



Early mechanisms of abbatial succession: the case of Iona (563–704)

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Comments about succession to the Iona abbacy rarely go beyond the observation that most of the early abbots – but not all – belonged to the Cenél Conaill, the kindred of Iona's founder, Saint Columba. This point privileges the role of eligibility criteria in the succession process at the expense of agency. This paper concerns itself with the specific mechanism that mediated the Iona abbacy: the central question is not 'who' could succeed, but rather 'how' they succeeded. It will be suggested that abbatial authority was passed from one abbot to the next via designations, whereby the reigning abbot appointed his own successor.

From the foundation of the monastery on Iona in c.563,¹ the abbot of Iona headed a network of centres across Ireland and Britain that were founded by, or associated with, Saint Columba. It is succession to the

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¹ The Annals have been subject to much discussion in recent decades where disagreements surrounding the chronology of their entries have been pronounced, see particularly D.P. McCarthy, *The Irish Annals: Their Genesis, Evolution and History* (Dublin, 2010); N. Evans, *The Present and Past in Medieval Irish Chronicles* (Woodbridge, 2010). This article utilizes the traditional dating; for a revised chronology based on the Clonmacnoise group of Annals see D.P. McCarthy, 'Chronological Synchronisation of the Irish Annals' (<https://www.scss.tcd.ie/misc/kronos/chronology/synchronisms/annals-chron.htm>) [accessed 20 August 2020]. References to *Annals of Ulster* and *Annals of Tigernach* [AU and AT henceforth] are to *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)*, ed. and trans. S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill (Dublin, 1983); *The Annals of Tigernach*, ed. and trans. G. Mac Niocaill (<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100002A/>) [accessed August 2020]. Mac Niocaill's edition of AT uses Daniel McCarthy's chronology and *The Annals of Tigernach*, ed. and trans. W. Stokes, 2 vols (Felinfach, 1993; repr. from *Revue Celtique* 17–18 (1896–7)). AU 563.4, pp. 82–3; AT 562.

abbacy of this monastery – or the *matrix ecclesia*, as it is called by Abbot Adomnán in his *Vita Columbae* – that concerns us here.² Abbatial succession at Iona is usually couched in the terms set out by William Reeves: that the abbacy was disproportionately held by men from a dynastic subgroup of the Uí Néill, the Cenél Conaill.³ While this point tackles succession through the lens of *eligibility*, it does not take into account the means, or the *mechanism*, by which transfers of authority took place. This paper seeks to answer the question: *how* did the abbacy pass from one holder to the next?⁴

To this end, examples of succession at work within the Insular milieu, drawn from Anglo-Saxon Northumbria and Irish legalistic material, will be considered in brief. Following this, an important though problematic reference to succession in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* will be examined. This will provide the backdrop to a study of succession at Iona in the 563–704 period which will conclude with a brief consideration of the period after Adomnán's death in 704. Ultimately, it will be suggested that a consistent succession mechanism was employed at Iona, whereby the reigning abbot, who designated his own successor, monopolized agency in the succession process.⁵

Northumbria

Bede's *Historia abbatum* provides evidence for succession mechanisms current in Northumbria.⁶ In the text, Benedict Biscop, the founder of Wearmouth and Jarrow, delivers an enthusiastic endorsement of elective succession on his deathbed:

² Quotes and translations of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* [VC henceforth] are to *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, ed. and trans. A.O. Anderson and M.O. Anderson, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1991). Adomnán, VC I.5, pp. 28–9: 'mother church'.

³ W. Reeves, 'On the Early System of Abbatial Succession in Irish Monasteries', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 6 (1853–6), pp. 447–51, at pp. 450–1; *idem*, *Life of Saint Columba, Founder of Hy*, The Historians of Scotland 6 (Edinburgh, 1874), p. cvi. Brian Lacey suggested that the Cenél Conaill's affiliation to the 'Uí Néill' was a genealogical fiction. He posited a distinction between 'Cenél Conaill proper' and a series of independent Donegal kingdoms, B. Lacey, *Cenél Conaill and the Donegal Kingdoms, AD 500–800* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 145–66. This challenges the view that early Iona abbots stemmed from the Cenél Conaill, as four abbots (Laisrén, Ségéne, Cumméne, and Fáilbe) were from the 'Cenél Duach', a formerly independent kingdom, Lacey, *Cenél Conaill*, pp. 98–9.

⁴ For abbatial succession mechanisms in a broader context see S. Wood, *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 127–39.

⁵ Designated succession was imagined for Iona and elsewhere, with the caveat that the community's wishes were taken into account, in J. Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development* (London, 1931), p. 265.

⁶ Quotes and translations of Bede's *Historia abbatum* [HA henceforth] are to *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, ed. and trans. C.W. Grocock and I.N. Wood (Oxford, 2013).

Ideoque multum cauetote fratres semper, ne secundum genus umquam, ne deforis aliunde, uobis patrem queratis. Sed iuxta quod regula magni quondam abbatis Benedicti, iuxta quod priuilegii nostri continent decreta, in conuentu uestrae congregationis communi consilio perquiratis . . .

On this account you should always be very careful, brothers, not to look for a father for yourselves according to family ties or from anywhere outside this community. You should instead look for one by sharing your opinions in the meeting of your community, and following the rule of that great Benedict who was once an abbot and following what the decretals in our letter of privilege contain.⁷

The point is laboured at the close of Ceolfrid's abbacy, where the brothers are urged to elect their own leader: 'Ut iuxta sui statuta priuilegii iuxtaque regulam sancti abbatis Benedicti'.⁸ Bede depicts elective succession in use, at least tacitly, in Sigfrith's election at Wearmouth upon Eosterwine's death, even if Ceolfrid is given a role and Benedict Biscop's ultimate approval was important.⁹ The *Historia abbatum* and the *Vita Ceolfridi* claim that Biscop fashioned his rule from the best practice of seventeen monasteries that he encountered during his travels.¹⁰ Whatever the prescriptions of Biscop's *regula mixta*, Bede claims that his succession principle was essentially that of the *Regula Benedicti*.¹¹

It must be emphasized that the *Historia abbatum* projects a contemporary set of ideals upon the past. That elective succession was not immemorial is clear, given the fact that on his deathbed Biscop appointed Ceolfrid to the abbacy of Jarrow, Eosterwine to the abbacy of Wearmouth, and finally Ceolfrid as the head of both centres.¹² While Bede depicts Biscop as eager to prevent strictly familial

⁷ Bede, *HA* §11, pp. 48–9. The papal privilege has been lost, however, it may have advocated elective succession and limited outside interference, Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, pp. xxxiv–xxxv; P. Wormald, 'Bede and Benedict Biscop', in S. Baxter (ed.), *The Times of Bede: Studies in Early English Christian Society and its Historian* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 3–29, at pp. 7–9. It targeted hereditary succession according to *Vita Ceolfridi* §16, in *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, pp. 94–7.

⁸ Bede, *HA* §16, pp. 62–3: 'Following the statutes of their privileges and the Rule of the holy abbot Benedict'. Ceolfrid is also associated with elective succession in *Vita Ceolfridi* §30, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, pp. 108–9.

⁹ Bede, *HA* §10, pp. 44–7. For Sigfrith's succession see Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, pp. xxxiii–xxxiv; C. O'Brien, 'Hwaetberht, Sigfrith and the Reforming of Wearmouth and Jarrow', *EME* 25 (2017), pp. 301–19.

¹⁰ Bede, *HA* §11, pp. 46–9; *Vita Ceolfridi* §6, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, pp. 84–5.

¹¹ *Regula Benedicti* §64, ed. R. Hanslik, *Regula Benedicti*, CSEL 75 (Vienna, 1960), pp. 163–6. See also, Wormald, 'Bede and Biscop', pp. 3–7.

¹² Bede, *HA* §§7, 13, pp. 36–41, 51–3. See also, *Vita Ceolfridi* §§12, 16, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, pp. 90–1, 94–5.

succession, in reality Eosterwine was Biscop's cousin and Ceolfrid may also have been a relation, making plain the uncomfortable contradiction that lay behind his deathbed directive.¹³ This contradiction reverberates throughout the text, as Bede's attempts to justify the appointments of Ceolfrid and Eosterwine make clear.¹⁴ Bede sought to retrospectively enshrine the status quo through the affirmation of the founder. The shift towards elective succession represents a rejection of familial appointments,¹⁵ and this rejection informs the *Historia abbatum*, which attempts to backdate the emergence of the succession principle. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to underestimate wider commitment to designated succession from this evidence alone.¹⁶

One need look no further than to the (in)famous Wilfrid, who, despite claims by his biographer that he introduced the Benedictine Rule into Northumbria,¹⁷ did not subscribe to elective succession practices and on his deathbed arranged that his foundations would be 'sub praepositis a se electis'.¹⁸ Wilfrid's preference for designated succession survived his bout of sickness, as evident by his appointment of Tatberht as his successor at Ripon, a position he was *sine scrupulo possideat*.¹⁹ Wilfrid's understanding that he was free to designate his successor is reiterated by his appointment of Acca, who (unlike Tatberht) was not a kinsman, to the abbacy of Hexham.²⁰ Wilfrid was hardly unique in appointing his own successor or having a preference for relatives. Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* relates how Chad was made abbot of Lastingham by his brother and predecessor Cedd, while Abbess Hereburh planned to install her daughter as abbess of Watton.²¹ Similarly, Æthelwulf's early ninth-century poem, *De abbatibus*, depicts a centre with a clear familial element, with two sets of brothers holding the abbacy one after the other; although no succession mechanisms are explicitly stated, it is telling that an abbot was immediately followed by

¹³ Bede, *HA* §§8, 13, pp. 40–1, 52–3. See also, O'Brien, 'Reforming', pp. 304–5; Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, p. xxxiii.

¹⁴ Bede, *HA* §§7–8, pp. 36–43.

¹⁵ O'Brien, 'Reforming', pp. 301–19.

¹⁶ See D. Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400–1200*, 2nd edn (London, 2017), p. 180.

