

Reviews and short notices

THE KINGSHIP AND LANDSCAPE OF TARA. Edited by Edel Bhreathnach. Pp xxi, 536, illus. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2005. €65.

There is a lot of mileage in Tara. This lavishly produced volume of fourteen essays by eleven authors was intended to represent the *status quaestionis* of scholarship in 2005 relating to one of the most mysterious of all early Irish royal sites, 'Tara of the Kings'. Whether, in fact, it has done so is a moot question.

The book is arranged under two headings, Kingship and Landscape, and the fourteen essays cover five main themes to do (mostly) with the principal textual sources relating to Tara's political history and its landscape: Charles Doherty on 'Kingship in Early Ireland', John Carey on 'Tara and the supernatural', Edel Bhreathnach on 'The political context of *Baile Chuinn*' followed by a three-page summary of the manuscript copies of the text, and a new edition of it, with translation and notes, by Bhreathnach and Kevin Murray; Bhreathnach on 'The political context of the *Airgialla* charter poem, a valuable essay by Thomas Charles-Edwards on the legal content of that poem, followed by a new edition of it by Bhreathnach and Murray, to which is appended a brief two-page diplomatic transcript of a later (Middle Irish) version of the text. This textual section is followed by detailed prosopographical inventories by Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin and Paul Byrne of the kings named in *Baile Chuinn* and the *Airgialla* charter poem, and of the early queens of Tara by Anne Connon. The two prosopographies alone occupy 200 pages – almost half the bulk of the book. Though not listed in the table of contents, these prosopographies are followed by six plates of manuscript reproductions of *Baile Chuinn*, 'An important sixteenth century MS from the O'Davoren law-school in the Burren, Co. Clare' (p. 332), and a facsimile of the *Airgialla* charter poem.

These in turn are followed (though, again, not mentioned in the table of contents) by detailed genealogical tables of the Uí Néill – the political dynasties most closely associated with Tara (pp 337–51); the following three charts (pp 352–7) illustrate marriage connections with the earliest Ulster and Munster population groups (there is, curiously, no comparable chart of links with the contemporary Leinster population groups; were there none?). There follows an essay by Conor Newman on 'Re-composing the landscape of Tara', with eleven rather poor black-and-white plates and seven slightly more useful maps; 'The medieval kingdom of Brega' is the title of a further essay by Bhreathnach, followed in turn by Domhnall Mac Giolla Easpaig on the 'Significance and etymology of the place name Temair'. The author's conclusion (p. 448) that the place name/word *Temair* originally meant 'an area that [had] been cut off, undoubtedly one that had been demarcated for sacred purposes' (based on an etymology of *Temenrige/Corcu Theimne*, which he associates with Greek *temenos* and Latin *templum*) seems odd, for the site of Tara, at any rate. The place-name theme is followed also in the essay by Nollaig Ó Muraíle, on 'Temair/Tara and other placenames', which is a gazetteer of all known instances (p. 30) of the place name together with a map of their locations. A bibliography and indices complete the volume.

Readers will come to this collection with a legitimate expectation of finding an advance on previous scholarship. Most immediately valuable – because not previously attempted – are the prosopographies. Certainly an eye-opener in that regard must be Anne Connon's essay on the early queens of Tara, which, by virtue of its 102 pages, is the longest

contribution by far. The genealogical tables (pp 337–57) that accompany the list are comprehensive. The other most substantial section of the book is made up of new editions of the two principal texts. Since *Baile Chuinn* was twice studied by men of no less a calibre than Rudolph Thurneysen (1912) and Gerard Murphy (1952), and the *Airgialla* charter poem by Máirín O Daly in 1952, one is bound to ask whether these new versions represent a significant advance on the work of the older scholars. It is curious, for example, that a crucial editorial choice in the first line of the *Airgialla* charter poem centres the entire poem at Taitiu (Teltown, County Meath) rather than at Tara. This point is reinforced in *Baile Chuinn*, in which Tara is only mentioned in the last two sections. The fact that the editors believe these verses to be additions of c.720 to the original text (composed during the reign of Fínnachta Fledach – that is, c.675–95) does not inspire any great confidence. The editors regard the choice of Taitiu rather than Tara by the author of the poem as significant, and henceforth refer in their notes to the overlord in question as ‘the lord of Taitiu’. To extricate herself from this black hole, Bhreathnach (Introduction) says that this curious position represents the replacement of the focus of the most prestigious kingship in Ireland from Tara to Taitiu, caused by the success of Christianity and the realignment of power amongst the dynasties of the Uí Néill. Bhreathnach dates the *Airgialla* charter poem between 722 and 743 (pp 98–9), and more specifically to the reign of Áed Allán mac Fergaile (king of Tara, 734–43). However, her suggestion that Áed Allán is mentioned in the poem (§11a) is mistaken; the name surely refers to his ancestor, Áed Uairidnach (d. 612).

