THE LIFE OF ST RUADÁN AND THE CURSING OF TARA

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The hagiographical sources are one of the most extensive classes of material relating to the history of the middle ages. This period was particularly fruitful for the composition of hagiography and, thanks to hagiography itself, we are provided with a vast range of information, not only on aspects of belief, cult, liturgy and church organisation, but also on social, political and cultural issues.

Irish medieval hagiography has received considerable attention from historians. The focus of such research has been mainly on the earliest lives of saints (7th to 9th centuries). However, there is still a vast field of later writings that have not yet been fully investigated. Although the main collections of Irish saints' lives were examined by Charles Plummer at the beginning of the twentieth century,[31] and subsequently by Richard Sharpe in 1991,[32] a great number of individual lives of Irish saints still await analysis and a precise dating.

There are approximately one hundred extant lives written in Latin and fifty in Irish. Some of the Latin lives survive only in continental manuscripts, but most are preserved in three thirteenth- and fourteenth-century compilations (*Codex Kilkenniensis*, *Codex Insulensis* and *Codex Salmanticensis*). The lives written in the Irish language are known mainly from various late medieval manuscripts and seventeenth-century transcripts from originals that have now perished.
These lives can be extremely useful for investigating the general cultural, social, mental and political milieux of medieval Ireland; but it is difficult to date the texts in a precise way. Out of approximately one hundred and fifty texts, only a dozen have been dated securely.

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[31] C. Plummer, 'A tentative catalogue of Irish hagiography' in *Miscellanea Hagiographica Hibernica*, ed. idem (Brussels, 1925), pp 171-285.
[32] R. Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' lives: an introduction to* Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae (Oxford, 1991).

Having realised the formerly underestimated usefulness of hagiography,[33] Irish medievalists started to investigate saints' lives in more detail and from varying points of view; but the dating problems have still remained.

In 1991, Professor Richard Sharpe made an important contribution to the study Irish medieval hagiography, providing a wide analysis of the process of compilation of the main collections of saints' lives. Furthermore, he suggested some dates for a particular group of nine (or perhaps ten) lives, which he named the 'O'Donohue group'.

The existence of this group was first hypothesised in 1960 by William Heist, the modern editor of the *Codex Salmanticensis*[34]. It has now been more fully elaborated by Sharpe that an archetype of this group within the *Salmanticensis* collection probably originated in the late eighth or early ninth century. In other words, those nine or ten lives from the *Codex Salmanticensis* are supposed to have been gathered into one collection much earlier than the compiling of the *Codex Salmanticensis*. Among so many undated lives, the addition of nine or ten securely dated texts would be a great improvement and advance in historical knowledge. However, there is no agreement about the late eighth or early ninth century date proposed by Sharpe. His hypothesis has caused considerable debate among historians and has attracted both criticism and support; there have been attempts to confirm dates for a number of the individual lives from the so-called O'Donohue group,[35] but objections have also been

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[33] The Irish hagiographical records remained unappreciated material well into the twentieth century. The lives of saints had been considered as quite useless for historical reconstruction (cf. K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: introduction to the sources* (London, 1972), pp 220-224). A new approach to the hagiographical sources has been presented by Daniel Binchy in his classic article 'St Patrick and his biographers: ancient and modern' in *Studia Hibernica*, 2 (1962), pp 7-173. Binchy was the first Irish historian who highlighted (in the case of St Patrick) the limitations of hagiographical texts as sources of information about the depicted period and its realities. On the other hand, Binchy pointed out that such texts are valuable sources of knowledge about perception and beliefs at the time when the hagiographer himself was writing.

[34] W. W. Heist (ed.), *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae e Codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi. Subsidia Hagiographica*, 25 (Brussels, 1965).

