

THE BERNICIAN ROYAL DYNASTY AND THE IRISH IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY

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The role of the Irish in the establishment and early development of the church in the north of England is well known (for example Hughes, 1971; Mayr-Harting, 1972, 94-113; Bieler, 1976). The patronage which king Oswald and his successor Oswiu extended to the monastery of Iona allowed the missionaries who came from there to found daughter-houses throughout Northumbria as well as in other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms subject to or in alliance with these two kings; though patronage was withdrawn at the synod of Whitby in 664, the ecclesiastical culture which the Irish had brought with them continued to influence the Northumbrian church to the end of the seventh century and beyond (Hughes, 1971). Less well known is the secular political interaction between the Bernician royal dynasty and the Irish in the late sixth century and throughout most of the seventh (as noted by Byrne, 1965, 52). This paper aims to reconstruct that interaction as far as possible.

The Irish in question are (1) the kingdom of Dál Riata; (2) the Uí Néill royal dynasty; and (3) the monastic community of Iona. In order to understand their relationships with the Bernicians, it is first of all necessary to know, at least in outline, how they stood relative to one another when the English first came into contact with them.

By our period the kingdom of Dál Riata was in the unusual position of being partly in Ireland and partly in Britain (for what follows see Byrne, 1973, 106-29; Bannerman, 1974b and 1974d; Anderson, 1973, 146-57). Originally confined to the north-eastern corner of Ulster, Dál Riata had colonized the closely adjacent parts of western Scotland, and at some stage, conventionally c. 500, its royal family crossed the short stretch of sea separating Irish from Scottish Dál Riata and thenceforth ruled both halves of the kingdom from the latter side. Irish Dál Riata, however, remained

subject to the provincial kingship of Ulster, in theory at any rate, and it appears that at least one of the Ulster kings, Báetán mac Cairill (ruled 572-81) managed to extend his control over Scottish Dál Riata as well. In 575 an alliance was made at Druim Cett on the Irish mainland between Áedán mac Gabráin, king of Dál Riata, and Áed mac Ainmerech, king of the northern Uí Néill (Byrne, 1965, 45-7 and 1973, 110-14; Bannerman 1974a and 1974b; Anderson, 1973, 146-9). From the Dál Riatan point of view this alliance was almost certainly intended to counter the claims of Báetán mac Cairill (Byrne, 1965, 45-7; 1973, 110-14; Ó Corráin, 1980, 181-2). The Uí Néill, who were only beginning the rise to the political preeminence which they enjoyed in later centuries, for their part gained a useful ally against an Ulster still capable of asserting itself. The agreement reached at Druim Cett eventually outlived both its originators and was terminated in 637, with disastrous results for Dál Riata.

The connection between the Uí Néill and the royal house of Dál Riata also had an ecclesiastical dimension. The monastery of Iona was established in 563 in Dál Riata by St Columba, a member of the Cenél Conaill branch of the Northern Uí Néill (Anderson, 1961, 66-7), and all but one of the saint's eight successors in the abbacy up to the end of the seventh century were demonstrably of the same stock (Reeves, 1857, 342-3). In other words, Iona began as an Uí Néill *Eigenkirche* within the kingdom of Dál Riata and continued as such throughout the period with which this discussion deals. Bede says that the island was given to Columba by the Picts (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, III 3, 4), while Iona's own chronicle claims that the monastery had been endowed by Conall mac Comgaill, Áedán mac Gabráin's predecessor as king of Dál Riata (Hennessy and MacCarthy, 1887, s.a. 573). Various plausible explanations for this discrepancy have been suggested (Plummer, 1896, II 131-2; Bannerman, 1974d, 79; Anderson, 1973, 145; Duncan, 1981, 9-10), but whatever the source of the endowment it is clear that a close association between Iona and the Dál Riatan kingship existed from the start. Thus, not long after 563, we find that Columba was present at Druim Cett (Anderson, 1961, I 10-11, 49 II 6): given his family ties on the one hand and the location of his monastery on the other, it can hardly be doubted that he was instrumental in arranging the alliance between his cousin Áed mac Ainmerech and Áedán mac Gabráin. Adomnán's *Life of Columba* also describes the saint otherwise involving himself in Áedán's political affairs (for example, Columba's attempts to involve himself in the Dál Riatan royal succession, Anderson, 1961, III 5 and I 9-10). The very fact of Iona's continued existence after its founder's death shows that Dál Riatan royal patronage was maintained; Iona for its part kept a detailed record of the Dál Riatan royal house and its affairs (Bannerman, 1968b; Anderson, 1973, 8-42) and, as the

writings of abbots Cuimmíne (ob. 669) (Anderson, 1961, III 5) and Adomnán (Anderson, 1961) show, hagiographical traditions which stressed the benefits to the Dál Riata kingship of reverence for Columba and his successors were carefully cultivated.

When the Bernician royal dynasty first came into contact with the Irish, then, the position was this: the royal house of Dál Riata and the Northern Uí Néill were associated on the secular level by an alliance made in 575 and terminated in 637, and on the ecclesiastical level via the monastery of Iona which, though it stood in Dál Riata territory, was controlled by Uí Néill abbots throughout the period with which this discussion deals.

A good place to begin this study is with evidence that is both well-known and of undoubted historical reliability. In his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (HE) Bede writes that 'siquidem tempore toto quo regnavit Eduini, filii praefati regis Aedilfridi, qui ante illum regnaverat, cum magna nobilium iuventute apud Scottos sive Pictos exulabant' (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, III 1); at least two of these sons of Ethelfrith, Oswald (III 3) and Oswiu (III 25), fled to Dál Riata with their retinues. Corroboration, if such is needed, comes from Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, which says that Oswald was baptized 'cum xii viris ... cum eo Scotos inter exsolante' (Anderson, 1961, I 1). Our starting point, therefore, is that at least two and possibly more Bernician dynasts were in Dál Riata between 616 and 633, the dates of Edwin's reign (Miller, 1979). But these and other Bernician exiles also appear in Irish sources as well as in an English source which had access to information not found in Bede. By examining this evidence it will be possible to learn something of what the exiles did while among the Irish, and to extend the Bernician presence in Dál Riata back to the late sixth century.

The first item of Irish evidence is an annal entry relating to the battle of Fid Eoin, which the Annals of Ulster (AU) (Hennessy and MacCarthy, 1887) record s.a. 628 and in which Connad Cerr, king of Dál Riata, was defeated at Fid Eoin on the Irish mainland. Three sets of annals—the Annals of Tigernach (ATig), Chronicon Scotorum (CS), and the Annals of Clonmacnois (AClon) (for editions see MacNiocaill, 1975)—add that an Anglo-Saxon *æþeling* fought on the Dál Riata side; the following quotation is from ATig (Stokes, 1896, 180–81):

Cath Fedha Eoin in quo Maelcaith mac Scandail rex Cruithniu victor erat. Dal Riada cecidit. Condadh Cerr ri Dal Riada cecidit 7 Dicull mac Eachach ri ceneoil Cruithne cecidit et nepotes Aedan ceciderunt, id est Rigullan mac Conaing 7 Failbe mac Eachach 7 Oisiricc mac Albruit rigdomna Saxan cum strage maxima suorum.

Oisiricc is self-evidently the Anglo-Saxon name *Osríc*, and *Albruit* (*Albirit*,

CS) represents *Ælfred* (see p 111 n 1); *rígdamna* is the closest Irish equivalent to Old English *æþeling* (compare O Corráin, 1971 and Dumville, 1979).