¹⁷ Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi* §47, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge, 1927), pp. 98–9.

¹⁸ Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi* §62, ed. and trans. Colgrave, pp. 134–5: 'Under the superiors chosen by himself'. See also, S. Foot, 'Wilfrid's Monastic Empire', in N.J. Higham (ed.), *Wilfrid: Abbot, Bishop, Saint; Papers from the 1300th Anniversary Conferences* (Donington, 2013), pp. 27–39.

¹⁹ Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi* §63, ed. and trans. Colgrave, pp. 136–9.

²⁰ Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi* §65, ed. and trans. Colgrave, pp. 140–1.

²¹ Quotes and translations of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* [*HE* henceforth] are to *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969). Bede, *HE* III.23, V.3, pp. 286–9, 460–1.

his brother.²² The shift towards elective succession at Wearmouth-Jarrow depicted in the *Historia abbatum* should not be viewed as representative of Northumbrian practice generally. Designative succession was practised and was utilized by Biscop himself, despite Bede's attempts to embellish the fact. There were several succession mechanisms at work; however, as the situation at Wearmouth-Jarrow illustrates, no system was inexorable.

Legalistic sources

With this in mind, it is worth considering two very different texts that deal explicitly with succession, the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis* (*Hibernensis* henceforth) and *Córus Bésnai*.²³ The *Hibernensis* is an early eighth-century collection of canon law compiled by Cú Chuimne († 747) and Ruben of Dair Inis († 725). The former was affiliated with Iona and thus provides a link to the centre under discussion in this paper. We are concerned with §36 of the text, *De principatu* ('Concerning Leadership').²⁴ Engagement with the *Hibernensis* demands terminological clarification: specifically, what was the *principatus* and who could be *princeps*? The *principatus* refers to administrative leadership of an ecclesiastical foundation, while the *princeps* refers to the person who holds jurisdiction over the centre and its temporalities.²⁵ The *principatus* was not intrinsically linked to any specific office,²⁶ and at various points in the *Hibernensis* the *princeps* is equated with a bishop,²⁷ an abbot,²⁸ or a man not in orders.²⁹ Moreover, the *Hibernensis* features a multiplicity of seemingly

²² Æthelwulf, *De abbatibus* §§13, 25, ed. and trans. A. Campbell, *De abbatibus* (London, 1967), pp. 32–3, 38–9. See also, Campbell, *De abbatibus*, p. xxix.

²³ Quotes and translations of the *Hibernensis* are to *The Hibernensis*, ed. and trans. R. Flechner, 2 vols, *Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Canon Law* 17 (Washington, 2019). I am indebted to Dr Flechner for giving me access to his edition before publication.

²⁴ *Hibernensis* §36, vol. 1, pp. 255–77; vol. 2, pp. 662–79.

²⁵ W. Davies, 'Clerics as Rulers: Some Implications of the Terminology of Ecclesiastical Authority in Early Medieval Ireland', in N.P. Brooks (ed.), *Latin and Vernacular Languages in Early Medieval Britain* (Leicester, 1982), pp. 81–97, at pp. 83–5; C. Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland A.D. 650 to 1000* (Kildare, 1999), pp. 50–3.

²⁶ J.M. Picard, 'Princeps and Principatus in the Early Irish Church: A Reassessment', in A.P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in Early Medieval Irish Archaeology, History and Literature in Honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin, 1999), pp. 146–60, at pp. 152–3; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Church in the Early Irish Laws', in R. Sharpe and J. Blair (eds), *Pastoral Care before the Parish* (Leicester, 1992), pp. 63–80, at p. 67; Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, pp. 55–9.

²⁷ *Hibernensis* §§21.30, 36.3, 36.9, 36.20, 36.33, 36.36, 36.38, 40.3, vol. 1, pp. 139, 256–8, 260–2, 265–6, 272–7, 308; vol. 2, pp. 576, 663–4, 666–7, 670–1, 675–9, 702. *Princeps* is distinguished from *episcopus* in *Hibernensis* §§40.2, 40.4, vol. 1, pp. 308–9; vol. 2, pp. 701–2.

²⁸ *Hibernensis* §§18.6, 36.7, 36.30, 38.12, vol. 1, pp. 107–8, 259–60, 271, 296–7; vol. 2, pp. 553–4, 666, 675, 693. For terminological implications of 'abbot' see Charles-Edwards, 'Church in the Laws', p. 67.

²⁹ *Hibernensis* §42.6, vol. 1, p. 338; vol. 2, pp. 725–6. See also, Picard, 'Princeps and Principatus', p. 153.

contradictory mechanisms regarding succession to the *principatus*. In a section entitled ‘De eo quod princeps solus successorem ordinat’ the agency behind succession lies with the reigning *princeps*,³⁰ yet the following notice states that the *consensus populi cum principe* is to be sought.³¹ Another notice stipulates that the *princeps* is to be chosen through lot-casting.³² This profusion of succession mechanisms is typical of the *Hibernensis*, which was not a technical lawbook outlining a prescriptive way of doing things, but a compilation of existing canon law material. It was a resource to be drawn on rather than strictly enforced.

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that the *principatus* and the abbacy were not synonymous, even if one man could (and often did) hold both offices.³³ Therefore, mechanisms of succession outlined in the text are not necessarily applicable to the specifics of abbatial succession. Whilst acknowledging this caveat, the testimony of the *Hibernensis* is still valuable. It has a tangible link to Iona through Cú Chuimne, and, as will be shown, the *principatus* and the abbacy were mutually inclusive at Iona for the period under consideration.³⁴ Therefore, the multiplicity of succession mechanisms in the text provide useful models for potential succession protocols in practice.

Another relevant text is the Old Irish law tract *Córus Bésgnai*, which forms part of the *Senchas Már* that has been dated to between c.660 and c.680 and may have been produced at Armagh.³⁵ Amongst the concerns of this tract is succession to the headship of a church, and, although the text is incomplete and sections dealing with succession are especially deficient, later glosses and commentaries help elucidate the

³⁰ *Hibernensis* §36.19, vol. 1, p. 265; vol. 2, p. 670: ‘That the *princeps* alone ordains his successor’. See also, *Hibernensis* §36.9, at vol. 1, p. 260; vol. 2, p. 666: ‘De eo quod debet princeps facere heredem in uita sua’ (‘That a *princeps* ought to appoint an heir in his lifetime’); *Hibernensis* §36.20, vol. 1, p. 266; vol. 2, p. 671: ‘De eo quod princeps solus ordinat successorem’ (‘That the *princeps* alone ordains his successor’). Another notice warns against opposing the *princeps* appointment, *Hibernensis* §36.18, vol. 1, p. 265; vol. 2, p. 670.

³¹ *Hibernensis* §36.20, vol. 1, p. 265; vol. 2, p. 670: ‘Consent of the people with the *princeps*’. See also, *Hibernensis* §36.9, vol. 1, p. 261; vol. 2, p. 667: ‘De eo quod post mortem debet princeps ordinari’ (‘That a *princeps* ought to be ordained after the death of the former’). For the development of a collective stake in monastic governance see R. Flechner, ‘Identifying Monks in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland: A Reflection on Legal and Economic Aspects’, in *Monachissimi d’Oriente e d’Occidente nell’alto Medioevo: Spoleto, 31 marzo–6 aprile 2016*, Settimane 64 (Spoleto, 2017), pp. 805–44, at pp. 823–4.

³² *Hibernensis* §36.1, vol. 1, p. 255; vol. 2, p. 662. See also, *Hibernensis* §25, vol. 1, pp. 159–62; vol. 2, pp. 591–3: ‘De Sorte’ (‘Concerning Lots’).

³³ Picard, ‘*Princeps and Principatus*’, p. 156.

³⁴ For overlap between abbacy and *principatus* see Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, pp. 55–9.

³⁵ L. Breatnach, *The Early Irish Law Text Senchas Már and the Question of its Date*, E.C. Quiggin Memorial Lectures 13 (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 19–42. Alternatively, *Córus Bésgnai* has been associated with Iona, I. Warnrjes, ‘Regnal Succession in Early Medieval Ireland’, *Journal of Medieval History* 30 (2004), pp. 377–410, at p. 397.

fragmentary elements. At its greatest extent eight levels of eligibility for the headship are enumerated, with *fine érlama* ('kin of the founding saint') and *fine griain* ('kin of the landowner') occupying the first and second positions respectively.³⁶ While *Córus Bésnái* fixates on who was eligible to succeed, it makes occasional comments on selection processes, the most thorough of which outlines a procedure involving elective succession:

Cach fine,³⁷ cach manche, cach andóit íar n-airdligiud; dligiud cach déoradas. Comloighthi cach etal ria n-anetal. Cach n-imthogu la comthoil comairle. Cach ríagal íar comairli co n-eltoi co cosmailius.

Every kindred, every community of church vassals, every mother-church in accordance with inherent right; every outside appointment in accordance with entitlement. Every pure person is to be favoured before an impure person. Every election with joint consent after consultation. Every ruling after consultation, with purity, with uniformity.³⁸

Elsewhere, the tract permits a situation whereby headship is passed from one branch of the kin to another (a circuit) when a church was established by a patron on familial land.³⁹ However, in another prescription any circuit of the branches is ruled out,⁴⁰ and in a later accretion it specifically notes that lot-casting is not undertaken if there is someone superior: 'noco cuirter cāe uird in cranncuir forin fine gabluithur ann ō bias adbur is ferr inā cēile ann'.⁴¹ In another gloss, this time to 'Mana taibre Dia' ('If God does not give it'), we see '.i. tre

³⁶ References to later glosses and commentaries are listed A–D as found in Breatnach's edition. *Córus Bésnái B* §86, ed. and trans. L. Breatnach, *Córus Bésnái: An Old Irish Law Tract on the Church and Society*, Early Irish Law Series 7 (Dublin, 2017), pp. 244–7: 1) founder's kin; 2) landowner's kin; 3) kin of the *manaig*; 4) mother church; 5) pupil; 6) confederate church; 7) neighbouring church; 8) exile of God. For this enumeration see Breatnach, *Córus Bésnái*, pp. 107–8; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Érlam: The Patron Saint of an Irish Church', in R. Sharpe and A. Thacker (eds) *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 267–90, at p. 278; Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, pp. 227–8.