Who can say whether Niall Nóí nGiallach – or any of his supposed successors – ever ruled at Tara? Did they ever exist, in fact? It was that fine Harvard historian, John V. Kelleher, who remarked that the Uí Néill ‘emerge into history [in the late seventh century] like a school of cuttlefish, from a large ink-cloud of their own manufacture’. Not a word of their supposed history could ever be believed; their emergence in later Irish history as high-kings of Ireland, with their seat at Tara, was as much a propaganda triumph as anything else. That the propaganda has survived to the present day is borne out by the reiteration of earlier views by contributors to this volume that accept unquestioningly Tara’s pre-eminent status as the prehistoric capital of Ireland, and the symbol par excellence of its timeless, centralised and unified kingship. But the earliest demonstrable link between the Uí Néill, the kingship of Tara and rule over all Ireland is made in texts from the mid-seventh century onwards (AD 645–700); it is hard to connect this contemporary seventh-century political ambition with the reality and significance of pre-Christian Tara (which the archaeology certainly suggests). By contrast, John Carey, in his contribution on ‘Tara and the supernatural’, makes the significant point that Tara was not directly linked with the world of the *síð*, such as were Crúachu or Emain Macha. But his sources are all relatively late in date, and lack that archaic feeling that one finds in genuinely older materials. It is perhaps worth remarking that only once (p. 355) is it pointed out in this book that the third-century Greek geographer Ptolemy does not even mention Tara. In the seventh and eighth centuries, on the other hand, the Uí Néill over-kings could often claim to be the most powerful kings in Ireland, and some were undoubtedly recognised as such. Hence, medieval Irish scholars (whatever about their latter-day successors) might be excused for assuming that powerful dynasties of the present had been equally powerful in the past, that their kings had resided at Tara since time immemorial and had always been inaugurated there. Like so-called independent ‘consultants’ in our own day, there was no shortage of *periti* to be found in medieval Ireland who could be relied upon to produce ringing endorsements of such views.

While it is good to see scholars collaborating in this fashion, one should always be mindful of that old Irish proverb: *Dall cách i gceird aroile* (Every man is blind in the other man’s area of expertise). Conor Newman, for example, in his discussion of the landscape of Brega remarks incidentally (p. 382) that Brega was a thoroughly suitable environment for the invention of ogham in the fourth and fifth centuries (notwithstanding the fact that Brega is almost entirely devoid of ogham stones); and there are other examples.

Now that the new Tara bypass has been completed – at astronomical cost, both in

financial terms and also in its effect on the archaeological fraternity in Ireland – it remains to be seen whether the Tara Project in the Discovery Programme will continue with its work. The volume here reviewed gives good grounds for hoping that it will.

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BOBBIO IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES: THE ABIDING LEGACY OF COLUMBANUS. By Michael Richter. Pp 211, illus. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2008. €55.

Of all the famous Irish ‘wandering scholars’ of the early Middle Ages, undoubtedly the best known – and certainly the most influential – was Columbanus (d. 615). Born in Leinster, drawn by a youthful asceticism to Bangor (County Down), he eventually set sail for the continent, in the company of twelve other monks, probably c.595, and established three monasteries in Burgundy: Annegray, Luxeuil and Fontaine. Of the three, Luxeuil was to be by far the most influential in the later Frankish Church, but even Luxeuil pales into insignificance beside Columbanus’s last foundation (and final resting place): Bobbio, near Piacenza, in north-west Italy. Although Columbanus was destined to spend only his last three years there, Bobbio’s fame lived on long after him, and still looms large today. It is all the more surprising, therefore, to find that this new book by Michael Richter is the first lengthy study of the monastery in the English language.

The book contains twelve chapters and an epilogue recounting (1) the earliest period, with the Latin texts (but no translation) of the oldest surviving foundation charters; (2) a potted history of the saint’s life and career; (3) a similarly brief synopsis of the careers of Columbanus’s successors as abbot: Attala (615–c.625/6), Bertulf (c.625/6–43), Bobulenus (c.643–c.654) and Comgall [Camogallus] (dates uncertain); there follows (4) a cursory account of the monastic scriptorium; (5) a chapter entitled ‘A dark century’, based on the fact that ‘After Comgallus, no name of an abbot of Bobbio is known with certainty for a century’ (until 747) (p. 87); a chapter (6) on the Carolingian century is followed by three on (7) the physical layout of the monastery, (8) its economy and (9) its library; the last three chapters are concerned with (10) the career of Abbot Agilulf (c.883–96); (11) ‘Columbanus’s last journey’ (the procession of the saint’s relics to Pavia, and back again to Bobbio); and, finally, (12) a cursory (three-page) account of ‘Manuscripts with Irish-language material’. This last chapter would have sat better with the earlier one (4) on the Bobbio scriptorium; even so, it is clear that the author’s expertise lies elsewhere. For a definitive treatment of the subject, we must await the publication of Professor Mirella Ferrari’s magisterial 2007 Oxford Lyell Lectures on Bobbio’s library and manuscripts. (Her essay on the ‘spigolature ambrosiane’ from Bobbio, in the 1989 *Traube-Gedenkschrift*, pp 59–78, is not mentioned.)

The principal sources for these chapters are the (later) copies of the foundation-charters and papal exemptions; Columbanus’s own letters (of which six survive); a vita of the saint composed by a monk of Bobbio, Jonas, and ‘published’ by him in 643; a late tenth-century text known as the *Miracula Sancti Columbani*, as well as the magnificent mid-eighth-century monumental marble epitaph of Bishop Cummian still extant in the abbey museum; a late seventh-century Latin *Carmen de Synodo Ticinensi*, and a number of eighth-century Lombard royal rescripts. There is no discussion of the many textual problems attached to any of these (though the author does admit (p. 17) that the charters are ‘three documents [that] bristle with difficulties’). There is no discussion, either, of the tortuous manuscript history of Jonas’s vita, and the implications for the proper evaluation of its statements concerning Columbanus’s successors. Perhaps the author intended (or intends) to take up these matters elsewhere.

Most remarkable of all – by its absence – is any account of Bobbio’s fame in the