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THE INSCRIPTIONS ON PRE-NORMAN IRISH RELIQUARIES

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a corpus of all the surviving inscriptions on reliquaries produced in Ireland before the Anglo-Norman invasion of 1171. Although these inscriptions are well known, they have often been published inaccurately and out of sequence, and the information to be gained from them has been diminished as a result. The catalogue seeks to redress the situation by rendering the inscriptions as accurately as possible and providing photographs to enable scholars to verify the exact texts for themselves. The discussion seeks to place the inscriptions in their social context, firstly through reference to contemporary historical and literary documentation, and secondly through a typological analysis of the content of the inscriptions: their intended order, the authority and claims of the parties named, and the literacy of the craftsmen. The individual inscriptions are discussed in detail in the light of the typological findings. In six cases (nos 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11) the dates are affected; in three cases (nos 2, 6, 12) the provenances are affected.

Introduction

Eleven, or possibly twelve, inscriptions from pre-Norman Irish reliquaries survive today. In chronological order, these are:

- (1) the crosier of St Dympna (c. 1000);
- (2) the Bann bell-shrine (c. 1000–25? or sometime before 1117?);

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- (3) the *Soiscél Molaise* (1000–25);
- (4) the fragment from Liathmore (1002–14);
- (5) the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal (1033?);
- (6) the crosier of Cú Dúilig (see note 43) (refurbished by 1039);
- (7) the *cumdach* of the *Cathach* (perhaps 1062–98, or earlier);
- (8) the shrine of the Bell of the Testament (1091–4);
- (9) the Lismore crosier (by 1113);
- (10) the shrine of St Lachtín's Arm (1118–21);
- (11) the Cross of Cong (c. 1123–34);
- (12) the inscription from the lost *cumdach* of the Book of Durrow (879–916, or 1002–13, or 1002–42, or post-Norman).

The last of these is a difficult case and may not, in fact, date to the pre-Norman period at all. But if it is post-Norman, it is unique in referring to historic rather than contemporary figures, and unlike other post-Norman inscriptions it also follows the pre-Norman textual formula, and it is possible that it was intended to look like an authentic pre-Norman inscription. It has therefore been included, as a sort of complement, at the end.

Although the inscriptions are well known, they have not been studied as a distinctive phenomenon before, and their unique character and much of their historical value have been missed. They are therefore catalogued after the Discussion and provided with individual bibliographies which include only those publications concerned with the actual inscriptions. Publications concerning the objects alone have not been included. The references are presented in chronological order of publication so that the development of debate about the inscriptions may be easily traced.

Each catalogue entry is accompanied by a detailed discussion of the inscription. This is necessary because the identities of the donors and the claims made by them in the inscriptions have hardly been reconsidered since they were first identified between 100 and 300 years ago; and the dates produced on the basis of these identities and claims have rarely been questioned or refined. Furthermore, new identifications are possible in the light of the typological findings, even for those which have been considered too general, too worn, or too mutilated to be useful.

The study therefore begins with a discussion in which the inscriptions are considered as a phenomenon. The purposes of the inscriptions, the way they were composed, the status and relationship of the donors and interested parties, and the status and literacy of the craftsmen all contribute to a greater understanding of the social system within which the inscriptions and their reliquaries were produced, and lead to the modification of several of their dates and provenances.

Discussion

There is evidence that the prime reason for putting an inscription on an object may have been to allow later generations to fix it, or to believe they have fixed it, in time and place. In this way the relative value of the object was established. The evidence is found in several prefaces, prologues and additional notes to literary works, of which a few will suffice to illustrate the point.

The most elaborate exposition is found in the preface to the Martyrology of

Oengus.¹ The Martyrology itself is a calendar of feastdays which has recently been dated to between 828 and 833 on the basis of the saints commemorated and events mentioned in the preface.² The preface is a later addition and probably dates to the eleventh century, although it only survives in fifteenth-century manuscripts.³ It begins by explaining the four prerequisites for a ‘work of art’ (*elathain, eladhain*) thus:⁴

Four things are required by every work of art, to wit a Place, and a Time, an Author and a Cause of invention.

It is worth knowing why Place should be required at the beginning and Time in the second place and Author in the third place and cause of invention *in fine*.

This is why Place is foremost, because it is by cities and churches that places (i.e. chief places) are estimated; and there is reverence to them.

By kings and peoples then, times are estimated, the second place is to these.

Author however in the third place, for of the Church or of the laity is every work of art.

Cause afterwards, for cause of precedence has been found by the poets . . .

The preface then puts theory into practice and records the author of the Martyrology, followed by the time, cause and place of composition.

The concept of labelling a work of art with author, time, cause and place is also documented in a number of eleventh-century manuscripts, where it is applied to a variety of art forms. It will suffice to mention two of these. The first is the preface to the *Amra* of Columcille, whose earliest surviving text is found in the Book of the Dun Cow, in a section dating to the second half of the eleventh century.⁵ This preface gives the time, place, author and cause both for the *Amra* and for the synod of Druim Ceat. In fact, several of these details had already been implicitly established in the *Amra* itself.⁶ Line 115 states that the work was commissioned by Aedh mac Ainmirech on the occasion of Columcille’s death, thus providing the ‘author’, ‘cause’ and ‘time’ of the work. But a commissioned

¹Whitley Stokes (ed.), *The Martyrology of Oengus* (London, 1905).

²P. Ó Riain, ‘The Tallaght Martyrologies, redated’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 20 (Winter 1990), 21–38.

³The manuscripts are the *Leabhar Breac* (RIA 23 P 16), which dates to sometime before 1411, and Oxford Bodleian Laud. 610, which was compiled in 1453. See J.F. Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland, vol. 1, ecclesiastical* (Dublin, 1979), 15 and 25.

⁴Stokes, *op. cit.* in note 1, preface 1, 3–9.

⁵R. I. Best and O. Bergin (eds), *Lebor Na Huidre, Book of the Dun Cow* (Dublin, 1929); see table, p. xx, and the identification of the hands, p. xiv, where it is suggested that the hand which wrote out the *Amra* may be contemporary with that of the Trinity *Liber Hymnorum*. See also Kenney, *op. cit.* in note 3, 716–18, for the *Liber Hymnorum*; and see F. Henry, *Irish art in the Romanesque period (1020–1170 AD)* (New York, 1970), 57, where the Trinity *Liber Hymnorum* is dated to the second half of the eleventh century.

⁶See W. Stokes, ‘The Bodleian *Amra Choluimb Chille*’, *Revue Celtique* 20 (1899), 30–55, 132–83, 248–89, 400–37; and 21 (1900), 133–36, for the translations and line numbers used here. Stokes gives a ninth-century date for the *Amra*, but Herbert dates it to around the time of Columcille’s death in 597. See M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry; the history and hagiography of the monastic familia of Columba* (Oxford 1988), 180. In any case, the poem is considerably older than its preface.

work can be said to have two 'authors', and the composer of the work duly hints at his own identity as chief poet in line 140 and, although he does not give his name, informed parties could easily work it out. In this context, it seems that the prime 'author' was the commissioner, Aedh mac Ainmirech, king of the Cenél Conaill and overlord of the Uí Néill. The poet himself seems to have been of secondary importance to the work. The details of author, place, time and cause are specifically documented and laid out in the eleventh-century notes and preface. But the concept of authenticating a work in this way seems to be much earlier, and can be seen in action in the poem itself.

The second example is a letter from Cuimíne, probably written *c.* 632, which also survives in an eleventh-century text.⁷ Cuimíne was writing to Abbot Ségéne at Iona concerning the computation of Easter. To support his argument he listed ten authoritative computations, attributing each to an author.⁸ He did not cite the time and place for the computations but it seems that he could expect Ségéne to know these since this information was part of the prologomena associated with them.⁹ But Cuimíne made an interesting increase in emphasis towards the end of the list. He stated that the ninth computation was dictated to Pacomius by an angel, thus giving it two authors; and he called the tenth computation 'the cycle of the 318 bishops', thus giving it 318 authors.¹⁰ This huge number of authors was the authority he claimed against the computation used at Iona, which he immediately denigrated as 'one whose author, place and time we are uncertain of'.¹¹

Through such examples as these, it is clear that the desirability of establishing the author, place, time and cause of any work of art was well established by the eleventh century when the surviving inscriptions began to be made. While none of the examples cited concern metal artefacts, it remains clear that a 'work of art' was understood in the widest sense. The term *elathain* in no way specifies literary art forms, and we have seen computations and a synod treated to the same authentication by author, time, place and cause. It is notable that in the earliest instances this information was largely implicit, relying on the knowledge of the recipient to complete the information or solve the clues placed unobtrusively in the work. By the eleventh century this was evidently no longer reliable, and elaborate prefaces and annotations make the principle of authentication and the necessary information explicit and prominent. As will be seen, the surviving inscriptions on the reliquaries are also concerned with recording the author, time and place of each, and with this information it is sometimes also possible to determine the cause. So the context and purpose of the inscriptions is clear: they were the official authentication of the artefact, produced at a time when it had become necessary to make this information explicit.

⁷M. Walsh and D. Ó Cróinín, *Cummian's letter De Controversia Paschali and the De Ratione Computandi* (Ontario, 1988), 3–7 and 51.

⁸*Ibid.*, 84–6, lines 208–20.

⁹*Ibid.*, 29–47.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 44–6. Walsh and Ó Cróinín believe that this cycle may be an amalgamation of the Dionysiac and Victorian cycles. If so, it is possible that Cuimíne was actually claiming an even larger total number of 'authors' for this, his preferred cycle, by including Dionysius, Victorius and their commissioner(s).

¹¹*Ibid.*, 86–7, line 221.

Sequence

The content of the inscriptions is carefully controlled and gives its information in a strict sequence. It is possible that the proper sequence has gone unnoticed because of the mutilated condition in which many inscriptions survive, and because even the perfect ones run in confusing directions. Even photographs of the inscriptions get published upside down.¹² However, the inscribers often left clear directions about this.

In the first place, the shape of the reliquary usually suggests clearly where its inscription begins. For example, there may be a 'top', as on the shrine of the Bell of the Testament¹³ (Pl. VIII) and the Bann bell-shrine fragment (Pl. II). Or there may be a relatively prestigious location, such as the head of a cross, as on the lost *cumdach* of the Book of Durrow (Pl. XII) and the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal (Pl. V). Failing this, if the reliquary is turned to the position it must have occupied when being carried, this produces an alternative 'top', as on the *Soiscél Molaise* (Pl. III) and the *cumdach* of the *Cathach* (Pl. VII). The shrine of St Lachtín's Arm (Pl. X) may have been reassembled, and in any case its cylindrical form would make it hard to identify an obvious starting-point. The inscription on the Lismore crosier (Pl. IX) proceeds from left to right, that on the Cross of Cong (Pl. XI) runs continuously round the cross, and those on the crosiers of Cú Dúilig (Pl. VI) and St Dymrna (Pl. I) occupy a single strip, leaving no confusion about their intended sequence.

Secondly, certain sections of the inscriptions are often marked with a cross. Although these crosses have been frequently reproduced, their probable function appears to have been overlooked. They appear most frequently on inscriptions which run in several directions, or whose passages do not all start at the beginning of their fields, or where phrases intersect each other. They do not mark every sentence but, as the formula becomes clear, it will be seen that they tend to appear at the beginning of each section, unless they are omitted altogether. So the crosses were apparently designed to help guide the reader through the inscription at points of possible confusion. This might be particularly necessary if the reader was not expected to be more than nominally literate.

With the help of these indications and directions, the beginning and order can be established for all the inscriptions, apart from the cylindrical St Lachtín's Arm with its very worn inscription. And in the light of this order, the formula for constructing the inscriptions becomes clear. It has three sections, which concern the commissioner, the interested parties and the craftsman respectively.

In every case where he is designated as such, the commissioner's name appears either at the obvious beginning of the inscription or at the most prestigious location on the reliquary, which is probably the beginning of the inscription in the less obvious cases. Since this happens in eight of the twelve inscriptions, it is probable that the remaining inscription on the Cross of Cong and the damaged inscriptions on the shrine of St Lachtín's Arm, the crosier of Cú Dúilig and the piece from Liathmore also began with the commissioner.

¹²M. Ryan (ed.), *The treasures of Ireland: Irish art 3000 BC–1500 AD* (Dublin, 1983), plate of the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal, p. 164. But see R.A.S. Macalister, *Corpus inscriptionum insularum Celticarum*, vol. 2 (Dublin, 1949), introduction, where he notes the prepositions used to record the relationship each party bore to the relic inside, although the order given does not agree with the present findings.

¹³One of several bells attributed to St Patrick.

The craftsman's designation survives on nine inscriptions, and with one exception he comes at the end. The exception is on the *cumdach* of the *Cathach*. This is a particularly muddled case, scattered with misspellings, malformed letters and apparent misunderstandings. It is also possible that this inscription was expanded later, and so it should probably not be allowed to confuse the issue. Thus it seems likely that the craftsman also came at the end of the inscriptions on the shrine of St Lachtín's Arm, the crosier of Cú Dúilig and the piece from Liathmore.

The first and last sections were apparently obligatory, since they occur explicitly in nine of the twelve inscriptions and implicitly in two more (the crosier of Cú Dúilig and the shrine of St Lachtín's Arm), while the piece from Liathmore is such a tiny fragment that its intended location in the inscription cannot be determined with certainty. But sometimes additional courtesies are observed. These always appear between the commissioner and the craftsman. For example, when an abbot has provided facilities for making the shrine, a prayer is asked for him, as on the shrine of the Bell of the Testament, the Cross of Cong, and possibly also on the *cumdach* of the *Cathach* and the shrine of St Lachtín's Arm. Occasionally, prayers are asked for people who were not apparently involved in commissioning, facilitating or making the shrine. These may be local kings, as on the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal and the Cross of Cong. In one case only (the shrine of the Bell of the Testament) a prayer is asked for the hereditary keeper.¹⁴

So the formula for constructing inscriptions on reliquaries can be summarised. Part I (apparently obligatory) concerns the commissioner. Part II (occasional) concerns the facilitator and other interested parties. Part III (apparently obligatory) concerns the maker.¹⁵ This formula, with its designations, occurs as a whole or in part in eight of the twelve inscriptions. It may also have occurred on the remaining inscriptions, but one lacks its designation (the Cross of Cong) and three more are too worn or incomplete to be sure (the piece from Liathmore, the crosier of Cú Dúilig and the shrine of St Lachtín's Arm).