[35] M. Herbert, 'The Vita Columbae and Irish hagiography: a study of Vita Cainnechi' in *Studies in Irish Hagiography: Saints and Scholars*, ed. J. Carey, M. Herbert, P. Ó Riain (Dublin, 2001), pp 31-40; I. Sperber, 'Late, and not of special distinction?: The misunderstood Life of St Fintán of Clonenagh' in *Ossory, Laois and Leinster*, 1 (2004), pp 28-49; J. Tschen-Emmons, *The limits of Late Antiquity: St. Áed mac Bricc and Ireland in Late Antiquity* (PhD thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2003).

formulated.[36] No scholarly consensus has been achieved to date and no detailed investigation of the O'Donohue group as a whole has been elaborated since Sharpe's hypothesised date in 1991.

This paper is part of my doctoral thesis, the purpose of which is to investigate the Lives of the O'Donohue group in order to provide evidence to support the dating proposed by Sharpe.

The Life of St Ruadán is one of the texts of the O'Donohue group. Like all the Lives from this group, it is extremely interesting and the many aspects worthy of further investigation prove impossible for one historian to follow them all. Because of the length restriction of this article, I will not be able to present all the aspects I have managed to follow. Therefore I will focus on one in particular, a very characteristic story from this Life, the story of the cursing of Tara, which earned a lot of attention during the Middle Ages in Ireland and reflects the political changes in the course of centuries.

The Life of St Ruadán is preserved in three versions, two in Latin and one in Irish. The Latin recensions appear in the *Codex Salmanticensis* (**S**), *Codex Kilkenniensis* and Rawlinson MS B485, Bodleian Library (the latter two are copies of the same text, **D**). The **S** version has been published twice, by the Bollandists and by Heist. The edition of the **D** text has been given by Plummer.[37] The Irish Life is preserved in two copies, first in the Stowe IX manuscript of the RIA Library, and the second in Brussels 2324-40, and it has also been published by Plummer.[38]

Both Kenney and Plummer agree that all of the versions appear to go back to a common original,[39] although Kenney claimed that the original must have been quite

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[36] J. Carey, 'A review of Richard Sharpe's Medieval Irish saints' lives' in *Speculum*, 68 (1993), pp 260-2; A. P. Smyth, 'A review of Richard Sharpe's Medieval Irish saints' lives' in *English Historical Review*, 107 (1992), pp 676-8; P. Ó Riain, 'Codex Salmanticensis: a provenance inter Anglos or inter Hibernos?' in *A miracle of learning. Studies in manuscripts and Irish learning. Essays in honour of W. O'Sullivan*, ed. T. Barnard, D. Ó Cróinín, and K. Simms (Cambridge, 1998), pp 91-100.

[37] C. Plummer, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (2 vols, Oxford, 1910), ii, *Vita Ruadani*, pp 240-52.

[38] *Betha Ruadhain* in *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, ed. C. Plummer (2 vols, Oxford, 1922), i, pp 317-29.

[39] J. F. Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland: ecclesiastical* (New York, 1929), p. 392; Plummer, *Vitae SS Hib.*, i, p. lxxxvi.

late whilst Plummer did not make any statement in the matter of dating. Kenney argued that the original form of the Life must have been written within the community of St Ruadán, because the Latin version, preserved in **D**, describes Ruadán as a *noster senex*.[40] Furthermore, he concluded that the Life of St Ruadan in its present form 'certainly implies that the monastery of Lorrha was a thing of the past'. The problem is that the *noster senex* phrase appears only once and in only one version of the text; moreover, in my opinion, there are no distinct signs within the Life that the monastery of Lorrha 'was a thing of the past'. Another interesting issue is that the name of Lorrha appears mostly in the **D** version. The **S** Life contains only one reference to Lorrha in passing in chapter 9, where it is said that the gift received by St Ruadán, an altar cloth, remained in the church of Lorrha for a very long time.[41] The descriptions of places in both recensions are very similar, but the name of Lorrha, frequent as it is in one of them, seems to be of less importance in the other. Those factors make the issue of dating much more complicated than it seemed to Kenney.

Regarding the topographical details in the *VRuadani*, there is a distinct difference between **S** and **D**. Although, for such a short *vita*, there is a considerable number of place-names mentioned in **S**, one of the redactors of **D** seems to have been interested in localised geography, providing more detailed information about some places (in chapters 1, 10, 12, 19; some of these occurrences are discussed below). It is evident that both **S** and **D** (and also the Irish Life of Ruadán) derive from a common origin: the contents are the same, and the sequences of events are identical. The main differences between St Ruadán's Lives appear in stylistics (**D** version is more elaborated) and in the above-mentioned topographical details.