³⁷ This may include both *fine érlama* and *fine griain* despite glosses privileging the latter, Breatnach, *Córus Bésnái*, p. 84. Cf. C. Etchingham and C. Swift, 'Early Irish Church Organisation: The Case of Drumlease and the Book of Armagh', *Breifne* 9 (2001), pp. 285–312, at p. 292; Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, pp. 224–5; C. Etchingham, 'The Implications of *Paruchid*', *Ériu* 44 (1993), pp. 139–62, at p. 154.

³⁸ *Córus Bésnái* §40, ed. and trans. Breatnach, pp. 36–7. The elective element is stressed in a later gloss, *Córus Bésnái A* §40, ed. and trans. Breatnach, pp. 160–1.

³⁹ *Córus Bésnái* §91, ed. and trans. Breatnach, pp. 44–5.

⁴⁰ *Córus Bésnái* §101, ed. and trans. Breatnach, pp. 46–7.

⁴¹ *Córus Bésnái B* §101, ed. and trans. Breatnach, pp. 250–1: 'the "orderly course" of lot-casting is not undertaken on the kindred "which is branched" there if there is a candidate better than any other there'.

chocran' (i.e. through lot-casting').⁴² Despite the dismissal of a circuit in this context, the later accretions suggest that situations could emerge which required lot-casting – for instance, when two candidates of equal material (*comadbar*) emerged.⁴³ In *Córus Bésgnai* and the *Hibernensis* therefore, lot-casting was presented as a viable succession mechanism.

The best evidence for *Córus Bésgnai* in action, perhaps unsurprisingly if Liam Breatnach is correct about the provenance of the tract, has an Armagh link. The early eighth-century *Additamenta*, found in the *Book of Armagh*, contain the testament of Féith Fio regarding successorship at Drumlease.⁴⁴ His kindred hold priority in succession, followed by the *muintir* of Drumlease or its *manaig*, and followed finally by a *déorad* ('outsider') from the community of Patrick.⁴⁵ The Drumlease example corresponds to the dynastic focus found within *Córus Bésgnai*, however, it also shows that prescriptions in *Córus Bésgnai* were open to various interpretations at specific sites. According to Colmán Etchingham, 'The fragmentary portion of *Córus Bésgnai* thus countenances four different types of churches,⁴⁶ each distinguished by the particular element of the indigenous community that is accorded first call on the office of head.'⁴⁷ Like the base text of *Córus Bésgnai* quoted above, the Drumlease document includes a statement asserting a moral requirement regarding would-be successors from Féith Fio's kin. While *Córus Bésgnai* implies that a candidate's merit will be assessed by means of an election, there is no explicit comment on succession mechanisms in the Drumlease document. In both texts, the question of *who* could succeed was more important than *how* they would succeed. However, two mechanisms can be extricated from *Córus Bésgnai* – one explicitly stated (election) and the other implied (lots) – and while these are important, I do not think they should be taken as an exhaustive list of viable succession mechanisms. As with the *Hibernensis*, we look in vain for a single emphatic statement regarding succession mechanisms in *Córus Bésgnai*. Like the Northumbrian examples cited above, the legal material allows for diversity.

⁴² *Córus Bésgnai C* §101, ed. and trans. Breatnach, pp. 276–7.

⁴³ See *Córus Bésgnai B* §101, ed. and trans. Breatnach, pp. 250–1. For lot-casting see F. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Early Irish Law Series 3 (Dublin, 1988), pp. 208–9. For lot-casting in *Córus Bésgnai* see B. Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship and Succession* (Dublin, 2000), p. 230; T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford, 1993), p. 97, n. 29.

⁴⁴ For dating see F. Kelly, 'Notes on the Irish Words', in L. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), p. 246.

⁴⁵ *Additamenta* §9, ed. and trans. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts*, pp. 172–3.

⁴⁶ *Córus Bésgnai* §§86, 92; 87, 90; 87, 91; 94, ed. and trans. Breatnach, pp. 44–7: 1) *eclais fine érlamo* ('church of the kin of the patron saint'); 2) *eclais fine griain* ('church of the kin of the land'); 3) *eclais fine érlamo 7 griin immalé* ('church of the kin of both the patron saint and the land'); 4) *cell manach* ('church of church vassals').

⁴⁷ Etchingham and Swift, 'Irish Church Organisation', p. 293.

Succession in Irish hagiography

At this point it is worth turning to the *Vita Columbae*, composed by Abbot Adomnán by c.700, for the only explicit reference to Iona's succession protocol.⁴⁸ While attempting to join the island community on Iona, Fintan is informed of Columba's passing:

Fintenus consequenter percunctatur dicens: 'Quem post sé successorē reliquit?' 'Baitheneum', aiunt, 'suum alumnū.' Omnibusque clamitantibus, 'dignū et debetū.'

Thereupon Fintén inquired, saying: 'Whom has he left as his successor?' 'Baithéne, his *alumnus*', they said. And while all exclaimed, 'A worthy and fitting successor.'⁴⁹

This reference is not unique in early Irish hagiography; the late seventh-century Patrician Lives of Tírechán and Muirchú include Patrick's designation of his own successor, Benignus.⁵⁰ Tírechán's Patrick affirms that Benignus will be *heres regni mei*,⁵¹ while Muirchú's Patrick proclaims that Benignus will be *meum successorē*.⁵² While these statements appear to validate a system that privileged abbatial designations, we must be circumspect about placing too much credence on transfers of authority between a founding saint and his immediate successor in hagiographical narratives. If a centre wanted to exploit a connection with a saint, one way of doing so was to depict a saint investing a chosen successor and office with their authority.⁵³

Therefore, Baithéne's appointment must be considered within the context of Adomnán's narrative, both the anecdote where it features (I.2) and the text holistically. The events surrounding Fintan's journey

⁴⁸ For dating see J.M. Picard, 'The Purpose of Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*', *Peritia* 1 (1982), pp. 160–77, at 167–9.

⁴⁹ Adomnán, *VC* I.2, pp. 20–1. Baithéne is also dubbed *alumnus* at III.18 (pp. 208–9) and the term is used for another individual at III.21 (pp. 212–13). The Andersons translated *alumnus* as 'foster-son' while Reeves and Sharpe opted for 'disciple', Reeves, *Founder of Hy*, p. 7; R. Sharpe, *Life of Columba* (London, 1995), p. 113. Sharpe allowed that Adomnán may have viewed Baithéne as Columba's foster son, Sharpe, *Columba*, p. 256, n. 55. In a retrospective entry, *AT* (534) dubs Baithéne *dalta*, the Irish equivalent of *alumnus*. While it is tempting to extrapolate a means of designating a successor from this, it cannot be shown beyond this case and Adomnán may have simply viewed Baithéne as Columba's spiritual son.

⁵⁰ Tírechán, *Collectanea* §5, ed. and trans. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts*, pp. 126–7. Muirchú, *Vita Patricii* I.28, ed. and trans. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts*, pp. 100–3. For dating, T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 438–40.

⁵¹ Tírechán, *Collectanea* §5, ed. and trans. Bieler, pp. 126–7: 'heir of my kingdom'.

⁵² Muirchú, *Vita Patricii* I.28, ed. and trans. Bieler, pp. 102–3: 'my successor'.

⁵³ For projections of abbatial authority in *Vita Columbae* see G. Márkus, *Conceiving a Nation: Scotland to AD 900* (Edinburgh, 2017), pp. 156–8.

to Iona were reported to Adomnán orally by a member of Fintan's community, however, the specificities of Baíthéne's succession probably stem from Adomnán himself.⁵⁴ It is interesting that the events surrounding Fintan's journey to Iona also appear in the *Vita prior Fintani*, where (in a similar fashion to the *Vita Columbae*) Baíthéne is said to have received instructions from Columba explaining that after his death Fintan would appear and that he was not to be admitted as a monk on Iona.⁵⁵ That Columba is presented as having left Baíthéne instructions for dealing with Fintan after his own death reinforces the idea that Baíthéne's succession was believed to have been arranged, which lends itself to the method of succession explicitly outlined by Adomnán. Given that Adomnán cited one of Fintan's monks (who apparently heard it from the saint himself) as his source for the anecdote, the version as found in the *Vita prior Fintani* could witness the story as it was remembered amongst Fintan's community, implying that Baíthéne's succession was viewed as designative even beyond Iona. It remains the case that Adomnán was more explicit about the succession mechanism in the *Vita Columbae*, however, he was not a neutral party, and it is right to question the veracity of his account.⁵⁶ Hagiography provided a means through which contemporary concerns could be superimposed upon a saintly past, and, as Thomas Owen Clancy has shown, Adomnán was not above 'encoding' his narrative with the political issues of his day.⁵⁷ Adomnán was the *abbot* of Iona, and as such he brought political and ideological baggage; perhaps the succession protocol quoted above resonates more with what Adomnán thought *ought* to be practised. Jennifer O'Reilly has shown that Baíthéne had a vaunted place in Adomnán's text, and the account of his spiritual development under Columba's tutelage forms a deliberate narrative strategy in itself.⁵⁸ Therefore, Adomnán's account must be approached with suspicion, since calling attention to Baíthéne's designation in I.2 may have been designed to provide a lens through which his narrative development was meant to be understood.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Adomnán, *VC* I.2, pp. 20–1.

⁵⁵ *Vita prior Fintani* §7 in *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi*, ed. W.W. Heist (Brussels, 1965), pp. 199–200.

⁵⁶ For the perspectives embedded within *Vita Columbae* see G. Márkus, 'Iona: Monks, Pastors and Missionaries', in D. Broun and T.O. Clancy (eds), *Spes Scotorum: Hope of Scots. Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 115–38, at pp. 121–2.