How historically credible is this entry with regard to Osric's involvement at Fid Eoin? It is first of all entirely plausible that an Anglo-Saxon *æþeling* should be fighting alongside Dál Riata during the time when, as we know from Bede, Bernician dynasts and their retinues were in exile there. Moreover, recent work on the Irish annals allows our entry to be regarded as a contemporary or near-contemporary record (Bannerman, 1974c; Hughes, 1972; Smyth, 1972; Anderson, 1973, 1-42; MacNiocaill, 1975). It has emerged that only two and probably even only one set of annals existed in the Irish-speaking world before the mid-eighth century. One, the Iona Chronicle (IC), was kept in the monastery of that name and was contemporary by 670/80 at the latest. The second, rather more doubtful set is supposed to have been kept at Bangor in northern Ireland. In the mid-eighth century a copy of the IC reached Ireland and, with the Bangor chronicle if it existed, became the basis of a new record from which all the extant annals covering the early medieval period developed. Where this new record was compiled and how it subsequently spread to other centres cannot concern us here. What is certain is that the IC found its way into all the extant sets of Irish annals and that it can to a large extent be recovered by reading these annals in conjunction. When this is done, the IC is found to have contained material relating to the monastery in which it was kept and to its sphere of interest (Bannerman, 1974c, esp. 21-5; Hughes, 1972, 117 and 122; Anderson, 1973, 6-8): Dál Riata, Pictland and North Britain; according to some Scholars (Smyth, 1972, 33-41; Mac Niocaill, 1975, 19-20) it also contained references to Ulster and Leinster, but others assign this material to the Bangor chronicle (Bannerman, 1974c, 9-10, 14-15, 25; Hughes, 1972, 122). And, finally, the IC contained entries relating to the Anglo-Saxons (Bannerman, 1974c, 21-4).

A survey of the extant sets of Irish annals up to AD 1000 brings to light—by my count—75 entries which refer to persons, places and events explicitly associated with Anglo-Saxon England.¹ These entries are very unevenly distributed over the chronological range. There are only two for the fifth cen-

¹ These are listed below. The following abbreviations are used: AU (Annals of Ulster); ATig (Annals of Tigernach); AI (Annals of Inisfallen); CS (Chronicon Scotorum); FrA (Fragmentary Annals of Ireland); AR (Annals of Roscrea); FM (Annals of the Four Masters); AClon (Annals of Clonmacnoise). The year sections are those of AU where possible. Editions are listed by Mac Niocaill 1975; for FrA see Radner 1978.

431 (AI, CS, AR); 471 (AI); 583 (ATig, AR, AClon); 597 (AU, ATig, CS, AR, AClon); 599 (AU, ATig, AR, AClon); 612 (AU, ATig, AI, AClon); 624 (ATig, AR, AClon); 628a (AU, ATig, CS, AClon); 628b (ATig, CS, AR, AClon); 630 (AU, ATig, AI, AClon); 631a (AU, ATig, AClon); 631b (ATig); 634 (ATig, AR, AClon); 638 (AU, ATig, AI, AClon); 641 (AU, ATig, AClon); 645 (AU, ATig, CS, AR, AClon); 649 (AU, ATig, CS, AClon); 650a

tury and most of the sixth; at the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the seventh the entries suddenly increase in frequency and continue to be very frequent throughout the seventh century and the first half of the eighth; in the second half of the eighth century the number of entries begins to decrease markedly, and this reduced level of frequency is then maintained for the remaining two centuries. Out of a total of 75 entries before AD 1000, two-thirds occur in the interval c.580-c.750, and, the two pre-c.580 ones apart, the rest are spread fairly evenly over the range c.750-1000. The subject matter of the entries shows a similarly uneven distribution. Up to the mid-eighth century there is an almost exclusive preoccupation with Northumbrian and Northumbria-related affairs; thereafter the coverage becomes more eclectic.

These features make it certain that the bulk, at least, of the pre-c.750 English entries reached the Irish annals via the IC. Any attempt to explain their presence in terms of retrospective insertion by an annalist or annalists working in Ireland after a copy of the IC had arrived there in the mid-eighth century encounters difficulties. The most obvious one is motive: why should an Irish annalist working after c.750 bother to reconstruct so detailed a record of specifically Northumbrian affairs in the seventh and earlier eighth centuries? True, the post-c.750 Irish annals did have some interest in England, as the Anglo-Saxon material just cited attests, and it might be argued that the pre-c.750 material is a function of this interest. But the earlier record is so much more detailed and geographically focussed than the latter: why would an Irish chronicler who had reconstructed and retrospectively inserted it lose interest just as he was approaching contemporaneity and then proceed with what is, by comparison with what goes before, the sparser and more eclectic record attested for the post-c.750 period? On the other hand, if one assumes

(AU, ATig, CS, AR, AClon); 650b (ATig, CS); 655 (AU, ATig, AR, AClon); 667 (AU, ATig, CS, FrA, AR, FM, AClon); 670 (AU, ATig, AI, CS, FrA, AR, AClon); 672 (FM, AClon); 674 (AU, ATig, AClon); 679 (AU, ATig, CS, AClon); 684 (AU, ATig, CS, FrA, AR, FM, AClon); 685 (AU, ATig, FrA); 686 (AU, ATig, CS, FrA, AR, FM, AClon); 687a (FrA, FM); 687b (FrA); 689 (ATig, CS, AR); 690 (AU, ATig, CS, AR, AClon); 692 (AU, CS, AClon); 697 (AU, ATig, AClon); 698 (AU, ATig, AClon); 700 (ATig, AR); 703 (AU, ATig, AI, FrA, AR, AClon); 710 (AU, ATig); 711a (AU, ATig, AR, FM); 711b (AU, ATig, AR, FrA); 712 (AU, ATig, AR); 715 (AU, ATig, AR, AClon); 716 (AU, ATig, AR); 717 (AU, ATig, AR); 728a (AU, FrA, AR); 728b (ATig, FrA, AR, AClon); 730 (AU, ATig); 731 (AU, ATig, AR, FrA, AClon); 734 (AU, ATig, AI, AR, FrA, AClon); 756 (AU, ATig, AR, AClon); 763 (ATig, AR, AClon); 766 (AClon); 782 (AU, AClon); 793 (AU); 820 (AU, AR, CS, AClon); 853 (AU, AI, AR, FrA, FM); 857 (AU, FrA); 864 (AU, FrA, AClon); 866 (AU, FrA, AClon); 870 (AU, CS, FrA); 877 (AU); 892 (AU, FrA?); 900 (FM); 912 (AU, FrA, AClon); 917 (AU, FrA); 920 (AClon); 928 (AClon); 935 (AClon); 936 (AU, FM, AClon); 937 (AClon); 941 (AClon); 944 (FM, AClon); 951 (AU, FM); 974 (AU, ATig, CS); 987 (ATig, CS, AR).

that the entries in question were originally part of the IC, everything falls into place. As noted earlier, Iona was in receipt of Northumbrian patronage from 635 to 664, and contacts with the Northumbrian church continued well beyond the end of the seventh century. It would have had good reason to maintain an annalistic record of the sort we have been discussing: the battles and deaths of Northumbrian kings, the foundation of Lindisfarne, the deaths of prominent churchmen, and so on. That the English record should change in the way described in the mid-eighth century is also readily explicable on the assumption that the pre-c.750 material derives from the IC: the mid-eighth century was when the copy of the IC which was ultimately to be preserved went to Ireland; like the Dál Riata and Pictish entries, the English ones after the mid-eighth century, in Bannerman's words (1974c, 25), 'fall off with dramatic suddenness'. Thereafter, the Irish annalists maintained a reduced and more general interest in the Anglo-Saxons, and probably added the few early entries which are clearly retrospective.¹ The IC provenance of the pre-c.750 material in the Irish annals is, I think, beyond doubt.