There is yet another difference which may give some meaning to the understanding of the history of all the versions. The **S** Life is very short – there are only three sentences regarding Ruadán's childhood and education,[42] and none regarding his death; and these two themes – childhood and death – were quite often subjected to a certain scrutiny by medieval Irish hagiographers (usually resulting with not long, but

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[40] Kenney, *Sources*, p. 392; Plummer, *Vitae SS Hib.*, ii, *Vita Ruadani*, c. 30.
[41] *VRuadani*, c. 9: *Iuvenis autem, secundum verbum Ruodani, munera non accepit nisi tantummodo lineam regis Kulann, que super altare Lothri multo fuit tempore*.
[42] *VRuadani*, c. 1.

significant outcomes). *VRuadani* is the only text in the O'Donohue group in which there is nothing said about the saint's death (no miracles attached, no date, no circumstances mentioned; in fact, Ruadán's death simply does not take place in this Life).

The lack of descriptions of Ruadán's childhood and death, the lack of topographical precision and consistent omissions of the name of Ruadán's main church, Lorrha, may mean that the **S** Life, as we have it, was somehow abbreviated or corrupted. The **D** text is more exact in giving topographical details, the chapter on the saint's childhood is much longer and the moment of his death is recorded and described according to a most conventional hagiographical fashion.[43] Obviously, the Irish Life cannot be compared with **S** and **D** on a level of stylistics because we are dealing with two completely different languages, but it is still possible to say on the basis of the content and expressions that the Irish Life derives from the Latin one. It is even more elaborate in descriptions and dialogues than the **D** text, yet it keeps the order of events and characteristic similes. Two fragments, the dialogue between St Ruadán and King Diarmait,[44] and the description of Ruadán's qualities,[45] are almost exactly the same in all three of the Lives.

The **S** Life may have been corrupted, but may also have been written in a way close to that which we have preserved in the codex. It is noticeably the shortest text, but it contains all the main points and significant information – **D** and the Irish Life only offer a more elaborate way of describing incidents, plus a few additional topographical remarks.[46] Thus, it seems clear that the **S** Life, as the most 'primitive' one, is also the earliest. It has been noticed not only by Sharpe,[47] but also – and much

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[43] Plummer, *Vitae SS Hib.*, ii, *Vita Ruadani*, c. 30.

[44] *VRuadani*, c. 12 (quoted below); Plummer, *Vitae SS Hib.*, ii, *Vita Ruadani*, cc 15-18; Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, i, *Betha Ruadhain*, cc xi-xiii.

[45] *VRuadani*, c. 25 (quoted above); Plummer, *Vitae SS Hib.*, ii, *Vita Ruadani*, c. 30; Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, i, *Betha Ruadhain*, c. xxii (59-60).

[46] There is, however, one exceptional addition in chapter 25 of the **D** Life: the chapter contains a description of a miraculous transporting of a vessel filled with butter over a bog. The redactor of **D** supplemented the text with the name of the bog and the story associated with it, although it had no links with saint Ruadán whatsoever. This occurrence may be interpreted as just one of the signs of the redactor's abovementioned interest in geography. (The same observation has been already made by Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, p. 306.)

[47] Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, pp 311-39, especially pp 305 & 331.