⁵⁷ T.O. Clancy, 'Adomnán and the Abbacy of Clonmacnois: Historical Needs, Literary Narratives', *Innes Review* 57 (2006), pp. 206–15.

⁵⁸ J.L. O'Reilly, 'Reading the Scriptures in the Life of Columba', in C. Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 80–106, at pp. 89–90, 103–6; *eadem*, 'The Wisdom of the Scribe and the Fear of the Lord in the *Life of Columba*', in Broun and Clancy (eds), *Spes Scotorum*, pp. 159–211, at pp. 172–99, 210.

⁵⁹ O'Reilly, 'Reading Scriptures', pp. 104–5.

Despite this, it must be remembered that Adomnán wrote for his own ecclesiastical community, a group probably familiar with succession protocols.⁶⁰ If Adomnán was proposing an alternative method to prevailing succession practices surely this would have raised eyebrows. Moreover, if Adomnán was making a deliberate point and trying to justify his ideal succession mechanism through a revisionary approach to the past, he did so in a subdued way compared to other hagiographers. Confirmation of Baíthéne's designation deviates from portrayals by Muirchú and Tírechán, where the accounts blatantly sought to elevate the standing of the successor and endow him, and his office, with saintly gravitas. In contrast, news of Baíthéne's designation is conveyed by a third party in an episode more concerned with establishing Columba's posthumous prophecies, as befits Adomnán's focus in Book I.⁶¹ Baíthéne's designation by Columba never actually features in the text, but instead the appointment is reported posthumously. The closest thing to an in-text designation is in the final chapter (III.23), when Columba leaves the task of completing a psalter to Baíthéne: 'Hic [. . .] in fine cessandum est paginae. Quae uero sequuntur Baitheneus scribat.'⁶² In O'Reilly's eyes, this signifies Baíthéne's designation,⁶³ and its significance is bolstered by Adomnán's authorial interjection:

Successori uero sequens patri spiritalium doctori filiorum, 'Venite filii audite me; timorem domini docebo uos', congruenter conuenit, qui sicut decessor commendauit non solum ei docendo sed etiam scribendo successit.

And the verse that follows, 'Come, my sons, hear me; I will teach you fear of the Lord', is fittingly adapted to the successor, the father of spiritual sons, a teacher, who, as his predecessor enjoined, succeeded him not in teaching only, but in writing also.⁶⁴

This is an important narrative event. The culmination of Baíthéne's spiritual development is paired with Columba's preparations for the end, and, as Adomnán makes clear, Baíthéne is ready to assume his teacher's mantle.⁶⁵ Crucially, however, there is no explicit designation of

⁶⁰ Adomnán, *VC* Preface, pp. 2–3. For Adomnán's audiences see Picard, 'Purpose', pp. 169–77.

⁶¹ Adomnán, *VC* Second Preface, pp. 4–7.

⁶² Adomnán, *VC* III.23, pp. 222–3: 'Here, at the end of the page, I must stop. Let Baithéne write what follows.'

⁶³ O'Reilly, 'Reading Scriptures', p. 105.

⁶⁴ Adomnán, *VC* III.23, pp. 222–3.

⁶⁵ See also G. Márkus, 'Four Blessings and a Funeral: Adomnán's Theological Map of Iona', *Innes Review* 72 (2021), pp. 1–26 (at pp. 4–5).

successorship as found in the Patrician hagiographies. There is not even an obvious indication that Baíthéne was thought to be present on the island. The text simply highlights Columba's affirmation that Baíthéne was ready to undertake the role previously assigned to him.

Writing with hindsight, Adomnán knew that Baíthéne would succeed Columba, and this guaranteed his position in the *Vita Columbae*. Moreover, Baíthéne was highly regarded by the Iona community in his own right, a view shared by Adomnán given his positively glowing interjection quoted above.⁶⁶ Baíthéne is the subject of a *vita* of his own which may represent an earlier seventh- or eighth-century Iona record,⁶⁷ and he receives pride of place in a list of Columba's twelve companions which is attached to the British Library manuscripts of *Vita Columbae* (dated to c.700).⁶⁸ Baíthéne and Columba share a feast day on 9 June, a coincidence that probably stems from the association between the pair.⁶⁹ Baíthéne's enduring stature and his association with Columba made him a subject ripe for development; but it stands that the actual succession mechanism does not prompt special comment from Adomnán. In I.2, Baíthéne's succession was needed to anchor events, but it is not the centre of attention itself and the sequence would still function if Adomnán cited a different succession principle; whether he was presented as being elected or whether he drew the longest straw, Baíthéne's position in the narrative was secure as a result of his place as Columba's immediate successor. The mechanism of succession was secondary in this context.

This suggests that Adomnán was simply describing Baíthéne's succession as he thought it had happened. However, this means that we are reliant on what Adomnán *thought* happened. Adomnán wrote a century after the fact; his comment may have been informed by the belief that succession in Columba's day mirrored his own period, or he may have relied on erroneous information. This presents a problem; Adomnán's statement on Baíthéne's succession is valuable because we lack similar statements elsewhere, and while it is possible that Adomnán was basing his comment on solid information, it is difficult to prove. Nonetheless, the personal and genealogical links between Columba and his cousin suggest that *if* Columba were in a position to appoint a

⁶⁶ M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Dublin, 1996), pp. 37–9. Sharpe, *Columba*, pp. 256–7, n. 55.

⁶⁷ For *Vita Baithini* see *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Heist, pp. 379–82. See also, Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 37–8.

⁶⁸ Anderson, *Life of Columba*, pp. 238–9. For dating see Sharpe, *Columba*, pp. 354–5, n. 356; Anderson, *Life of Columba*, p. 237.

⁶⁹ Adomnán, *VC* II.45, pp. 176–9. *Féilre óengusso céli dé. The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*, ed. and trans. W. Stokes, Henry Bradshaw Society 29 (London, 1905; repr. Dublin, 1984), pp. 138–9. See also, Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 38–9.

successor, Báithéne would have been the natural choice. This is what Adomnán seems to have believed, and it makes his testimony at the very least plausible.

Mechanisms of abbatial succession

The preceding discussion identified several parties that had an interest in influencing abbatial succession. Of particular importance were the reigning abbot and the wider ecclesiastical community. This suggests two primary mechanisms for succession:

- i An abbot designates his successor,
- ii The community elects an abbot.

To these, a third party could be added, that being an outside agent such as a dynast or a king.⁷⁰ This presents a tempting conclusion with regards to Iona; does the Cenél Conaill element in the abbacy suggest that ‘secular’ Cenél Conaill had a role in succession? The probable answer is no; there is no evidence for the direct hand of an outside dynastic agent in the succession process. That a genealogical link to Columba was an important eligibility criterion afforded the Cenél Conaill a privileged position in supplying personnel who could go on to be eligible for the abbacy.⁷¹ However, this kind of soft power does not necessitate direct agency in influencing the specifics of succession and certainly does not imply a succession mechanism involving outside dynastic powers.

It is also worth considering whether bishops had a role in the succession process, given that bishops were associated with Iona. Aside from explicit mention of Bishop Coeddi (styled *episcopus Iae* in the Annals),⁷² it has plausibly been suggested that Virgno (alias Fergna), Iona’s fourth abbot, was a bishop before assuming the abbacy.⁷³ Two early eighth-century abbots, Conamail († 710) and Dorbéne († 713), have claims to episcopal orders. Conamail’s episcopal status rests on the testimony of the *Cáin Adomnáin*’s guarantor list, where he is dubbed *episcop*.⁷⁴ The core list of names is near-contemporary to c.697,

⁷⁰ These methods are envisaged for the pre-Carolingian period in Wood, *Proprietary Church*, pp. 127–8. Designation is signalled out as the most common method.

⁷¹ For the church, and Iona specifically, in the regulation of regnal succession see I. Warntjes, ‘The Role of the Church in Early Irish Regnal Succession – The Case of Iona’, in *L’Irlanda e gli Irlandesi nell’alto Medioevo: Spoleto, 16–21 aprile 2009*, Settimane 57 (Spoleto, 2010), pp. 155–213, at pp. 203–7.

⁷² *AU* 712.1, pp. 168–9. He features at twenty-one on the guarantor list of the *Cáin Adomnáin*, M. Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘The Guarantor List of *Cáin Adomnáin*, 697’, *Peritia* 1 (1982), pp. 178–215, at p. 191.

⁷³ C. Bourke, ‘Fergna Epscop’, *Innes Review* 51 (2000), pp. 68–71.

⁷⁴ Márkus, ‘Monks, Missionaries and Pastors’, pp. 128–9, n. 50. Conamail features at twenty-three, Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Guarantor List’, pp. 191–2.

however, the titles are a more complicated matter. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha holds that while the regnal and abbatial titles represent later additions,⁷⁵ episcopal titles may be contemporaneous with the core list of names.⁷⁶ Despite this, many titles are verifiably false, and without corroborating evidence Conamail's episcopal status must be taken as nothing more than a remote possibility.⁷⁷ Dorbéne has also been called a bishop due to the appearance of the terms *kathedra* and *primatus* in his annalistic obit.⁷⁸ Again, this is difficult to verify in any authoritative way, and his episcopal credentials remain uncertain.

Regardless, Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* reveals that the first three Northumbrian bishops based at Lindisfarne were sent from Iona,⁷⁹ and in Áedán's case (635–51) it is clear that he received his consecration on Iona,⁸⁰ and this is similarly implied for his successor Finán (651–61),⁸¹ suggesting the presence of a bishop.⁸² Could a bishop have had a role in the abbatial succession process? Bede may provide an answer:

Habere autem solet ipsa insula rectorem semper abbatem presbyterum cuius iuri et omnis prouincia et ipsi etiam episcopi ordine inusitato debeant esse subiecti ordine inusitato debeant esse subiecti, iuxta exemplum primi doctoris illius, qui non episcopus sed presbyter extitit et monachus . . .