We return now to the Fid Eoin entry. It records a battle involving Ulster, Dál Riata and an Anglo-Saxon *æpelung*. Given what has just been said about the IC's contents, our entry can confidently be assigned to that compilation. The historical value of the contemporary entries in the IC between c.670/80 and c.750 is universally recognized, but there is less agreement on the earlier material. On the one hand, Smyth (1972) has argued very convincingly for the keeping of contemporary annals at Iona from the time of its foundation just after the middle of the sixth century. On the other, Anderson considered that 'the matter earlier than the mid-seventh century has at best the authority of tradition or long memory' (1973, 41). Kathleen Hughes arrived at an intermediate position: '... the Iona Chronicle is contemporary from about the 680s and ... records were kept before this, even if they were not written up as formal annals until the later part of the century ... I think that the Iona Chronicle can be taken as an accurate contemporary record certainly from the later decades of the seventh century, and very probably using contemporary notes to compile the earlier entries' (1972, 118-9). This is not the place to attempt a detailed evaluation of these views, but considering the evidence for scribal activity and historical writing at Iona prior to the late seventh century (Hughes, 1980, 8), Anderson's is undoubtedly too pessimistic; the Andersons in fact summarized much of this evidence in their edition of Adomnán's *Life* (1961, 18f). The Fid Eoin entry has the authority of a contemporary or very nearly contemporary record. It should also be kept in mind that the English material in the IC would not have been subject to poli-

¹ For example 434, 471, 583, 597, 645, 687b.

tically motivated manipulation by later redactors in the way that the Irish entries potentially were, since the English were not a politically significant element in Irish affairs after the mid-eighth century. In short, barring some sort of corruption,¹ what the *Fid Eoin* entry says can be taken at face value. Given this, and that the entry accords with what Bede tells us about the Bernician exiles, it can safely be concluded that at least one of the *æþelingas* staying in Dál Riata during Edwin's reign died fighting on the Dál Riata side in an Irish battle which took place round about the year 628.

The second item of Irish evidence to be considered is a literary tradition of Anglo-Saxon involvement in Irish affairs. This tradition is attested in a variety of Irish vernacular prose texts which are commonly grouped together under the generic heading 'King Cycle' and which for the most part date from the Old and Middle Irish periods (c. 700–c.1200). No attempt is going to be made to determine the dates and historical reliability of the individual texts which concern us here. This would be very difficult if not impossible given the present state of scholarship on the subject, and is in any case unnecessary for present purposes. At root, the King tales are an historical genre, but they bear varying degrees of relationship to history. A comparison with Germanic *Heldensage*, which is based on characters and events of the Migration period is useful if not pressed too far. Like the Germanic texts, the King tales often make history subservient to literary ends with a consequent derangement of historical accuracy. Unlike the Germanic genre, however, distortions of his-

¹ Stokes (1890, 426–7) suggested that the forms *Albruit/Albirit* are scribal errors for *Albruic/Albirc*, which would correspond to Old English *Ælfric*, and that the part of the entry which mentions Osric is actually a misplaced obit of Osric son of *Ælfric*, a cousin of Edwin's who ruled briefly after Edwin's death before himself being slain by Cadwallon. This suggestion was later adopted by Anderson (1922, 152–3) and, in a modified form, by Dumville (1979, 2–3n). Osric son of *Ælfric* cannot, of course, have died at *Fid Eoin*, and the proposed emendation consequently casts serious doubt on the validity of our entry. A scribal error of the sort suggested by Stokes is by no means impossible, but emendation ought to be a last resort, and there is no warrant for it here. For one thing, *Albruit/Albirit* can plausibly be explained as representing OE *Ælfred*. The Anglo-Saxon names in the Irish annals provide plenty of examples of the spelling *A* for */Æ/* (Stokes, 1890, 426–8); the *b*, which in Irish orthography can represent the voiced labial fricative (Thurneysen, 1946, 21–4), closely approximates the OE pronunciation of the *f* in *Ælfred* (Campbell, 1959, 179–80); *-t* can in the Irish orthographical system represent */d/* in final position (Thurneysen, 1946, 21–4; Stokes, 1890, 426–8 for examples). Besides, as Byrne, (1965, 57 n 76) points out, the emendation in question 'would involve a triple error on the part of the annalist—pre-dating, misspelling, and miscalling the king *rigdomna*... It seems preferable to take the annal at its face value and remember the 'magna nobilium iuventute' of Bede, *Hist Eccles* III 1'. What Stokes proposed is initially attractive because it transforms an otherwise unknown Osric son of *Ælfred* into a known historical figure, but it is hardly justified.

tory also occur because the King tales functioned as dynastic propaganda (Byrne, 1974; Ó Corráin, 1972, 75-8). Their purpose was to supply the historical context of the genealogies, to legitimize the status quo of Irish dynastic politics by the establishment of allegedly historical precedents: why certain dynastic branches were dominant, the origins of their rights and privileges, and so on. History, legend, myth and invention were pressed into service to create 'early' histories for the ruling dynasties of early medieval Ireland, which were then manipulated according to need as political circumstances changed.

In this genre of texts the English had become a literary topos. As such, they were incorporated where thought appropriate without regard to historical consistency. All the texts in question, however, have this much in common: it is an Irish king who brings the English into Ireland, and they fight other Irishmen on his behalf. In *Gein Branduib meic Echach* Áedán mac Gabráin is said to have brought 'Saxons and Britons and the men of Scotland' to contest the kingship of Ireland (Best, 1927, 6). In *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin* it is Áedán's grandson Cano who brings them to Ireland, and it is to intervene in a dispute involving the Corcu Loígde of Munster (Binchy, 1963, 16). Two related texts, *Fled Dúin na nGéd* (Lehmann, 1964) and *Cath Maige Rath* (O'Donovan, 1842),¹ show Congal Cáech the king of Ulster unsuccessfully attacking the Uí Néill king Domnall mac Áeda in alliance with the Saxons, the Britons, the Scots and even the Franks. So far we are not necessarily very far removed from history: Áedán is an historical person, and the battle of Mag Rath was actually fought in 637 (Bannerman, 1974b, 6-8; 1974, 100-102; Anderson, 1973, 152). With *Caithréim Conghail Cláiringh-igh*, however, we move into the realm of legendary and mythical kings. Conghal, Fergus mac Léti's rival for the kingship of Ulster, is exiled, but eventually he returns to Ireland accompanied by British and English forces to regain the throne (MacSweeney, 1904, 150-91). The same motif occurs in *Cath Maige Mucrama*, except that it is Lugaid mac Con who brings the Saxons, Britons and Scots to help him gain the kingship of Tara (O Daly, 1975, 46-8). And finally, *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* (TBDD) actually names three of the English leaders. Listed among the warriors in the retinue of Conaire, a mythical king of Tara, are: 'Ósalt 7 a da chomalta. Osbrit Lamfota 7 a dá chomalta. Lindas 7 a da chomalta. Tri rigdomna do Saxanaib sin filet oc-ond rí' (Best and Bergin, 1929, 233). All three names are Germanic. The *Os-* element in the first two is extensively attested in Anglo-Saxon and continental names (Searle, 1897, 370-81; Förstemann, 1900, 120f). *Osalt* represents

¹ The 'Saxons' do not, however, appear in the shorter version of the tale edited by Marstrander, 1911.