The commissioners

Most of the commissioners have long been identified, but there remain several who have not or who should be reconsidered. These include the commissioners of the *cumdach* of the Book of Durrow, the crosier of Cú Dúilig,

¹⁴By the nineteenth century, when most of the shrines discussed here were acquired by collectors and museums, the institution of hereditary keepership was well established. Under this system, the relic and its shrine were entrusted to the keeping of a single family within the kin-group to which the relic pertained. The relic passed from father to son, and its safety was ensured through long-standing curses which would punish both the keeper who allowed harm to come to the relic and the person who damaged or stole it. Many of the relics now in museums were acquired directly from their hereditary keepers (e.g. the crosiers of St Dymphna, St Colman, St Tola, St Mura, St Berach and St Blathmac, the *cumdach* of the *Cathach*, and others). The system still functions. The most recent example known to me dates to the late 1970s or early 1980s. See K. McCall, *Healing the family tree* (London, 1982), 71–2. But the system is much older. For example, there is an obit for Flann Ua Sionaigh, *maor* [keeper] of the *Bachall Isu* [crosier of St Patrick], in 1135. See J. O'Donovan (ed.), *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters* (AFM) (Dublin, 1851 ff), under the year 1135.

¹⁵Notwithstanding R. Ó Floinn, 'The *Soiscél Molaise*', *Clogher Record* 13, no. 2 (1989), 61, who argues that the order of the inscriptions is dictated by rank, with the most important secular patrons at the top of the list, followed by ecclesiastical patrons in descending order of rank, followed by the craftsman.

the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal, the Bann bell-shrine fragment, and the crosier of St Dympna. The name on this last is completely lost, but the others might yet be identified. Although some of the names are very general and others are badly mutilated, the field is narrowed when the commissioners of the other reliquaries are considered as a group, for it emerges that few people apparently had the right to do this.

The names and titles of the commissioners survive intact in five inscriptions. These comprise three kings, one *rigdamna* and one abbot: the lost *cumdach* of the Book of Durrow (*rigdamna*), the *Soiscél Molaise* (abbot), the *cumdach* of the *Cathach* (king), the shrine of the Bell of the Testament (king), and the Cross of Cong (king). Although we cannot be sure of the order of the inscription on the shrine of St Lachtín's Arm, the commissioner(s) can only be drawn from those named: two kings, a *rigdamna* and an abbot. No keeper and no bishop is identified as having commissioned a reliquary.

Similar evidence is presented in the annalistic record, where there are three references to commissions. These relate to the Cross of Cong, the shrine of St Manchan and a lost shrine of St Commán, two of which were commissioned by kings and one by an abbot.¹⁶

Little is known of the abbots, and their relationship to the relics they had enshrined is therefore unclear, but the royal commissioners seem to have borne a specific kind of relationship to the relics. They were not necessarily the keepers, but they appear to have claimed the highest rank of anyone connected with the relic. For example, Domnall Ua Lochlainn was not the keeper of the Bell of the Testament, but he was king of the sept to which the keeper belonged. Nor was Cathbarr Ua Domnall the keeper of the *Cathach* ('battler'), but he was king of the sept which apparently had the strongest rights over it.¹⁷ This was the Cenél Luighdeach, a sept whose kings are obited as 'upholders of the defence and warfare of the Cenél Conaill'.¹⁸

The keeper is mentioned in two or possibly three inscriptions, but he was apparently uninvolved in the commission on two occasions and his function as keeper would appear to have been irrelevant on the third. Thus Cathalan Ua Máel Challand is remembered, apparently as a courtesy, as keeper of the Bell of the Testament. Domnall Mac Robartaig is remembered on the *cumdach* of the *Cathach* as one of the commissioners, although this does not seem to have been part of the original text and he may have had himself added on later when he became abbot. Even then, his office as keeper of the *Cathach* goes unmentioned. Finally, Muredach Ua Dubthaig may have been the keeper of the relic in the Cross of

¹⁶See C. O'Connor (ed.), 'The Annals of Tigernach', *Rerum Hibernicarum Scriptores*, vol. 2 (Buckingham, 1814), for the years 1119–23. See also AFM for the years 1166 and 1177.

¹⁷Cathbarr Ua Domnall was not king of the Cenél Conaill, as Henry stated. The Annals of Ulster (AU) make it clear that the Cenél Conaill was ruled at this date by the Ua Cenannain family. The Cenél Luighdeach only gained the kingship of the Cenél Conaill during the thirteenth century.

¹⁸AU and AFM 1038 and 1106, where Cathbarr Ua Domnall and his father are obited as 'pillar(s) of the defence and warfare of the Cenél Conaill'; for the relationship between these men see Kenney, *op. cit.* in note 3, 629.

Cong in that it continued to be associated with his family's tenure of the abbacy of Cong,¹⁹ but, if so, his function or status as owner of the relic is not mentioned on that inscription either.

So it seems that the commissioners of reliquaries were drawn from a narrow and clearly defined section of society. Generally speaking, the commissioner was not a keeper, bishop, steward or *erenach*, except by coincidence. Rather, he tended to be the highest-ranking relevant person available, i.e. (usually) the king or *rigdamna* of the sept which held the relic (or, if preferred, to which the keeper belonged). He might, or might not, also have had additional status as overking of a group of septs or as king of Ireland, but high status in itself was evidently not sufficient to enable him to commission a reliquary. For example, although Donnchad Mac Briain was commemorated as king of Ireland on the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal and thus presented himself as the highest-ranking person in the country, he was clearly not the commissioner and took fourth place in the inscription. And the same can be said of Terdelbach Ua Conchobair, who took second place in the inscription on the Cross of Cong.

So the possible identifications for the commissioners of the crosier of Cú Dúilig, the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal and the Bann bell-shrine fragment are fewer than has been believed. In all cases, the first likelihood is that the commissioners were kings or *rigdamnaí*, and they should be sought among those with the most likely connection with the relics. Failing this, they should be sought among the most relevant abbots. Thus, for example, the traditional identifications of the figures named on the crosier of Cú Dúilig as an *erenach* and a bishop respectively are not possible, and other identifications can be suggested;²⁰ the severe mutilation of the first names on the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal does not preclude their identification; and the identity of the commissioner of the *cumdach* of the Book of Durrow has important implications about its provenance.

The craftsmen

Very little is known of the craftsmen. They are (or were) explicitly identified on all but the crosier of Cú Dúilig, but only two are given any further identification. Donnchad Ua Taccáin, maker of the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal, is identified as a monk of 'Cluana', probably Clonmacnoise; and Máel Sechnaill Ua Cellacháin, possible maker of the shrine of St Lachtín's Arm, is identified as a local king.²¹

Little more can be discovered about the craftsmen, either in the inscriptions or elsewhere. For example, craftsmen did not generally receive obits in the

¹⁹The Ua Dubthaig family territory was at Cong; the abbey was founded by Ruadhraigh Ua Conchobar for the Ua Dubthaig family, and Muredach died there in 1150. The family continued to hold the abbacy, and the cross remained at Cong until it was sold to the Royal Irish Academy by the last abbot in the nineteenth century. See J. Raftery and A. Mahr (eds), *Christian art in ancient Ireland* (New York, 1976), 152.

²⁰See references for inscription no. 5.

²¹This part of the inscription is not legible today and the reading may be unreliable. However, it is not inherently unlikely that a king should have been a craftsman. The failure to identify craftsmen in the annals may suggest merely that this profession did not add to a person's status or consequence. But see also note ²² below.

annals.²² Only two of the craftsmen named in the inscriptions may have been given obits. The first was Máel Sechnaill, usually identified as the maker of the shrine of St Lachtín's Arm; but the annalists were evidently only interested in his status as king of southern Ireland and, if Máel Sechnaill was indeed the maker of the shrine, the annalists did not record his profession as a craftsman.²³ The only other who might possibly have received an obit is Máel Finnéin (or Máel Finnia), repairer of the crosier of Cú Dúilig. But the identity proposed for him here (as the son of Conn na mBocht of Clonmacnoise) is little more than guesswork and, although this man belonged to a multi-talented family including builders, stonemasons, scholars, lecturers and historians, the obit does not, of course, contain any suggestion that this Máel Finnia was a metalworking craftsman.²⁴

In addition to the lack of specific obits, few of the craftsmen's surnames can be matched to those of the families chronicled in the annals. Cú Dúilig Ua Inmainen, maker of the shrine of the Bell of the Testament, may have belonged to a southern Irish family of that name which was mentioned once in the Annals of Innisfallen, but in geographical terms alone this is an outside possibility.²⁵ Máel Ísu Mac Bratdan Uí Echan, maker of the Cross of Cong, was evidently allied to the Ua Echain family, who provided an abbot for Cloncraft or Clonard, but he did not belong to the central stem, and in any case there is only one reference to this family in the annals.²⁶ Apart from these two, it is not possible to link any of the craftsmen to known families and so gain some idea of where they might have come from and what relation they might have borne to their patrons.

However, it is apparent that at least some of the craftsmen settled within convenient range of their patrons, who continued to patronise them. For example, two generations of the Mac Aeda family lived at Kells and were patronised by the Ua Domnaill sept;²⁷ and there is evidence to suggest that Máel Ísu Mac Bratdan remained in Roscommon after making the Cross of Cong, where he continued to be patronised by the Ua Conchobair sept.²⁸

Apart from the meagre evidence about the craftsmen's identities and their relationship to their patrons, there is also evidence to suggest that literacy was rare among craftsmen. Perhaps the most classically clear script (and a faultless text) is found on the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal, written by Donnchad Ua Taccáin, monk of Cluana. Donnchad is the only known monk of the group. The other

²²Few of the craftsmen named in the inscriptions received obits. But there were rare craftsmen, designated *princead* or *primsaer*, who did receive obits: Neabhán Mac Maelchiaráin, obit 1003 (AFM; W. Hennessy (ed.), *Chronicon Sctorum, A chronicle of Irish affairs from the earliest times to AD 1135, with a supplement containing the events from 1141 to 1150* (CS) (London, 1866)); and Maelbrigte ua Brolchain, obit 1029 (AU; AFM; W. Hennessy (ed.), *Annals of Loch Cé* (ALC) (Dublin, 1939)). No work by either craftsman is known today.

²³S. MacAirt (ed.), *Annals of Innisfallen* (AI) (Dublin, 1951); AFM 1121.

²⁴AFM 1056, and see note 47.

²⁵AI 944 and 1059.6.

²⁶AFM 1136.

²⁷J. O'Donovan, 'Irish charters in the Book of Kells', *Irish Archaeological Miscellany*, vol. 1 (Dublin, 1846), 128–58 (where Mac Aeda's sons sell his house). AU 1090; ATig: 'The reliquaries of Columcille, viz. the Bell of the Kings and the Cuillebaigh, came from Tirconnell, with 120 ounces of silver, and Aongus O'Donnallain was the one who brought them from the north'. See also the inscription on the *cumdach* of the *Cathach*, which is signed by Sitric Mc Meic Aeda.

²⁸See AFM references to enshrinements, note 16 above.

inscriptions make a strong contrast to this. Sitric Mc Meic Aeda's inscription on the *cumdach* of the *Cathach* is unusually muddled; the name Cathbarr is rendered with an extra H as Chathbarr; the word *cumtach-sa* was originally misspelt as *cumtaoh-sa* and had to be corrected by the insertion of serifs; the 'S's have a habit of falling over backwards, a tendency reminiscent of early efforts to write; the crosses which differentiate the three sections of the inscription are missing; and the formula of the inscription is uniquely overset in that a second commissioner has been added to the end. Some or all of this may suggest that Sitric was trying to copy a text which was meaningless to him. Cú Dúilig ua Inmainen appears to have had similar problems on the shrine of the Bell of the Testament: after writing the words *do Domnall* twice, he produces *dod Chathalan*, as though he could not distinguish where the words began and ended; he had to insert the C of *cona* into a space too small for it after the text was completed; the crosses which normally mark off the sections of the inscription are missing, but they have been replaced by pairs of vertical lines; and the spelling of his own names may be incorrect. On the crosier of Cú Dúilig, the name is rendered Conduílig, which is either incorrect or not a pure form. The letters in Macene's inscription on the Bann bell-shrine fragment become increasingly confused towards the end of the text, and Gilla Báithín's script on the *Soiscél Molaise* is remarkably uneven. Nechtain was short of space on the Lismore crosier but he marked all his abbreviations carefully, so Nial spelt with only one L looks like a mistake, as does the D missing from the middle of *lasan(d)ernad*, and the tiny R inserted in the second *Or*. Finally, Máel Ísu's rendering of *lasdermad* and *incanernad* on the Cross of Cong is reminiscent of Nechtain.

In total there are eight inscriptions in which the craftsman evidently had problems, and one (by a monk) where he clearly did not. This last appears to be a conscious display of virtuosity: not only is it set out in the most immaculate script, it is also punctuated. Of the rest, one inscription is lost (on the *cumdach* of the Book of Durrow) and two (on the shrine of St Lachtín's Arm and the crosier of St Dympna) are very worn and so no evidence can be gathered from them.

It may be suggested that at least some of these apparent mistakes could have been in the exemplars which the craftsmen were trying to copy, and this possibility should be taken into consideration, although it would only account for mistakes in spelling and grammar, and possibly also in sequence. Mistakes and awkwardness in letter formation are more plausibly attributed to the craftsmen themselves. But it is hard to believe that these royal and abbatial patrons would not have had access to competent scribes to write out the inscription texts for the craftsmen to copy. The reliquaries themselves are among the most finely crafted objects to survive from the period, and the patrons were of the highest social status. The commissioning and production of such reliquaries seems to have been taken very seriously, and it would be extraordinary if the composition of the inscriptions had been left to chance. Indeed, the very fact that the inscriptions show evidence of having been corrected argues against such a possibility. It is surely more likely that most of the mistakes are due to the craftsmen, most of whom, therefore, seem to have been only partially literate, at best.