earlier – by Byrne.[48] Byrne's argument was based on the use of the word *cortex* ('bark', 'cork', 'shell') in the meaning of 'vessel', in the **S** version, replaced in **D** by the less unusual *vas*. Sharpe noticed that the word *cortex* may have become an obsolete word by the time of the composing/editing the **D** Life of Ruadán. Sharpe also pointed to another occurrence of a quite uncommon word, *boccetum* (*bocetum*/*bucetum*: 'cattle pasture'), which appears in the Life of Columba by Adomnán and two other Lives from the O'Donohue group: the *VLugidi* and the *VFinani*.[49] According to the *Non-Classical lexicon of Celtic latinity*, the word *boccetum* appears also in the **S** Life of St Daig mac Cairill and in the *Bethu Brigte*.[50] Apart from the Life of Daig, the date of which is unknown,[51] the rest of the sources in which the word *boccetum* can be found are not later than the ninth century (*Vita Columbae* – written by 704, two O'Donohue Lives: *VLugidi* and *VFinani*, presumably *circa* 800[52] and *Bethu Brigte* – ninth century). It seems probable that the use of *boccetum* may have become extinct after the ninth century. Furthermore, both Byrne and Sharpe underlined that the spelling in **S** indicates an early date for the composition of the Life, e.g. *i Pull Ruodan* (dative inflection of *poll*, whilst in **D** *juxta Pollum Ruodani*).[53] Thus, the 'primitiveness' of the **S** Life shows itself in the spelling, examples of obsolete vocabulary, and the simple and often brief narrative form, which was later elaborated by the redactor(s) of **D** and the translator(s) of the *Vita* into Irish.

According to the **S** Life, St Ruadán was of the Uí Duach. The Uí Duach occupied the lands in Osraige and they may have been a branch of the Eóganachta dynasty, although in the *VRuadani* such an association is not made. The author of the **S** Life mentions the name of the saint's father, Birr,[54] but in the genealogies (*Book of Leinster*) Ruadán is called the son of Fergus Birn.[55] In the **D** recension, St Ruadán is

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[48] Byrne, 'Derrynavlan: the historical context' in *R.S.A.I.Jn.*, 110 (1980), p. 118.

[49] *VRuadani*, c. 8; Adomnán, *Vita Columbae*, iii.23; *VLugidi*, c. 21; *VFinani*, c. 32; see Sharpe (ed.), *Life of St Columba* (London, 1995), p. 373.

[50] *The non-Classical lexicon of Celtic latinity*, ed. A. J. R. Harvey, J. Power *et al.* (Turnhout, 2006), i, p. 89; *Vita Dagaei*, c. 20; *Bethu Brigte*, c. 39.

[51] Kenney described this Life as a late abridgment (Kenney, *Sources*, p. 384).

[52] *VLugidi* and *VFinani* are discussed in corresponding chapters of the thesis in progress.

[53] Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives*, p. 331.

[54] *VRuadani*, c. 1.

[55] Ó Riain, *Corpus Geneaogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1985), 208.

described as belonging to the Eóganachta, 'and his father was called Byrra and he was of the seed of Duach'.[56] The author of the Irish Life offers a detailed pedigree for Ruadán, from his father Fergus Bern of the Uí Duach to Eógan Mór and Ailill Ólomm,[57] deriving Ruadán's origins straight from the founders of the Eóganachta dynasty. The **S** Life of Ruadán remains the only hagiographical text on Ruadán in which the name of the Eóganachta dynasty is absent.

The association of Ruadán with the Eóganachta does not appear in any of two notes devoted to him in the main corpus of the text of the early ninth century *Martyrology of Oengus* either.[58] Thus, that association may have been of no particular importance in the eighth and ninth centuries, and started to be emphasised in a later period. There are more arguments supporting such a possibility, discussed below.

The Uí Duach, as mentioned above, may have been a branch of the Eóganachta, judging by the twelfth-century sources, but it is not certain whether they are reliable on this point. The Uí Duach are associated with the Eóganachta in the glosses to the *Félire Oenguso*,[59] *Félire hUí Gormáin*[60] and in the genealogies in the *Book of Leinster*.[61] Yet the record has been preserved in nineteenth-century studies by O'Donovan and Hardiman that the Uí Duach from Osraige were believed to be kin to the Uí Máine and other peoples of Ulaid.[62] I could not find any other trace of such an association in the earlier sources. It does not mean, however, that we can exclude the possibility that the Uí Duach originated in Ulaid or that it was at some point believed that they did. They might have been from Ulaid as well as of the Eóganachta from Munster, for the association of the Uí Duach with the Eóganachta in the twelfth-century sources seems to have been created for political reasons. Therefore, none of

