other cases of apparent abduction. Preston-Matto contended that the so-called three Gormlraiths and Derbforgaill ingen Uí Máel Sechlainn all represented hostages in their respective contexts.<sup>24</sup> There are no obvious grounds, however, for the comparison between these women.

There is good reason to accept the idea that Mór was indeed a hostage, though she was not referred to by any of the three relevant terms when she was captured in 1053.<sup>25</sup> She was taken by Conchobar ua Máel Sechlainn, a man known to have been her husband some time before, from Gilla Pádraic, king of Osraige. There is no record of how she came into Gilla Pádraic's keeping and, so, it is impossible to say for certain that she was not his wife by this time. Her status as a hostage is based on two points. The first is that she was a person of demonstrable political influence in her husband's circle before this incident.<sup>26</sup> The second is that her recorded children were all by Conchobar ua Máel Sechlainn, reducing the likelihood of a second marriage.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Brown, *Hugh de Lacy, first earl of Ulster: rising and falling in Angevin Ireland* (Woodbridge, 2016), p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> Chron. Scot. 882; Ann. Tig. 1059.11.

<sup>19</sup> Chron. Scot. 1113; Ann. Inisf. 1120.4.

<sup>20</sup> A.U. 1165.10.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Candon, 'Power, politics and polygamy: women and marriage in late pre-Norman Ireland' in Damian Bracken and Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel (eds), *Ireland and Europe in the twelfth century* (Dublin, 2006), pp 123–5.

<sup>24</sup> Preston-Matto, 'Queens as political hostages', pp 141–61.

<sup>25</sup> A.F.M. 1053.12.

<sup>26</sup> She had witnessed a land grant of his that has been dated 1033x49: Gearóid Mac Niocaill, 'The Irish "charters"' in Peter Fox (ed.), *The Book of Kells, MS 58 Trinity College Library Dublin: commentary* (Luzern, 1990), pp 157–8.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret E. Dobbs (ed. and tr.), 'The Ban-shenchus [part two]' in *Revue Celtique*, xlviii (1931), p. 190.

The idea that Meath was in ‘complete disarray’ after Máel Sechlainn Ua Máel Sechlainn’s death in 1155 justified Preston-Matto in suggesting that Derbforgaill could be characterised as the ‘main legitimate representative of the kingdom of Temair’ at that time.<sup>28</sup> She further inferred that Derbforgaill had major standing before his death, including at the time of her abduction in 1152. The exact dynamic at play in Meath will be discussed below so far as it relates to Derbforgaill’s substantial donations, but here it suffices to say that Mór’s hypothesised importance was not to her natal family, the Uí Chonchobair Failge, but rather to her first (and possibly only) husband Conchobar ua Máel Sechlainn.<sup>29</sup> The case being made for Derbforgaill is, therefore, quite different. It is also somewhat confused between her importance to her natal family and her importance to her husband.<sup>30</sup>

The appeal by another historian that ‘Derbforgaill is mentioned far more often in contemporary accounts than her mediocre importance as wife of Tigernán Ua Ruairc, a minor provincial king, should entitle her to’ is a misreading of her relationship with her husband.<sup>31</sup> That relationship was not antagonistic, nor, it should be added, was Ua Ruairc a minor provincial king.<sup>32</sup> The vision of the two in opposition probably owes something to a throwaway comment made by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, who wrote that ‘Mac Murrrough added insult to injury by abducting Tigernán’s wife, Dervorgilla, who according to some of the annals was more than a willing victim, for Tigernán was as difficult in love as he was in politics’.<sup>33</sup>

Ó Corráin’s reading was undoubtedly based on the Annals of Clonmacnoise, which report of Derbforgaill’s capture that ‘shee was procured and enduced thereunto by her unadvised brother Melaghlín for some abuses of her husband Tyernan don before’, but the expression ‘for abuses don before’ is not a reference to abuse of Derbforgaill.<sup>34</sup> It is a description of military action against the Uí Máel Sechlainn that had antagonised Derbforgaill’s male relations, especially Máel Sechlainn Ua Máel Sechlainn. The expression is used in this way elsewhere in the Annals of Clonmacnoise.<sup>35</sup> Derbforgaill also returned to Ua Ruairc after this episode, in 1153, even though divorce was easily obtainable.

<sup>28</sup> Preston-Matto, ‘Queens as political hostages’, p. 158.

<sup>29</sup> Candon, ‘Power, politics and polygamy’, pp 123–5.

<sup>30</sup> See below; Preston-Matto, ‘Derbforgaill’s literary heritage’, p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh, ‘“But what exactly did she give?”: Derbforgaill and the nuns’ church at Clonmacnoise’ in Heather King (ed.), *Clonmacnoise studies II* (Dublin, 2003), p. 177.

<sup>32</sup> More recently, Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh criticised two other historians for exaggerating Derbforgaill’s importance at the expense of her husband, suggesting that here, perhaps, ‘an underlying feminism distorts the picture’: Ní Ghrádaigh, review of ‘Law, Literature and Society: Csana Yearbook 7. Edited by J.F. Eska’ in *Classics Ireland*, xv (2008), p. 102. On Ua Ruairc’s importance, see, for example, Colin Veach, ‘Henry II’s grant of Meath to Hugh de Lacy’ in *Ríocht na Midhe*, xviii (2007), p. 77: ‘Tigernán Ua Ruairc was as great a threat as there could be found in Ireland’.

<sup>33</sup> Donncha Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (Dublin, 1972), p. 161.

<sup>34</sup> Ann. Clon. 1152.

<sup>35</sup> Ann. Clon., p. 19: ‘Then Aaron the High Priest of the Jewes told him that they were Jewes, and how his Brother Moyses by the Helpe of God Brought diuers pleagues on the Egyptians for their abuses’; Ann. Clon. sub anno 1136: ‘Dermott mcMorrogh king of Leinster accompanied with all the forces of the Danes came to Westmeath to be revenged of the o’Melaghlins for their abuses don to him before’. The Annals of Clonmacnoise survives only in a seventeenth-century English translation and the use of this expression seems

There are other points that tell against the interpretation of *Derbforgaill* as a hostage. Diarmait Mac Murchada's Anglo-Norman-supported campaign of 1170–71 has created the false impression that he was a king who regularly battled for national supremacy and took the hostages of other provincial rulers.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, throughout his career he was more narrowly confined and, before 1170, had never campaigned to be king of Ireland. This is relevant because his march against Tigernán Ua Ruairc has been presented as a logical extension of his authority. On no prior occasion, though, had Mac Murchada invaded Bréifne or attempted to take Ua Ruairc's hostages. When the two had clashed in the past it had been in Meath,<sup>37</sup> where Mac Murchada had generally been bested by Ua Ruairc, or possibly also in Leinster, where Ua Ruairc had done a great deal of damage as a deputy of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair.<sup>38</sup>

Mac Murchada's presence in Bréifne is to be explained with reference to a recent association with the king of Connacht Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair, which involved him in affairs outside of his typical orbit, and not as an independent campaign against Ua Ruairc. In 1151, Diarmait Mac Murchada accompanied Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair as he marched against the Uí Briain, and so was present at the Battle of Móin Mór.<sup>39</sup> After the defeat of the Uí Briain in that battle, suzerainty of Munster fell to Ua Conchobair and not to Mac Murchada.<sup>40</sup> Custody of hostages would presumably have gone along with this. The move against Ua Ruairc in 1152 was primarily conducted by Ua Conchobair and Mac Lochlainn, with Mac Murchada again providing auxiliary support.<sup>41</sup> Much as in the case of the Uí Briain, Ua Ruairc's hostages were taken by Ua Conchobair. He brought them to Athlone, a base of the kingdom of Connacht, and *Derbforgaill* was not among them.<sup>42</sup> That the capture of *Derbforgaill* was not part of the plan is suggested by the facts that it was Mac Murchada who took her, not Ua Conchobair, that Ua Conchobair marched to Leinster to secure her release the following year, and the subsequent lack of further cooperation between Ua Conchobair and Mac Murchada.<sup>43</sup>

If Mac Murchada did not have form where the capture of hostages in Bréifne was concerned, he did for abduction and rape. In 1132, asserting his claim to the provincial kingship for the first time, he raided Kildare, the most important monastic community in Leinster. Its abbess, Mór, had been installed by Ua Conchobair Failge in 1127 at the expense of a daughter of Cerball Ua Fáeláin, king of Uí Fáeláin. Mac Murchada married Sadb, another daughter of Ua Fáeláin, around

to have been characteristic either of the original set of annals or of its translator, Conell Mageoghagan, because it does not appear elsewhere.

<sup>36</sup> See for example, Marie Therese Flanagan, 'High-kings with opposition, 1072–1166' in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (ed.) *A new history of Ireland, i: prehistoric and early Ireland* (Oxford, 2005), esp. pp 932–3.

<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, Ann. Clon. 1136.

<sup>38</sup> A.U. 1128.8; A.L.C. 1128.5, 1128.6: 'A raid was made by Tairdelbach ua Conchobuir into Laigin, and he plundered Loch Garman; thence he passed around Laigin to Áth Cliath, and destroyed many cattle along that way; from Áth Cliath he went to his house again. The disrepute of that expedition lies on Tigernán ua Ruairc.'