Dating

With new evidence about the commissioners, the interested parties and the craftsmen, it is clear that many inscriptions will need to be re-examined. But the

implications will have an effect on the dates attributed to the objects, and dating, too, needs to be approached with caution.

In several cases it is difficult to match the status claimed on the reliquary to that accorded to the person in the annals. There are two points to be borne in mind here. Firstly, it should be remembered that the annals and the inscriptions were drawn up by different people with different motives. For example, the fact that a commissioner claimed a particular title or status does not necessarily mean that the annalists recognised that claim, either at the time or later, and it would be dangerous to try to produce absolute dates on the basis of some of the more extreme claims. For example, Donnchad Mac Briain claimed the title 'king of Ireland' on the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal. The annalists simply do not recognise this. Yet the *cumdach* has been dated on this claim. Secondly, there is evidence that the titles of king and abbot were retained in an honorary manner throughout a person's life, and the fact that those titles appear in his obit does not prove that they were all functional at the time of death. Cathbarr Ua Domnall is an example of this. His successor was killed in 1100, but when Cathbarr died in religious retirement in 1106 he was still designated 'king' in his obit.²⁹ Máel Brigte Ua Críchidéin, possible commissioner of the Bann bell-shrine, is another. He is documented in his capacity as abbot of Moville in 1007, but there are obits for two other abbots of Moville at 1015 and 1019 before his own in 1025.

Taken together, all these considerations have a considerable impact on our interpretation of several inscriptions, and each will be examined in detail in the catalogue which follows.

Summary and conclusion

The surviving inscriptions from reliquaries made in Ireland before the Anglo-Norman invasion have a unique character which sets them apart from inscriptions in other media and makes it worth examining them as a typological phenomenon in their own right. They are composed according to a two- or three-part formula which concerns the commissioners, the interested parties and the craftsmen respectively. Of these, the commissioners and craftsmen appear to be compulsory at the beginning and end of the inscription, while the interested parties appear to be optional and are usually set in the middle.

The main purpose of the inscriptions is apparently to authenticate the reliquary as a socially significant work of art by recording its authors (the commissioners and craftsmen), date (derived from the identities of the commissioners), and perhaps its cause (which may occasionally be inferred from the precise mixture of people named).

A comparative analysis of all the commissioners named in the inscriptions reveals a social system in which only those with family connections to the relic were entitled to commission a reliquary for it, and this appears to have been limited to those with the highest rank. However, those with political connections to the commissioners could appear as interested parties in the optional middle section of the inscription. Some of these interested parties actually outrank the commissioners.

²⁹AU 1100 and 1106.

A comparative analysis of all the craftsmen suggests that most of them had little or no status and that their craft made no difference to this. Thus if Máel Finnia of Clonmacnoise did repair the crosier of Cú Dúilig, his metalworking skills go unmentioned at his obit, and if Máel Sechnaill Ua Cellacháin did make the shrine of St Lachtín's Arm, his skills go unmentioned too. This is in strong contrast to other professions such as stonemason, lector, historian and so on which do get mentioned in the obits of even the highest-ranking people.

A study of the calligraphic skills of the craftsmen suggests that most of them were at best only partially literate, and this may reflect their low social status.

With regard to the reliquaries themselves, this study has refined the dates of four of them: the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal (narrowed down to a single year), the crosier of Cú Dúilig (confined to the early part of the eleventh century), the shrine of the Bell of the Testament (narrowed down to four years), and the Cross of Cong (dated two years earlier). It has opened new possibilities for the dates of two more: the Bann bell-shrine (dated to the early eleventh or late eleventh to early twelfth century) and the *cumdach* of the *Cathach* (whose inscription may have been modified).

The study has also produced important new information about the provenances of three objects: the Book of Durrow (documenting its association with the controllers of Durrow Priory), the crosier of Cú Dúilig (transferred from Kells to Cashel), and the Bann bell-shrine (now attributed to Kells).

Because of their inscriptions, these objects have always been felt to be reliably dated, and they form the matrix around which other metal objects are interpreted. So in the final analysis these reliquaries are not the only objects to be affected by this study. Many other artefacts will now have to be reconsidered.

Catalogue

1. CROSIER OF ST DYMPNA: probable date *c.* 1000.
Dublin, National Museum of Ireland, no. P.1017.

... UA(LL) IATH GNE IN SAETHAR SO

Macalister reconstructed the inscription thus:

... UALLACH UA LIATHAIN DORIGNE IN SAETHAR SO

[and for] Uallach Ua Liathain, the maker of this hard work

The inscription runs up the upper binding strip on the shaft (Pl. I).

This inscription is very worn and only the last section is legible. Macalister's reading of the name appears to have been largely supposition and there is no reference to Uallach Ua Liathain in the annals. However, even if correct, the craftsman's name alone would probably have been insufficient to date the inscription, since craftsmen generally did not receive obits in the annals.

However, it may be possible to infer an approximate date for this inscription from the crosier itself. The inscription appears to be contemporary with the manufacture of the crosier, which is an early example of the type introduced

around the beginning of the eleventh century.³⁰ It is also the earliest surviving example of the recreated *kerbschnitt* technique, which was also introduced in the early part of the eleventh century after a long period of less complex techniques. The inscription may actually refer to this in its unique ending which mentions the difficulty of the work.

Petrie 1878, 116, fig. 99; Macalister 1945, 127, no. 967.

2. BANN BELL-SHRINE: c. 1000–25? or sometime before 1117?
Dublin, National Museum of Ireland, no. 1918.354.

OR DO MAELBRIGTI LASINDERNDAD 7 DO (M)ACENI DORIGNE

Pray for Máel Brigte for whom it was made, and for Macene, who made it

The inscription runs along the horizontal section behind the crest (Pl. II).

Máel Brigte has never been identified because the fragment has no satisfactory provenance, no keepers are known and the name Máel Brigte has been considered too common to allow a likely identification. However, since very few people would have had the right to commission this reliquary the possible identifications are reduced. Even so, it remains difficult to suggest a satisfactory identification and the following discussion is offered with due caution.

The provenance of the fragment does not help to associate it with any likely patrons, but its decoration is closely related in style and technique to the decoration on the *cumdach* of the *Cathach*. The inscription on that object suggests that it was made during the eleventh century, probably at Kells, and there is evidence that there was an established workshop there at this period.³¹

There are five known Máel Brigtes who could conceivably have been active during the eleventh century. Of these, the two *ua Brolcháins* seem unlikely. One was a stonemason (obit 1029, AU), and the other was bishop of Kildare (obit 1097, AU). Although this family was later powerful enough for one of them to become abbot of Derry (which had eclipsed Kells as the chief Columban monastery by that time), there is no indication that either of these eleventh-century *ua Brolcháins* held the rank of abbot or king. Likewise, Mac Cathasach, *fosairchinnech* of Ard Macha, also held the wrong kind of title.

This leaves two possibilities. The first is Máel Brigte *ua Críchidéin*, abbot of Finnén and Comgall (Moville and Bangor), who has an obit at 1025 (AU). He was already abbot of Moville in 1007 (AU), although the dates of his tenure are unclear since two other abbots of Moville are obited at 1015 and 1019. As an abbot, Máel Brigte *ua Críchidéin* did hold the right sort of title to commission a reliquary, and there seem to have been links between Moville and Kells during the

³⁰This crosier was dated to the tenth century by Petrie, MacDermott and Henry, but considerations of typology, style and technique tend rather to place it early in the eleventh century. See G. Petrie, *The round towers of Ireland* (Dublin, 1845), 230, 231; M. MacDermott, 'The crosiers of St Dymphna and St Mel and tenth-century Irish metalwork', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 57C (1957), 167–96; F. Henry, *Irish art during the Viking invasions (800–1020 AD)* (London, 1965), 116–20; P. E. Michelli, 'The pre-Norman crosiers and metalwork of Ireland' (unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of East Anglia, 1989), 82–5 and cat. no. 12.

³¹See note 27.

eleventh century, since a later abbot, Mac Loingsigh ua Máelsechlainn, was holding both abbacies at once in 1055 when he was in battle with the Coarb of Patrick (AU).

The second possibility is Máel Brigte Mac Rónáin, abbot of Kells, obit 1117 (AU; Three Fragments). Another abbot of Kells is obited at 1114 (AU), and he is the next after Domnall Mac Robartach who was named on the *cumdach* of the *Cathach*. As has already been pointed out, Domnall's abbacy is far from well dated, and he had certainly retired before his death in 1098, as his obit states that he was abbot of Kells 'for a time'. So Máel Brigte Mac Rónáin and his colleague who died in 1114 might both have been abbot of Kells at any time during the second half of the eleventh century.

In the end, the preferred identification will probably rest on whether it is considered that the style of this shrine belongs to the early or late eleventh century. It does have similarities with the early eleventh-century Innisfallen crosier (including the mask, whose moustache is entwined with the surrounding decoration, and the manner of setting niello and silver wire in isolated, highly raised ridges). In support of the later date, entries in the Annals of Ulster and the Annals of Tigernach for the year 1090 state that two Columban relics were brought to Kells for enshrinement that year, which strongly suggests that the workshop at Kells was still functioning then.³² The relics were the *cuilebadh* and the Bell of the Kings. Unfortunately, neither relic survives and their shrines cannot therefore be compared with the Bann bell-shrine. The earlier date might therefore be considered the more likely.

Macene, if his name has been read correctly, is unidentified.

Graves 1868–9, 347; Petrie 1878, 106, fig. 95a; Armstrong 1918, 180; Raftery 1941, 156, pl. 36.4; Macalister 1945, 111–12, no. 942.

3. *SOISCÉL MOLAISE*: 1001–25.

Dublin, National Museum of Ireland, no. R.4006.

+ OR DO . . . NFAILAD DO CHOMARBA MOLASI LASAN
 . . . IN CUTACHSA DO . . .
 NLAN + 7 DO GILLABAITHÍN CHERD DO RIGNI I GRESA

+ Pray for Cennfaílاد, successor of Molaise, for whom
 was made this shrine, for . . .
 nlan + and for Gilla Baíthín, the craftsman who made this object

The inscription runs around three edges of the page-edge side of the shrine (Pl. III).

Cennfaílاد Mac Flaithbertach was obited as abbot of Devenish in 1025 (AFM), and he is also obited separately as *erenach* of Devenish in the same year (AU; AFM). The previous abbot's obit is at 1001 (AFM). Like most craftsmen, Gilla Baíthín has no obit.

This inscription has been most recently discussed by Ó Floinn, who adds a

³²W. Stokes (ed.), 'The Annals of Tigernach', *Revue Celtique* 16 (1895), 374–419; 17 (1896), 6–33, 116–263, 337–420; 18 (1896), 5–59, 150–303, 374–91, for the year 1090; AU 1090.

new identification to those of the commissioner and craftsmen already known, and through this narrows the date of the enshrinement to 1001–11.³³ But there are problems with his identification of the third name.

On the basis of his understanding of the structure of inscriptions, Ó Floinn argues that the name must be that of an ecclesiastic, and suggests Coencomrach Ua Scannlain, an *erenach* of Devenish who died in 1011 (AFM). Two problems arise here. Firstly, there is no necessity for the missing name to have belonged to an ecclesiastic, as secular names appear after the commissioner on other reliquaries such as the shrine of the Bell of the Testament and the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal. Secondly, only Coencomrach's surname will fit the gap, and this is not only uncharacteristic of the rest of the inscription but also unparalleled on any other reliquary inscription. To be in character, the missing name would have to be a Christian name, and this rules out Coencomrach Ua Scannlain as a possible identification.

But it is not easy to suggest an alternative identification. The inscription is unevenly laid out, and it is difficult to estimate how many letters are missing from the name. However, Ó Floinn is probably right in filling the gap with the name Scannlain, although this would be a Christian name, not a surname.

Further restrictions are imposed by Scannlain's location in the text of the inscription. This is laid out in the customary manner, with crosses at the beginning of the first and last sections, and there does not appear to have been a middle section. Scannlain is introduced without a cross and therefore he probably belongs to the first section and represents a co-commissioner. If so, his name must be sought among kings, *rigdamnaí* and abbots only. There are only two eleventh-century references to Scannlain. The first is Scannlain Ua Dungaláin, abbot of Dún Lethglaisi (Downpatrick), who was abducted and blinded in 1010. He has no obit, but that event probably put an end to his incumbency as abbot. The second is Scanlan Mac Cathail, *rí* Éoganacht of Loch Lein, who died at Clontarf.³⁴ Neither of these is a very strong candidate for the identification, although perhaps the first is the more likely.

In the end, then, although important light has been thrown on the interpretation of the inscription, the third name has not yet been definitely identified, and the date of the reliquary cannot yet be modified.

Petrie 1878, 90, no. 89; Raftery 1941, 120–1, ref. pl. 58; Macalister 1945, 124, no. 961; Ó Floinn 1983a, 151–3, no. 75; Ó Floinn 1989, 51–63.

4. FRAGMENT FROM LIATHMORE: 1002–14.

Dublin, National Museum of Ireland, no. E.602:73.

... AC CENEDIC DORIG ER...

... [M]ac Cenedic, king of Ire[land]

³³ Ó Floinn, *op. cit.* in note 15, 51–63.

³⁴ Scanlainn Ua Dungaláin, abb. Dún Lethglaisi, outraged, AU 1010; Scanlan Mac Cathail, *rí* Éoganacht of Loch Lein, obit: J. O'Donovan (ed.), *Three fragments copied from ancient sources by Dubhaltach Mac Fírbisigh* (Dublin, 1860), 1012; AFM 1013; AU 1014.