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[56] Plummer, *Vitae SS Hib.*, ii, *Vita Ruadani*, c. 1: *Beatissimus abbas Ruadhanus de nobilissimo genere Hybernie, id est de gente Eoghonacht, natus est. Cuius pater Byrra uocabatur, qui ortus de semine Duach* (...).
[57] Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, i, *Betha Ruadhain*, c. 1.
[58] *Félire Oengusso Céli Dé*, ed. W. Stokes (London, 1905), Apr. 15, p. 106.
[59] *Fél. Oeng.*, pp 224-5. However, the association is not explicit. It is a gloss in which at the first instance Fintan Maeldub is described to be of the Uí Duach, and afterwards as one of the Eóganachta Caisil.
[60] *Martyrology of Gorman*, ed. W. Stokes, (London, 1895), p. 89.
[61] M. A. O'Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1962), 148a50, 151a27; E. Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum Locorum et Tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae* (Dublin, London, 1910), p. 668.
[62] J. Hardiman, *Ancient Irish deeds and writings* (Dublin, 1826), p. 17; J. O'Donovan, *Tribes and customs of Hy Maine*, quoted after Hogan, *Onomasticon*, p. 668.

the Uí Duach associations appear reliable enough to let us entirely exclude the other. The only fact which can be reconstructed in the matter of the Uí Duach genealogical association is that since the twelfth century they were believed or promoted to be connected to the Eóganachta. It is not possible to tell what their actual association really was.

Félire Oengusso and the **D** Life give 15 April as the feast day of St Ruadán.[63] There is only one annalistic entry on St Ruadán in the *Annals of Tigernach*,[64] but the time of his activity can also be estimated by the personages mentioned in his Life: it makes him contemporary with St Finnian of Clonard (d. 549),[65] Diarmait mac Cerbaill (reigned 544-565 or 549-572),[66] Brendan of Clonfert (died 577 or 583),[67] Áed mac Bricc (died 589),[68] Colum Cille (died 597),[69] Baithine (died 598 or 600)[70] and, finally, Colmán Elo (died 611).[71] Thus, one can assume that St Ruadán was believed to have lived in the second half of the sixth century.

While adolescent, Ruadán studied under St Finnian in Clonard, and then he went to Múscraige to found his own monastery, but was told by an angel that it was not the place meant for him.[72] *In hoc loco tua non erit resurrectio* ('your resurrection will not be in this place'), the angel said. So he went *ad eum locum ubi nunc est civitas eius* (...) *et illic suam fundavit civitatem* ('to that place where now his church is (...) and there he founded his church'). Curiously, the hagiographer seems to avoid naming the place. The **D** version contains the name of Lorrha at this point.[73] Lorrha, having been pointed by the angel as the place of Ruadán's resurrection, by godly appointment was to preserve St Ruadán's relics and so to become the centre of St Ruadán's cult, and yet the author of the **S** Life seems oblivious of its name.

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[63] *Fél. Oeng.* 15 April, p. 106; Plummer, *Vitae SS Hib.*, ii, *Vita Ruadani*, c. 30.
[64] *Ann. Tig.* 583.3: *Ruadhan Lothra quieuit secundum alios.*
[65] *A.U.²* 549.3; *Chronicle of Ireland* 549.3.
[66] *A.U.²* 544.1, 565.1, 572.4; *Chronicle of Ireland* respectively. J. F. Byrne, *Irish kins and high-kings* (Dublin, 1973), p. 281.
[67] *A.U.²* 577.3, 583.5; *Chronicle of Ireland* 577.6.
[68] *A.U.²* 589.1, *Chronicle of Ireland* 589.2.
[69] *A.U.²* 595.1; *Chronicle of Ireland* 595.1.
[70] *A.U.²* 598.1; *Chronicle of Ireland* 598.1.
[71] *A.U.²* 611.3; *Chronicle of Ireland* 611.3.
[72] *VRuadani*, c. 2.
[73] Plumer, *Vitae SS Hib.*, ii, *Vita Ruadani*, c. 2.