<sup>39</sup> A.F.M. 1151.14; Ann. Tig. 1151.3; Ann. Clon. 1141.

<sup>40</sup> A.F.M. 1151.14, 1151.22, 1152.9; Ann. Tig. 1151.3; Ann. Clon. 1141.

<sup>41</sup> A.F.M. 1152.10; Ann. Tig. 1152.6.

<sup>42</sup> A.F.M. 1152.11.

<sup>43</sup> A.F.M. 1153.11.

1132, linking his provincial ambitions to that sector of north Leinster.<sup>44</sup> During his attack Mac Murchada had Mór ‘carried off a prisoner, and put into a man’s bed’.<sup>45</sup> If the complementary account in *Chronicon Scotorum* is to be believed, it was Mac Murchada’s own bed. It reported that ‘the successor of Brigit was betrayed and carried off by Diarmait son of Murchad and forced to submit to him’.<sup>46</sup> It is clear something similar occurred in 1152, despite (or perhaps especially because of) Derbforgaill’s noted importance to her husband.<sup>47</sup>

Abduction was characterised by rape of the captured woman, usually implied but sometimes explicitly reported, and the consequent humiliation of an important male relation. Though the type of abduction discussed in the law texts envisions this individual as a father, in political circumstances it was almost exclusively a husband. Hostage-taking, by comparison, was intended to provide security for a future relationship. As noted above, there is only one certain case of a woman being employed as a hostage and the circumstances of that were themselves exceptional. There is merit to the argument that Mór ingen Uí Chonchobair Failge was also a hostage, but there is very little to support the idea that many women were used in this role and even less for the idea that Derbforgaill was among them.

Derbforgaill’s status as an abductee is all but confirmed by her husband’s conduct in 1166–7. Tigernán was instrumental in forcing Mac Murchada to flee from Ireland, leading two expeditions into Leinster: the first as an ally of Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, and the second, after Ua Conchobair had returned home to Connacht, which was specifically intended ‘to take revenge for Ó Ruairc’s wife’.<sup>48</sup> As Ua Ruairc approached, many of Mac Murchada’s nobles rebelled and when he saw that ‘they wanted to capture him, to hand him over and sell him to Ua Ruairc’, he fled from Ireland.<sup>49</sup> When Mac Murchada returned in 1167, his first wave of foreign mercenaries proved insufficient to resist Ua Conchobair, Ua Ruairc and Diarmait Ua Máel Sechlainn (whom we will meet below). When he was confronted with their army, Mac Murchada paid Ua Ruairc 100 ounces of gold ‘in compensation for his wife’.<sup>50</sup> It is perhaps needless to add that these events are inconsistent with the hypothesis that Derbforgaill had been a hostage.

## II

The earliest Irish laws prohibited women from disposing of property without the permission of an appropriate male relation or guardian. This prohibition disappeared by the eighth century, though there is some doubt over whether donations

<sup>44</sup> Marie Therese Flanagan, ‘Mac Murchada, Diarmait [Dermot MacMurrough; called Diarmait na nGall]’, *O.D.N.B.*, xxxv, 915–17.

<sup>45</sup> A.L.C. 1132.1: ‘an caillech féin do breith a m-broid, & a tabairt a leabaidh fir’.

<sup>46</sup> Chron. Scot. 1132: ‘Comarba Brigde do brath co ruccadh do Diarmait mac Murchadha et a thabairt dia riar ar egin’; Colmán Etchingham, ‘Kildare before the Normans: “an episcopal and conventual see”’ in *Journal of the County Kildare Archaeological Society*, xix (2000/01), p. 21.

<sup>47</sup> See below.

<sup>48</sup> Ann. Tig. 1166.13: ‘do dighail mna h-Úi Ruairc fair’.

<sup>49</sup> Evelyn Mullally (ed. & trans.), *The deeds of the Normans in Ireland* (Dublin, 2002), p. 58, ll 210–11: ‘E que voleint [le] prendre, A O Roric liverer e vendre’.

<sup>50</sup> Ann. Tig. 1167.5: ‘i l-lógh a mna’.



to the church ever controverted it.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, even in the very earliest Irish historical documents there are references to women disposing of their own movable wealth. In his confession, Patrick tells how he felt obliged to return the gifts left by pious women on the altar because he did not wish to give anyone reason to criticise his ministry.<sup>52</sup>

There are other records of women donating to the church in early Christian Ireland, many of which are to be found in hagiographies. For instance, the Bethu Brigte records a cow gifted to Brigit by a woman, and of apples and sloes given to Brigit by two nuns.<sup>53</sup> In a life of Finian of Clonard, translated by Whitley Stokes from the Book of Lismore, Brigit gave Finian a gold ring as he was leaving Kildare. This ring was valuable and Finian refused it to demonstrate his lack of interest in worldly possessions, but Brigit counselled him that though he refused it, he would need it.<sup>54</sup> A life of Brigit from the same collection mentions the donation of a silver chain to Brigit by the queen of Crimthann mac Énna Cennselaig, king of Leinster.<sup>55</sup> Similar donations are found in poetry and an expectation of such gifts from women also appears in the law tract *Cáin Adamnáin*. It demanded that all women, from the wife of a lord (*bantoisech*) to an unfree woman (*bandoire*), regularly donate according to their ability.<sup>56</sup> The amount expected from the wife of a lord was even specified: a scruple, or one twenty-fourth of an ounce, of gold.<sup>57</sup>

Lisa Bitel's collection of references to female donations to the church also includes women's surrender of themselves as persons to the church, a factor which is arguably just as relevant, but the examples above have been selected to show material rather than personal endowments.<sup>58</sup> Such material contributions were minor, being for the most part ornaments, food and drink, an animal or a small number of animals, and small amounts of gold. The few relevant annal entries excluded from Bitel's analysis also correspond to this pattern. For instance, a cup of silver engraved by the daughter of Ruaidrí na Saide Buide Ua Conchobair was given to Clonmacnoise in 1129,<sup>59</sup> and in 1153 Mac Duinn Sléibe's wife gave an offering of a single ounce of gold to Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin, successor of Colm Cille.<sup>60</sup>

Even such gifts as these had value relative to the wealth women could expect to hold in medieval Ireland. A woman's personal holdings were always small compared to male contemporaries of the same class and derived primarily from her

<sup>51</sup> D. A. Binchy, *Studies in early Irish law*, p. 225, quoted in Lisa Bitel, 'Women's donations to the churches in early Ireland' in *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, cxiv (1983), pp 9–10. For the disappearance of the prohibition on female donations, see CIH 2103.35–6; Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, p. 121.

<sup>52</sup> Ludwig Bieler, *Libri epistolarum Sancti Patricii episcopi, clavis Patricii ii* (Dublin, 1993), §49, p. 85.

<sup>53</sup> Donncha Ó hAodha (ed.), *Bethu Brigte* (Dublin, 1978), §32, pp 12, 29.

<sup>54</sup> Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Lives of saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford, 1890), pp 78, 225, ll 2613–16.

<sup>55</sup> Stokes, *Lives of saints*, pp 48, 195, ll 1595–6.

<sup>56</sup> Gilbert Márkus (ed. & trans.), *Adomán's 'Law of the Innocents' — Cáin Adomnáin: a seventh-century law for the protection of non-combatants* (Glasgow, 1997), §24, p. 13; Kuno Meyer (ed.), *Cáin Adamnáin* (Oxford, 1905), §24, pp 13–15.

<sup>57</sup> Meyer (ed.), *Cáin Adamnáin*, p. 14: 'screpald óir'.

<sup>58</sup> Lisa Bitel, 'Women's donations', pp 18–22.

<sup>59</sup> A.F.M. 1129.12; Ann. Clon. 1108.

<sup>60</sup> A.F.M. 1153.4.

marriage. Categories of marriage were distinguished according to the wealth contributed by each participant, and legal capacity also depended on this factor; a man or woman who did not contribute equally to their marriage was subject to limitations on legal competence.<sup>61</sup> For most of the medieval period, though, a marriage of joint authority (*lánamnas comthinchuir*), resulting from joint contribution, was the most common type, at least among the nobility.