This island always has an abbot for its ruler who is a priest, to whose authority the whole *prouincia*, including even bishops, have to be subject. This unusual arrangement follows the example of their first teacher, who was not a bishop but a priest and monk.⁸³

⁷⁵ Ní Dhonnchadha suggested that titles were added over a long period, Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Guarantor List', pp. 184–5. Alternatively, they may have been appended by 727, T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Uí Néill 695–743: The Rise and Fall of Dynasties', *Peritia* 16 (2002), pp. 396–418, at p. 403.

⁷⁶ Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Guarantor List', p. 184.

⁷⁷ Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Guarantor List', p. 192.

⁷⁸ *AU* 713.5, pp. 168–9. Herbert, *Iona*, p. 58, n. 6; J.M. Picard, 'The Schaffhausen Adomnán – A Unique Witness to Hiberno-Latin', *Peritia* 1 (1982), pp. 216–49, at p. 216, n. 2; Anderson, *Life of Columba*, p. xlv. Cf. Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, p. 92. Abbot Fáelchú († 724) also assumed the *kathedra*, *AU* 716.5, pp. 172–3. For this reason, it has been suggested that he was in episcopal orders, J.E. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795*, The New Edinburgh History of Scotland 1 (Edinburgh, 2009), p. 271.

⁷⁹ For Áedán, Bede, *HE* III.3, III.5, V.22, pp. 218–21, 226–9, 554–5. For Finán, Bede, *HE* III.17, III.25, pp. 264–5, 294–5. For Colmán (661–4), Bede, *HE* III.25, III.26, IV.4, pp. 296–7, 308–9, 346–7.

⁸⁰ Bede, *HE* III.5, pp. 226–9.

⁸¹ Bede, *HE* III.25, pp. 294–5.

⁸² For consecration of the Lindisfarne bishops see Márkus, 'Monks, Missionaries and Pastors', pp. 129–31.

⁸³ Bede, *HE* III.4, pp. 222–5. For *prouincia* see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 241.

While Bede's statement about abbots not holding episcopal office may be incorrect (as Virgno's case suggests), his statement on the primacy of abbatial authority on Iona makes it difficult to envisage a context wherein bishops had a specific role in succession. It describes a situation where episcopal authority in matters of governance was minimal and implies that the abbacy and the *principatus* were mutually inclusive, as will be discussed below.⁸⁴ Ultimately, the succession mechanisms outlined above are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, as the lines between 'designations' and 'elections' in the strictest sense could become blurred.⁸⁵ Even if Adomnán's comment on Baíthéne's succession is accepted, it only recounts the transfer of authority from a founder to his immediate successor. It cannot be assumed that a consistent succession mechanism can be extrapolated from a single scenario, as the case of Wearmouth-Jarrow makes clear.

Abbatial succession at Iona (563–704)

While it is plausible that Columba appointed Baíthéne as his successor, it remains to be seen if a consistent succession mechanism applies to the whole period under consideration. Several sources inform the analysis: an eighth-century abbot list included in the *Liber confraternitatum Sancti Petri Salisburgensis*, which lists all abbots until Sléibíne's abbacy (752–66);⁸⁶ a series of genealogies which record the lineages for abbots of Uí Néill (almost exclusively Cenél Conaill) descent;⁸⁷ and annalistic sources that represent a lost 'Iona Chronicle' that may have become contemporaneous shortly after Iona's foundation.⁸⁸ Alongside these, Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* mentions several abbots in passing. These sources⁸⁹ provide a basic chronological framework while the genealogies assign a familial context to all but two abbots (Table 1).

⁸⁴ Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, p. 93.

⁸⁵ Wood, *Proprietary Church*, pp. 128–9.

⁸⁶ Salzburg, Erzabtei St Peter, Ms A 1, fol. 20v. For facsimile see K. Forstner, *Das Verbrüderungsbuch von St. Peter in Salzburg: vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe im Originalformat der Handschrift Al aus dem Archiv von St. Peter in Salzburg*, Codices selecti phototypice impressi 51 (Graz, 1974).

⁸⁷ References to *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae* [CGSH henceforth] are to *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. P. Ó Riain (Dublin, 1985). CGSH §§327, 336–48, pp. 54–5. See also, Ó Riain, CGSH, p. xvii; P. Ó Riain, 'Irish Saints' Genealogies', *Nomina: Journal of the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland* 7 (1983), pp. 23–9. Cf. Herbert, *Iona*, p. 37, n. 5; pp. 74–5.

⁸⁸ T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Chronicle of Ireland*, 2 vols, Translated Texts for Historians 44 (Liverpool, 2006), vol. 1, pp. 7–9.

⁸⁹ Following the Clonmacnoise group of Annals, Columba's death was dated to 593, D.P. McCarthy, 'The Chronology of Saint Columba's Life', in I. Warntjes and P. Moran (eds), *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe. Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship. Festschrift for Dáibhí Ó Cróinín*, *Studia traditionis theologiae* 14 (Turnhout, 2014), pp. 1–32. This has implications for other obits (Baíthéne, 596; Lasrén, 603; Virgno, 624), McCarthy, 'Chronological Synchronisation of the Irish Annals'.

Table 1 Iona abbots in the sources. Bold indicates a Cenél Conaill genealogical connection

	Genealogies	<i>Liber confraternitatum</i>	Annals	<i>Vita Columbae</i>
Columba (563–97)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Baithéne (597–600)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Laisrén (600–5)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Virgno (605–23)	✗	✓	✓	✓
Ségéne (623–52)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Suibne (652–7)	✗	✓	✓	✗
Cumméne (657–69)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Faílbe (669–79)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Adomnán (679–704)	✓	✓	✓	✓

The genealogies evince a consistent Cenél Conaill element in the abbacy. However, in the 600–79 period, all of the Cenél Conaill affiliated abbots were descended from Ninnid (Fig. 1). Iona's third abbot, Laisrén (600–5), was the first abbot to emerge from this collateral, and he follows Columba and Baithéne in boasting a genealogical connection to the Cenél Conaill.⁹⁰ He is also brought into contact with Columba in the *Vita Columbae*, and elsewhere in the text is depicted leading the monks of Durrow.⁹¹ The succession of Virgno, the first of two non-Cenél Conaill abbots in the 563–704 period, is more peculiar.⁹² Virgno has several quirks which make him stand out as a successor of Columba. He does not seem to have been Irish (and thus was bereft of a Cenél Conaill link), and, as already noted, he may have been in episcopal orders.⁹³ Adomnán's statement that Virgno became abbot 'deo auctore' has been taken as designed to assert Virgno's legitimacy, implying that his abbacy was viewed as somewhat unusual, at least to Adomnán.⁹⁴ Despite this, Virgno is brought into contact with Columba in *Vita Columbae*, where he is dubbed *bonae indolis iuuenis*.⁹⁵ In bringing the earliest abbots (Baithéne, Laisrén, and Virgno) into contact with Columba, Adomnán's account may preserve

⁹⁰ *CGSH* §336, p. 54.

⁹¹ Adomnán, *VC* I.12, I.29, pp. 36–7, 56–7.

⁹² For Virgno see Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 39–40.

⁹³ An artificial Cenél Conaill link is supplied for Virgno in the notes of *Féilire Óengusso*, ed. Stokes, p. 86. See also, Bourke, 'Fergna', pp. 69–70, n. 15; Warntjes, 'Church in Succession', p. 185, n. 68.

⁹⁴ Adomnán, *VC* III.19, pp. 208–9. Márkus, *Conceiving a Nation*, p. 152.

⁹⁵ Adomnán, *VC* III.19, pp. 208–9: 'a young man of good ability'. See also, O'Reilly, 'Wisdom of the Scribe', pp. 199–210.

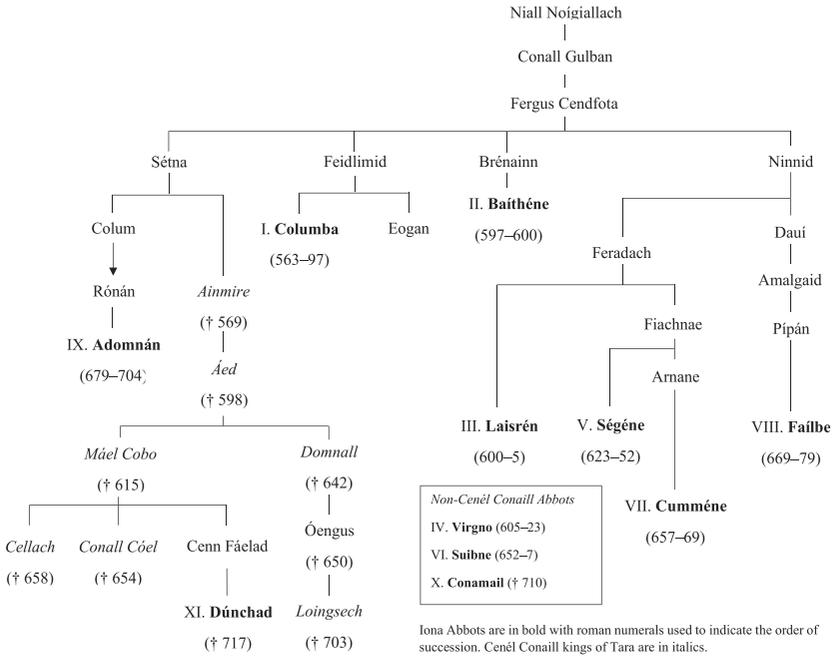


Fig 1 The Cenél Conaill abbots of Iona

an understanding that succession initially privileged a connection to Columba himself. In this period abbatial appointments are certainly plausible; however, these should be viewed as the product of membership of a ruling circle which was directly associated with Columba. In this context, Virgno's succession makes perfect sense and it was his link to Columba and the ruling circle, rather than his genealogical connections, that ensured his succession.

Ségéne's tenure (623–52) sees a traceable link to Columba disappear.⁹⁶ However, this was compensated for by stellar genealogical connections: he was Laisrén's nephew, a relationship that probably aided his appointment. The succession of Suibne (652–7) after Ségéne's death is more surprising, given that he lacked the standard genealogical credentials of an Iona abbot (a Cenél Conaill link) and probably lacked any meaningful connection to Columba to make up for this. The oddity of Suibne's succession becomes apparent when compared with that of his own successor Cumméne (657–69), Ségéne's nephew and arguably the more natural successor.⁹⁷ Máire Herbert drew a

⁹⁶ For Ségéne's abbacy see Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 40–3.