However, it is difficult to claim that the author of the **S** version of the Life was unaware of the fact that Lorrha was the main centre of Ruadán's cult. It is worth restating that he did mention Lorrha once,[74] but he did not put any stress on its importance. He seems rather to have assumed that the name of Lorrha as Ruadán's main ecclesiastical site was obvious to everybody who would read the *Vita*. It is striking that there is no attempt to advertise the position of the church of Lorrha, and there are two ways of explaining it: either the author was not at all involved and interested in the doings of Lorrha, or – quite opposite – he wrote the Life entirely for internal purposes of the church of Lorrha (like daily reading in a refectory), therefore there was no point in mentioning the name of the church repeatedly.

How did it happen that the church of Lorrha, having been omitted in political calculations around 800 so much that the author of the Life did not bother himself to advertise its position more strongly, suddenly appeared to be noticed by, and associated with, the Eóganachta dynasty in the twelfth century? *Circa* 800 the Eóganachta already had a chosen saint, promoted in their political struggle against the influence of the church of Armagh and the Uí Néill – saint Ailbe and his church of Emly.[75] The church of Emly was very important at that time, enjoying the full support of the kings of Munster, and the church of Lorrha may have been overshadowed by it. As the years went by, the authority of the Eóganachta over Munster diminished and the link with the church of Emly weakened. By the mid-tenth century the Eóganachta lost the overkingship of Munster[76] and the strong connection with Emly disappeared from the sources. When in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries the Eóganachta (precisely Eóganachta Caisil) once again contended for the seat of Cashel and overkingship of Munster with the rival dynasty of Dál Cais,[77] the political need of ecclesiastical and spiritual support for the Eóganachta reappeared. And the sudden appearance of the association of St Ruadán and his church with the Eóganachta may be a reflex of those circumstances.

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[74] In passing, describing the gift of an altar cloth given to Ruadán; see above.

[75] The Life of Ailbe is also included in the O'Donohue group and is discussed in one of the chapters of my thesis.

[76] Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, p. 176.

[77] M.-T. Flanagan, 'High-kings with opposition, 1072 – 1166' in *N.H.I.*, i, p. 899 ff.

It seems apparent that the association Of Ruadán with the Eóganachta dynasty was a later development, reflected in later Lives (the **D** version of the Latin Life and the Irish Life) by much stronger indications of Lorrha as the centre of St Ruadán's activity and by depicting Ruadán as mainly a Munster saint. In twelfth-century sources, like *The Book of Leinster*,[78] marginal glosses in *Félire Oengusso*[79] or *The Book of Rights*[80] Ruadán is clearly localised to Munster and associated with the Eóganachta dynasty – as he is also in the **D** version of his Life. *The Book of Rights* is a tract containing details of the mutual responsibilities of the king of Cashel (regarded as a high-king of Munster) and the sub-kings of Munster. This tract is a witness of the Eóganachta Caisil claims to authority over Munster. The twelfth-century association of St Ruadán with the Eóganachta may have been a result of the saint's suitability to represent the interests and aspirations of the Eóganachta dynasty.

This suitability is to be found in the story of the cursing of Tara.[81] It describes Diarmait mac Cerbaill, the Uí Néill king of Tara – who is, by the way, the only identifiable secular character mentioned in the *VRuadani* - as the king of all Ireland, who introduced peace to all its lands. But one of his heralds, Bac Lomm, inspired by the devil, was violating the strongholds of Ireland until he was killed by one of the lords, Áed Guaire. Áed, fearing for his life, ran away to seek refuge with St Ruadán, but the king found him there and took him to Tara to punish him with death. Ruadán went after them and demanded that Áed should be set free, but Diarmait did not wish to listen to the saint. Ruadán took out his bells and sang psalms, and the sons of twelve kings of Tara died that night, so the kings forced Diarmait to negotiate with the saint. And this section of the **S** Life describes the saint and the king duelling with the weapons of malediction.

Diarmait:

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[78] Ó Riain, *Corp. Geneal. SS Hib.*, 208.
[79] *Fél. Oeng.*, Apr. 15, pp 114-5.
[80] *Lebor na cert*, ed. and trans. M. Dillon (Dublin, 1962), p. 19.
[81] *VRuadani*, c. 12.