Describing the marriage practices of medieval Ireland in this way exaggerates the independence of women, however. As Bart Jaski argued, ‘the property she brought into the marriage did not come from her own assets — a woman usually had little or no private possessions which she could control freely — but from *coibche* given to her by her husband, which in an earlier period was given to her father’.<sup>62</sup> Jaski elsewhere conceded that ‘It may also be that the family made this contribution or dowry of their own accord, called *tinchor* or *tinól* in the legal texts.’<sup>63</sup> The ‘*coibche*’ was a ‘bride-price’, later ‘bride-gift’, or payment associated with formal marriage. Though its value is nowhere recorded in the original laws, according to later legal commentators it equalled the bride’s honour-price, which was half that of her father.<sup>64</sup> Following marriage, a woman had half the honour-price of her husband.<sup>65</sup>

The link between *coibche* and a woman’s honour-price, calculated as a fraction of her father’s, must have impacted the wealth held by noble women of the highest class in subsequent centuries, because, as we shall now see, the honour price of provincial kings inflated considerably between the codification of the law texts and the twelfth century. The law tract *Uraicecht Bec*, dating to the ninth or early tenth century,<sup>66</sup> reported that the king of Munster had an honour-price of fourteen *cumala*,<sup>67</sup> a value which was elsewhere attributed to provincial kings in general.<sup>68</sup> An earlier law tract, *Bretha Nemed toisech*, from the eighth century,<sup>69</sup> gave twenty-one *cumala* for a supreme king,<sup>70</sup> though this does not necessarily equate with a provincial king since yet another legal tract, *Míadshleхта*, perhaps eighth-century in date,<sup>71</sup> provided a further increment for a king of Ireland, called a *triath*, whose

<sup>61</sup> See Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, pp 70–73.

<sup>62</sup> Bart Jaski, *Early Irish kingship and succession* (Dublin, 2000), p. 144.

<sup>63</sup> Jaski, ‘Marriage laws in the early Middle Ages’ in C. E. Meek and Katharine Simms (eds), *‘The fragility of her sex’? Medieval Irish women in their European context* (Dublin, 1996), pp 24–5; CIH 1948.7–11, 1949.8–12. Presumably a *tinchor* or *tinól* that took the place of a *coibche* would be equal in value.

<sup>64</sup> Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Marriage in early Ireland’ in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *Marriage in Ireland* (Dublin, 1985), p. 16.

<sup>65</sup> CIH 427; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Women and the law in early Ireland’ in Mary O’Dowd and Sabine Wichert (eds), *Chattel, servant or citizen: women’s status in church, state and society* (Belfast, 1995), p. 50.

<sup>66</sup> Liam Breatnach, ‘Law’ in Kim McCone and Katharine Simms (eds), *Progress in Medieval Irish studies* (Maynooth, 1996), p. 119.

<sup>67</sup> Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, p. 17; CIH 1617.33.

<sup>68</sup> Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, p. 17; CIH 568.26, 2307.34.

<sup>69</sup> Liam Breatnach, ‘Canon law and secular law in early Ireland: the significance of *Bretha Nemed*’ in *Peritia*, iii (1984), pp 439–59; Fangzhe Qiu, ‘Manuscript contexts of early Irish law tracts: a case study on *Uraicecht Becc*’ in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, xxxv (2015), p. 160.

<sup>70</sup> Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, p. 18, n. 6; CIH 2212.37.

<sup>71</sup> Eoin MacNeill, ‘Ancient Irish law. The law of status or franchise’ in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, xxxvi, C (1923), p. 311.

honour-price was placed at five cumala of red gold.<sup>72</sup> A cumal was a unit of value, originally meaning a female slave. Allowing for variance and change over time, it has been estimated to equate roughly to between two and four cows, or three ounces of silver.<sup>73</sup> It may also have had a land value of roughly thirty-five statute acres.<sup>74</sup>

The law texts reflect Irish society when they were recorded — i.e., usually circa 800. By the twelfth century, there is evidence to suggest that the honour price of provincial kings had increased. Tigernán Ua Ruairc demanded 100 ounces of gold from Mac Murchada as his *eineach* or honour-price in 1167.<sup>75</sup> In 1168, the murderers of Murchad Ua Finnalláin, king of Delbna, paid either 700 or 800 cows as ‘eneclann’, or compensation for the violation of ‘eineach’ or honour-price, to the guarantors of Ua Finnalláin’s life.<sup>76</sup> This payment was quite separate from the ‘eraic’ fine incurred by the murder itself. The right to have *eneclann* calculated in precious metals was a prerogative of certain kindreds only, which may explain the payment in gold on one occasion and the payment in cattle on another, but gold may simply appear in the record as a unit of account.<sup>77</sup> A similar payment was made by the murderers of Muirchertach Ua Briain, also in 1168, amounting to 720 cows.<sup>78</sup> This was also *eneclann*, though it has been mistakenly rendered as *eraic* in the English translation of the standard edition.<sup>79</sup>

There is some ambiguity here since roughly the same payment (700–800 cows) was made to Ua Conchobair alone in one case (for Ua Briain’s assassination) and to Ua Conchobair and Ua Cerbail together in the other (for Ua Finnalláin’s). Furthermore, going by the exchange rates offered in a Middle Irish legal commentary, the 100 ounces of gold given to Ua Ruairc in 1167 would be far in excess of even 800 cows.<sup>80</sup> There is no reason to believe Ua Ruairc’s *eineach* would be greater than Ua Conchobair’s, but at the least it must be acknowledged that the twenty-one cow honour-price had been set aside in favour of larger payments, though undoubtedly the law texts still provided the underlying rationale.<sup>81</sup> This may also have happened in earlier eras, but it is the first evidence of it in the annals.

<sup>72</sup> Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, p. 18, n. 10; CIH 583.7–12.

<sup>73</sup> Marilyn Gerriets, ‘Money in early Christian Ireland according to the Irish laws’ in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xxvii, no. 2 (Apr. 1985), p. 337. See also Liam Breatnach, ‘Forms of payment in the early Irish law tracts’ in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, lxxviii (winter 2014), pp 1–20.

<sup>74</sup> Katharine Simms, ‘The contents of later commentaries on the Brehon Law tracts’ in *Ériu*, lxxix (1998), pp 26–7; Gearóid Mac Niocaill, ‘Tír Cumaile’ in *Ériu*, xxii (1971), p. 84, n. 10.

<sup>75</sup> A.F.M. 1167.13; Ann. Tig. 1167.5.

<sup>76</sup> A.F.M. 1168.12; Ann. Tig. 1168.1.

<sup>77</sup> Kuno Meyer (ed.), *Rawlinson B 502: a collection of pieces in prose and verse in the Irish language, compiled during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, now published in facsimile from the original manuscript in the Bodleian Library, with an introduction and indexes* (Oxford, 1909), pp 118b39, 121a40, quoted on eDil (<http://www.dil.ie/20074>) (12 Mar. 2019).

<sup>78</sup> A.F.M. 1168.8, 1168.18.

<sup>79</sup> A.F.M. 1168.18.

<sup>80</sup> See note 82 for more detail. See also CIH 149.1; Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish farming* (Dublin, 1997), p. 594; Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, pp 112–16.

<sup>81</sup> The *forbach flatha* or ‘lord’s portion’ was the share of compensation legally due to a lord for injuries against his client and usually amounted to one-third (see Flanagan, *Irish society, Anglo-Norman settlers, Angevin kingship*, pp 238–40; D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Crith Gablach* (Dublin, 1941), p. 30; D. A. Binchy, ‘Irish history and Irish law: II’ in *Studia Hibernica*,

With an increase in honour-price must have come a corresponding increase in the wealth held by daughters of the major provincial kings. On this evidence we can suggest that, for females of royal status, the coibche payment in the twelfth century was somewhere between six hundred cows (equal to fifty ounces of gold according to the exchange rates typically used in legal commentaries) and three hundred cows.<sup>82</sup> As a result these women brought relatively large sums into their marriages. They were probably also gifted additional wealth by their own families. Though inexact, we can by these means approximate the movable wealth of women who donated to the church in the twelfth century.

Therefore, though donations to churches have been described as ‘frequent and substantial’,<sup>83</sup> they are almost all minor and in keeping with expectable wealth for a woman in the period. That is, apart from the donations of Derbforgaill in the mid-twelfth century. Derbforgaill gave sixty ounces of gold to the new Cistercian foundation at Mellifont in 1157<sup>84</sup> and she ‘completed’ the nuns’ church at Clonmacnoise in 1167.<sup>85</sup> The question is not whether Derbforgaill’s donations were exceptional, because by comparison with other donations by women they clearly were, but rather how she was able to make them and why she did so.

Along with generally increased wealth of noble women by the twelfth century, there is reason to regard Derbforgaill as an especially wealthy woman. When she was abducted by Diarmait Mac Murchada in 1152, it is noted particularly that she was taken ‘with her wealth’,<sup>86</sup> ‘with her cattle’,<sup>87</sup> or ‘with her cattle and furniture’.<sup>88</sup> Two different accounts of her return exist. In one, it is simply reported that ‘the daughter of Murchadh Ó Maelseachnaill came again to Ó Ruairc by flight from Leinster’.<sup>89</sup>

xvi (1976), p. 23). Muirchertach Ua Briain imposed a fine of fifty cows in 1093, as forbach flatha for the murder of Áed Ua Conchobair in 1092 (Ann. Inisf. 1092.3, 1093.8), which gives an idea of the degree to which Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair and Donnchadh Ua Cerbaill’s fees exceeded the limits of the legal principle that probably inspired them.