Old English *Oswald*. The final *-t* is no problem, since this grapheme can in the Old Irish orthographical system represent either /t/ or /d/ in final position (Thurneysen, 1946, 23); the omission of the OE /w/, which is normally written in Irish spellings of the name (Stokes, 1890, 428), must be an error. *Osbrit* might represent either *Osfrith* or *Osberht*, both of which are well attested in Anglo-Saxon and continental sources (Searle, 1897; Förstemann, 1900). If the first, one would expect *f* rather than *b* for the /f/ of the name-element *-frīþ*, since spellings of this element in the Irish annals normally use the phonologically more appropriate *f* (Stokes, 1890, 426-8), but the annals also have a few examples with *b*, which represents a voiced labial fricative in Old Irish orthography (Thurneysen, 1946, 21-4). More of a problem is the final *-t*, where *-th* or perhaps *-d* is expected for OE /θ/ (Thurneysen, 1946, 21-4, 82-3; McCone, 1981); in fact, the Irish annals spellings normally use *-th* and very occasionally *-d* (Stokes, 1890, 426-8). If *Osbrit* is taken as *Osberht* the *b* and the *t* are straightforward, but one has to assume an unmetathesized OE original, and among the numerous attestations of *Osberht* Searle (1890) lists only one example of this. Omission of the /h/ is not a serious difficulty, since the annal spellings of *-berht* sometimes write it and sometimes not: compare *Cuthbertus*, *Ecbertus* with *Ecberctus*, *Eicberict* (Stokes, 1890, 427). As regards *Lindas*, both elements of the name, *lind* ('linden tree, shield') and *as* (= *æsc*, 'ash-tree, spear') (Bach, 1952, 215-16) are otherwise attested as components of Germanic names, and the combination of substantive + substantive in two-part compound names is a standard pattern for Germanic name formation (Bach, 1952; Schramm, 1957). But a form **Lindæsc* does not, as far as I am aware, occur either in England (Searle, 1897) or elsewhere in the Germanic world (Förstemann, 1900). Moreover, whereas *lind* can occur either in first or second position, *æsc* is attested only in initial position. Neither of these observations is particularly damaging, however, since *Lindas* may simply be the one surviving example of **Lindæsc*. For present purposes there is no difficulty at all, since it is clear that *Lindas* is a Germanic name just like *Osalt* and *Osbrit*, even if it may be corrupt in some way.

The literary tradition just described cannot have been derived from the *Fid Eoin* entry, since *Osalt*, *Osbrit* and *Lindas* do not occur in the annal and *Osric* does not appear in TBDD. We are therefore being offered information which is independent of and additional to what we know from the IC. Can this information be trusted? Given the historicity of English military involvement in Ireland, it must in general terms be virtually certain that our tradition is ultimately based on historical fact. Specific features confirm this. Firstly, at least some of the texts place the English into an historically appropriate context, as allies of *Dál Riata* in the early decades of the seventh century. Secondly, TBDD specifies that the 'Saxons' which it names were *rig-*

damnai: if they are after all no more than literary inventions, perhaps elaborations of the Fid Eoin entry, it is difficult to see why the Irish author should be so particular, but in a genuine tradition the title would have suited the Bernician *æpelingas* exactly. Thirdly, it is significant that one of TBDD's *rígdamnai* should be named Oswald, on the one hand because the *æpeling* Oswald is known to have been in Dál Riata in 628, the year of Fid Eoin, and on the other because, as we learn from Bede, stories about king Oswald were current in seventh-century Ireland (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, III 13). The tradition with which we are dealing must, in fact, go back originally to one of these seventh-century accounts which told how king Oswald, while still a *rígdamna*, had along with other Anglo-Saxon *rígdamnai* fought in Ireland on behalf of the king of Dál Riata, probably at Fid Eoin but quite possibly on some other occasion.

We come, finally, to the evidence which will allow the Bernician presence in Dál Riata to be extended back to the late sixth century. The starting point is the battle of Degsastan. Bede, who gives the fullest account (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, I 34)¹ says that Áedán mac Gabráin attacked the Northumbrian king Ethelfrith at the now-unidentified Degsastan in 603, and that he was decisively defeated; Irish sources also mention hostilities between Áedán and the English (Hennessy and MacCarthy, 1887, s.a. 599, along with the corresponding entries in ATig, AR, AClon; Anderson 1961, I 9; Hull, 1930, 414-5; Best and O'Brien, 1965, 837), and it is possible that Degsastan was only one of several such encounters round about the year 600 (Bannerman, 1974d, 84-6; Jackson, 1964, 27-9). Of particular interest for this study is the account given by the E version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC) (Plummer, 1892, 21):

Her Ægðan Scotta cining feaht wið Deolreda ond wið Æðelferþe Norðhymbra kining æt Dægsan stane, ond man ofsloh mæst ælne his here. þær man ofsloh Theodbald Æðelferðes broðr mid eallan his weorode. Ne dorste siððan nan Scotta cininga lædan here on þas þeoda. Hering Hussan sunu lædde þone here ðider.

Hering and *Hussa* are Germanic not Celtic names (Searle, 1897, for other Anglo-Saxon attestations of *Hussa*): according to our entry, therefore, a Germanic battle-leader fought on the Irish side at Degsastan. Given the time and place, the natural assumption is that Hering was a Northumbrian, but he could just as easily have come from elsewhere in England or even from the continent. Nevertheless, Blair (1954, 156) and Bannerman (1974d, 87) have

¹ The attempt by Duncan (1981, 16-18) to turn Degsastan into a battle between Ethelfrith and the Britons in 611 X 614 is unconvincing.

identified Husa the father of Hering with the Husa who appears just before Ethelfrith in a Bernician regnal list, the two earliest copies of which occur in the *Moore Memoranda* compiled in 737 (Blair, 1950) and in the early ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* (Mommsen, 1898, 206: for this list see Miller, 1979, 44–51). Bannerman went on to suggest a reason for Hering's behaviour: 'that Hering, son of Husa one-time king of Bernicia, was hoping to regain the kingship for himself' at Degsastan, using the Dál Riata as allies (1974d, 87, 98). If this is right, we have at least one Bernician *æpeling* in Dál Riata round about the year 600, a decade and a half before the sons of Ethelfrith arrived. But there are problems.¹

Firstly, only the E version of ASC, together with Gaimar's *Estoire des Engleis* (Bell, 1960, 31), mentions Hering in connection with the battle. Both of these date from the early twelfth century (Gransden, 1974, 29–41, 209–12; Whitelock, 1979, 109–25), which in relation to the actual date of Degsastan is very late indeed. Both texts can, however, be traced back to the northern recension of the ASC (Whitelock, 1979, 113–16; Gransden, 1974, 39–40), which was compiled, probably at York, in the early tenth century and which incorporates northern material not found in other versions of the ASC. This is still three centuries removed from contemporaneity, however, and the reliability of whatever sources the compiler of the northern recension used is far from clear. The intrinsic historical authority of our entry is consequently not particularly impressive.