I am defending the justice of the state that peace should be in every place, you are defending evil. You shall receive from the Lord the vengeance of blood, for your paruchia *will fall first in the whole of Ireland and it will retreat from you.*

Ruadán:

Your kingdom will fall first and none of your line shall rule for ever.

Diarmait:

Your place will be deserted and swine living there shall destroy it with [their] *nostrils.*

Ruadán:

The state of Tara shall be deserted many hundreds of years earlier and without a [single] *inhabitant for ever.*

Diarmait:

Your body will have a taint and one of your limbs shall die. Your eye, blinded, will not be seeing light.

Ruadán:

Likewise your body shall be killed by your enemies and your limbs shall be separated into parts cruelly.

Diarmait:

The wildest boar will dig under your border stone with its tusk.[82]

Ruadán:

Your thigh, which was not raised before me,[83] *shall not be buried with your corpse, but a man will throw it on a pile of sheep's manure.*

Diarmait:

You are defending violation of the law, I am defending the truth. You are bringing disorder to my kingdom; but God loves you more. Go then, and take your man, and pay his price.

The story of the cursing of Tara is preserved also as an Irish text.[84] Richard Sharpe expressed his belief that the original Irish version of this story was transmitted into

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[82] *Aper ferocissimus suo dente tuam piramidem perfodiet.* The word *piramis/pyramis* is rare in medieval Latin and usually applied to the Egyptian pyramids. However, it may also mean 'sign of a border', 'border-stone'. This simile may describe the violation of the borders of Diarmait's lands and their desolation by wild beasts plundering. One could also assume that the author meant Diarmait's grave *per analogiam* with the next sentence, where it is spoken of a place of a burial, too.
[83] I.e. the king did not get up to welcome the saint and therefore showed him disrespect.

Latin at a 'relatively late date',[85] and inserted into the **S** Life of Ruadán. His reason is that in the chapter of the *VRuadani* containing this story, the late form of the name 'Áed' – 'Odo' – is consistently used. The argument seems reasonable, although I would not go so far (nor actually does Sharpe) as to say that the **S** Life did not contain the story of the cursing of Tara at any earlier point of its redaction; I would rather be inclined to believe that the shorter, less dramatically depicted scene, possibly without the dialogue, was replaced with the Latin translation of the story existing concurrently in Irish.

In the Irish versions Áed is slain by Diarmait, who violated the sanctuary at Lorrha when pursuing his victim. Ruadán is not demanding freedom for Áed, but makes his vengeance by assembling other saints, the 'Twelve Apostles of Ireland', of whom he was one, and solemnly cursing Tara and predicting Diarmait's death.

A death-tale, *aided*, is quite common in secular Irish literature. There are poems preserved on the deaths of the King Conchobar and Queen Medb, and of Cúchulain, and many other characters of Irish mythology. There is also the *Aided Diarmata*, its earliest versions preserved in fourteenth-century manuscripts,[86] in which the story of Ruadán's cursing of Tara is retold with details very similar to chapter 12 of the *Vita Ruadani*, together with the description of the clerics chanting 'the psalms of commination' and ringing their bells 'against the king'.[87] *Uraicecht na ríar*, the eighth-century poem on the grades of the poets, gives the details of a procedure of cursing according to customary Old Irish law,[88] a procedure which used to be concluded with composing a satire against the wrongdoer and reciting it against him. The poetical similes in the dialogue between St Ruadán and King Diarmait may reflect this customary tradition, although not necessarily, or just partially – since there

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[84] S. H. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (2 vols, London, 1892), i, 72-82, ii, 76-88; Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, pp 96-7.

[85] Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' lives*, p. 332.

[86] *Lebor buidhe Lecain* (Yellow Book of Lecan) and *Lebor Ui Maine* (Book of Uí Máine). The text of the *Aided Diarmata* has been published by S. H. O'Grady in *Silva Gadelica*, vol. i (London, 1892), pp 72-82.

[87] O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, p. 77: *Ro gabsat na cléirigh iar sin salmu escaine ocus ro bensat a cluco forsin rígh*.