<sup>82</sup> Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, p. 116: ‘The later glossators generally took the equation to be 1 milch cow = 1 ounce of silver = 2 sets = 1/3 cumal’. For the value of silver in particular, see Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, p. 594; CIH 149.1: ‘uinge dergor ar da buaibh decc’, or ‘an ounce of red gold for twelve cows’. On this basis, we can roughly estimate that a provincial king’s law-text honour-price (14 cumala = 3.5 ounces of gold = 42 ounces of silver = 42 milch cows or 21 cumala = 5.25 ounces of gold = 63 ounces of silver = 63 milch cows) was out of date by the twelfth century. Ua Ruairc’s claim of 100 ounces of gold as eineach in 1167 would equate to 1,200 ounces of silver/1,200 cows/400 cumala. Ua Conchobair’s claim of 720 cows (for Ua Briain’s death) in 1168 would equate to 720 ounces of silver/60 ounces of gold/240 cumala. Divided evenly, Ua Conchobair and Ua Cerbaill’s jointly-prosecuted claim for either 700 or 800 cows (A.F.M. 1168.12; Ann. Tig. 1168.1) would equate to either 350 ounces of silver/350 cows/29 ounces of gold each or 400 ounces of silver/400 cows/33 ounces of gold each. There is a wide enough chasm between these figures and the older values to postulate that eineach had inflated considerably. Female honour-price, calculated as a fraction of her father’s/husband’s, on which her principal endowment, the coibche, was based, must have increased by the same proportion.

<sup>83</sup> Bitel, ‘Women’s donations’, p. 12.

<sup>84</sup> A.F.M. 1157.9; Ann. Tig. 1157.3.

<sup>85</sup> A.F.M. 1167.16: ‘do forbadh’.

<sup>86</sup> Ann. Tig. 1152.6: ‘cona maithius’.

<sup>87</sup> Ann. Clon. 1152.

<sup>88</sup> A.F.M. 1152.10: ‘cona crodh, & cona h-airilledh’.

<sup>89</sup> Ann. Tig. 1153.5: ‘Ingen Murchadha h-Úi Mael Sechlainn do techt dochum h-Úi Ruairc arís a n-elódh o Laignib’.

According to the other, however, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair invaded Leinster ‘and took away the daughter of Ua Maeleachlainn, with her cattle’.<sup>90</sup> It seems evident that her personal wealth was considerable to warrant such attention, not only from the kings of Leinster and Connacht, but also from the annalists who recorded these events.

One other significant point raised by Bitel is the idea that ‘every gift was given in response to and/or in the expectation of some sort of return’.<sup>91</sup> The returns considered by Bitel are primarily prospective religious ones, such as the intercession of the saints or a place in heaven,<sup>92</sup> or very minor material returns.<sup>93</sup> What she does not consider, however, are the potential political returns and implications of gifts and donations. As great a donation as *Derbforgaill* gave to Mellifont, or even to Clonmacnoise, could only take place in a political context. This political context is to be discovered in the operation of her husband’s kingdom and its neighbours.

### III

Tigernán Ua Ruairc’s long career was defined by intervention in Meath and even his marriage to *Derbforgaill* was an outcome of that interest. He dominated the kings of Meath as much as possible to extend his authority and protect his territorial gains at their expense. For many years, the *de jure* king of Meath was Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn, *Derbforgaill*’s father. A brother of *Derbforgaill*, Máel Sechlainn Ua Máel Sechlainn, was the architect of *Derbforgaill*’s abduction in 1152 and when Murchad died in 1153 he acceded to the kingship.<sup>94</sup> That Ua Ruairc could not prevent this is evidence of diminished power in Meath after the events of 1152. However, in 1155 Máel Sechlainn Ua Máel Sechlainn was poisoned at Durrow,<sup>95</sup> and the recovering king of Bréifne was probably responsible.

The kingship of Meath was then contested by two Uí Máel Sechlainn half-brothers, Donnchad and Diarmait. Each received support from different quarters, as Meath’s neighbours sought to take advantage. Donnchad was endorsed by Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, claimant of the kingship of Ireland, who imposed him as king.<sup>96</sup> Unfortunately for Donnchad he was quickly deposed<sup>97</sup> and left for Leinster to seek the help of Diarmait Mac Murchada.<sup>98</sup> Mac Murchada took advantage of the opportunity to attack Tigernán Ua Ruairc’s holdings in Meath under the guise of supporting Donnchad.<sup>99</sup> Ua Ruairc naturally backed the claim of Diarmait Ua Máel Sechlainn, in opposition, though Mac Murchada won the battle when their forces met in 1156.<sup>100</sup>

After gaining this victory and recovering the kingship, Donnchad had one of the sub-kings of east Meath killed. Cú Ulad Ua Caindelbáin of Laegaire was firmly in

<sup>90</sup> A.F.M. 1153.11: ‘tuc inghen Uí Mhaoileachlainn cona crodh uadha’.

<sup>91</sup> Bitel, ‘Women’s donations’, p. 14.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>94</sup> Ann. Clon. 1152; A.F.M. 1152.10.

<sup>95</sup> A.F.M. 1155.6; Ann. Clon. 1155.

<sup>96</sup> A.F.M. 1155.11.

<sup>97</sup> A.F.M. 1155.18.

<sup>98</sup> A.F.M. 1156.18, 1156.19.

<sup>99</sup> A.F.M. 1156.19.

<sup>100</sup> A.F.M. 1156.20.

Ua Ruairc's sphere, which probably prompted his assassination.<sup>101</sup> Ua Ruairc invaded Meath in response, but once again was unsuccessful.<sup>102</sup> It was in precisely this political climate that the consecration of a church at Mellifont, and the great donation of Derbforgaill, took place. She gave sixty ounces of gold, which was the equal of Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's contribution of gold (he also gave cows and land) and of Ua Cerbaill's entire contribution. Derbforgaill also gave a chalice of gold and cloths for the nine altars.<sup>103</sup>

What, then, were the political implications and returns of Derbforgaill's donation? Ua Ruairc's presence, and the donation of his wife, certainly constituted a belated acceptance of Mac Lochlainn's overkingship. The synod was convened under the auspices of the king of the Northern Uí Néill, who made the largest donation: 140 cows, sixty ounces of gold and a grant of land.<sup>104</sup> In return for Ua Ruairc's acknowledgment of his authority, Mac Lochlainn acquiesced to the excommunication of his former client, Donnchad Ua Máel Sechlainn. Donnchad was also removed from the kingship of Meath in favour of Diarmait.<sup>105</sup> Cú Ulad Ua Caindelbáin's assassination was the pretext for the volte-face, but Ua Ruairc's acknowledgment of Mac Lochlainn was the real reason Mac Lochlainn abandoned Donnchad.<sup>106</sup> This settlement subsequently broke down and the kingship of Meath was contested again in subsequent years, but the excommunication and deposition of Donnchad Ua Máel Sechlainn in 1157 was a quid pro quo for the substantial donation made by Derbforgaill.

As for the substance of the donation itself, there remains a question of exactly whose funds were being donated. Derbforgaill's sixty ounces of gold (or its equivalent in silver or cattle) would have constituted an overwhelming portion of her own (significant) wealth. Considering the political advantage that accrued to Ua Ruairc through the donation, it seems reasonable to suppose that it was made at least partly with his support. Records are unequivocal that it was Derbforgaill who made the contribution, but contrary to the arguments and interpretations of modern historians, there is no reason to suppose that Derbforgaill acted independently or that she would not have supported her husband.<sup>107</sup> Instead, Derbforgaill's donation at Mellifont should be regarded as uxorial support of Ua Ruairc's policies.

If the uxorial link and not the natal is key to understanding Derbforgaill's patronage, we must re-assess the connection to Clonmacnoise as well. The case for Derbforgaill's patronage of the nuns' church at Clonmacnoise as a protraction of Uí Máel Sechlainn benefaction at the monastery has been boosted by, and indeed largely based on, the idea that Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn granted the church of the nuns at Clonmacnoise to Arrouasian nuns at Clonard in 1144. This appears in numerous works, but is in fact groundless.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Seán Ó Hoireabhárd, 'The assassination of Tigernán Ua Ruairc, the last king of Meath' in *Peritia*, xxix (2018), pp 116–17.

<sup>102</sup> A.F.M. 1157.8.

<sup>103</sup> A.F.M. 1157.9.

<sup>104</sup> A.F.M. 1157.9; Ann. Tig. 1157.3.

<sup>105</sup> A.F.M. 1157.9; Ann. Tig. 1157.4.

<sup>106</sup> A.F.M. 1157.9.

<sup>107</sup> See especially Karen Eileen Overby, 'Female trouble: ambivalence and anxiety at the Nuns' church' in Joseph F. Eska (ed.), *Law, literature and society: CSANA Yearbook 7* (Dublin, 2008), pp 93–112, and Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh, "'But what exactly did she give'", pp 175–207.