Leask and Macalister identified this name as Brian, son of Cennétig, who claimed the title 'king of Ireland' between 1002 and 1014.

The fragment (Pl. IV) was found on the floor of a ruined church in Liathmore, Co. Tipperary. It is clearly part of a longer inscription which was once attached to some object. Unfortunately, there is no record of the object, although it is possible to make certain deductions about it.

Leask and Macalister suggested that it may have been a shrine. This seems reasonable since the other inscriptions show that people who claimed the title 'king of Ireland' were very likely to have been involved in enshrining relics. But Leask and Macalister went on to suggest that it may even have been a processional cross, and this is less likely. The only other inscription from such a cross is that on the Cross of Cong. On the other hand, there are inscriptions from four book shrines, three crosiers, two bells, and an arm. It should also be remembered that the Cross of Cong is not just a processional cross. It is primarily a reliquary. There were many kinds of reliquary, and any of them might have been brought into a church at some stage. All that can reasonably be said about the lost object is that it was probably a reliquary.

With regard to Brian himself, it is not possible to determine his role in relation to the relic which carried this inscription. It is tempting to assume that he was the person who had it enshrined, but the fragment is too meagre to support this. Kings of Ireland were not always entitled to enshrine the relics which carried their name. On the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal, for example, Donnchadh Mac Briain is recorded as an interested party only. He was not the commissioner. And on the shrine of St Lachtín's Arm, Tadg Mc Meic Carthaig was the highest-ranking person recorded, but the commissioner was either Cormac, the *rigdamna*, or Diarmait Mc Denisc, the *coarb*. Furthermore, if Macalister's reading of the inscription is to be trusted, the maker of that particular shrine was a king of Munster. So all that can be said of Brian is that he was involved in enshrining an unknown relic. He may have commissioned the reliquary, but it is equally possible that he was an interested party only, or even the maker.

Leask and Macalister 1946, 1–14.

5. *CUMDACH* OF THE STOWE MISSAL: 1033?

Dublin, National Museum of Ireland, no. 1883:614a.

+ OR DO . . . MAIN H
U CAT . . . [LASA]NDERNAD

+ OC . . . IND
HU D . . . LAIG

+ OCUS DO MACCRAITH HU D
ONDCHADA DO RIG CASSIL

OR DO DONDCHAD MACC
BRIAIN DO RIG HEREND

+ OR DO DUNCHAD HU TACCAIN
DO MUINTIR CLUANA DORIGNI

BENDACHT DE AR CECH AN
MAIN AS A HARILLIUTH

+ Pray for main Ua Cat for whom (it) was made

+ And ind Ua D laig

+ And for Mac Craith Ua Donnchadha, king of Cashel

Pray for Donnchad Mac Briain, king of Ireland

+ Pray for Donnchad Ua Taccáin of the community of Cluana who made
(it)

The blessing of God on every soul according to its deserts

The inscription is on the cross and borders of the base of the *cumdach* (Pl. V).

This inscription has often been misrepresented, perhaps because of the holes left in it by the later insertion of gems, which have obliterated the names of the commissioners. However, enough survives of the word *lasandernad* (for whom was made) to show that they were commemorated on the long arm (i.e. the upright and head) of the cross. Contrary to Henry's assertion, Donnchad Mac Briain was not the commissioner.³⁵ Instead, he is recorded as an interested party.

The surviving names in the inscription strongly suggest that the relic belonged to a Munster family. The highest-ranking person named is Donnchad Mac Briain, and next under him is Mac Craith Ua Donnchadha, who was king of one of the more powerful branches of the Éoganacht. But since Mac Craith was not the commissioner, the relic is unlikely to have belonged to his particular branch, and the missing names should probably be sought among the other stems of the Éoganacht. And in fact these do yield possibilities.

All that is left of the commissioner's name is '. . . . main Hu Cat', and one name survives which matches this. A Mathgamain Ua Cathail is obited at 1037 in the Annals of Innisfallen. The obit is not explicit about Mathgamain's status, but Ua Cathail was the name of the kings of the Éoganacht of Loch Lein. This is a very likely identification: not only does Mathgamain's name exactly match the surviving letters on the inscription, but the surplus fits the gap very neatly. And equally important, he was the probable head of a suitable sept at the right time.

All that survives of the second name is '. . . [F?]ind Hu D . . .'. A name can be found which matches these letters and fits the gap: Find Ua Dúngalaig, *tigírna* of the Muscraige Tíre, is obited at 1033 in the Annals of the Four Masters.³⁶ The Muscraige had a particular relationship with the Éoganacht. Byrne states that the Éoganacht granted the Muscraige special rights and privileges, including the right to have a special 'mesne king of all Muscraige to represent them as a whole *vis-à-vis* the king of Cashel'.³⁷ The Muscraige Tíre were the most powerful stem of the sept as a whole, and it is possible that Find Ua Dúngalaig held that mesne kingship as well as the kingship of his own stem of the sept.

If the identities of the two commissioners are accepted, the *cumdach* of the

³⁵F. Henry, *op. cit.* in note 5, 82.

³⁶Compare the obit in AI 1033.14: Find U Dunlaing, *rig* Muscraige Tíre.

³⁷F.X. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London, 1987), 181.

Stowe Missal can be seen as a remarkable representation of the political structure of Munster at the time.³⁸

To date, this reliquary has been dated on rather shaky grounds. It has already been pointed out that the annalists never recognised Donnchad Mac Briain's claim to be king of Ireland. Petrie states that he first claimed the title after murdering his brother Tadg and assuming the kingship of the Dál Cais in 1023.³⁹ Henry gives the unsupported statement that he was king of Ireland without opposition from 1023;⁴⁰ and McCarthy gives a unique translation of the Annals of Tigernach which suggests that Tadg had submitted to Donnchad before he was murdered.⁴¹ But none of this proves when Donnchad began to claim the title, and Ó Floinn states that in fact he only did so from about the year 1042.⁴² The fact is, this claim cannot be used to date the reliquary because there is no documentation which tells us when that claim was made.

Mac Craith must also be used with caution. His kingship is less well defined than Henry suggested. He evidently became king of Cashel on the pilgrimage of Dúngal in 1024 (AI) or on his death in 1025 (AI), although Mac Craith's name does not actually appear in the annals until 1026. The Annals of Innisfallen record that he was put in fetters in 1040, and give an obit for his successor in 1045. Mac Craith himself has an obit as king of Cashel in 1052, but it has already been said that this does not prove that the title was active at the time. We can only be sure of Mac Craith's kingship between 1026 and 1040.

But if the identifications of Mathgamain Ua Cathalain and Find Ua Dúngalaig are accepted, we can produce a better date. Ó Riain has dated the shrine to between 1026 and 1033 with the help of these identities and the supposed beginning of Mac Craith's kingship. However, it is possible to get closer than that. The last king of Loch Lein was killed in 1033 (AU), and Mathgamain himself died violently in 1037. Find Ua Dúngalaig died in 1033. If Mathgamain was indeed king of Loch Lein, it can only have been during the year 1033, after the succession of Mathgamain and before the death of Find, that the shrine was made.

O'Connor 1819, appendix, no. 1, 1–3; Todd 1853–7, 393–8; Todd 1856, 5–12; Petrie 1878, 94–5, no. 91; McCarthy 1886, 135–6; Warner 1906, xlv–l; Raftery 1941, 154–5, ref. pl. 66; Macalister 1945, 104, no. 932; O'Rahilly 1926–8, 95–109; Henry 1970, 82; Ó Floinn 1983b, 163–5, no. 76; Ó Riain 1991a, 14–15; Ó Riain 1991b, 285–95.

³⁸P. Ó Riain independently made the same identifications of these two names. See 'Dating the Stowe Missal Shrine', *Archaeology Ireland* 5 (1) (1991), 14–15; 'The shrine of the Stowe Missal, redated', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 91C (1991), 285–95. Ó Riain treats Mathgamain as an abbot and, if he is right, the reliquary cannot be dated more closely than Ó Riain has suggested. But the annals are not explicit about Mathgamain's status and he did not need to be an abbot in order to commission the reliquary. He may equally plausibly have been a king, which would suit his role as a commissioner well, and kings are not always designated in the annals.

³⁹G. Petrie, *Christian inscriptions in the Irish language*, vol. 2 (ed. M. Stokes) (Dublin, 1878), 94–5, no. 91.

⁴⁰F. Henry, *op. cit.* in note 5, 82.

⁴¹B. McCarthy, 'On the Stowe Missal', *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 27 (1877–86), 135–6.

⁴²R. Ó Floinn, 'Shrine of the Stowe Missal', in M. Ryan (ed.), *op. cit.* in note 12, 163–5, no. 76.

6. CROSIER OF CÚ DÚILIG: refurbished before 1039.
London, British Museum, no. 59/2/21.1.

OR DO CONDUILIG OCUS DO MELFINNEIN

Pray for Cú Dúilig and for Máel Finnéin

The inscription runs up the binding strip inside the curve of the crook (Pl. VI). It is not primary, and this has certain implications regarding its content.⁴³

Only one other reliquary has survived with an official secondary inscription, namely that added to the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal when it was refurbished; it referred solely to the refurbishment, and the primary inscription was left visible. The original inscription was also left visible when the *cumdach* of the *Cathach* was refurbished. And no official secondary inscription survives where there is no trace of a primary one. So the secondary inscription on this crosier almost certainly implies that the crosier originally carried an inscription referring to the commission. That inscription probably occupied a binding strip on the shaft, as on the crosier of St Dympna. In fact, there is a binding strip missing from the shaft of the crosier of Cú Dúilig which could have held the inscription.

The primary inscription was probably still in place when the secondary one was added. The strip under the crook is inconveniently short, leaving no space for surnames or designations. If the binding strip on the shaft had been missing when the crosier was refurbished, a new one could have been made and this would have provided more room for a fuller inscription.

Thus there are certain restrictions on the interpretation of the surviving inscription. As it is not part of the original crosier, it almost certainly does not refer to anyone concerned with the original commission. Instead, it is more likely to refer to a later repair or refurbishment (the crosier underwent several).⁴⁴

With regard to the interpretation of the inscription, Petrie was the first to identify Máel Finnéin as a bishop of Kells who died in 967 (AFM; AU), and Cú Dúilig as a *fosairchinneach* of Kells who died in 1047 (AFM).⁴⁵ This identification was later elaborated to suggest that Máel Finnéin was the commissioner of the original crosier, while Cú Dúilig commissioned a later refurbishment.⁴⁶ The interpretations have been accepted ever since. However, in the light of the foregoing discussion they would seem to have been misdirected.

The present study has shown that wherever the commissioner's and the craftsman's designations survive on the inscriptions, those names came at the beginning (nine examples) and end (eleven examples) respectively; and it has therefore been suggested that this was probably the case in the few remaining inscriptions too. In this light, Cú Dúilig should probably be seen as the

⁴³This crosier is better known as 'the Kells Crosier' because of early misinterpretations of the inscription.

⁴⁴Michelli, *op. cit.* in note 30, 192–200.

⁴⁵Petrie, *op. cit.* in note 39, 116–17.

⁴⁶M. MacDermott, 'The Kells Crosier', *Archaeologia* 96 (1956), 105–6.

commissioner and Máel Finnén as the craftsman—who may be unidentifiable, as craftsmen did not generally receive obits in the annals.⁴⁷

Cú Dúilig may be identifiable, but he cannot have been the *fosairchinneach* of Kells originally proposed, because the consistent evidence of the inscriptions and the annals is that he must have been a king, *rigdamna* or abbot. In fact, when bishops, archbishops, and *erenachs* have been discounted, there are few possible identities left for Cú Dúilig.

Both MacDermott and Henry proposed a likely alternative identification, although they evidently preferred to connect the crosier with Kells. This was Cú Dúilig Uí Donnchadha, a member of the Éoganacht of Cashel, who is obited as *rigdamna* of Cashel at 1039 in the Annals of Innisfallen. This man is interesting, as he was heir to a kingship which presented itself in particular terms.

It was an Éoganacht king of Cashel who is thought to have commissioned the Tripartite Life of St Patrick in the late tenth century.⁴⁸ This document contains the statement that:

No one is king of Cashel until Patrick's successor installs him and confers ecclesiastical rank on him... Twenty-seven kings of the race of Aillil and Oengus ruled in Cashel under a crosier until the reign of Cenn Gagain.

Whatever the reality of the situation, the claim is uncompromising. In official terms the kingship of Cashel was necessarily ecclesiastical, and while it is no longer possible to verify that every king of Cashel was a bishop or abbot, three are known from other sources to have been abbots and one was a bishop.⁴⁹ So Cú Dúilig Uí Donnchada, *rigdamna* of Cashel and potential abbot or bishop, is very likely to have had an interest in the refurbishment of a crosier, especially if that crosier was an essential appurtenance of his future kingship.⁵⁰

If this identification is acceptable, the inscription and the refurbished parts of the crosier (the crest, drop-trim and crook-knop) can be dated to some time before 1039.

Rock 1858, 287; Petrie 1878, 116, fig. 100; Macalister 1949, 33, no. 88; MacDermott 1956, 66, 104–6; Henry 1967, 118.

⁴⁷It may, however, be worth considering one possibility. Máel Finnia, the son of Conn na mBocht of Clonmacnoise, has an obit at 1056 (AFM). Máel Finnia belonged to a remarkably talented family of masons, scholars and administrators, and he is the only member of this family whose talents are not recorded in his obit. This identification may be supported by the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal, which shows that Clonmacnoise almost certainly had a workshop at this period and that this workshop was patronised by the Éoganacht of Cashel.

⁴⁸K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland, an introduction to the sources* (London, 1972), 240; Kenney, *op. cit.* in note 3, 342–3; L. Bieler, *The life and legend of Patrick* (Dublin, 1948).