Even assuming that Hering, whoever he was, was at Degsastan as claimed, is the identification of his father Husa with Husa, Ethelfrith's predecessor, based on anything more than a coincidence of names? It is. Because kingship did not necessarily or even usually pass from father to son among the Anglo-Saxons, and because there was no generally agreed mechanism for a king to designate his successor, the *æpeling* who succeeded in realizing his claim to the kingship over other, often quite numerous *æpelingas* with equally valid claims, did so by force (Dumville, 1979). This led to dynastic infighting as successful claimants tried to eliminate as many actual and potential rivals as possible. If they were wise, dynasts belonging to disenfranchised lines fled

¹ A non-problem is the syntax of the entry. Blair (1954, 156) and Bannerman (1974d, 87) saw some ambiguity as to which army Hering was meant to be leading and Anderson (1922, 13n) thought he was leading the Northumbrians against the Irish. I can find no ambiguity at all. The Irish, as we know from Bede, were defeated at Degsastan, so 'man ofslōh mæst ælne his here' clearly refers to the Irish army. Since Áedán's defeat, as Bede also notes, no other Irish king had dared 'lædan here' into English territory. When the here is mentioned a third time, to the effect that 'Hering Hussan sunu lædde þone here ðider', the reference must by the ordinary rules of Old English syntax—note especially the use of the definite article—be to the Irish army.

into exile and canvassed support at foreign courts for an eventual return to power. The flight of the sons of Ethelfrith to Dál Riata upon the Deiran Edwin's accession is one example, but there is no shortage of others (Kirby, 1974). If Hussa the father of Hering is identified with Ethelfrith's predecessor, Hering's conduct at Degsastan turns out to be consistent with what we know about the conduct of royal dynastic politics among the Anglo-Saxons in general, and with Bernician dynastic politics of the late sixth and early seventh centuries in particular. Hering would by this reading have fled to Dál Riata when Ethelfrith became king in 592. This does not demonstrate the identity of the two Hussas conclusively, but it certainly is a striking coincidence that a tenth-century source of indeterminate reliability should show the son of a man named Hussa attacking Ethelfrith at precisely the time when one would expect a son of Hussa, former king of Bernicia, to be doing just that.

Support for Bannerman's view of Hering comes from two additional quarters. Firstly, Adomnán says that there were two 'Saxons'—his word for Anglo-Saxons (Anderson, 1961, 198, 200, 460)—at Iona during the lifetime of St Columba, who died in 597 (*ibid.*, 66f). The *Life of Columba* on one occasion refers to 'quidam relegiosus frater Genereus nomine Saxo' (III 10), and on another to a certain 'Pilu Saxo' who, as the relevant chapter notes, was at Iona four years before Columba died (III 22). Adomnán wrote a century after the saint's death and was not impossibly far from genuine tradition about his patron's lifetime (*ibid.*, 184); he also used earlier written records (*ibid.*, 184, 532). Moreover, both 'Saxons' are introduced quite incidentally, and neither is of any thematic importance within the *Life*, which makes it unlikely that they were accreted to Columban tradition for some specific hagiographical purpose. In addition, their names are too genuinely Germanic to have been taken out of thin air by some hagiographer or for them to have been corrupted from something else. The element *Pil-* is well attested in Anglo-Saxon and continental names (Searle, 1897, 388; Förstemann, 1900, 303f). *Gen-* appears to be attested on the continent only (Förstemann, 1900, 627f); presumably *Genereus* represents *Genhere*, on the pattern of *Wulfhere*. In short, there is a very good case for believing Adomnán when he says that Anglo-Saxons were present in Iona during the final decade of the sixth century. Given that Iona was closely associated with Áedán mac Gabráin, this makes it entirely plausible that an Anglo-Saxon should have fought on Áedán's side at Degsastan a few years later, which is one possible explanation of the ASC entry. The most obvious explanation for how they might have gotten there at so early a stage is that they came with exiles of whom Hering was one, that these exiles were baptized at Iona as the sons of Ethelfrith later were, and that at least one or two of them joined the monastic community.

Secondly, there is the observation that only one of the four *æpelingas* who fought in Ireland during Edwin's reign is identifiable as a son of Ethelfrith's: Oswald. Neither Osfrith/Osberht nor *Lindæsc nor Osric figure in the list of Ethelfrith's sons, the earliest copy of which is preserved in the *Historia Brittonum* (Mommsen, 1898, 202); that Osric son of Albruit (ATig)/Albirit (CS)/Alfrith (AClon) was no son of Ethelfrith's is doubly certain, for the element *æpel-* (as in the Old English form of the name, *Æpelfrip*) is always rendered *adal-* or some variant thereof in Irish spelling (Stokes, 1890, 426-8). Who were these other *æpelingas*? They could have been members of collateral branches of the Bernician and/or the Déiran dynasties who fled along with the sons of Ethelfrith upon Edwin's accession. But the Fid Eoin entry prevents Osric being explained away so easily. Its syntax demands that Osric be included among the grandsons of Áedán mac Gabráin: '... et nepotes Aedan ceciderunt, id est Rigullan mac Conaing 7 Failbe mac Eachach 7 Oisiricc mac Albruit rigdomna Saxan cum strage maxima suorum'. The only way that this can be is if Osric's father had begotten him on a daughter of Áedán. Assuming that Osric must have been at least fifteen years old to have fought at Fid Eoin, and that the annalistic date of 628 for the battle is approximately correct (Anderson, 1973, 29-30, 41 on absolute dating of entries in this period), his father would have to have done this by about 612; Osric could, of course, have been older. Since the Fid Eoin entry represents a contemporary or near-contemporary record, it has to be accepted unless some form of textual corruption can be shown to be likely, and there is no indication of that. At least one Anglo-Saxon dynast, therefore, was in Dál Riata about four and very possibly more years before the arrival of the sons of Ethelfrith.

According to Adomnán, then, there were Anglo-Saxons in Dál Riata before 597 and in 593 more particularly, while the Fid Eoin entry allows the deduction that this was so by about 612 or before. The latter's Anglo-Saxon, moreover, was an *æpeling*. Since both sources have considerable historical authority, they confirm the intrinsically good case for identifying Hering as a son of Hussa, Ethelfrith's predecessor as king of Bernicia, who fled to Dál Riata upon Ethelfrith's accession in 592 and later fell trying to realize his claim to the Bernician kingship with Dál Riata help at Degrastan.

It has been argued so far that there were at least two Anglo-Saxon *æpelingas* in Dál Riata prior to the arrival of the sons of Ethelfrith in 616. One was Hering, a son of Hussa the predecessor of Ethelfrith as king of Bernicia, who had fled to Dál Riata upon Ethelfrith's accession in 592 and died trying to regain his father's kingship with Áedán mac Gabráin's help at Degrastan. The other was the IC's Ælfred, who was probably though not verifiably a Bernician as well, and who fathered a son named Osric on a daughter of Áedán mac Gabráin's at some point before 612. With the accession of Edwin, at

least two of the sons of Ethelfrith, Oswald and Oswiu, took refuge in Dál Riata as Hering and Ælfred had done earlier. About 628 Osric son of Ælfred fought on the Dál Riatan side at the battle of Fid Eoin in Ireland and perished there. Oswald and two other *æpelingas* of unknown though presumably Bernician stock named Osfrith/Osberht and *Lindæsc also fought in Ireland at some point in the period 616-633, though whether or not they were involved at Fid Eoin specifically is unclear.