⁹⁷ *CGSH* §§337–8, p. 54. Herbert, *Iona*, p. 136.

correlation between Ségéne's collection of testimonies about Columba and Cumméne's composition of the saint's hagiographical dossier (*liber de uirtutibus Columbae*), suggesting that their actions should be viewed as a united enterprise.⁹⁸ Cumméne's successor, Fáilbe (669–79), another descendant of Ninnid's, can also be linked to Ségéne, since Adomnán credits him as his source for testimonies delivered to Ségéne by Oswald and Ernéne.⁹⁹ Oswald's attestation was given personally, and it is possible that it was delivered at his court during a visitation made to Northumbria,¹⁰⁰ similar to circuits of the Columban daughter houses undertaken by Cumméne (661) and Fáilbe (673–6).¹⁰¹ The same could be said for Ernéne's testimony.¹⁰² In such a scenario, Fáilbe would have accompanied Ségéne on visitations, suggesting a place within Ségéne's inner circle.

In Ségéne, Cumméne, and Fáilbe we may see a continuation of the ruling clique, which had shifted focus from an association with Columba to membership of a specific Cenél Conaill collateral.¹⁰³ But where does Suibne fit in? Even if it is assumed that Suibne was part of this group, his appointment ahead of Cumméne, whose genealogical credentials place him amongst Ninnid's descendants, is not explained.¹⁰⁴ It is tempting to see Suibne's tenure as a placeholder abbacy designed to retain abbatial succession prerogatives within the ruling circle in a period where Cumméne was not able to succeed Ségéne directly. However speculative this might be, the genealogical links between Ségéne, Cumméne, and Fáilbe, alongside plausible personal connections and their eventual assumption to the abbacy, is suggestive of something more than coincidence. If the abbacy was transferred via designations, it may have been viewed as risky to install another Cenél Conaill figure, who could have restricted succession to his own associates in a similar fashion. While Laisrén was the first of Ninnid's progeny to hold the abbacy, it is from Ségéne's abbacy that succession was deliberately

⁹⁸ Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 24–5, 43. Cumméne's work is mentioned by Dorbéne in Adomnán, *VC* III.5. See also, Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 12–26.

⁹⁹ *CGSH* §339, p. 54. Adomnán, *VC* I.1, 1.3, pp. 16–17, 26–7.

¹⁰⁰ T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Iona, Abbots of', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition; F. Edmonds, *Gaelic Influence in the Northumbrian Kingdom: The Golden Age and the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 2019), p. 105, n. 38. Cf. Sharpe, *Columba*, n. 43, p. 253.

¹⁰¹ *AT* 660; *AU* 673.4, 676.5, pp. 140–3. See also, Herbert, *Iona*, p. 45.

¹⁰² Ernéne's obit is recorded in *AU* 635.5, pp. 118–19.

¹⁰³ See also, Warntjes, 'Regnal Succession in Ireland', pp. 396–7.

¹⁰⁴ A compilatory text with material drawn from various legal texts and dubbed the 'Succession Tract' gives priority to older candidates in the succession process. If age featured as an eligibility criterion, it may simply be the fact that Cumméne was too young to directly succeed Ségéne, hence Suibne's tenure. A dated edition and translation can be found in A. G. Richey, *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, 6 vols (Dublin, 1879), vol. 4, pp. 372–87. For the text and its sources see Jaski, *Kingship and Succession*, pp. 289–95. I am thankful to Immo Warntjes for making me aware of this text.

constricted to this collateral.¹⁰⁵ In the 623–79 period, the transfer of abbatial authority was mediated by a group of dynastically minded abbots, who sought to retain the office within their own collateral. Suibne's succession suited this dynastic interest and his appointment sees the decision of the reigning abbot take precedence, if the appointment was designed to prevent other Cenél Conaill affiliates from restricting the abbacy to their own associates.

The suggestion that the Iona abbacy was transferred via designations within the confines of a ruling circle is problematized by the emergence of Fáilbe's successor. Adomnán (679–704) was associated with the royal line of the Cenél Conaill (Fig. 1) and his succession sees a shift in the genealogical constitution of the abbacy away from the progeny of Ninnid.¹⁰⁶ This may reflect an absence of available candidates from amongst Ninnid's descendants. Cumméne's death in 669 probably extinguished the line of Ninnid's son Feradach, leaving Fáilbe as the last eligible candidate from the collateral.¹⁰⁷ The adherence to celibacy at Iona makes this scenario likely; this paucity of available candidates created room for a more distantly related successor.

Adomnán's proximity to royal power may have made him an attractive candidate to Fáilbe, and probably played a role in his succession. Adomnán's exploitation of royal connections for the benefit of Iona is a notable feature of his abbacy.¹⁰⁸ For instance, the promulgation of the *Cáin Adomnáin* (697), which boasted a guarantor list featuring ninety-one prominent secular and ecclesiastical signatories, is a manifest display of Iona's authority under his leadership.¹⁰⁹ It is hardly coincidental that Loingsech, ruler of the Cenél Conaill, heads the secular signatories, a tantalizing glimpse of the strings Adomnán could pull. That Fáilbe is mentioned as a source in the *Vita Columbae* suggests that Adomnán fostered tangible links with his predecessor, an important factor if the reigning abbot monopolized the machinery of succession.¹¹⁰ Herbert's suggestion that Fáilbe used his visit to Ireland from 673 to recruit Adomnán for the 'future leadership of the

¹⁰⁵ In *Vita Baithini* a 'Fintini filii Lippani' appears alongside Baithéne, *Vita Baithini* §11, ed. Heist, p. 381. He has tentatively been identified as Finán mac Pípaín, brother to Abbot Fáilbe, *CGSH* §§623, 662.25, pp. 76, 82; *Genealogiae regum et sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. P. Walsh (Dublin, 1918), p. 41; Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 37–8. While this would place another of Ninnid's descendants in the Columban network, the genealogy is of dubious value, Ó Riain, *Corpus*, pp. xxxix, xlii. Moreover, Fáilbe died in 679, while his brother was apparently in contact with Baithéne in the late sixth century, a chronological leap that is difficult to countenance.

¹⁰⁶ *CGSH* §340, p. 54.

¹⁰⁷ Warntjes, 'Church in Succession', p. 205. See also, Wood, *Proprietary Church*, p. 145.

¹⁰⁸ For Adomnán's abbacy see Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 47–56.

¹⁰⁹ *AU* 697.3, pp. 156–7. Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Guarantor List', pp. 178–9.

¹¹⁰ Adomnán, *VC* I.1, I.3, pp. 16–17, 26–7.

Columban *familia* is a likely scenario if no eligible candidates from Ninnid's line were available.¹¹¹ This helps set Adomnán's succession in a readily understandable context: as a candidate he had the benefits of opportunity, connections, and an established relationship with the decision-maker himself.

A case has been made that succession on Iona rested on the decision of the reigning abbot. This becomes problematic when considered through the lens of eligibility. As noted above, *Córus Bésgnai* prioritizes the *fine érlama* in succession to the headship of a church. It is possible that succession in the 563–704 period was dictated by a limited pool of eligible candidates, with the non-Cenél Conaill abbots emerging only when no other candidates were available. This scenario demands that the preferred dynastic element was paired with a situation whereby the Cenél Conaill element on the island was limited to Ninnid's descendants.¹¹² In this context, the actual succession mechanism becomes a moot point and the domination of the abbacy by this collateral simply reflects their position as the only eligible candidates who could succeed.

While we can rarely comment on Iona personnel beyond the abbots themselves, it would be surprising if Cenél Conaill representation on Iona was so restricted. Following Adomnán's death in 704, three Cenél Conaill-affiliated abbots had emerged by 716, each hailing from a different collateral.¹¹³ Furthermore, the list documenting Columba's twelve companions includes at least five figures who were related to Columba.¹¹⁴ Among them are individuals who feature in the *Vita Columbae*, such as Baíthéne and Ernán (Columba's maternal uncle).¹¹⁵ A brother is mentioned for Baíthéne (Cobthach), however, he is not attested elsewhere and, alongside Baíthéne's alternative name (Conin), he may have been fabricated to facilitate a parallel with Matthew X.2.¹¹⁶ Scandal, who appears on the list, can be linked to another Northern Uí Néill group, the Cenél nÉndai,¹¹⁷ and Cairnán, another of Columba's listed companions, can be attached to the Cenél mBógaine, a Cenél Conaill collateral.¹¹⁸ Alongside these we can place Laisrén, whose first appearance in the *Vita Columbae* can be dated to 572, suggesting that

¹¹¹ *AU* 673.4, 676.5, pp. 140–3. Herbert, *Iona*, p. 47.

¹¹² Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, p. 266.

¹¹³ Dúnchad († 717), Dorbéne († 713), and Faelchú († 724); *CGSH* §§341–3, pp. 54–5.

¹¹⁴ Anderson, *Life of Columba*, pp. 238–9.

¹¹⁵ Sharpe, *Columba*, p. 306, n. 193.

¹¹⁶ Sharpe, *Columba*, p. 355, n. 356.

¹¹⁷ Adomnán's mother, Ronnat, belonged to this group, *CGSH* §722.21, p. 172.

¹¹⁸ *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, vol. I §144f50–1, ed. M.A. O'Brien (Dublin, 1976), p. 165. Cairnán is identifiable through his father and grandfather (Brandub and Meilge) who are mentioned on the list, Anderson, *Life of Columba*, pp. 238–9.

more relatives followed the initial influx.¹¹⁹ The British Library manuscripts of the *Vita Columbae* contain notices of Columba's relatives through the female line, some of whom were buried at Derry, Durrow, and Iona itself.¹²⁰ These notices reinforce the attachment of Columba's relatives to houses in the network.¹²¹ An early dynastic component does not necessarily imply consistent representation, given adherence to celibacy at Iona. However, it is difficult to imagine that the only eligible Cenél Conaill candidates were those who took the abbacy. Succession was driven by more than a limited eligibility pool, the sequence of abbots bespeaks a consistent dynastic interest, representing a co-ordinated effort to limit the abbacy to a ruling circle.