⁴⁹Feidlimidh Mac Crimthann became abbot of Cork in 836, and 'occupied the abbot's chair' at Clonfert on the day he became full king of Ireland in 838; he has an obit as king of Cashel in 847 (AI). Olchobar Macc Cínáeda, abbot of Emly, became king of Cashel in 848 (AI). Cenn Faelad Ua Mugthaigirnd, abbot of Emly and king of Cashel, died in 872 (AI). Cormac Macc Cuilennain, 'noble bishop and celibate', took the kingship of Cashel in 901 (AI). Cenn Gagain, who is specifically mentioned in the Tripartite Life in the context of the ecclesiastical nature of the kingship of Cashel, is not recorded as having held ecclesiastical status.

⁵⁰R. Ó Floinn, 'The *Soiscél Molaise*', *Clogher Record* 13 (2) (1989), 61, suggests that the act of commissioning a reliquary might have been a way of establishing a future claim to a title.

7. *CUMDACH OF THE CATHACH*: perhaps 1062–98, or earlier.
Dublin, National Museum of Ireland, no. R.2835.

OROIT DO CHATHBARR UA DON...ILL LASINDERNAD IN CUM-
TACH-SA

[blank]

7 DO SITTRIUC MAC MEIC AEDA DO RIGNE 7...M...M...C RO...
RTAIG DO COMARBA CENANSA LASINDERNAD

Pray for Cathbarr Ua Domnall for whom was made this shrine
and for Sitric Mac Meic Aeda who made (it) and for Domnall Mac
Robartaig, coarb of Kells, for whom (it) was made.

The inscription runs round the edge of the base of the shrine, leaving one short side blank between the first commissioner and the craftsman (Pl. VII).

The dates of this inscription are rather difficult to pin down. Cathbarr Ua Domnall was king of the Cenél Luighdeach, obit 1106 (AFM; AU), but he had gone into religious retirement before this, and another king of the Cenél Luighdeach was killed in 1100 (AFM; AU).⁵¹ These are the first kings of the Cenél Luighdeach to be recorded since 1011, so we have no idea when either of them succeeded. Domnall Mac Robartaig may have become abbot of Kells on the death of Gilla Críst ua Mael Doraid in 1062, assuming that Gilla Críst died in office and that Domnall was his immediate successor. Unfortunately, as pointed out in the general discussion, we cannot be sure of any of this, and Domnall himself had apparently retired before his death in 1098 (AFM; AU).⁵² Domnall was also keeper of the *Cathach*, although this fact is not recorded in the inscription.⁵³ Sitric's father is recorded as a craftsman who had lived at Kells, but neither Sitric nor his father has an obit.⁵⁴ At the moment, the best date which can be offered for the inscription is sometime after 1062 and before 1098, which is the span currently accepted for it, but it should be remembered that Domnall could have taken up the abbacy before or after 1062 and that he had retired before 1098. But there are further considerations which should be made.

It has been suggested that the variable script and large number of apparent mistakes may indicate that Sitric was supplied with a text to copy but was not himself literate. But there may be more to it than that. One of the apparent mistakes in the inscription is that the textual formula has been uniquely overset by the addition of a second commissioner (Domnall) to the end. It is Domnall's dates which are currently used to date the inscription, so if his section is a later addition this will affect the date attributed to the original inscription and the reliquary which carries it.

⁵¹See p. 11 and notes 17 and 18.

⁵²Domnall was probably abbot by 1084, since a charter of that date cites him as coarb: see A. Gwynn and R.N. Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses, Ireland* (Dublin, 1988), 82. He had evidently retired before his death in 1098, since his obit in AU states that he was coarb of Columcille 'for a time'.

⁵³Petrie, *op. cit.* in note 39, 92; J. Raftery, *Christian art in ancient Ireland* (Dublin, 1941), 155.

⁵⁴O'Donovan, *op. cit.* in note 27, 140–1, 156–7.

In fact, Domnall's section looks very like a later addition. If that section is ignored, the layout of the rest of the inscription, and its lack of crosses, makes better sense. Cathbarr's section as sole commissioner occupies the whole of one side, and Sitric's section as craftsman starts at the left-hand corner of the opposite side and finishes halfway along it. This layout makes the crosses unnecessary. Now, if Domnall then decided to add his name to the inscription, he could not have had it put in the middle in the normal way because there was insufficient room between the two existing parts of the inscription, and he would have been forced to have it added to the end, which is where it actually appears. Domnall may not have been in a position to do this until after he succeeded to the abbacy of Kells. If this is what happened, the first part of the inscription, and the reliquary itself, would have to be dated to before Domnall's tenure of the abbacy, whenever that was.

Betham 1827, 113–14; Reeves 1857, 319; Petrie 1878, 92, fig. 90; Lawlor 1916; Macalister 1945, 38, no. 588a; Henry 1970, 89–90; Kenney 1979, 629–30.

8. THE SHRINE OF THE BELL OF THE TESTAMENT: 1091–4.
Dublin, National Museum of Ireland, no. R.4011.

OR DO DOMNALL U LACHLAIND LASINDERN

AD IN CLOCSA || OCUS DO DOMNALL CHOMARBA PHATRAIC
ICONDER

NAD OCUS DOD CHATHALAN U MAELCHALLAND DO MAER IN CH
LUIC || OCUS DO CHONDULIG U INMAINEN CONA MACCAIB
ROCUMTAIG

Pray for Domnall Ua Lochlainn for whom was made this bell //
and for Domnall, coarb of Patrick, in whose house (it) was made
and for Cathalan ua Máel Challand, for the keeper of this bell //
and for Cú Dúilig Ua Inmainen, with his sons, (who) enshrined (it)

The inscription runs continuously round the edge on the back of the shrine (Pl. VIII).

Domnall Ua Lochlainn's predecessor was killed in 1083, so he was probably king of Cenél nEógain from then until 1121, when he was obited as *ardri Herenn* (AU; AI). The Annals of the Four Masters add the information that he had been king of Ireland for 27 years when he died, i.e. from 1094 onwards. Domnall Mac Amhalgaidh was abbot of Armagh from 1091 to 1105 (AFM), but Cú Dúilig, like most craftsmen, has no obit.

On the assumption that Domnall would only have commissioned the shrine when he was king of Ireland, the shrine has been dated to between 1094 and 1121.⁵⁵ But this assumption is unwarranted. Domnall is not given any title in the inscription. This is not uncommon. About half the commissioners lack titles in the inscriptions. Mathgamain Ua Cathalain (if he is accepted as commissioner of the

⁵⁵Henry, *op. cit.* in note 5, 94–5.

cumdach of the Stowe Missal) is one example. The others are Cathbarr Ua Domnall for the *cumdach* of the *Cathach*; Niall Mc Meicc Aeducáin for the Lismore crosier; Máel Brigte for the Bann bell-shrine fragment; and Cú Dúilig for the crosier of Cú Dúilig. The title ‘king of Ireland’ is claimed on three reliquaries: the lost *cumdach* of the Book of Durrow, the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal, and the Cross of Cong. There is no dispute about the claim made on the Cross of Cong, but the claim on the lost *cumdach* of the Book of Durrow may have stretched a point, and the claim made on the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal was not recognised at all by the annalists. None of the other commissioners were ever in a position to have made the claim, and none did. So it seems that if a commissioner had any conceivable claim to the title ‘king of Ireland’ he most certainly had this recorded in the inscription; and the fact that Domnall failed to do this on the shrine of the Bell of the Testament (which has surplus inscription space) is a strong indication that he did not consider himself in a position to claim the title at that time. Therefore the shrine should almost certainly be dated to before 1094, when Domnall apparently started to claim the title ‘king of Ireland’.

As Henry pointed out, Domnall Mac Amhalgaidh, who is also named on the inscription, was abbot of Armagh from 1091. So the shrine is very likely to have been made between 1091 and 1094.

Reeves 1850; Ellacombe 1872, 353; Reeves 1877, 1–30; Petrie 1878, 109, fig. 97; Coffey 1910, 49; Macalister 1945, 112–13, no. 944; Henry 1970, 94–5; Ó Floinn 1983c, 167–8, no. 79b.

9. LISMORE CROSIER: by 1113?

Dublin, National Museum of Ireland, no. 1949.1.

OR DO NIAL MC MEICC
AEDUCAIN LASANER

Pray for Nial Mc Meicc
Aeducáin for whom was

OR DO NECTAI CERD DO RIG
NAD IN GRESA + NE I GRESA

Pray for Nechtain, craftsman, who
made this object + made this object

The inscription runs round the base of the crook and the upper rim of the crook-knop, beginning at the front to the right of the boss (Pl. IX).

Despite the long acceptance of the commissioner’s identity, this has not in fact been established. Sir James Ware did not give an obit for Bishop Nial Mc Meicc Aeducáin of Lismore, although Harris incorporated the reference when he edited and revised the work in 1739, and there is an obit for him in Mac Airt’s edition of the *Annals of Innisfallen* at 1113.⁵⁶

This is the only inscription-bearing object which was commissioned by a bishop rather than a king or abbot, but the crosier is unlikely to have been designed as a reliquary. The supposition that pre-Norman Irish crosiers contain the original staves of early saints ignores the fact that it would be impossible to

⁵⁶AI 1113.12 (Mac Airt’s edn), but O’Conor’s edition (1825) does not include it.

insert a pre-bent wooden crook into a cast cover such as this one.⁵⁷ What Nial commissioned was a crosier *per se*, not a reliquary, and he therefore has no bearing on the issue of who could and who could not commission a reliquary.

The date of this crosier is less well established than has been supposed. The previous bishop of Lismore was not Maeldúin Ua Rebacháin, as Petrie and later scholars state.⁵⁸ The title 'coarb' is used only for abbots in the annals, and Maeldúin's obit at 1090 styles him 'coarb of Mochuda' (abbot of Lismore); it gives no indication that he was also bishop of Lismore. 'Bishop' also seems to have been retained as an honorary title throughout a person's life, and if Maeldúin had ever held this title we would expect to find it mentioned in his obit. The last recorded bishop of Lismore before Nial was Cinaed Ua Con Minn, whose obit is at 958. So Nial's obit at 1113 is the only date we have for the crosier.

Harris 1739, 550; O'Neill 1863, 40; Petrie 1878, 118, fig. 101; Stokes 1928, 84–5; Westropp 1897, 355; Raftery 1941, 160, pls 93 and 94; Macalister 1945, 109, no. 939; Henry 1970, 97; Ó Floinn 1983d, 170–1, no. 81.

10. SHRINE OF ST LACHTÍN'S ARM: 1118–21.

Dublin, National Museum of Ireland, no. 1884.690.

.. O CHORMAC MC MEIC CARTHAIGI DO RIGDANU MUMAND
O RATHAI(N)E D... (palm)

.. OR DO TADC MC MEIC C... DO RIG
... (thumb)

.. R DO DIARMAIT MC MEIC DERISC DO COMA
... (back)

.. DO MAEL SECHNAILL U CELLACHAI(N) DO ARDRIG
... CUMTUICH SO (little finger)

Pray for Cormac Mc Meic Carthaigi, for the royal heir of Muma
of Ráth Áine...

Pray for Tadg Mc Meic C[arthaigi], for the king

...

Pray for Diarmait Mc Meic Derisc, for the coarb

...

⁵⁷ But there is much evidence that this type of crosier was commonly adapted as a reliquary some time after its manufacture. Analysis of the history of repairs to these crosiers shows that almost all were dismantled at an early stage with the apparent object of inserting relics (see Michelli, *op. cit.* in note 30, 364–9). On the Lismore crosier, three cavities were created after manufacture. Firstly, the hollow base of the crest was detached to allow the insertion of a small box of wood fragments (now removed); secondly, one side of the drop had a small sliding panel cut into it to allow the insertion of another small box (empty); thirdly, the crest and face of the drop were detached to allow the insertion of some waxed linen (now removed) into the hollow crook (see National Museum of Ireland file no. IA/8/84, containing miscellaneous notes made during the 1960s by P. Morrissey). The traces of these operations are clearly visible, although when the filigree panels were in place they would have been barely noticeable. So the Lismore crosier, like many others, was evidently adapted to become a reliquary, although it was apparently not originally designed to be one.

⁵⁸ Petrie, *op. cit.* in note 39, 11; W. Hennessy (ed.), *The Annals of Ulster* (Dublin, 1887), under the year 1090; S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill (eds), *The Annals of Ulster (to AD 1131)* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), under the year 1090. See also the references for this inscription.

Pray for Máel Sechnaill Ua Cellacháin, for the chief king
 ... this shrine

The shrine is of a right arm, and the inscription runs up the four pairs of binding strips, beginning below the palm and continuing on the thumb, back and little finger sides respectively (Pl. X).

This inscription must be interpreted with caution as the text may bear little resemblance to its original content and arrangement. The shrine shows signs of reassembly, as its circlet now masks some of the inlaid panels. The beginnings and possibly also the ends of the inscription strips also seem to be masked, and the upper strip on the back of the arm has been patched. So it is possible that the strips are no longer in their original places. Added to this, the upper strips, which would have given the designations of the commissioners, the interested party and the craftsman, are so worn as to be virtually illegible. Furthermore, the surviving script may have been renewed in places: the letters become angular, less deeply cut, and less evenly laid out. If this was done because the text was becoming difficult to read, it is possible that mistakes have been introduced.

The shrine's association with St Lachtín is mainly based on its provenance, which documents its unbroken history and attribution since it was kept at St Lachtín's church at Donaghmore as 'The Shrine of St Lachtín's Arm' in the seventeenth century.⁵⁹ Todd also thought he could make out an L after the word 'Coma[rba]'. If the letters 'rba' exist, they will be found on an upper strip immediately above the circlet, and the 'L' of Lachtín would therefore be the fourth letter in. Unfortunately, one such strip mentions 'Rath Áine' at that point, two others are illegible, and the fourth, which happens to be above Diarmait's section, seems to have traces of the word 'rig' at that point, although whether this is from 'dorigne' or 'do rig' is not clear. And since Diarmait Mc Meic Derisc (if that name has been rendered or read correctly) had no obit, we cannot find out which abbacy he held. So the attribution to St Lachtín cannot be confirmed by the inscription.