On the death of Edwin, the exiled sons of Ethelfrith 'patriam sunt redire permissi', and Eanfrith returned from his Pictish exile to become king of Bernicia (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, III 1; Miller, 1978). Within a year he was killed in battle against the British king Cadwallon, who proceeded to ravage Northumbria until Oswald, 'superveniente cum parvo exercitu, sed fide Christi munito', managed to defeat him (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, III 1). Oswald then assumed the kingship himself. Did he, like Hering, receive help from Dál Riata? Circumstances make it likely. For one thing, Oswald was one of the *æpelingas* who had fought on behalf of Dál Riata in Ireland, and reciprocity is to be expected. For another, there is Oswald's patronage of Iona immediately after his accession. Bede believed that Oswald did this because he desired the christian conversion of his kingdom (III 3). This could, of course, have been an element in Oswald's thinking, and he may actually have believed that he had been victorious over his enemies through Columba's intercession as Adomnán claims (Anderson, 1961, I 1). But Iona was Dál Riata's 'national' church, and it was controlled by members of the politically ambitious Uí Néill dynasty; Oswald's patronage could also have been payment for services rendered. The only explicit indication that Dál Riatan assistance had been given, however, comes from Fordun's *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, a late fourteenth-century work (Hughes, 1980, 6-7). Fordun says that Eanfrith and Oswald came to Domnall Brecc, king of Dál Riata, and asked him for help to win back their father Ethelfrith's kingdom, and that Domnall sent 'a strong body of warriors' with them (Skene, 1871-2, iii 34). But this was written some seven and a half centuries after the event, and simple prudence tells one to dismiss it out of hand. Obviously, Fordun must have used pre-existing material for his account, but so far as I am aware there has been no thorough study of his sources for the early part of the *Chronica*, or of his treatment of these sources. The few scholarly opinions that have been published are not optimistic about Fordun's reliability (for example Anderson, 1973, 215; Hughes, 1980, 6-7). One cannot demonstrate conclusively that Oswald had Dál Riatan help in attaining the Bernician kingship. What can be said is that circumstances make it quite likely that he did; Fordun's account, though tantalizing, is too much of an unknown quantity at the moment for it to be of any use.

From the first arrival of the Irish missionaries in 635 until the synod of Whitby in 664, Iona enjoyed Bernician royal patronage. During at least part of this period, and indeed until 685, Dál Riata was subject to Bérnician overlordship. This emerges from a series of textual references in Bede's HE and in the early eighth-century *Life of Wilfred*; it is corroborated by contemporary Irish evidence for Dál Riata's subjection to 'extranei' between 637 and some time before 669. We begin with Bede's statement that Oswald 'regna terrarum plus quam ulli maiorum suorum ab eodem uno Deo, qui fecit caelum et terram, consecutus est, denique omnes nationes et provincias Britanniae, quae in quattuor linguas, id est Brettonum, Pictorum, Scottorum et Anglorum divisae sunt, in ditione accepit' (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, III 6). Oswiu 'aequalibus pene terminis regnum nonnullo tempore coericens, Pictorum quoque atque Scottorum gentes, quae septentrionales Britanniae fines tenent, maxima ex parte perdomuit ac tributarias fecit' (II 5). When Oswiu's successor Ecgfrith was still new to the kingship the Picts attempted a rebellion, but it was put down; thereafter 'regnum ad aquilonem et austrum per triumphos augebatur, ita beatae memoriae Wilfritho episcopo ad austrum super Saxones et ad aquilonem super Brittones et Scottos Pictosque regnum ecclesiarum multiplicabatur' (Colgrave, 1927, 41-3). It is only when Ecgfrith marched against the Picts in 685, and was defeated and killed at Nechtansmere, that they and the Irish recovered their freedom: 'Picti terram possessionis suae, quam tenuerunt Angli, et Scotti qui erant in Britannia, Brettonum quoque pars nonnulla libertatem receperunt' (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, IV 26). According to these texts, then, Dál Riata was subject to a Bernician overlordship which began during the reign of Oswald (634-42) and ended with the death of Ecgfrith in 685. All we know about this overlordship is that the subject *gentes* were *tributariae*.

This, as noted above, is corroborated by contemporary Irish evidence. In the Schaffhausen manuscript of the *Life of Columba* a short excerpt from an earlier *Life* by Cuimmíne, abbot of Iona from 657 to 669, has been inserted into Adomnán's text (Anderson, 1961, 3, 103-5). It says that Columba had warned Áedán mac Gabráin that if he or his descendants should ever show any hostility to his own, that is, Columba's, kindred, 'sceptrum regni huius de manibus suis perdant' (III 5). Cuimmíne adds that this had actually come about as a result of the battle of Mag Rath in 637, in which Domnall Brecc, Áedán mac Gabráin's grandson, joined Congal Cáech king of Ulster in attacking Domnall mac Áeda, king of the Northern Uí Néill and kinsman both of Columba and of Cuimmíne. This battle terminated the agreement between Dál Riata and the Northern Uí Néill reached at Druim Cett, and resulted in a defeat for the Ulster-Dál Riata alliance. 'Et a die illa usque hodie,' Cuimmíne concludes, 'adhuc in proclivo sunt ab extraneis', referring to Áedán's

descendants. Cuimmíne died in 669, but obviously he could have written much earlier. His wording does, however, imply a reasonable interval between the battle and the time when he wrote. He consequently provides contemporary evidence for Dál Riata's subjection to *extranei* between 637 and some time before 669, just when, according to our English sources, Oswald and Oswiu had succeeded in extending their overlordships over Dál Riata—an apparently open and shut case.

The problem is that Bede is not consistent with regard to Oswald's overlordship.¹ In his account of the so-called *Bretwaldan* he writes that Edwin was 'rex Nordanhymbrorum gentis, id est eius quae ad borealem Humbrae fluminis plagam inhabitat, maiore potentia cunctis qui Britanniam incolunt, Anglorum pariter et Brettonum, populis praefuit, praeter Cantuariis tantum, necnon et Mevanias Brettonum insulas, quae inter Hiberniam et Britanniam sitae sunt, Anglorum subiecit imperio'; his successor Oswald 'hisdem finibus regnum tenuit'; it is only when he comes to Oswiu that the Irish are mentioned: 'aequalibus pene terminis regnum nonnullo tempore cohercens, Pictorum quoque atque Scottorum gentes, quae septentrionales Britanniae fines tenent, maxima ex parte perdomuit ac tributarias fecit' (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, II 5). Here, the HE is quite clear that Oswiu was the first Northumbrian king to extend his authority over the Irish and the Picts. It would appear that Bede used two different sources of information on this matter, and that he was either unable to decide between them or failed to notice the contradiction.

Several considerations support the notion of a Bernician overlordship beginning in Oswald's reign. For one thing, Cuimmíne says that Dál Riata had been oppressed by *extranei* from the battle of Mag Rath onwards—'a die illa'. Cuimmíne is a contemporary authority, and since he claims that Dál Riata's subjection began at a date corresponding to the early part of Oswald's reign, the natural course is to believe Bede when he says that Oswald was the first to gain ascendancy over the Irish. For another, Adomnán describes Oswald as 'totius Britanniae imperator' (Anderson, 1961, I 1); *Brittannia* is Adomnán's word for the whole island of Britain, encompassing Picts, Britons, Scots and Saxons (ibid., 30). Moreover, it is not difficult to construct a scenario for how Oswald might have gained ascendancy over Dál Riata. The Uí Néill controlled church of Iona continued to exist in the later sixth and earlier seventh centuries within the context of the political accord between Dál Riata and the Northern Uí Néill reached at Druim Cett. By attacking Domnall mac Áeda at Mag Rath, Domnall Brecc violated the Druim Cett agreement, an act

¹ As noted by Plummer (1896, II 86) and again pointed out by Blair (1954, 161). Plummer notes that Alcuin attributes overlordship of the British, Picts and Scots to Edwin. Alcuin must have been mistaken, for why would the sons of Ethelfrith have fled to Dál Riata, and been safe there, if Edwin had been overlord?

which must have compromised Iona's position in Dál Riata and which the Uí Néill abbot Cuimmíne resented. The battle of Mag Rath occurred shortly after Oswald had become king and invited the Iona missionaries: what was his reaction to Iona's predicament? It is possible that he stepped in to help the church in which he had just invested prestige and property. The defeat which Domnall Brecc suffered would have been the perfect opportunity for Oswald to establish his authority over Dál Riata.