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, Jennifer Borland, 'Audience and spatial experience in the nuns' church at Clonmacnoise' in *Different visions: a journal of new perspectives on medieval*

The work of Ragnhalla Ó Floinn,<sup>109</sup> cited as supporting the theory of continued Uí Máel Sechlainn interest in Clonmacnoise,<sup>110</sup> makes no claim about either continued interest or an 1144 grant. Similarly, the work of John Brady,<sup>111</sup> cited in support of the grant,<sup>112</sup> contains no such content or evidence.<sup>113</sup> This factoid derives rather from Annette Kehnel's expansion on an earlier claim by Aubrey Gwynn and Richard Neville Hadcock's *Medieval religious houses: Ireland*, and William Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum*, a seventeenth-century catalogue of religious houses and their dependencies. Kehnel's work was then accepted by others and used, directly or indirectly, to support the idea that Derbforghaill's 1167 patronage was an extension of her father's in 1144.<sup>114</sup>

A transcript of a papal confirmation from February 1196 is extant, recognising the nuns' church at Clonmacnoise as a dependency of the house at Clonard, but with no allusion to an earlier grant.<sup>115</sup> The claim of an earlier Ua Máel Sechlainn grant appears rather to derive from Gwynn and Hadcock, who stated that Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn 'almost certainly' founded the house at Clonard in 1144<sup>116</sup> and, further, that 'The O'Melaghlinns were also closely connected' with Clonmacnoise.<sup>117</sup> Their justification for claiming that Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn founded a house of nuns at Clonard in 1144 was that, according to themselves, in Visio Tnugdali, St Malachy is said to have established houses of Irish nuns in 1144 and Clonard subsequently enjoyed pre-eminence among these.<sup>118</sup> Gwynn and Hadcock appear to have mistranslated Visio Tnugdali, which recorded the number of houses of monks and nuns founded by Malachy rather than the year in which they were founded. Most editions of this text record this number as fifty-four houses,<sup>119</sup> but the French translation used by Gwynn

*art*, no. 3 (Sept. 2011), p. 21; Ní Ghrádaigh, "But what exactly did she give", p. 178; Overby, 'Female trouble', p. 98; Dianne Hall, *Women and the church in medieval Ireland, c.1140–1540* (Dublin, 2003), p. 71; Tadhg O'Keeffe, *Romanesque Ireland* (Dublin, 2003), p. 262.

<sup>109</sup> Ragnhalla Ó Floinn, 'Clonmacnoise: art and patronage in the early medieval period' in H. A. King (ed.), *Clonmacnoise studies 1* (Dublin, 1998), pp 87–100.

<sup>110</sup> Ní Ghrádaigh, "But what exactly did she give", p. 178.

<sup>111</sup> John Brady, 'The nunnery of Clonard' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, ii no. 2 (1960), pp 4–7.

<sup>112</sup> Ní Ghrádaigh, "But what exactly did she give", p. 178.

<sup>113</sup> Brady's substantive argument, endorsed by Marie Therese Flanagan, that Clonard was the mother house of the Arrouaisian canonesses in Ireland in the twelfth century, is not being challenged here. See also Marie Therese Flanagan, 'St. Mary's Abbey, Louth, and the introduction of the Arrouaisian Observance into Ireland' in *Clogher Record* x, no. 2 (1980), pp 231–2.

<sup>114</sup> Annette Kehnel, *Clonmacnois—the church and lands of St Ciarán* (Münster, 1997), p. 155.

<sup>115</sup> Maurice P. Sheehy, *Pontificia Hibernica* (2 vols, Dublin, 1962–5), i, no. 29, 84; William Dugdale and Roger Dodsworth, *Monasticon Anglicanum* (3 vols, London, 1661), ii, 1043–4; William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum* (8 vols, London, 1846), vi, part ii, 1144–5.

<sup>116</sup> Aubrey Gwynn and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses: Ireland* (Dublin, 1970), p. 163

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>119</sup> Jean-Michel Picard (trans.) and Yolande de Pontfarcy (ed.), *The vision of Tnugdali* (Dublin, 1989), p. 155: 'The latter [Malachy] came to Rome at the time of Pope Innocent and was established by him as legate and archbishop; he distributed everything he had to

and Hadcock stated that Malachy founded forty-four in total.<sup>120</sup> Judging by their own citation, they interpreted this passage to mean Malachy had founded houses of nuns in Ireland in 1144.<sup>121</sup>

Kehnel further extended their supposition that Ua Máel Sechlainn oversaw the establishment of an Arrouaisian nuns' convent at Clonard in 1144, but their summary of the record of the convent of nuns at Clonmacnoise in the passage referred to by Kehnel makes no positive reference to a Meath influence at Clonmacnoise in the same year.<sup>122</sup> Clonard's associations with the Uí Máel Sechlainn in the twelfth century are easy to verify and, though the reference to 1144 is groundless, the Arrouaisian observance is still likely to have been introduced there between 1142 (when Malachy established his first foundation in Ireland) and 1148 (when he died). On the other hand, as we will see, Uí Máel Sechlainn links with Clonmacnoise are much more elusive.

The contemporary political situation in Meath provides further grounds for challenging the supposition of Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn's involvement at Clonmacnoise, at least in 1144. This is partly because 1143–4 was a particularly tumultuous time in Meath. In 1143, the king of Connacht Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair deposed the incumbent king of Meath, Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn, imposing his own son Conchobar in Murchad's place.<sup>123</sup> Conchobar was murdered within the year because he was not from Meath.<sup>124</sup> Toirdelbach invaded Meath once again in 1144, to avenge his son.<sup>125</sup> He then enforced a new political arrangement in Meath, and in fact two different arrangements, which may or may not be mutually exclusive, are recorded.

In both, he partitioned Meath. The first saw Donnchad son of Muirchertach Ua Máel Sechlainn given the west, and the east was further divided between Tigernán

holy monasteries and to the poor; he was the builder of fifty-four congregations of monks, canons and nuns to whom he provided all the necessities of life and kept nothing at all for himself'; Emil Peters, *Die vision des Tnugdalus* (Berlin, 1895), p. 30: 'Dieser wurde, als er zur Zeit des Papstes Innocenz nach Rom gekommen war, von ihm selbst zum Legaten und Erzbischof eingesetzt. Er verteilte alles, was er besaß, unter die heiligen Klöster und die Armen und wurde der Gründer von vierundfünfzig Kongregationen von Mönchen, Kanonikern, Nonnen, denen er alles Notwendige verschaffte, ohne etwas für sich zurückzubehalten'; Brigitte Pfeil (ed.), *Die 'Vision Des Tnugdalus' Albers Von Windberg: Literatur- und Frömmigkeitsgeschichte im ausgehenden 12. Jahrhundert. Mit einer Edition der Lateinischen 'Visio Tnugdali' aus CLM 22254* (Frankfurt, 1999), p. 55: 'et Malachiam. qui predicto viro successit in archiepiscopatu. qui Romam tempore Innocentii pape veniens. ab episcopo legatus. et archiepiscopus constitutus est; qui omnia quecumque habere poterat sanctis cenobiis et pauperibus dividebat. Hic constructor extitit. quinquaginta quattuor. congregationum. monachorum. canonicorum. sanctimonialium. quibus omnia necessaria providebat. et nichil omnino sibi retinebat'.

<sup>120</sup> V. H. Friedel & Kuno Meyer (eds), *La Vision de Tondale* (Paris, 1907), p. 55: 'S. Malachies qui fu apres lui vint a Rome au temps pape Inocent et le fist celi pape liegat et arceuescque, li queis S. Malachies donnoit en son vuant as poures ce qu'il auoit pour nostre signour Jhesu Crist et fonda en se temps .xliiii. abeis de moignes, de chanoines et de nonnains et les pourueoit de tout cou que mestiers leur estoit et pour li riens n'en retenoit.'

<sup>121</sup> Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses: Ireland*, p. 150; Friedel & Meyer (eds), *La Vision de Tondale*, p. 55.

<sup>122</sup> Kehnel, *Clonmacnois*, p. 155, n. 90; Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses: Ireland*, pp 314–16, esp. p. 315.

<sup>123</sup> A.F.M. 1143.13; Ann. Tig. 1143.4.

<sup>124</sup> A.F.M. 1144.7; Ann. Tig. 1144.1.

<sup>125</sup> A.F.M. 1144.7, 1144.10; Ann. Tig. 1144.5.



Ua Ruairc and Diarmait Mac Murchada.<sup>126</sup> In the other, Toirdelbach restored Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn to east Meath alone and an unnamed son of Muirchertach Ua Máel Sechlainn was given the west.<sup>127</sup> On the evidence of the annals, then, 1144 would be an especially unlikely time for Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn to intervene at Clonmacnoise. James Ware, who was also cited by Gwynn and Hadcock on the question,<sup>128</sup> reports only that Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn founded the nunnery at Clonard before the arrival of the English.<sup>129</sup>

Moreover, unlike Clonard, in the mid-twelfth century Clonmacnoise was dominated by the kings of Connacht rather than those of Meath. Clonmacnoise had once received most patronage from Meath, but its associations with that kingdom declined sharply after Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair came to power in Connacht in 1114. As Kehnel remarked, ‘Donations, building activities in the monastery, as well as military support, were the characteristic features of Ua Máelsechlainn patronage over Clonmacnois during the tenth and early eleventh century. All three domains were taken over by the Ua Conchobair kings of Connacht from the later eleventh century.’<sup>130</sup> The donations included ‘jewels’ (altar plate) offered in 1115 and a belfry built in 1124.<sup>131</sup> The defence of the monastery included action against the English, as in 1178 when ‘Hugo de Lacy came with a great and strong battalion to plunder Clonmacnois. But the Connachtmen did not let them sleep that night and early on the morrow he was carried off for fear of Ruaidhrí Ó Conchobhair and the Síol Muireadhaigh overtaking them in Cumang Cluana.’<sup>132</sup> The switch of political orientation at Clonmacnoise is underlined by the list of items stolen from the community in 1129. They included sacred objects given by patrons on both sides of the Shannon, but what is notable is the age of the items. A century-old model of Solomon’s Temple given by Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill (d. 1022) and the chalice given by Donnchad mac Flainn (d. 944) were the noted items of Meath origin. The stolen objects thus highlight again the replacement of former patrons by Ua Conchobair.<sup>133</sup>

The appearances of Connacht families in positions of leadership at Clonmacnoise also increased dramatically in the twelfth century. The Uí Mháeleoin appear as comarbai or abbots of Clonmacnoise from 1109 onwards and, though their origins are obscure, Kehnel highlighted a passage in a little-known eighteenth-century manuscript where the author described them as an

<sup>126</sup> A.F.M. 1144.7.