But the inscription does furnish enough information to produce a good date. Tadhg was already king of Cashel when he became king of Munster in 1118 by killing Brian son of Murchad (the king of Munster) and Amlaíb Ua hEchach (who may have been king of the Uí Echach) (AI). By the same token, Cormac presumably became *rigdamna* of Munster in 1118. He deposed Tadhg in 1123 and died in 1124 (AI; AU). Diarmait Mac Derisc has no obit. Máel Sechnaill is identified as Lord of the Uí Echach (as the Éoganacht of Raithlind were known) by the Annals of the Four Masters. He may have succeeded to this title in 1118 when Tadhg killed Amlaíb Ua hEchach. He died in 1121, when he was obited as king of southern Ireland but not identified as a craftsman (AI; AFM). It is notable that Mael Sechnaill does not claim the title 'king of southern Ireland' in the inscription. The traditional date of 1118–21 stands.

One further point may be worth making. If this is indeed a relic of St Lachtín, the principal commissioners are unlikely to have been Cormac, Tadhg or Máel Sechnaill. St Lachtín himself was a member of the Muscraige,⁶⁰ whose relationship

⁵⁹G. Coffey, *Guide to the Celtic antiquities of the Christian period preserved in the National Museum, Dublin* (Dublin, 1910), 54.

⁶⁰F. Byrne, *Irish kings and high kings* (London, 1973; and see 1987 edn), 171.

to the Éoganachta was commemorated on the *cumdach* of the Stowe Missal. Since Tadg and Cormac were members of the Éoganacht of Cashel and Máel Sechnaill was a member of the Éoganacht of Raithlind, they are unlikely to have had the right to be principal commissioners of a shrine of St Lachtín. The only person likely to have had this right would be Diarmait (whose title of coarb seems to be legible), since coarbs tended to be drawn from the kin of the founding saint. Thus Diarmait would probably have been a member of the relevant kin-group, which in this case would be the Muscraige. If he was coarb of St Lachtín, he would have been abbot of Freshford, St Lachtín's principal foundation, and those abbots have no obits in the annals.⁶¹

Anon. 1839, 1–2, notes to pl. 19 (1885 edition); Todd 1850–3, 461–4; Nesbitt 1853, 241; Huband Smith 1854, 215; Petrie 1878, 104–5, fig. 95; Coffey 1910, 53–4 (first published 1909); Stokes 1928, 85–6; Raftery 1941, 161, pl. 99; Macalister 1945, 94–5, no. 909; Ó Floinn 1983e, 169–70, no. 80.

11. THE CROSS OF CONG: c. 1123–34.

Dublin, National Museum of Ireland, no. R.2833.

+ *HAC CRUCE CRUX TEGITUR QUA PASUS CONDITOR ORBIS*

OR DO MUREDACH
U DUBTHAIG DO SENÓIR EREND

OR DO THERRDELUGH U CONCHO DO RÍG EREND LA
SDERRNAD IN GRESSA

OR DO DOMNALL MC FLANNACAN U DUB[THAIG] D EPISUP
CONNACHT
DO CHOMARBA CHOMMAN ACUS CHIARÁN ICANERNAD

IN GRESSA OR DO MAEL ISU MC BRATDAN U ECHAN
DO RIGNI IN GRESSA

+ *HAC CRUCE CRUX TEGITUR QUA PASUS CONDITOR ORBIS*

+ *With this cross, the Cross is covered, by which suffered the creator of the world*
Pray for Muredach Uí Dubthaig, for the senior of Ireland
Pray for Terrdelbach Ua Conchobair, for the king of Ireland, for whom
was made this object

Pray for Domnall Mac Flannagain Uí Dub(thaig), for the bishop of
Connacht, for the coarb of Commán and Ciarán, in whose house was
made this object

Pray for Máel Ísu Mac Bratdan Uí Echan, who made this object

+ *With this cross, the Cross is covered, by which suffered the creator of the world*

The inscription is on the narrow sides of the cross, running continuously from left to right. The Latin verse appears on the left of the stem; Muredach's section is on

⁶¹Gwynn and Hadcock, *op. cit.* in note 52, 36.

the tip and top of the left arm, and the end is apparently missing from the curve; Terrdelbach's section is on the left and top of the head; Domnall's section is on the right of the head, with what is apparently a Gothic record of a missing plaque in the curve, and finishes on the top of the right arm; Máel Ísu's section continues on the top and tip of the right arm; the Latin verse is repeated on the right of the stem (Pl. XI).

The sequence of the inscription has been misrepresented in the past to suggest that the principal commissioner was Terrdelbach Ua Conchobair.⁶² In fact the principal commissioner is probably Muredach Ua Dubthaig, who comes first in the inscription.

Much confusion has been generated about this reliquary, although the records about it are clear enough. The annalistic record states that a relic of the True Cross was circulating in Connacht (CS for the year 1118, *recte* 1122?).⁶³ Terrdelbach acquired a piece of it and had it enshrined in Roscommon at an unspecified date (ATig for the year 1123). The inscription amplifies this. Domnall may already have been abbot of Roscommon by 1122/3, as another abbot of Roscommon died in 1097 (AU; AFM). He may also already have been 'bishop of Connacht', as another bishop of Connacht has an obit at 1117.⁶⁴ He may even also have been abbot of Clonmacnoise by then, since another abbot died in 1127 and may have retired before that (AI; AU; AFM). Domnall himself died in 1136 (AFM), but Muredach is already designated 'archbishop of Connacht' in 1134 (ATig; Misc As). Bearing in mind that it is often not clear when an abbot took up his title, we cannot be sure when Domnall's titles first applied to him. So the date of the inscription has to be placed between Terrdelbach's acquisition of the relic c. 1123 and Muredach's tenure of the bishopric, which is documented by 1134. Muredach died in 1150 (AFM) and Máel Ísu has no obit.

Henry has suggested that the cross was in use by 1136 because the Annals of the Four Masters record a violation of the *Bachall Buidhe* (Yellow Staff) at that date (AFM).⁶⁵ But although the cross must indeed have been in use by then, this reference does not seem to prove it. The term *bachall* can be interpreted very literally to mean 'staff', but it would be stretching the definition to apply it to a

⁶² Henry, *op. cit.* in note 5, 107, explicitly states that the inscription begins with Terrdelbach Ua Conchobair and continues with Domnall Mac Flannagain, followed by Muredach Uí Dubthaig. This is difficult to explain because O'Neill and Petrie had already published the correct order (see references for this inscription).

⁶³ The entries in CS run four years behind their equivalents in AU, AI and AFM, so it is probably justifiable to correct this date to 1122. The Annals of Tigernach have the following entry for the years 1119–23: 'Christ's cross in Ireland in this year, and a great tribute was given to it by the king of Ireland, Toirdelbach Húa Conchobáir, and he asked for some of it to keep in Ireland, and it was granted to him, and it was enshrined by him in Roscommon'.

⁶⁴ The inscription's use of the title 'bishop of Connacht' with reference to Domnall has caused some confusion as there was no see of that name. However, it is difficult to see how he could have been bishop of Elphin, as Henry suggested, since that see was not formed until the Synod of Kells in 1152 and, in any case, could never have given its incumbent jurisdiction over the whole of Connacht. The use of the title 'bishop of Connacht' seems rather to suggest that Domnall was in fact bishop of Tuam, whose elevation to metropolitan status may already have been anticipated. It was confirmed after Domnall's death at the Synod of Kells. Domnall's obit styles him 'archbishop of Connacht', which suggests that the annalists also associated him with Tuam, and they may have amended his title retrospectively.

⁶⁵ Henry, *op. cit.* in note 5, 107–9. *Bachall Buidhe* is probably better translated as 'Yellow Crosier'. Anderson noted that St Columille had a crosier which was known as the *Cath Buaidh* (Yellow Battler) — see J. Anderson, *Scotland in Early Christian times*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1881), 240–1.

cross reliquary. Moreover, the term is universally used to mean 'crosier' in the annals and the hagiographies, so the entry is probably irrelevant to the Cross of Cong.

The identity of the craftsman Máel Ísu has also been confused. O'Donovan was the first to suggest that Máel Ísu should be identified with an abbot of Cloncraft, Gilla Christ Ua hEchain, who is obited at 1136 in the Annals of the Four Masters.⁶⁶ The same statement was later made by Wilde.⁶⁷ Since these annals are a late compilation, Henry elaborated the hypothesis by suggesting that the Four Masters might have written 'Gilla Christ' in mistake for 'Máel Ísu'.⁶⁸ Since Gilla Christ means 'servant of Christ' and Máel Ísu means 'servant (or tonsured one) of Jesus', the two names might be seen as alternatives. But this would be an unlikely mistake, and when the two surnames are taken into account the argument becomes weaker still. Máel Ísu has the surname Mac Bratdan and the dynastic name Uí Echan; that is, in effect, 'Máel Ísu Mac Bratdan of the Uí Echan dynasty'. Evidently he belonged to a collateral branch. Gilla Christ has the surname Ua hEchain, which suggests that he belonged to a central stem of the dynasty—and his status as an abbot may well reflect this. The two names therefore seem to be irreconcilably different, and, in common with most craftsmen, Máel Ísu has no obit and cannot be identified after all.

Petrie 1847–50, 577–9; O'Neill 1854–5, 417–19; O'Donovan 1856–7, 37–40; Wilde 1867, 194–5; Petrie 1878, 120, fig. 103; Coffey 1910, 55; Macalister 1945, 15–16, no. 552; Henry 1970, 107–9.

12. THE *CUMDACH* OF THE BOOK OF DURROW: 879–916, or 1002–13, or 1002–42, or later.
Lost.

The *cumdach* was seen in 1677 by Roderick O'Flaherty, who copied the inscription onto a flyleaf of the book, together with a short description (Pl. XII):

Inscriptio Hibernicis literis incisa cruci argenteae in operimento hujus libri in transversa crucis parte nomen artificis indicat et in longitudine tribus lineis a sinistra, et totidem dextra, ut sequitur.

An inscription incised in Irish letters on a silver cross on the lid of this book: in the transverse part of the cross the name of the craftsman is shown, and on the longitude with three lines to the left and the same to the right, as follows:

+ OROIT ACUS BENDACHT CHOLUIMB CHILLE DO FLAUND MACC
MAILSECHNAILL DORIG HEREIM LASANDERNAD ACUMDDACHSO

⁶⁶J. O'Donovan, in *Proceedings and Transactions of the Kilkenny and South East Ireland Archaeological Society*, new series, 1 (1856–7), 39. This journal was subsequently redesignated *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, and it is indexed under this title in many libraries. However, scholars in England will not find the early volumes unless they know the title and series under which those volumes were originally published. The volume numbers do not match those of the new designation.

⁶⁷W. Wilde, *Lough Corrib* (Dublin, 1867), 194–5.

⁶⁸Henry, *op. cit.* in note 5, 108.

+ The prayer and blessing of Columcille for Flann, son of Máel Sechnaill, the king of Ireland, for whom this case was made

O'Flaherty identified the commissioner as Flann Sinna, son of Máel Sechnaill I and overlord of the Uí Néill 879–916, which would place the *cumdach* between these dates. But there are problems both with this identification and with the inscription as a whole.

With regard to the identification, there is another possible candidate. It is not clear whether the title 'king of Ireland' refers to Flann or to Máel Sechnaill. Flann son of Máel Sechnaill II has an obit at 1013 in the Annals of Ulster, which refers to him as 'Flann son of Máel Sechnaill king of Ireland', as in the inscription. If this is the correct obit for him (he has a second as 'royal heir of Ireland' at 1042), the title must refer to his father, Máel Sechnaill II, rather than to Flann himself. So it is possible that this inscription does not refer to Flann Sinna but to Flann son of Máel Sechnaill II.

The other ten inscriptions which survive on pre-Norman reliquaries date from the eleventh century or later. If Flann Sinna indeed commissioned the *cumdach* of the Book of Durrow sometime during the late ninth or early tenth century, his action in having it inscribed seems to have been remarkably ahead of its time, and Flann son of Máel Sechnaill II may therefore be a better identification. Máel Sechnaill II himself was overlord of the Uí Néill from 1002, which is the earliest date the title 'king of Ireland' could have applied to him. One possible date for the *cumdach* might therefore be between 1002 and Flann's death in 1013 or 1042.

But there are more problems with the inscription. Firstly, it is clear that Roderick O'Flaherty made quite a careful copy of the text, even going so far as to try and suggest something of the letter style. The style suggested is not like that found on all the other eleventh- and twelfth-century inscriptions but appears to be Lombardic (Pl. XII).

Possibly related to this, it seems that the spelling of Máel Sechnaill's name does not belong to the pre-Norman period either. The 'Mail' form first appears in the Annals of Ulster in 1289, but the name Flann had disappeared from the annals before this, and had presumably fallen out of use. The combination of Flann's name with the 'Mail' form of Máel Sechnaill seems to be an impossible one for the pre-Norman period.

In summary, although there is much to suggest that this inscription might have been pre-Norman, it seems in fact to have been later. It is a type which does not appear to have existed before the eleventh century and there is a possible eleventh-century candidate for the identification. But the text appears to have been Lombardic in script and spelling, and the inscription may therefore have been a relatively late attempt to authenticate the book and possibly also its *cumdach*. In any case, it is likely to express the contemporary ownership of the Book of Durrow by a family belonging to the Ua Máelsechlainn sept, and may preserve a then-existing tradition about who originally had the book enshrined.

So whether or not either Flann ever commissioned a *cumdach* for the Book of Durrow, the inscription is probably a reliable indication that it belonged to the Ua Máelsechlainn sept by the later Middle Ages, and this supports the known provenance of the book.