But there are counter-arguments. Assuming that Oswiu was the first to gain authority over Dál Riata, he would probably only have been able to do this only after eliminating Penda in 655 (Kirby, 1976, 289; Miller, 1978, 62-3). If Cuimmíne wrote before this date, and it is entirely possible that he did, the *extranei* he referred to could have been some non-English overlord. Cuimmíne is unlikely to have referred to his own Uí Néill kinsmen, the victors at Mag Rath, as *extranei*, but Domnall Brecc is known to have had losing ways, and the Britons or Picts might have gained some sort of ascendancy over Dál Riata after Mag Rath (Bannerman, 1974d, 99-103; Anderson, 1973, 152-5; Kirby, 1976 on Dál Riata's position relative to the Britons and Picts in this period). There is no direct evidence for this, but the possibility remains. Adomnán's description of Oswald as 'totius Britanniae imperator' need not, furthermore, be regarded as a statement of historical fact. Both Adomnán himself and his contemporary, the Patrician hagiographer Muirchú, used a very similar formulation to articulate an as yet unrealized Uí Néill political ambition (Anderson, 1961, i 14, 36; Bieler, 1979, 74), and he could conceivably have been trying to glorify Iona's first Bernician patron, possibly in an attempt to flatter Oswald's nephew Aldfrith, who was king of Northumbria when the *Life* was written and with whom Adomnán is known to have had close personal contacts (Plummer, 1896, ii 301-2). Finally, alternative scenarios for Oswald's reaction to Iona's plight are readily available. He could have taken the Dál Riatan side, since he had fought for Dál Riata in Ireland some years before and possibly had Dál Riatan help in gaining his kingship. Also, *Fled Dúin na nGéd* and *Cath Maige Rath* have been cited to the effect that 'Saxons' fought on the Dál Riatan side at Mag Rath. And, in general, the proximity of Domnall Brecc's reversal of long-established policy towards the Uí Néill to Oswald's attainment of the Northumbrian kingship invites suspicion. Of course, it is also possible that Oswald did nothing at all about the situation created by Mag Rath.

The problem is that there is simply not enough hard evidence to resolve the contradiction posed by Bede.¹ It may not even be a contradiction: Oswald's

¹ This is apparent in the range of scholarly opinion on the subject. Anderson, 1961 50f let English overlordship begin in Oswald's reign, but in 1973, 157 opted for Oswiu's instead. Also in favour of Oswiu's reign is Miller, 1978, 63. Kirby, 1974, 8 put the estab-

overlordship might have lapsed during the difficult early years of Oswiu's reign, and then been re-established by Oswiu once Penda had been eliminated. But this too is conjecture. What is certain is that an overlordship whereby the Dál Riata were *tributaries* did exist at least in the latter part of Oswiu's reign and throughout Ecgrith's, and that it ended with Ecgrith's defeat at Nechtansmere.

A final aspect of Irish involvement in Bernician dynastic affairs prior to the end of the seventh century remains to be discussed: that the Irish were instrumental in Aldfrith's succession to the Northumbrian kingship after Ecgrith's death. Aldfrith was a son of Oswiu's, and as such an *æpeling* of the Bernician dynasty. He was exceptional in being literate. The facts are well known, and do not require detailed restatement here (Plummer, 1896, ii 263-4): before becoming king of Northumbria in 685 he had lived in Iona and, probably, in Ireland, acquiring an education for which he was famous in England and Ireland both in his own time and in later tradition. In studying among the Irish Aldfrith was not, of course, unusual among Anglo-Saxons of the seventh century, for, as Bede tells us, considerable numbers of them went to the Irish in order to study for the monastic life (*ibid.*, 196-7). Nor is it particularly odd to find an *æpeling* training for an ecclesiastical career if we regard it as an example of the church functioning as a convenient repository for politically superfluous dynasts. What is surprising is that Aldfrith ever got to be king of Northumbria.

When Aldfrith succeeded Ecgrith a single line of the Bernician dynasty had dominated the Northumbrian kingship for half a century. Seen another way, two sons of Ethelfrith, Oswald and Oswiu, had managed to exclude all other Bernician as well as Deiran collateral lines from the kingship for that length of time. Given the circumstances of royal succession among the Anglo-Saxons (Dumville, 1979), there must have been constant pressure from numerous prospective claimants (Kirby, 1974, 17f), and an opportunity for them presented itself when Ecgrith died at Nechtansmere. An episode found both in the early eighth-century *Anonymous Life of Cuthbert* (Colgrave, 1940, 102-4) and in Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* (*ibid.*, 234-8) is instructive with regard to Aldfrith's position within this context. In the year before Nechtansmere the abbess Ælflæd, Ecgrith's sister, is said anxiously to have asked Cuthbert to prophesy who would succeed her brother as king, since she knew that Ecgrith lacked brothers and sons. Cuthbert replied not with a name but with the observation that 'illum autem non minus tibi esse fratrem usurpaveris, quam alterum'. The abbess was puzzled, and the saint found it necessary to add that Ecgrith's prospective heir was 'in aliqua insu-

ishment of English overlordship into Ecgrith's reign; also Stenton, 1971, 87.

la super hoc mare', whereupon she understood: 'Illa iam cito rememoravit de Aldfrido qui nunc regnat pacifice fuisse dictum, qui tunc erat in insula quam li nominant'. This episode is illuminating in two ways. Firstly, as Kirby points out (1974, 19), Ecgrith's sister had reason for anxiety as her brother got ever deeper in trouble on his northern frontier, since it must have seemed inevitable that the kingship would pass to another line. Secondly, Ælflæd had been so far from regarding Aldfrith as a serious contender for succession that she had simply forgotten to take him into account, and this gives contemporary support to the impression which the modern historian would get of Aldfrith's position: that he was far from being the natural candidate for succession to Ecgrith (Kirby 1974, 19f). He had no more claim in principle to the kingship than other members of his dynasty, and there must have been quite a few of these. He was furthermore training for the church. And in any case he was far away in Iona, and not on the spot to enforce his claim. Yet Aldfrith did succeed Ecgrith, once again shutting out prospective claimants from other segments of his dynasty. How did he manage it?

At Nechtansmere it was not only the Picts who threw off Northumbrian overlordship, but the Irish of Dál Riata as well: 'et Picti terram possessionis suae, quam tenuerunt Angli, et Scotti qui erant in Brittania ... libertatem receperunt'. Aldfrith was in Iona in the year preceding the battle; immediately afterwards he was king of Northumbria. It is quite obvious that he must have been installed by the Pictish-Dál Riata alliance opposing Ecgrith. Less readily apparent is that the Uí Néill were involved as well.