At this point it is worth considering the abbots' pre-abbatial careers. Herbert observed that before Adomnán's tenure, 'other abbots had spent much of their pre-abbatial careers as monks on the island'.¹²² Adomnán seems to have lacked deep roots on Iona before assuming the abbacy, given that the *Vita Columbae* only witnesses direct contact with his immediate predecessor Fáilbe.¹²³ It is unlikely that Adomnán's appearance on Iona was his first taste of monastic life, and he was probably attached to other Columban houses before his arrival on Iona.¹²⁴ It is less clear that Adomnán's experience was unique as we lack detailed information to make authoritative statements for other abbots. While Baithéne was associated with Tíree and Hinba, his position on the list of twelve companions (if taken as accurate) situates him on Iona, as does the *Vita Columbae* on various occasions.¹²⁵ Adomnán never places Laisrén on Iona itself and instead he appears alongside Columba in Ardnamurchan before appearing at Durrow.¹²⁶ According to the *Vita Columbae*, Virgno is on Iona as a young man, but it says nothing more.¹²⁷ We lack certain evidence for the pre-abbatial careers of Ségéne, Suibne, and Cumméne.¹²⁸ Fáilbe's attachment to Ségéne has already received comment, and while the two can be brought into

¹¹⁹ Adomnán, VC I.12, pp. 36–7. Sharpe, *Columba*, pp. 273–4, n. 91.

¹²⁰ Anderson, *Life of Columba*, pp. 238–9.

¹²¹ Sharpe, *Columba*, p. 355, n. 356.

¹²² Herbert, *Iona*, p. 47.

¹²³ It has been suggested that Adomnán had contact with Fáilbe's predecessors in Sharpe, *Columba*, pp. 44–5; J.M. Wooding, 'Introduction', in J.M. Wooding, et al. (eds), *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker* (Dublin, 2010), pp. 11–19, at p. 13.

¹²⁴ Sharpe, *Columba*, pp. 44–6.

¹²⁵ Adomnán, VC I.19, I.22, I.23, I.37, II.15, pp. 44–5, 48–51, 66–71, 114–15.

¹²⁶ Adomnán, VC I.12, I.29, pp. 36–7, 56–7.

¹²⁷ Adomnán, VC III.19, pp. 208–11.

¹²⁸ In a future article I will argue that Cumméne Albus, from his position as head of Durrow, was the notorious *paries dealbatus* ('whited wall') who caused trouble after the Synod of Mag Léne, as recounted in Cummian, *De controversia paschali*, ll. 270–3, ed. and trans. M. Walsh and D. Ó Cróinín, *Cummian's Letter De controversia paschali* (Toronto, 1988), pp. 92–3.

contact, this did not necessarily occur on Iona. Generally, it is not clear whether these men served in other Columban houses before relocating to Iona. However, I would not be too quick to suggest that Adomnán is exceptional in this regard, based on lack of evidence alone.

We should not underestimate the fluidity of movement within the Columban network. A cursory reading of the *Vita Columbae* evinces an interconnected group of houses linked to Iona, and an important role has been envisaged for the daughter houses in supplying manpower for Iona's evangelization initiatives in Britain.¹²⁹ The *Vita Columbae* depicts a situation where Columba had the authority to appoint candidates to govern his foundations,¹³⁰ call them to Iona,¹³¹ and regulate their movement.¹³² Adomnán sketches a hierarchical relationship between Iona and its daughter houses, where Columba, as *monasteriorum pater et fundator*, was an omnipresent force to whom ultimate jurisdictional authority was ceded.¹³³ While Adomnán's outline is widely accepted,¹³⁴ his is the view of the abbot, the very position he invests with such authority, and as such we must be circumspect. *Córus Bésgnai* (quoted above) placed the *andóit* ('mother church') quite far down the list of parties which could appoint a leader to a subordinate church. The *fine érlama* and the *andóit* are represented as separate interests, however, this does not necessarily imply that the *fine érlama* were not attached to the *andóit*.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, the importance of the local element remains, as *Córus Bésgnai* stipulates that appointments rested on the agreement of the local ecclesiastical community.¹³⁶ Such a model hardly supports the situation described in Adomnán's work, where the Iona abbot had sole responsibility over appointments to leadership positions in his daughter houses.

It is worth returning to Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*:

Ex quo utroque monasterio plurima exinde monasteria per discipulos eius et in Brittaniam et in Hiberniam propagate sunt, in quibus omnibus idem monasterium insulanum, in quo ipse requiescit corpore, principatum teneret.

¹²⁹ D.N. Dumville, 'Derry, Iona, England and the Governance of the Columban Church', in G. O'Brien (ed.), *Derry and Londonderry: History and Society: Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County* (Dublin, 1999), pp. 91–114, at p. 103.

¹³⁰ Adomnán, *VC* I.45, pp. 82–3.

¹³¹ Adomnán, *VC* I.31, pp. 58–61.

¹³² Adomnán, *VC* I.6, pp. 29–31.

¹³³ Adomnán, *VC* Second Preface, pp. 2–3: 'father and founder of monasteries'.

¹³⁴ Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 33–6; A.D.S. MacDonald, 'Iona's Style of Government Among the Picts and Scots: The Toponymic Evidence of Adomnán's Life of Columba', *Peritia* 4 (1985), pp. 174–86, at p. 185; Dumville, 'Columban Church', p. 107.

¹³⁵ Etchingham, 'Implications', pp. 156–7; *idem*, *Church Organisation*, pp. 227–8.

¹³⁶ Etchingham, 'Implications', p. 160; *idem*, *Church Organisation*, p. 232.

From both of these [Iona and Durrow] sprang very many monasteries which were established by his disciples in Britain and Ireland, over all of which the island monastery in which his body lies held the *principatus*.¹³⁷

Bede's statement does not necessarily validate the framework laid out by Adomnán, however, given what has been said about the *principatus* it certainly makes it more plausible. Bede's description of Áedán's consecration before his despatch to Northumbria may present a problem. Bede states that upon gaining his kingdom, Oswald requested a bishop from the *maiores* from whom he had received baptism.¹³⁸ After the failure of the initial candidate, Áedán was sent following a decision made *in conuentu seniorum*.¹³⁹ If correct, does this imply a similar collective element in appointments to the daughter houses (or the Iona abbacy)? A lack of obvious abbatial oversight is not surprising given that Ségéne, the reigning abbot, was not in episcopal orders. Bede makes it clear that Áedán's consecration was undertaken so that he could go to Northumbria as per Oswald's request. Ségéne was merely a priest, and therefore had limited agency in episcopal appointments.¹⁴⁰ That Iona retained the prerogative to appoint bishops at Lindisfarne until the Synod of Whitby (664), however, is suggestive of the authority that Iona wielded in relation to the daughter houses. In appointments where episcopal rank was not required, Adomnán's testimony gains currency.

If the *Vita Columbae* is broadly correct in its depiction of Iona's relationship with the daughter houses it has implications for the Iona abbacy, particularly the administrative role of successors before their appointment. In the *Vita Columbae*, four men are named as leading daughter houses, three were related to Columba, and two went on to succeed him.¹⁴¹ Baíthéne is explicitly named as *praepositus* of the centre on Tiree and is also depicted leading the community on Hinba, whilst

¹³⁷ Bede, *HE* III.4, pp. 222–3.

¹³⁸ Bede, *HE* III.3, pp. 218–19: 'elders'.

¹³⁹ Bede, *HE* III.5, pp. 228–9: 'at a meeting of the elders'.

¹⁴⁰ Bede's description, where Áedán rebukes his predecessor for his harshness and is subsequently sent to Northumbria, may be a set piece aimed at stylizing Áedán along Gregorian lines, P. Wormald, 'The Venerable Bede and the "Church of the English"', in S. Baxter (ed.), *The Times of Bede: Studies in Early English Christian Society and its Historian* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 207–28, at p. 210. That Bede was using Áedán to make a point, or simply recounting what he *thought* happened should not be dismissed. Bede certainly knew Ségéne was a priest, which may have influenced his account, Bede *HE* III.5, pp. 226–7. See also, D.A. Bullough, 'The Missions to the English and Picts and their Heritage (to c. 800)', in H. Löwe (ed.), *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter*, Veröffentlichungen des Europa Zentrums Tübingen (Stuttgart, 1982), pp. 80–98, at pp. 85–6, n. 18.

¹⁴¹ Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 34–5.

at another point he has a supervisory role on Iona itself.¹⁴² Similarly, Laisrén features in a leading role at Durrow.¹⁴³ If Iona's abbot controlled appointments to daughter houses as well as the selection of his successor, the placement of candidates in such houses could have functioned as an important step in designating a successor (and equipping them with administrative experience). Notably, the long section on Columba's death in the *Vita Columbae* lacks mention of Baithéne's presence on Iona, a surprising omission given his prominence in the narrative.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps he was remembered as being on Tiree, governing his appointed community and was then summoned to Iona to take the abbacy upon Columba's death, just as Herbert envisages for Laisrén at Durrow upon Baithéne's death.¹⁴⁵ It is difficult to say whether the placement of potential successors in authority positions in the Columban network was a formalized process, whereby appointment to a particular centre was a natural stepping stone to the Iona abbacy. Bede's comments on Durrow are suggestive of its prominence,¹⁴⁶ while other centres such as those on Tiree and Hinba feature in the *Vita Columbae*. A link between the abbacy and a specific daughter house (or any daughter house) cannot be drawn for all abbots under consideration, and it is difficult to advance one above another in affording a position of particular prominence in succession, or even to suggest that such appointments had any consistent role beyond the examples in the *Vita Columbae*. However, that placement of candidates in positions of authority was a means of designating a successor, at least on some occasions, is a reasonable inference from the available evidence.