Sometime after 1144, Malachy founded the Augustinian priory of St Mary at Durrow, which was then a protectorate of the O'Melaghlin (i.e. the Ua

Máelsechlainns).⁶⁹ There are late suggestions that the Book of Durrow was kept at the priory. The priory was dissolved in 1547,⁷⁰ and there is no record of the book before that date. But in 1625 Archbishop Ussher recorded that the monks of Durrow had kept an old Gospel book which they declared had belonged to St Columcille;⁷¹ and in 1654 Sir James Ware commented that the Augustinian canons at Durrow had kept a Gospel book with a cover of silver plates and an inscription that St Columcille had written it within twelve days.⁷² The Book of Durrow and what is known of its *cumdach* both match that description. Sir James Ware also noted that the book still existed at the time of writing. So if the inscription is accepted as reliable, it documents the association of the book with the Ua Máelsechlainns, who controlled the land on which the priory which kept the book was built.

Reeves 1857, 327; Petrie 1878, 158; Anderson 1881, 146; Luce *et al.* 1960, 32.

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⁶⁹Gwynn and Hadcock, *op. cit.* in note 52, 174.

⁷⁰A.A. Luce, G.O. Simms, P. Meyer and L. Bieler, *Evangelior quattuor codex Durmachensis* (Olten and Lausanne, 1960), 67.

⁷¹W. Reeves, *Adamnan's Life of St Columba* (Dublin, 1857), 327.

⁷²Luce, Simms, Meyer and Bieler, *op. cit.* in note 70, 67.

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PL. I—Crosier of St Dympna, shaft (photo: P.E. Michelli).

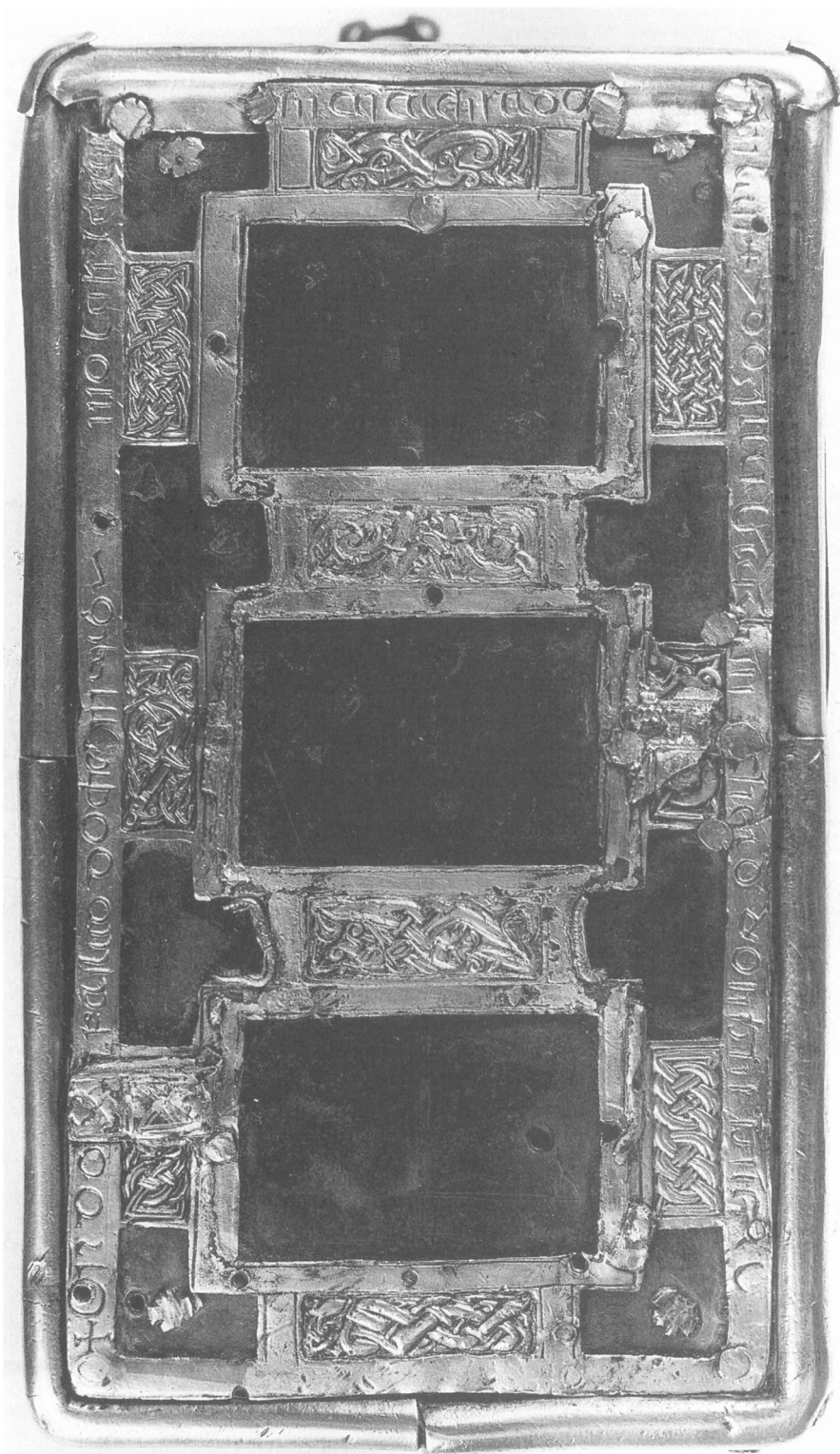


(a)

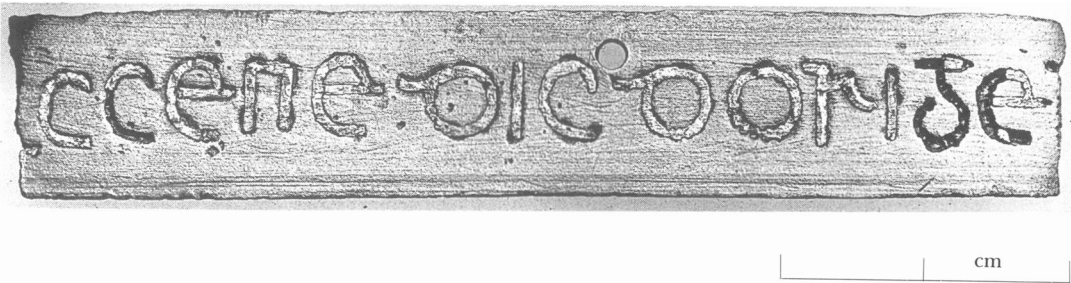


(b)

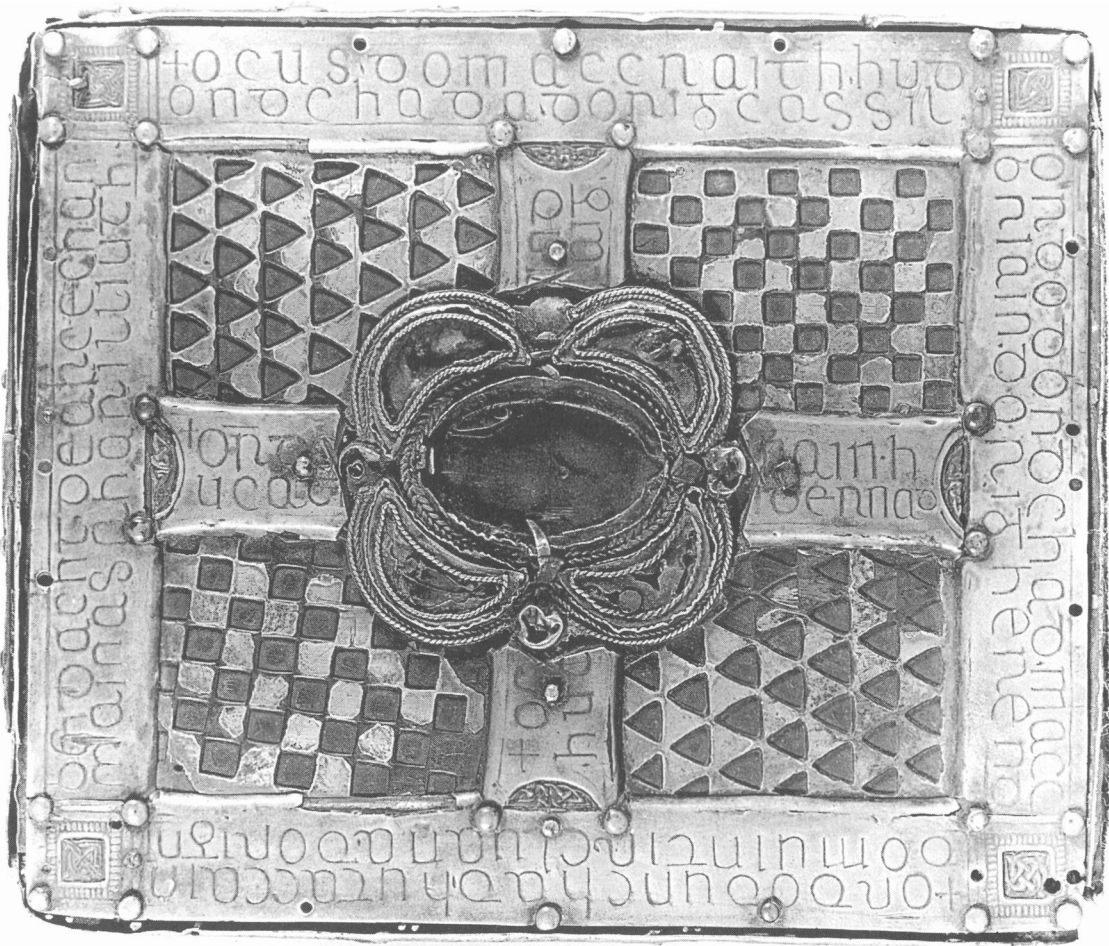
PL. II—(a) Bann bell-shrine, crest (copyright National Museum of Ireland). (b) Bann bell-shrine, crest (copyright National Museum of Ireland).



Pl. III—The *Saiséal Molaise*, lower side (copyright National Museum of Ireland).



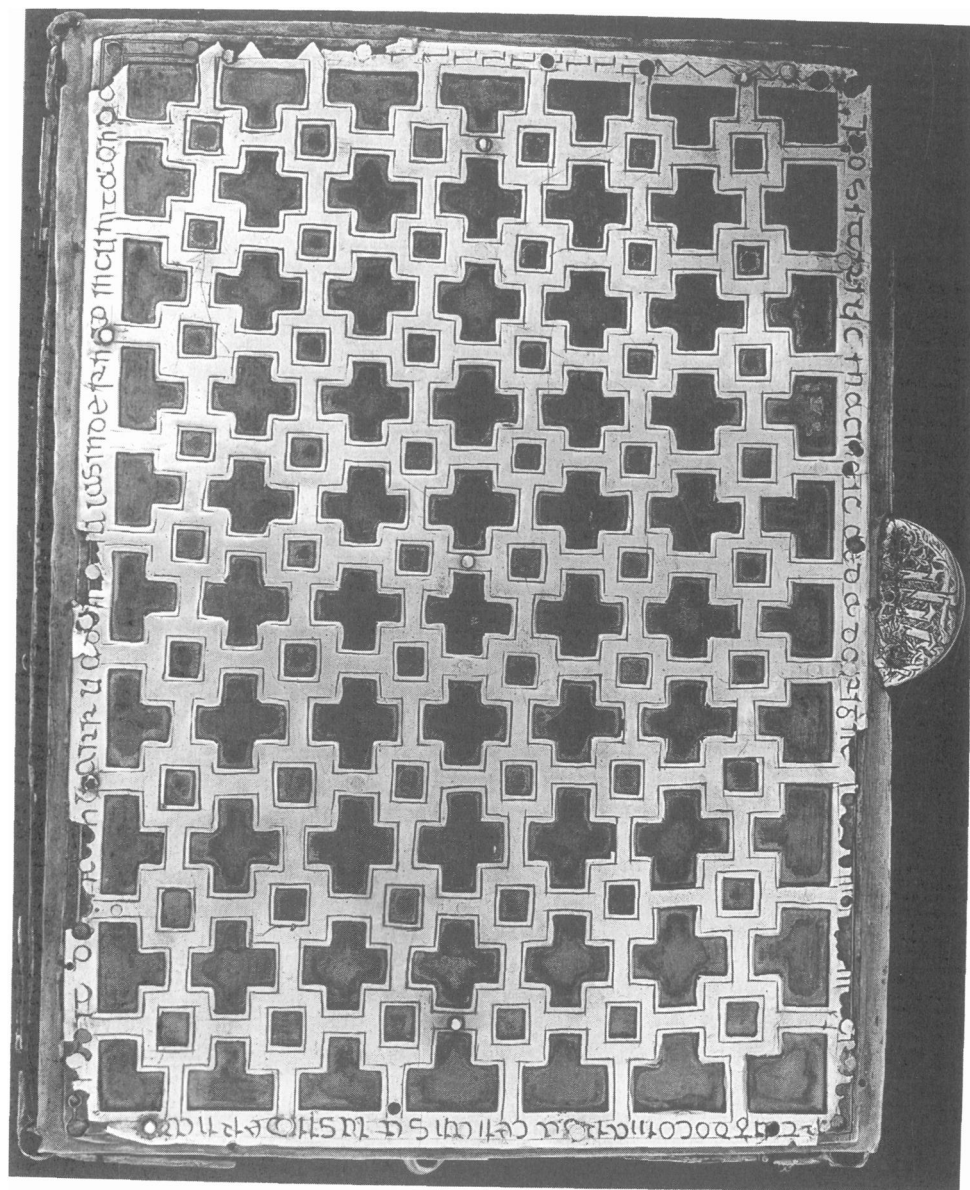
Pl. IV—Fragmentary inscription from Liathmore (copyright National Museum of Ireland).



Pl. V—Cumdach of the Stowe Missal, base (copyright National Museum of Ireland).



PL. VI—Crosier of Cú Dúilig, crook (photo: P.E. Michelli).