'Anno dominicae incarnationis DCLXXXIII', writes Bede, 'Ecgfrid rex Nordanhymbroborum, misso Hiberniam cum exercitu duce Bercto, vastavit misere gentem innoxiam et nationi Anglicorum semper amicissimam' (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, iv 26). Why should Ecgrith have done this? Molly Miller recently suggested that Berht's foray 'may be explicable in part by a lack of reliable information and intelligence, which must have been acute by this time... It looks very much as though a war of nerves sent Ecgrith's forces chasing wild geese in Ireland' (1978, 64). This is unconvincing. Ecgrith already had plenty on his hands with his subject territories in Britain, and it is most unlikely that he would have lashed out indiscriminately at, of all places, Ireland. In fact, he knew exactly what he was doing.

Firstly, Berht's raid is mentioned in the Iona Chronicle, which identifies the place in Ireland that was attacked: 'Saxones Campum Bregh vastant 7 aeclesias plurimas in mense Iuni' (Hennessy and MacCarthy, 1887, s.a. 684). Mag Breg, the area to the north of the Liffey, was Uí Néill territory (see map in Byrne, 1973, 89).

Secondly, Bede notes that, after Aldfrith had become king, Adomnán was sent to him 'a sua gente' (Colgrave and Mynors' 1969, v 15; v 21), and im-

plies that the main purpose of the visit was to find out about the correct method of calculating Easter. Adomnán corroborates and corrects this in his *Life of Columba*, where he says that he paid Aldfrith two visits, one soon after the 'bellum Ecfridi', and the second two years later (Anderson, 1961, II 46; on these visits see *ibid.*, 94 and Plummer, 1896, II 301-2). And the IC supplies the motivation for the first visit: 'Adomnanus captivos reduxit ad Hiberniam lx' (Hennessy and MacCarthy, 187, s.a. 686). These *captivi*, who had to be brought back to Ireland, can be none other than the prisoners taken in the raid of 684. Adomnán, himself a member of the Uí Néill, was sent 'a sua gente' to bring back prisoners taken from Uí Néill territory, and Aldfrith willingly returned them.

Thirdly, Aldfrith was related to the Uí Néill through his mother. The Irish genealogies say that Colmán Rímid, king of the Northern Uí Néill (ob. 604) (Byrne, 1973, 283), was 'athair Fína, máthair íside Flaind Fína meic Ossu regis Saxonom' (O'Brien, 1962, 135); *Ossu* is an Irish spelling for *Oswiu* (Stokes, 1890, 428) and Flann Fína was the Irish name for Aldfrith (Plummer, 1896, II 263-4). If the genealogical record is accurate, Aldfrith was related to the Uí Néill via a union between Oswiu and an Uí Néill princess. But the earliest manuscript copies of the genealogies date from the eleventh-twelfth centuries, and as Dumville has recently reiterated (1977), early medieval genealogical records were subject to politically motivated manipulation. Can Aldfrith's alleged Uí Néill affiliation be believed? On the one hand, the political interaction between the Bernician dynasty and the Irish which this discussion has been describing ended with the death of Aldfrith early in the eighth century. Irish genealogists working after this time would have had no reason to invent a connection between the two dynasties in question or to manipulate an existing record for political effect. It is therefore very probable that we are dealing with a genealogical record made in the seventh or early eighth century. But at so early a date an error about, or a deliberate falsification of, biological fact is unlikely to have been believed by contemporaries, least of all by Aldfrith himself, so that our record is likely to be true as well as early. But even if it is, after all, a politically motivated invention, it would have to have been an early one, and one significant for English-Irish dynastic relations of the period. On the other hand, what is otherwise known of the careers of Oswiu and Aldfrith is consistent with the Irish genealogical record. Oswiu went to Dál Riata as a child (Plummer, 1896, II 161-2 and Miller, 1979, 52f for the chronology of Oswiu's career), and was in his early twenties when his brother Oswald became king. He grew up in Dál Riata; the close links between Dál Riata and the Uí Néill during this period have been cited repeatedly. Oswiu's son Aldfrith spent most of his life among the Irish. He was educated at Iona and, according to Alcuin, had been there since his

youth (Plummer, 1896, ii 263-4). English sources furthermore agree that he was an illegitimate son of Oswiu's. We have already seen that Ælflæd thought that she had no brothers to take over from Ecgrith, and that her memory of Aldfrith needed some jogging. In his version of the episode Bede goes out of his way to say that Aldfrith 'ferebatur filius fuisse patris illius [i.e. Ecgrith]' (Colgrave, 1940, 238); again in the HE, Bede notes that Aldfrith 'frater eius [i.e. Ecgrith] et filius Osuii regis esse dicebatur' (Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, iv 26). And in his *Life of Cuthbert* he comes out with it: Ecgrith was succeeded by 'frater eius nothus' (Colgrave, 1940, 238; further references to the same effect in Plummer, 1896, ii 263). And so, in English eyes, Aldfrith would have been if he was begotten before Oswiu became king, for Oswiu married Edwin's daughter Eanflæd soon after, probably between 643 and 645 (Miller, 1979, 42-3). We know, then, that Aldfrith was begotten before this time, that he was regarded by Bede as illegitimate, and that he had spent most, perhaps all his life before becoming king in 685 among the Irish, and at the Uí Néill monastery of Iona in particular. We also know that his father Oswiu spent much of his life before 642 in Dál Riata, and that this was the time when relations between Dál Riata and the Uí Néill, the dynasty into which he allegedly married, were very close. Given also the intrinsic likelihood that our Irish genealogical information is correct, there can be little doubt that Aldfrith was related to the Uí Néill by blood.

Putting these three points together, we have the following. In 684 Ecgrith attacked Uí Néill territory in Ireland. A year later, a Pictish-Irish alliance defeated Ecgrith and installed as king Aldfrith, a Bernician dynast who was a blood relative of the Uí Néill and had spent most, perhaps all, of his previous life among the Irish. Shortly thereafter an Uí Néill churchman, Adomnán, came to Aldfrith on a mission 'a sua gente' to request the return of prisoners taken in Uí Néill territory during the raid of 684, and that request was granted. The conclusion must be that the Uí Néill took part in the Pictish-Irish revolt against Ecgrith (as suggested by Plummer, 1896, ii 260; Colgrave and Mynors, 1969, 426n; Stenton, 1971, 87-8), and that they did this to support the claim of their kinsman Aldfrith to the Northumbrian kingship; Ecgrith, realizing what was afoot, made a preemptive strike against the Uí Néill. Final confirmation that this was so comes from the Iona Chronicle. The ACLon version of the 684 entry says: 'The Saxons the plains of Moyebrey with Divers churches wasted and Destroyed in the month of June for the alliance of the Irish with the Brittaines' (Murphy, 1896, s.a. 680). 'Brittaines' can, of course, mean all the inhabitants of Britain apart from the Saxons as well as 'Britons' more narrowly. ACLon is a seventeenth-century English translation of a set of annals of the Tigernach type (Mac Niocaill, 1975, 22-3), and it is the only one of the seven sets of annals which preserve this particular

entry to refer to the 'Brittaines', but its lateness and isolation do not automatically invalidate the extra information provided. In fact, when the extant sets of annals are read in conjunction with a view to reconstructing the IC, AClon is found to have preserved a very substantial part of the IC stratum (see p 106 n 1). When used simply as corroborative evidence for an already virtually conclusive case, it is decisive.

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