<sup>127</sup> A.F.M. 1144.10.

<sup>128</sup> Gwynn and Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses: Ireland*, p. 314.

<sup>129</sup> James Ware, *De Hibernia & antiquitatibus ejus* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, 1658), pp 192–3: ‘Moniales Ord S. Augustini. O-Melaghlin Midiae regulus dotavit ante Anglorum adventum. Coelestinus 3 confirmavit possessiones an. Dom. 1195’.

<sup>130</sup> Kehnel, *Clonmacnois*, p. 128. Strictly speaking, the Uí Máel Sechlainn designation only applies from the late eleventh century with Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill’s grandsons and great-grandsons. Up to that point, it is still better described as Clann Cholmáin patronage.

<sup>131</sup> Ann. Tig. 1115.7; Chron. Scot. 1124.

<sup>132</sup> Ann. Tig. 1178.3: ‘tanic Uga de Laithi ruadh-chath romór do argain Cluana Maic Nóis, & nir’ leicset Connachta codladh na h-aidchi-sin doib, & ro h-imcuiredh co moch armamarach é ar eglá Ruaidhrí h-Úi Chonchobair & Sila Muredhaigh do breith orro a Cumang Cluana’.

<sup>133</sup> Raghnaill Ó Floinn, ‘Clonmacnoise’, p. 97.

offshoot of the Uí Chonchobair.<sup>134</sup> More reliably, the Uí Neachtain of Uí Maine in Connacht appear as heads of the Céilí Dé community at Clonmacnoise and the Uí Dubhthaigh archbishops of Connacht also had associations with Clonmacnoise.<sup>135</sup>

To stress the point still further, the kings of Connacht, and many other nobles of the province besides, were buried at Clonmacnoise in the twelfth century. This could be said of Ruaidrí na Saide Buide Ua Conchobair in 1118, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair in 1156 and Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair in 1198, as well as Gilla na Naem Ua hEidin (one-time usurping king of Síol Muiredaig) in 1100.<sup>136</sup> As for the many slain in the battle between Connacht and the Cenél Conaill in 1181, ‘the bodies of those nobles were conveyed, after their deaths, to Cluain-mic-Nois, and interred in the sepulchre of the nobles of their ancestors’, which suggests the prevalence of the practice.<sup>137</sup> Meanwhile, the kings of Meath and their spouses, whose predecessors had previously done so, were interred at Durrow.<sup>138</sup> Remarkably, a mint was also established by the Uí Chonchobair at Clonmacnoise in the twelfth century, in operation in the 1170s, and possibly earlier.<sup>139</sup> Another important source, the Annals of Tigernach, derive their name from an abbot of Clonmacnoise and there is reason to believe they were indeed produced ‘in the Clonmacnoise scriptorium’. They were described by Flanagan as an Uí Chonchobair ‘house chronicle’ and noted by her to be favourable towards that dynasty.<sup>140</sup> They also terminate in 1178, following the attack on the monastery by Hugh de Lacy in which it was defended by the forces of Connacht.<sup>141</sup>

Therefore, though it has been asserted that Derbforgaill ‘was also very clearly stating her independence from her husband by giving resources to a church in her own family’s circle’, this was not so.<sup>142</sup> There is only limited evidence to support the notion of a continuous Uí Máel Sechlainn interest in Clonmacnoise in the

<sup>134</sup> Kehnel, *Clonmacnois*, p. 151; R.I.A. MS 14 B4.

<sup>135</sup> Kehnel, *Clonmacnois*, pp 149–53; A.F.M. 1132.4, 1136.2, 1170.3, 1200.2; Ann. Tig. 1136.4, 1170.4; Chron. Scot. 1132. See also P. Ó Riain, ‘Sanctity and politics in Connacht, c.1100’ in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, xvii (1989), pp 1–14; Colmán Etchingham, ‘Episcopal hierarchy in Connacht and Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair’ in *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, lii (2000), pp 13–29.

<sup>136</sup> A.F.M. 1100.10, 1118.1, 1156.9; Ann. Tig. 1100.4, 1118.7, 1156.4; Chron. Scot. 1100, 1118; A.U. 1118.9, 1156.1; A.L.C. 1118.11; Misc. Ir. Annals 1118.5, 1156.2; Ann. Clon. 1153.

<sup>137</sup> A.L.C. 1181.1, 1181.2: ‘rucad cuirp na rigraide sin iar ná n-oiged co Cluain Mic Nóis, a n-othar lighe rigraidhe a sinnser’.

<sup>138</sup> A.F.M. 1137.11, 1153.5. See also the assassinations of Máel Sechlainn Ua Máel Sechlainn and Domnall Bregach Ua Máel Sechlainn at Durrow in 1155 and 1173 respectively (Ann. Tig. 1155.1, 1173.7). In the absence of any mention of removals elsewhere, they may also be presumed to have joined Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn and his wife Mór among the dead at Durrow. See also Ó Floinn, ‘Art and patronage’, p. 97.

<sup>139</sup> Ann. Clon. 1170; Marie Therese Flanagan, ‘After Brian Bóraime: the high-kingship and the kings of Connacht’ in *Medieval Dublin XVI* (Dublin, 2017), pp 235–236, n. 94–98; John Lynch, *Cambrensis eversus*, ed. Matthew Kelly (3 vols, Dublin, 1850), ii, 60–61.

<sup>140</sup> See Paul Walsh, ‘The annals attributed to Tigernach’ in *I.H.S.*, ii, no. 6 (Sept. 1940), pp 154–9; D. P. Mc Carthy, *The Irish annals: their genesis, evolution and history* (Dublin, 2008), p. 21; Brian Ó Cuív, *Catalogue of Irish language manuscripts in the Bodleian library at Oxford and Oxford college libraries* (Dublin, 2001), p. 165; Flanagan, *Irish Society*, pp 233, 246, 259.

<sup>141</sup> Ann. Tig. 1178.3.

<sup>142</sup> Ní Grádaigh, ‘“But what exactly did she give”’, p. 178.

twelfth century. And, other than this imagined grant by Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn in 1144, all the evidence comes from the 1160s. This is, to wit, a grant of land by Diarmait Ua Máel Sechlainn to Clonmacnoise in 1161,<sup>143</sup> the freeing of two small churches from ‘cess and press for ever in honour if God and St Queran’,<sup>144</sup> also by Diarmait, in 1162, Derbforgaill’s completion of the nuns’ church in 1167, and the death of Derbhaile, daughter of Donnchad Ua Máel Sechlainn, at Clonmacnoise, also in 1167.<sup>145</sup>

The explanation for these events lies in the political climate that existed when they took place. They represent an alliance with, or rather, dependence on Connacht, not an independent resurrection of Uí Máel Sechlainn influence at Clonmacnoise. In fact, the events were an immediate sequel to the circumstances behind the donation at Mellifont. As discussed above, at that time Donnchad Ua Máel Sechlainn was excommunicated and deposed. Now, Mac Lochlainn went back on his deal with Ua Ruairc and, in 1159, placed Donnchad Ua Máel Sechlainn in the kingship of Meath.<sup>146</sup>

During his exile, Donnchad had sought protection first in Leinster, and later in Connacht.<sup>147</sup> In 1159, however, Diarmait’s champion Tigernán Ua Ruairc formed an alliance with Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair.<sup>148</sup> As a result, Diarmait immediately became the choice of the king of Connacht, Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, for kingship in Meath, and Donnchad became Ruaidrí’s enemy.<sup>149</sup> The alignment thus shifted: Ua Conchobair and Ua Ruairc supported Diarmait and Mac Lochlainn supported Donnchad, who remained in power.

This came to an end in 1160, when Donnchad Ua Máel Sechlainn was assassinated.<sup>150</sup> At once, Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair marched into Meath and placed Diarmait Ua Máel Sechlainn in the kingship.<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, when Mac Lochlainn marched south to remove Diarmait later the same year, Ua Ruairc and Ua Conchobair supported the latter, and he retained power.<sup>152</sup> In 1161, Mac Lochlainn conceded the point and recognised Diarmait as the holder of east Meath and Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair as the holder of west Meath.<sup>153</sup> Immediately afterwards, Diarmait granted Beann Artghaile (site now unknown), ‘to God and St Ciarán’ — that is, to Clonmacnoise.<sup>154</sup> Clearly, this was done in recognition of support from the king of Connacht.