Edging towards a conclusion, it is worth briefly considering Adomnán's immediate successor, Conamail, who assumed the abbacy in 704, as can be inferred from his 710 annalistic obit and his position following Adomnán on the Salzburg abbot list.¹⁴⁷ For 707, the Annals include an extraordinary entry recording Dúnchad's succession to the *principatus*.¹⁴⁸ This marks the beginning of a confused period in Iona's history, where the Annals record overlapping abbaies until 724.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴² Adomnán, *VC* I.30, I.41, III.8; I.21; I.37, pp. 56–9, 74–7, 192–5; 46–9; 68–9.

¹⁴³ Adomnán, *VC* I.29, pp. 56–7. Columba's uncle Ernán was *praepositus* on Hinba (I.45, pp. 82–3), while Cáiltán was *praepositus* of *Cella Diuni* (I.31, pp. 58–9). See also, Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 33–5.

¹⁴⁴ Adomnán, *VC* III.23, pp. 216–33.

¹⁴⁵ Herbert, *Iona*, p. 39.

¹⁴⁶ Bede, *HE* III.4, pp. 222–3.

¹⁴⁷ *AU* 704.2, 710.1, pp. 162–3, 166–7.

¹⁴⁸ *AU* 707.9, pp. 164–5.

¹⁴⁹ *AU* 707.9, 710.1, 713.5, 716.5, 717.1, 722.6, 724.1, pp. 162–73, 175–6. I intend to consider this period in detail in a future article.

James Fraser has suggested that in 707 we do not see an *abbatial* succession, but instead, a separation of the abbacy and the *principatus*, where the latter was concerned with Iona's 'principate' in Pictland.¹⁵⁰ According to Fraser, following Conamail's death in 710, Dúnchad (whose abbatial status is confirmed by Bede, the Salzburg abbot list, the genealogies, and his annalistic obit)¹⁵¹ assumed the abbacy, at which point the Pictish 'principate' went to Bishop Coeddi (†712).¹⁵² The headship of Iona was once again united in 717 following the expulsion of the *familia* of Iona from Pictland,¹⁵³ until the aged Fáelchú surrendered the *principatus* to the enigmatic Feidlimid in 722.¹⁵⁴ Finally, upon Fáelchú's death in 724, the *principatus* and abbacy were once again united.

Fraser's view – that the abbacy and *principatus* were mutually exclusive in this period – rests on the fair assumption that the annalist's innovative use of titles reflects a major change in the status of the headship of Iona. In this context, the *principatus* reflects the management of Iona's interests in Pictland. This distinction is belied by an extraordinary entry for 724, which records the death of Fáelchú, *abbas Iae*, alongside the succession of Cilléne to the *principatum Ie*.¹⁵⁵ That Cilléne was an *abbot* of Iona is confirmed by the Salzburg abbot list, and his obit as found in the *Annals of Tigernach*.¹⁵⁶ Given that Cilléne's succession sees the restoration of the headship to one individual, the use of *principatus* in this entry must be explained, if elsewhere its use indicates a division of leadership. No anomalous successions are recorded between Cilléne's in 724 and his death in 726, suggesting that the use of *principatus* in the 724 entry implies accession to the abbacy.

The extraordinary inclusion of an obit and a succession in a single entry by the contemporary annalist looks like an attempt to signal that normality had been restored following a turbulent period. Such innovations in annalistic writing would have been unnecessary if there was a calm and formalized division of leadership. The extraordinary use of terminology in this period may reflect an attempt to deal with an unusual situation at Iona, where multiple men claimed the abbacy at the same time, something the annalist(s) may have been loath to admit.¹⁵⁷ The *principatus* and the abbacy were mutually inclusive for

¹⁵⁰ Fraser, *Caledonia*, pp. 237–62, esp. pp. 260–2. Cf. Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, pp. 92–3.

¹⁵¹ Bede, *HE* V.22, pp. 554–5; *CGSH* §341, p. 54; *AU* 717.1, pp. 172–3.

¹⁵² *AU* 712.1, pp. 168–9.

¹⁵³ *AU* 717.4, pp. 172–3; Fraser, *Caledonia*, pp. 279–82.

¹⁵⁴ Fraser, *Caledonia*, pp. 261–2, 384.

¹⁵⁵ *AU* 724.1, pp. 178–9.

¹⁵⁶ *AT* 726.

¹⁵⁷ For further annalistic references to *principatus* at Iona see *AU* 801.4, 814.9, pp. 256–7, 270–1. For the Annals' 'terminological flexibility' in the period see Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, pp. 92–3.

Cilléne, something that will also be shown to be the case for Dúnchad. A challenge is posed by Feidlimid, who, despite taking the *principatus* in 722,¹⁵⁸ does not feature in the genealogies or the Salzburg abbot list and is only obituarized in a dubious entry in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, where he is called *abb Iae*.¹⁵⁹ It has been suggested that Feidlimid was installed to aid Fáelchú, who was seventy-four upon his succession in 716.¹⁶⁰ While plausible, I would not rule out the possibility that the 722 entry indicates a short-lived attempt by Feidlimid to seize the abbacy.

Fraser also suggests that the irregular pattern of entries does not imply contention on Iona, with 707 simply marking a division of labour between Dúnchad and Conamail. Dúnchad's succession has sometimes been seen as a natural progression from Adomnán's abbacy, as Dúnchad was genealogically associated with the ruling line of the Cenél Conaill,¹⁶¹ while the succession of Conamail, who lacked a Cenél Conaill affiliation, is viewed as abnormal.¹⁶² Despite this, Dúnchad's succession was more controversial than it first appears. Immo Warntjes has suggested that for much of the seventh century Iona's support was thrown behind the sons of Domnall mac Áedo, specifically the sons of Óengus mac Domnaill.¹⁶³ Such support is evident in Adomnán's abbacy through his association with Loingsech mac Óengusso, who receives the distinction of being dubbed *rex Hibernie* in the Iona Annals.¹⁶⁴ For 650, the Annals record an ill-fated rebellion by Óengus against the sons of Máel Cobo (Cellach and Conall Cóel), the rulers of the Cenél Conaill, resulting in Óengus' demise.¹⁶⁵ Dúnchad was a grandson of Máel Cobo through another son (Cenn Fáelad); he was closely related to the men who killed Óengus.¹⁶⁶ In terms of eligibility, Dúnchad certainly would have been at home in the Iona abbacy; yet his familial connections must have been viewed as controversial, and whether such a man would have been Adomnán's natural successor, given the latter's fruitful relationship with Loingsech, is less certain. Notably, *Cáin Adomnáin's* guarantor list mentions two Iona-related

¹⁵⁸ *AU* 722.6, pp. 176–7.

¹⁵⁹ J. O'Donovan, (ed.), *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters*, 7 vols, 2nd edn (Dublin, 1856), pp. 356–7.

¹⁶⁰ Herbert, *Iona*, p. 60; Fraser, *Caledonia*, pp. 261–2.

¹⁶¹ *CGSH* §341, p. 54.

¹⁶² Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 57–8; K. Hughes and J. Bannerman, 'The Church and the World in Early Christian Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies* 13 (1962), pp. 99–116, at p. 115; Charles-Edwards, 'Iona, Abbots of'.

¹⁶³ Warntjes, 'Church in Succession', pp. 188–90.

¹⁶⁴ *AU* 703.2, pp. 162–3. For Adomnán's relationship with Loingsech see Herbert, *Iona*, pp. 51–2.

¹⁶⁵ *AU* 650.2, pp. 126–7. For this entry see Warntjes, 'Church in Succession', p. 190, n. 77.

¹⁶⁶ *CGSH* §341, p. 54.

signatories: Bishop Coeddi and Conamail.¹⁶⁷ It is difficult to take Conamail's inclusion as anything other than a sign of Adomnán's approval, and in this context Dúnochad's absence is notable. How, then, is Conamail's apparently problematic succession explained? The simplest answer is that which has been advanced by this overall thesis: he was appointed to the abbacy by Adomnán, his predecessor. Behind the succession of Dúnochad were many factors, one being a clash between eligibility and succession mechanism.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to provide evidence for abbatial succession mechanisms on Iona. Despite the existence of various methods for succession in the Insular world it is likely that a consistent succession mechanism was employed at Iona, whereby the reigning abbot appointed his successor. In acknowledging that the reigning abbot was vested with ultimate agency in the succession process, we can move beyond the loose statement that the abbacy tended to be restricted to members of the Cenél Conaill. The succession process witnesses something more than rigid adherence to eligibility criteria, as the emergence of Virgno and Suibne makes plain. Initially, attachment to Columba was the key element in succession, and a ruling circle was formed around the saint. That a strong Cenél Conaill element was present in this period was a product of Columba himself, whose favouritism towards relatives is suggested by the surviving source material. However, this preference was not all encompassing, and Virgno's association with Columba in the *Vita Columbae* indicates his place in the ruling group, an attachment which facilitated his succession despite a lack of Cenél Conaill credentials. Ségéne's succession followed from his relation to Laisrén, who likely acted as his route into the ruling circle. However, from this point a deliberate effort was made to restrict succession to Ninnid's descendants. Suibne's succession is only abnormal if viewed through the lens of eligibility criteria. If we adjust our focus to consider succession mechanisms, then his emergence sits neatly within the domination of the abbacy by the descendants of Ninnid, where he may have acted as a placeholder for Cumméne.

Adomnán represents a shift, but his succession should still be conceptualized as a designation, born as it was of a fruitful mix of opportunity, stellar genealogical connections, and an established

¹⁶⁷ Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Guarantor List', pp. 191–2.

relationship with Fáilbe, the decision-maker himself. While Adomnán's genealogical connections may have aided his rise to the top, he seems to have eschewed them in appointing his own successor Conamail, and it is only through considering succession mechanisms that Conamail's otherwise peculiar emergence makes sense. In the period under consideration, the abbacy was mediated within a broad framework of eligibility. However, it was the reigning abbot that dictated events, and following Adomnán's death in 704 it is clear that these decisions could have consequences.

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