[88] L.Breatnach (ed.), *Uraicecht na ríar* (Dublin, 1987), p. 139.

is a possibility of the existence of influence of another kind: the influence of ecclesiastical literature.

In the Life of St Ruadán the word *clamor* is used to describe the cursing chant of the clerics. *Clamor* may mean a shout, a battle-cry, a regular liturgical chant, but also a liturgical ceremony of malediction.[89] The abovementioned guarantor-list of the late seventh-century *Law of the Innocents*, where the name of the abbot of Lorrha appears, contains a sanction clause with a list of psalms to be used in malediction against those who violate the law.[90] Furthermore, to the extant form of the Law of the Innocents a Middle Irish poem has been attached (composed probably in the tenth century), which in its essentials repeats the threat of the malediction psalms to be used against those who were insubordinate.[91]

The *Fragmentary Annals* under the year 677 also provide an example of the use of maledictory psalms (although there is a need to remember that these annals are quite often chronologically unreliable). St Adomnán is depicted as asking king Fínnechta Fledach to talk to him about the recently remitted *bóaire*, the cattle tribute, but the king refuses, so Adomnán sends such an answer to him:

Go to him and tell him: I will sing fifty psalms meanwhile, and there is a psalm in that fifty in which I shall pray to the Lord that neither son nor descendant of yours, nor any man of the same name, shall ever take the kingship of Ireland.[92]

Therefore, the practice of malediction by psalms is confirmed to be an early phenomenon and does not undermine the early date for the *VRuadani*. The elaborate story with Diarmait mac Cerbaill in the centre of interest does not do that either, as King Diarmait from the seventh century onwards featured prominently in Irish

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[89] L. K. Little, *Benedictine maledictions: liturgical cursing in Romanesque France* (Ithaca, New York, 1993).
[90] M. Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Guarantor-List of Cáin Adomnáin, 697' in *Peritia*, 1 (1982), p. 200. Cf. D. M. Wiley, 'The maledictory psalms' in *Peritia*, 15 (2001), pp 263-79.
[91] O. O'Neill, 'A Middle Irish poem on the maledictory psalms' in *Journal of Celtic Studies*, 3 (1981-2), pp 40-50.
[92] *Fragmentary annals*, p. 27.

literature.[93] Although it is possible – as Sharpe suggested[94] – that the story of the cursing of Tara in its present shape was inserted into the *VRuadani* at a later stage of redaction, it does not mean that the story was not there earlier, only in a different, simpler and shorter form, like the other chapters of the Life.

The **S** Life of St Ruadán, although probably corrupted and containing a later insertion, still bears the marks of the early date of composition. Its 'primitive' form gives a strong impression that it is the earliest version of all the extant Lives of Ruadán. The use of distinctively early vocabulary (*cortex*, *boccetum*) again strengthens this impression. The fact that St Ruadán is not depicted as a specifically Munster saint, associated with Eóganachta, clearly indicates that the Life had been composed before the tradition of Ruadán's strong association with the Eóganachta became widespread and promoted. Apart from the probably inserted story of the cursing of Tara, there is no element in the Life which could seriously undermine the hypothesis of the early date of its composition.

The story of the cursing of Tara by St Ruadán in the sixth century, although of a clearly legendary character, has of course some historical justification as it records the official abandonment of the pagan sacral kingship. But for the author of the Life of Ruadán it was just a reflex of distant changes which took place centuries ago, without any precise historical reliability. The more important issue which can be noticed when investigating the changes in the Life of St Ruadán is the shifting of his political and geographical associations in the course of the evolution of the text. The story of the cursing of Tara was a famous and widespread motif during the Middle Ages in Ireland and there are plenty of aspects of it to investigate, plenty of interpretations, remakes and versions of the story. And quite probably all of them originated in the hagiographical tradition of the earliest version of the Life of Ruadán, which makes the issue of dating even more crucial. Hopefully, the thesis in progress will satisfy this demand.

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[93] E. Bhreathnach, *The kingship and landscape of Tara* (Dublin, 2005), pp 49-56.
[94] Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' lives*, p. 332.

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