Similarly, when in 1162 Diarmait freed Cill Ua Nilucaín and Ros Míde from tax ‘for God and Ciarán [Clonmacnoise]’,<sup>155</sup> it was just after he had also made a payment of 100 ounces of gold to Ua Conchobair for west Meath.<sup>156</sup> It may have been part of the deal, or it may have been further confirmation of good relations, but it certainly took place in the same context. In 1163 Diarmait was deposed once

<sup>143</sup> A.F.M. 1161.10; Ann. Clon. 1163.

<sup>144</sup> Ann. Clon. 1164; A.F.M. 1162.12.

<sup>145</sup> A.F.M. 1167.14; Ann. Tig. 1167.1.

<sup>146</sup> A.F.M. 1159.9; Ann. Tig. 1159.5.

<sup>147</sup> A.F.M. 1158.17.

<sup>148</sup> A.F.M. 1159.10.

<sup>149</sup> A.F.M. 1159.11, 1159.12; Ann. Tig. 1159.12, 1159.15.

<sup>150</sup> A.F.M. 1160.7; Ann. Tig. 1160.1.

<sup>151</sup> A.F.M. 1160.20; Ann. Tig. 1160.3.

<sup>152</sup> A.F.M. 1160.22.

<sup>153</sup> A.F.M. 1161.9.

<sup>154</sup> A.F.M. 1161.10.

<sup>155</sup> A.F.M. 1162.12: ‘do Dhia & do Chiarán’; Ann. Clon. 1164.

<sup>156</sup> A.F.M. 1162.11, 1162.12.

more and a rent was paid to Mac Lochlainn by his successors, rather than to Ua Conchobair.<sup>157</sup> The donations to Clonmacnoise could also reflect Uí Máel Sechlainn desire to re-establish their connection with that site, but their political weakness in this period means that it was not an independent assertion of influence. After the fall of Mac Lochlainn in 1166, Ua Conchobair established control over all Ireland, aided by Diarmait Ua Máel Sechlainn and especially by Ua Ruairc. Great conventions held at Athlone in 1166, Tlachta in 1167 and Faughan Hill in 1168 emphasised the continued robustness of the Connacht-Bréifne-Meath alliance that had brought Ua Conchobair to power, as did the military manoeuvres of these and subsequent years.

Derbforgaill's completion of the nuns' church at Clonmacnoise thus underscored the good relations between Ua Conchobair and Ua Ruairc. Her donation was not made to win favour, since good relations were well established. Instead, it was an additional endorsement of the alliance. It was not the only construction at Clonmacnoise that year: 'a church was erected at Cluain-mic-Nois, in the place of the Dearthach, by Conchobhar Ua Ceallaigh and the Uí-Maine' around the same time.<sup>158</sup> This again emphasises the continued influence of the western province at the site. The authority of Clonard over the nuns at Clonmacnoise is much more likely to date from this point, as an inclusion of Meath, and Diarmait Ua Máel Sechlainn, in the acts of good will.

Dearbhaile, who died in 1167, was married to Ragnall Mac Cochláin, king of Delbna Ethra, the territory of Meath in which Clonmacnoise was situated.<sup>159</sup> Her burial might well have taken place in Clonmacnoise for that reason alone, but it was certainly even more appropriate in the political climate of the time. She was a daughter of Donnchad Ua Máel Sechlainn, one-time enemy of Ua Ruairc, great-granddaughter of Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn and, therefore, grandniece of Derbforgaill, but these relationships are unlikely to have made any difference either way since, as we have seen, the dominant relationship of the period was marital and not natal.<sup>160</sup>

#### IV

If Derbforgaill's influence relative to her husband has sometimes been exaggerated, it is partly because her case seems to demand it.<sup>161</sup> She has other appearances in the historical record, in addition to the abduction and two major donations. The monk Gilla Mo Dutu Ua Caiside, associated with the monasteries at Ardbraccan in Meath and later Daminis (Devinish island on Lough Erne), was the author of several poetical compositions relevant to the present discussion: one referencing Tigernán Ua Ruairc and Derbforgaill (the metrical Banshenchas), and another referencing Ua Ruairc only (*Éri óg inis na náem*).<sup>162</sup> Modern consensus opinion is that

<sup>157</sup> A.F.M. 1163.12.

<sup>158</sup> Ann. Tig. 1167.19: '*Teampall do dénam i c-Cluain Mic Nóis i n-ionadh an dearthaigh lá Conchobhar Ua c-Ceallaigh, & lá h-Uibh Maine*'.

<sup>159</sup> Ann. Clon. 1180.

<sup>160</sup> For a discussion of Uí Máel Sechlainn pedigrees, see Paul Walsh, 'The Ua Maelechlainn kings of Meath' in *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, lvii (1941), pp 165–83.

<sup>161</sup> See above, n. 32.

<sup>162</sup> See Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, 'An Banshenchas Filíochta' (M.A. Thesis, University College, Galway, 1977), §§265–6; R. A. Stewart MacAlister (ed.), *Lebor Gabála Erenn* (5 vols, Dublin, 1938–56), v, 562–3, §77.

Tigernán and Derbforgaill were dual patrons of Gilla Mo Dutu and, further, that Éri Óg inis na náem and the metrical Banshenchas were respectively dedicated companion pieces.<sup>163</sup> The focus on kings in one and noble women in the other, and praise of both Tigernán and Derbforgaill in the metrical Banshenchas, is suggestive of this idea. On the basis that there is evidence of Ua Ruairc producing anti-Uí Máel Sechlainn propaganda, it may be further supposed that praise of Derbforgaill's parents, which also appears, was decidedly for her appreciation over her husband's.<sup>164</sup> Gilla Mo Dutu's Meath origins should not be overlooked either, however.

These views are harmonious with the present reinterpretation of Derbforgaill's life. If we accept that Tigernán and Derbforgaill patronised these literary works together (whatever that says about mutual wealth), then we can easily extend that view to Mellifont and Clonmacnoise, where Derbforgaill was a named benefactor and her husband was not. Éri Óg inis na náem was written in 1143 and the metrical Banshenchas was produced in 1147; Mellifont and Clonmacnoise were patronised by Derbforgaill in 1157 and 1167 respectively.<sup>165</sup>

This suggests a long-standing arrangement and has implications for our views of female participation in political life. Though Ua Ruairc reigned for forty-eight years, Derbforgaill was his only wife; an unusual arrangement to say the least. The question of whether a sole wife was more likely to attain such a status within her husband's entourage may bear further investigation. If we accept the idea of mutual patronage, it also has implications for our understanding of the reform movement, adding Ua Ruairc to the category of 'reforming kings' like his contemporaries Ua Cerbaill and Mac Murchada (neither of whom were men of one wife).

Tigernán's patronage extended beyond partnership with Derbforgaill. His interests in Meath had already prompted investment before Gilla Mo Dutu's first compositions appeared. A series of notitiae or 'notes' contained in the Book of Kells preserve grants of land made by Irish kings before the English invasion, including Tigernán Ua Ruairc. He witnessed a grant by the community at Kells as early as 1133, and he was also responsible for two grants to the same community, one dated 1122 × 48 and another 1137 × 61.<sup>166</sup> The latter, an award of 'Mag nDechrad' is the subject of a recent publication by Denis Casey, who estimated its extent at approximately 150 square kilometres.<sup>167</sup> Even if doubt can easily be cast on that appraisal, it is, nonetheless, an example of Ua Ruairc's patronage.<sup>168</sup>

<sup>163</sup> Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, 'The manuscript tradition of the Banshenchas' in *Ériu*, xxxiii (1982), p. 110; Kevin Murray, 'Gilla Mo Dutu Úa Caiside' in John Carey, Máire Herbert and Kevin Murray (eds), *Cín Chille Cúile: texts, saints and places. Essays in honour of Pádraig Ó Riain* (Aberystwyth, 2004), p. 155.

<sup>164</sup> Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Bréifne bias in Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib' in *Ériu*, xliii (1992), pp 135–58.

<sup>165</sup> Ní Bhrolcháin, 'Metrical Banshenchas', pp 109, 113; Murray, 'Gilla Mo Dutu Úa Caiside', p. 155; Herbert, 'Bréifne bias', p. 155; Macalister (ed.) *Lebor Gabála Erenn*, v, 560, §74.

<sup>166</sup> Gearóid Mac Niocaill, 'The Irish "charters"' in Fox (ed.), *The Book of Kells*, pp 155, 160–61.

<sup>167</sup> Denis Casey, *Tigernán Ua Ruairc and a twelfth-century royal grant in the Book of Kells* (Dublin, 2020), pp 37–9.