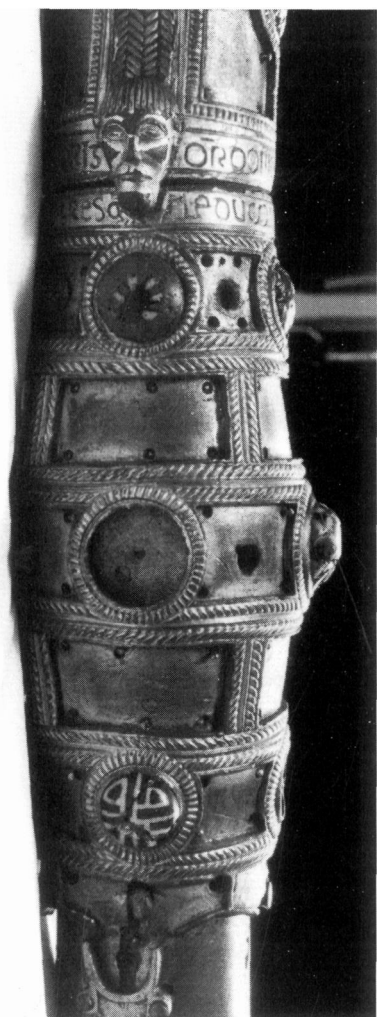
PL. VII—The *cumdach* of the *Cathach*, base (copyright National Museum of Ireland).



PL. VIII—Shrine of the Bell of the Testament. (Copyright National Museum of Ireland.)



PL. IX—The Lismore crosier, meeting of crook and knop. (a) Back (photo: P.E. Michelli). (b) Side (photo: P.E. Michelli).

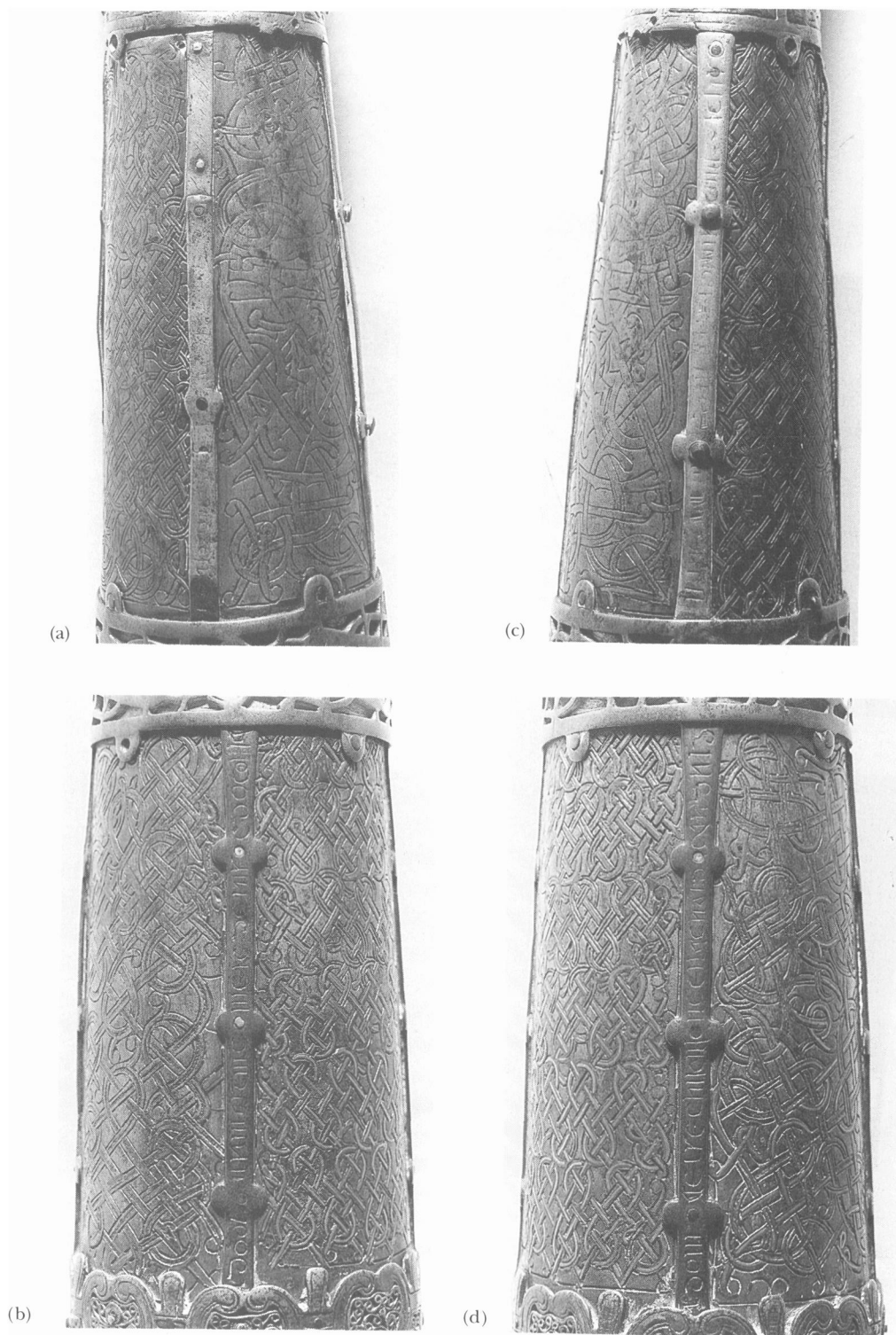


(c)

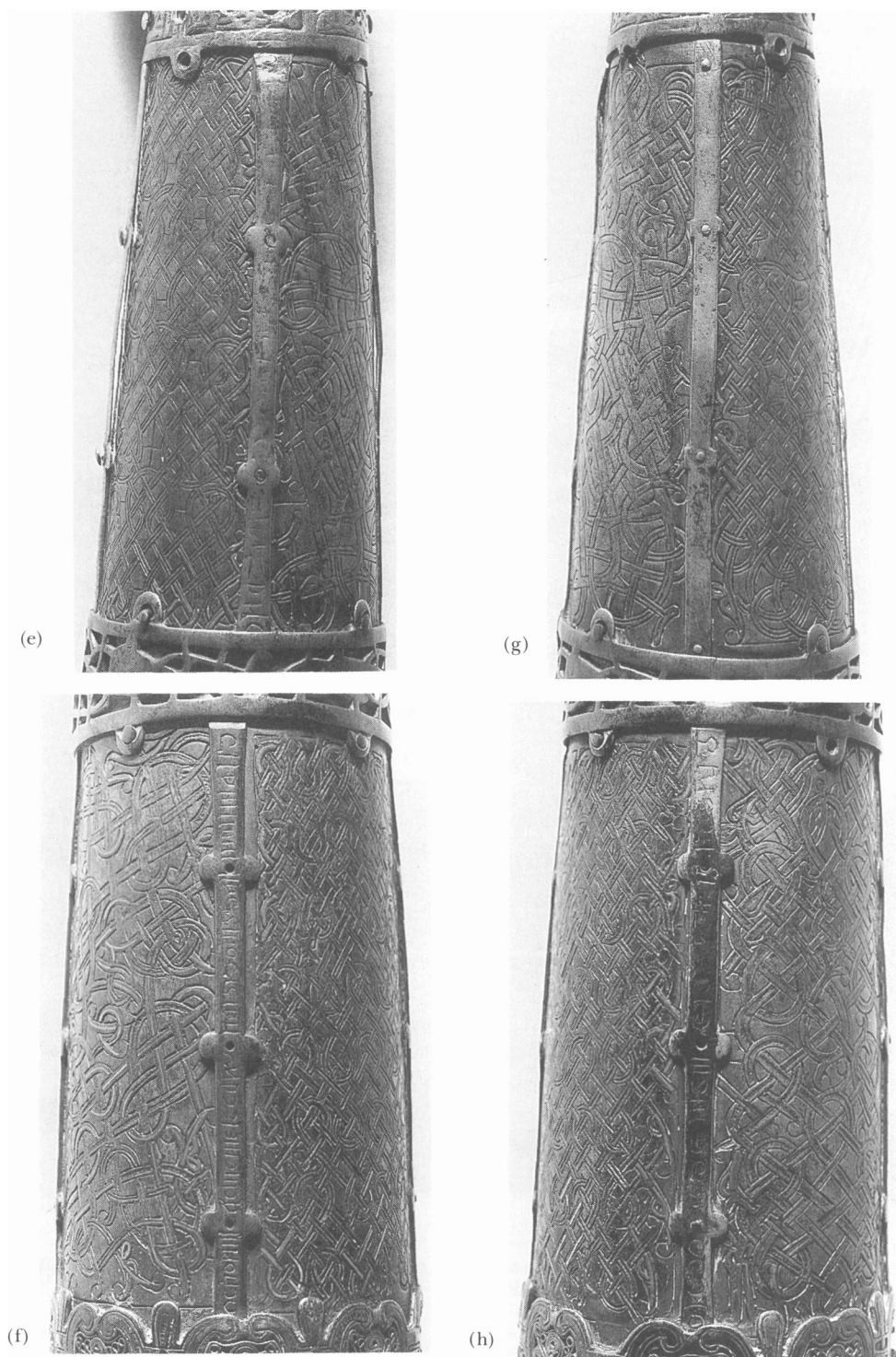


(d)

PL. IX—(continued). (c) Front (photo: P.E. Michelli). (d) Side (copyright National Museum of Ireland).



Pl. X—Shrine of St Lachtín's Arm. (a) Upper arm, palm side. (b) Lower arm, palm side. (c) Upper arm, thumb side. (d) Lower arm, thumb side. (Copyright National Museum of Ireland.)



PL. X—(continued). (e) Upper arm, back. (f) Lower arm, back. (g) Upper arm, little finger side. (h) Lower arm, little finger side. (Copyright National Museum of Ireland.)



(a)



(b)



(c)

PL. XI—The Cross of Cong. (a) Lower section of left side. (b) Upper section of left side. (c) End of left arm. (Copyright National Museum of Ireland.)



(d)



(e)



(f)



(g)

PL. XI—(continued). (d) Upper edge of left arm. (e) Left edge of cross head. (f) Top of cross head. (g) Right edge of cross head. (Copyright National Museum of Ireland.)



(h)



(i)

PL. XI—(continued). (h) Part of curved edge at base of cross head. (i) Continuation of curved edge at base of cross head. (Copyright National Museum of Ireland.)



(j)



(k)

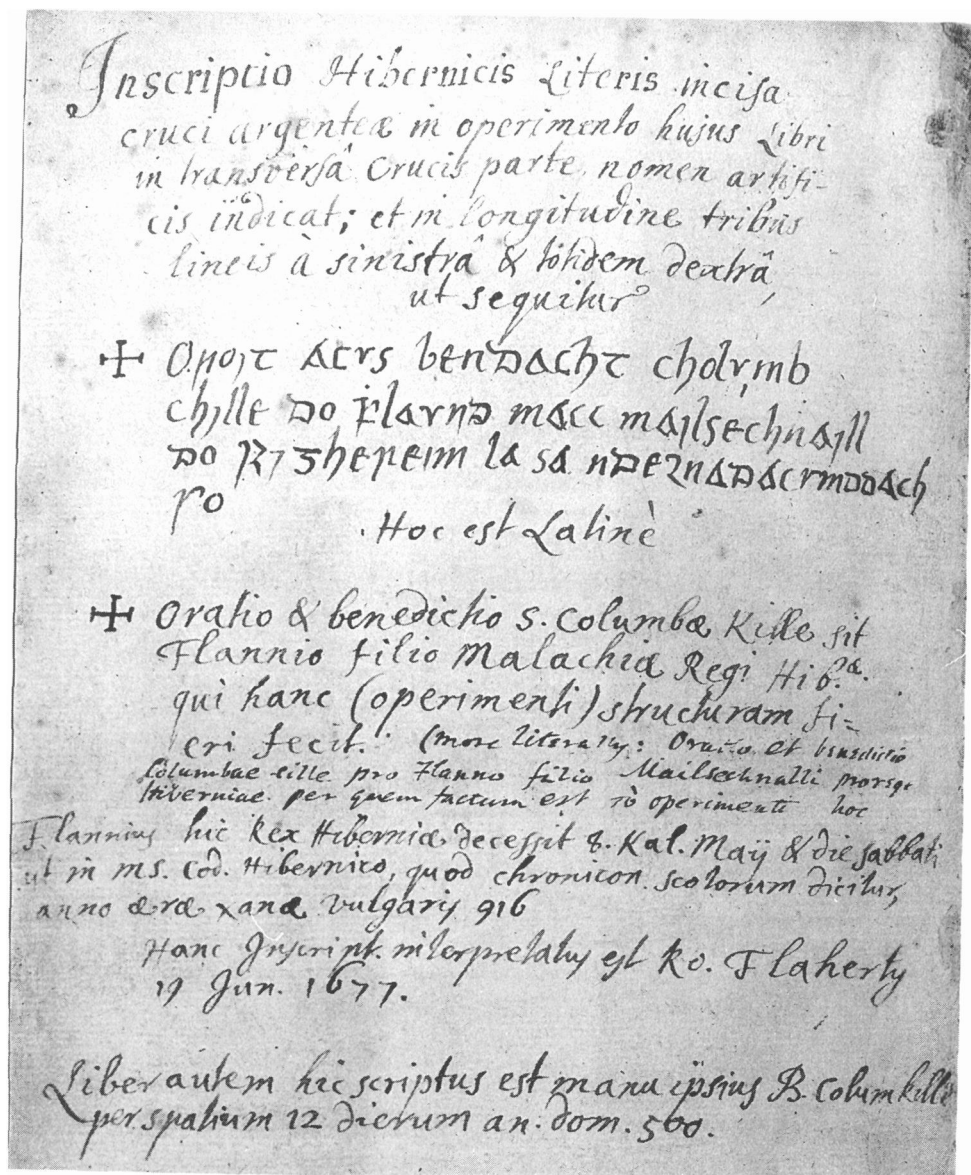


(l)



(m)

PL. XI— (continued). (j) Upper edge of right arm. (k) End of right arm. (l) Upper section of right side. (m) Lower section of right side. (Copyright National Museum of Ireland.)



PL. XII—Flyleaf of the Book of Durrow, recording inscription on lost *cumdach* (copyright the Board of Trinity College, Dublin).