<sup>168</sup> Two of the four boundary points specified in the grant, 'the end of Ros' and 'Rind in Daire', remain unidentified. A third, Domnach Mór, has been interpreted as Donaghmore, near Navan, having once been thought to be Donaghpatrick. The fourth, 'Áth Ó Canannán', is an otherwise unattested placename, suggested by Tomás Ó Canannán to be a

Royal patronage of ecclesiastical centres in Ireland in general is a well-known phenomenon and there are plenty of examples beyond those discussed here. The grant of Cashel by Muirchertach Ua Briain in 1101 is ubiquitously cited, perhaps because it illustrates how recently-acquired land could be secured against its former owners — in this case the Éoganacht Caisil. Another notable example is the grant by Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn to Newry Abbey of c.1157 and the Uí Máel Sechlainn are accredited with the foundation of the Cistercian abbey of Bective in 1147 as well.<sup>169</sup> We also have Latin charters by Diarmait Mac Murchada, Domnall Ua Briain and Cathal Crobderg Ua Conchobair, among others.<sup>170</sup> There is, as such, no reason to doubt Ua Ruairc's involvement, even if he appears to be the only king who donated through or with his wife.

## V

Derbforgaill has drawn much attention and, for the purpose of proving different points, the events of her life have been presented in a variety of ways. Noted enough in the present day to warrant biographies in *Medieval Ireland: an encyclopedia* and the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*,<sup>171</sup> her fame started in her own time, when Giraldus Cambrensis penned a history of the invasion presenting her as 'a Helen of Troy' whose indiscretions had caused the invasion. Remarkably, vestiges of that argument still appear today, as up to now historians have been unwilling to place greater weight on the Irish sources (especially the annals).

Anthony Candon's hypothesis that Mór ingen Uí Chonchobair Failge, who was taken from Osraige by Conchobar ua Máel Sechlainn, was a hostage (that is a *gíall*), rather than an abductee, opened the possibility that other famous abductions were nothing of the kind. Whereas Candon's argument rested on Mór's prior relationship with Conchobar (he had once been or still was her husband), those who applied the theory to Derbforgaill focussed on her links with her natal family. They speculated that she was both a legitimate representative of the Uí Máel Sechlainn dynasty and that Diarmait Mac Murchada's capture of her constituted her husband's submission, in analyses largely directed at emphasising her importance (but at the same time downplaying her agency).

On the contrary, the political context precludes such a conclusion. Diarmait Mac Murchada's invasion of Uí Briúin Bréifne was something of an anomaly: he had

crossing point of the Boyne near Slane (Tomás G. Ó Canann, 'Áth Uí Chanannáin and the toponymy of medieval Mide' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, viii (1992–3), pp 78–83). Casey, following Ó Canann, provides western boundary points for the grant by tracing attestations of 'Dechrae', which in different periods seem to correspond with Dulane in the north and Moyagher in the south. Even if these are accepted to related to the same Mag nDechrae, there is no reason to take them as boundaries or as fixed points for the twelfth-century grant. Furthermore, even if Mag nDechrae had indeed once meant the entirety of this area, it still might only have applied to fragments of it in later periods. The suggestion that roughly 150 square kilometres (or 37,000 acres) were alienated to the church at Kells requires more proof, especially when the lands encompassed the surrounds of Ardraccan and Donaghmore, two other important churches with which Tigernán was also associated.

<sup>169</sup> Flanagan, *Irish royal charters: texts and contexts* (Oxford, 2005), pp 291–305.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, *passim*.

<sup>171</sup> Anne Connon, 'Derbforgaill' in Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Ireland*, p. 122; Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin, 'Derbforgaill', *D.I.B.*, iii, 175–6.

never before ventured so far, nor was it a logical extension of his suzerainty. Furthermore, he only went as an ally of Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair, the powerful king of Connacht with whom he had become associated since the Battle of Móin Móir. The hostages of Bréifne captured during the 1152 expedition were taken to Athlone, the site of an Uí Chonchobair castle. The abduction of Derbforgaill on the other hand — for abduction it was — soured the alliance and Ua Conchobair even went to Leinster himself to secure her return. Mac Murchada's prior form where abduction and rape were concerned only underlines his predilection for the strategy, while Ua Ruairc's demand for compensation in 1167 confirms that he had suffered the humiliation associated with abduction.

Derbforgaill's wealth provides a link between the abduction and her later donations, since it was noted that Mac Murchada took her to Leinster 'with her wealth', and that same wealth returned with her to Ua Ruairc. A reconsideration of the basis of female wealth showed that the highest class of royal female could have expected greater wealth in the twelfth century than in earlier periods, since their fathers' honour-prices, on which their greatest endowment, the *coibche*, was based, seem to have increased.

Nonetheless, Derbforgaill's donations were considerable relative to all other examples of female donation in medieval Gaelic Ireland. Sixty ounces of gold (or its equivalent), altar-cloths and the resources required for the construction of a nuns' church go far beyond the single scruples or even ounces of gold offered by other women. The conclusion must be either that Derbforgaill received an enormous *coibche* and drew on additional wealth from other sources or, most likely, that her donations were supported by her husband.

Tigernán Ua Ruairc's political interests are reflected in the donations themselves. The consecration of a church at Mellifont represented an opportunity to endorse the European ecclesiastical reform movement for some of those present. Among these were Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, Donnchad Ua Cerbaill and perhaps Derbforgaill, though it might be more accurate to say Derbforgaill and Tigernán together. Tigernán's real interest, as ever, was in controlling Meath. The excommunication and deposition of Donnchad Ua Máel Sechlainn, and his replacement with his half-brother, Diarmait, represented major progress on this front. Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn's support of Donnchad had put him at odds with Ua Ruairc. Now Ua Ruairc recognised Mac Lochlainn's suzerainty in return for a local concession.

The affair at Clonmacnoise was a sequel. Ua Ruairc, a steadfast ally of Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair from 1159 onwards, brought Diarmait Ua Máel Sechlainn into the king of Connacht's sphere of influence. After numerous setbacks, they defeated and killed Mac Lochlainn in 1166. Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair conducted a tour of the island, establishing his authority with the aid of Ua Ruairc and Ua Máel Sechlainn alike. They were also present at Ua Conchobair's subsequent conventions at Athlone, Tlachta and Faughan Hill. Derbforgaill's sponsorship of the construction of a nuns' church followed Diarmait Ua Máel Sechlainn's own donations to Clonmacnoise. Connacht was the dominant secular power at Clonmacnoise from at least the early twelfth century, and, notwithstanding an early medieval connection between the latter and Meath, these donations reflected collective endorsement of the alliance, rather than an attempt by one party to recover ancient influence.

In addition to showing the political context of Derbforgaill's donations, this paper addressed a long-standing pillar of evidence for continuous Uí Máel Sechlainn influence at Clonmacnoise. This was a two-fold grant supposedly made by Murchad Ua Máel Sechlainn in 1144: first the establishment of an

Arrouaisian house at Clonard, and secondly the grant of a nuns' church at Clonmacnoise to this house at Clonard. Uí Máel Sechlainn associations with Clonard are undoubted, but the idea they introduced Arrouaisian observance to Clonard, and similarly at Clonmacnoise as a daughter house of Clonard, both in 1144, comes from a mistranslation of the Visio Tnugdali and general lack of familiarity with the political background; furthermore, the link between Clonard and Clonmacnoise is based on evidence no earlier than 1196, after the construction of the nuns' church under Derbforgaill's guidance. It, therefore, cannot support the notion of Uí Máel Sechlainn influence at Clonmacnoise being perpetuated by Derbforgaill.

Arguably, the difficulty with existing interpretations of Derbforgaill is that they present her importance in opposition to her husband. The idea that the couple were antagonistic is unevenced and unlikely, and it also presupposes an improbable degree of independence for Derbforgaill. The poetic compositions of Gilla Mo Dutu Ua Caiside are generally regarded as products of their mutual patronage and the one associated with Derbforgaill, the metrical *Banshenchas*, also praises Tigernán. Among the wider implications of this study must be the reconceptualisation of female political importance as functional through or in concert with marriage partners, rather than the natal family.<sup>172</sup>

This will not be the final word on Derbforgaill. The particulars of her case are guaranteed to provoke further interest and, therefore, future revelations and interpretations. There are also questions that this paper does not attempt to answer. For instance, Derbforgaill retired to Mellifont in 1186, dying there in 1193. It is not known why she chose Mellifont over the female religious community she had supported at Clonmacnoise, especially considering growing English influence in lower Airgiála, where Mellifont was situated. Mystery adds to Derbforgaill's attraction and the evidence we have on her life is central to our understanding of numerous issues, especially those relating to female experience. It may reasonably be hoped, however, that the appropriate political context of the major events of her life has now been recovered.<sup>173</sup>

<sup>172</sup> Note that Anne Connon has argued that mothers (rather than wives) were the principal concern of the *Banshenchas*: Anne Connon, 'The *Banshenchas* and the Uí Néill queens of Tara' in Alfred P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin, 2000), pp 98–108. Much of the discussion of marriage in medieval Ireland has concerned law rather than its internal politics: Cosgrove (ed.), *Marriage in Ireland* (Dublin, 1985); Meek and Simms (eds), '*The fragility of her sex*'.

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