

## **A survey of the relationship between Dál Birn of Osraige and the kings of Déisi Muman in the early medieval period**

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Nestled between the medieval overkingdoms of Munster and Leinster, the kingdom of Osraige occupied an important position in the political landscape of the southern half of Ireland in the medieval period. From the fifth century, it encompassed much of the area now within the borders of modern-day counties Kilkenny and Laois, and operated as an important buffer zone between the kings of the two provincial kingdoms.<sup>1</sup> The kingship of Osraige was, throughout the medieval period, dominated by a dynasty called Dál Birn.<sup>2</sup> Dál Birn claimed their descent from Lóegaire Birn Búadach, a legendary king of Osraige, and produced a line of well-established kings, including Cerball mac Dúnlainge.<sup>3</sup> Cerball's family dominated the kingship of the region, and when his great grandson Gilla Pátraic mac Donnchada produced a new branch of the dynasty, they came to control the kingship.<sup>4</sup> Gilla Pátraic died in approximately 996 CE, but his branch of the family, known as the Mac Giolla Pátraic branch, is the origin of the Fitzpatrick surname still in use today. As the title suggests, the focus of this essay is the relationship between the Dál Birn/ Mac Giolla Pátraic dynasty and their closest neighbours, the Déisi Muman in county Waterford. Dál Birn seem to have maintained a rather tense relationship with the kings of Déisi Muman. As neighbouring kingdoms with a shared border, much of the interactions between the two seems to have related to their close proximity to one another and as a result, the relationship fluctuated often between alliance and conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Edel Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World AD 400 – 1000: Landscape, kingship and religion* (Dublin, 2014), p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> William Carrigan, *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Ossory* (Dublin, 1905), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> J.F. Shearman, 'Loca Patriciana: Part XII. The Early Kings of Ossory: The Seven Kings of Cashel Usurpers in Ossory: The Kings of the Silmaelodra-Of the Clan Maelaithgen – Maelduin Mac Cumiscagh-Cearbhall Mac Dungal: The Anglo-Norman Invasion of Ossory, &c., &c. Martin the Elder., a Patrician Missionary in Ossory: His Churches', *The Journal of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland* 4:33/34 (1878), p. 339.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

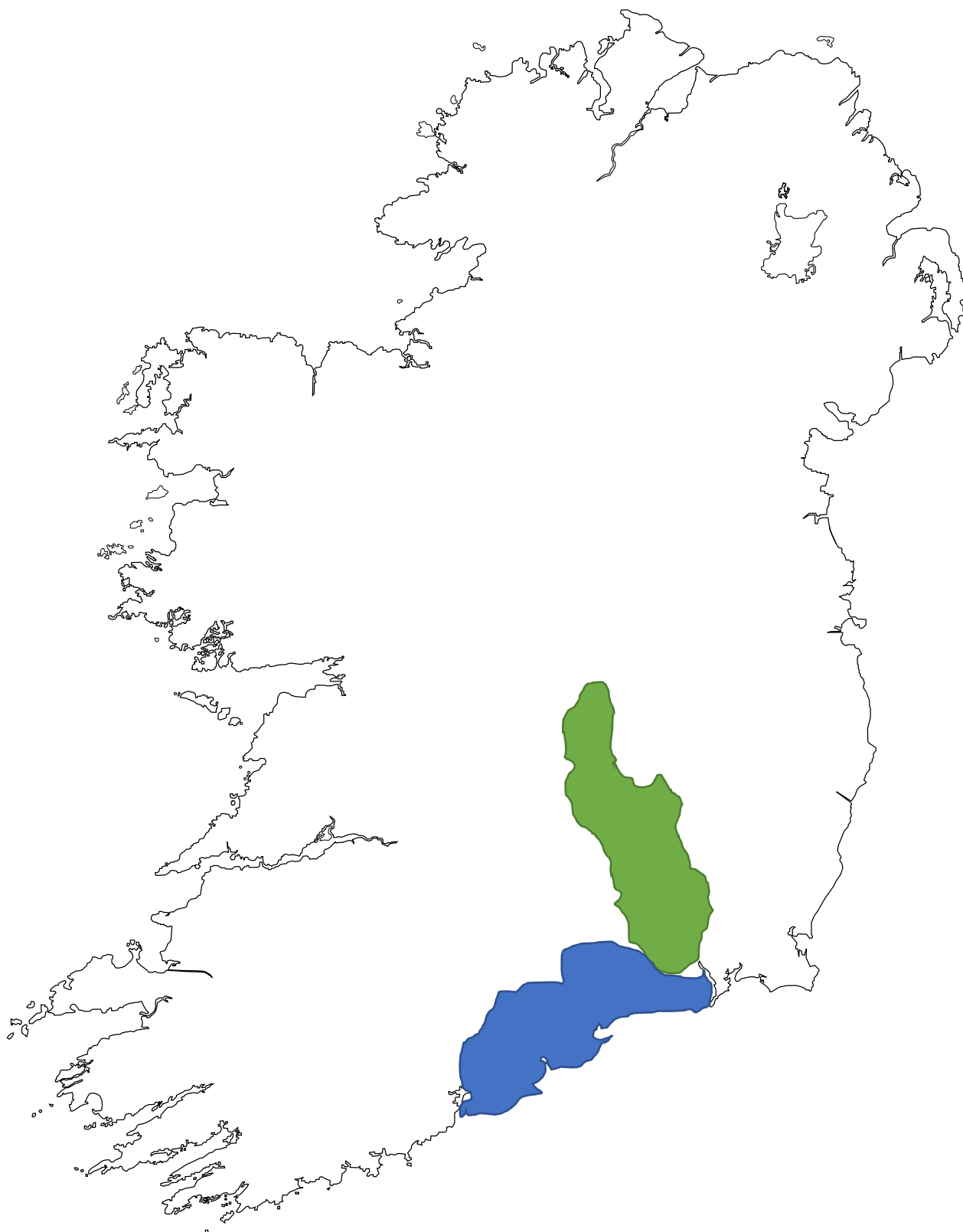


Fig. 1: Map of Ireland showing the approximate locations of the kingdom of Osraige (green), and the kingdom of Déisi Muman (blue).

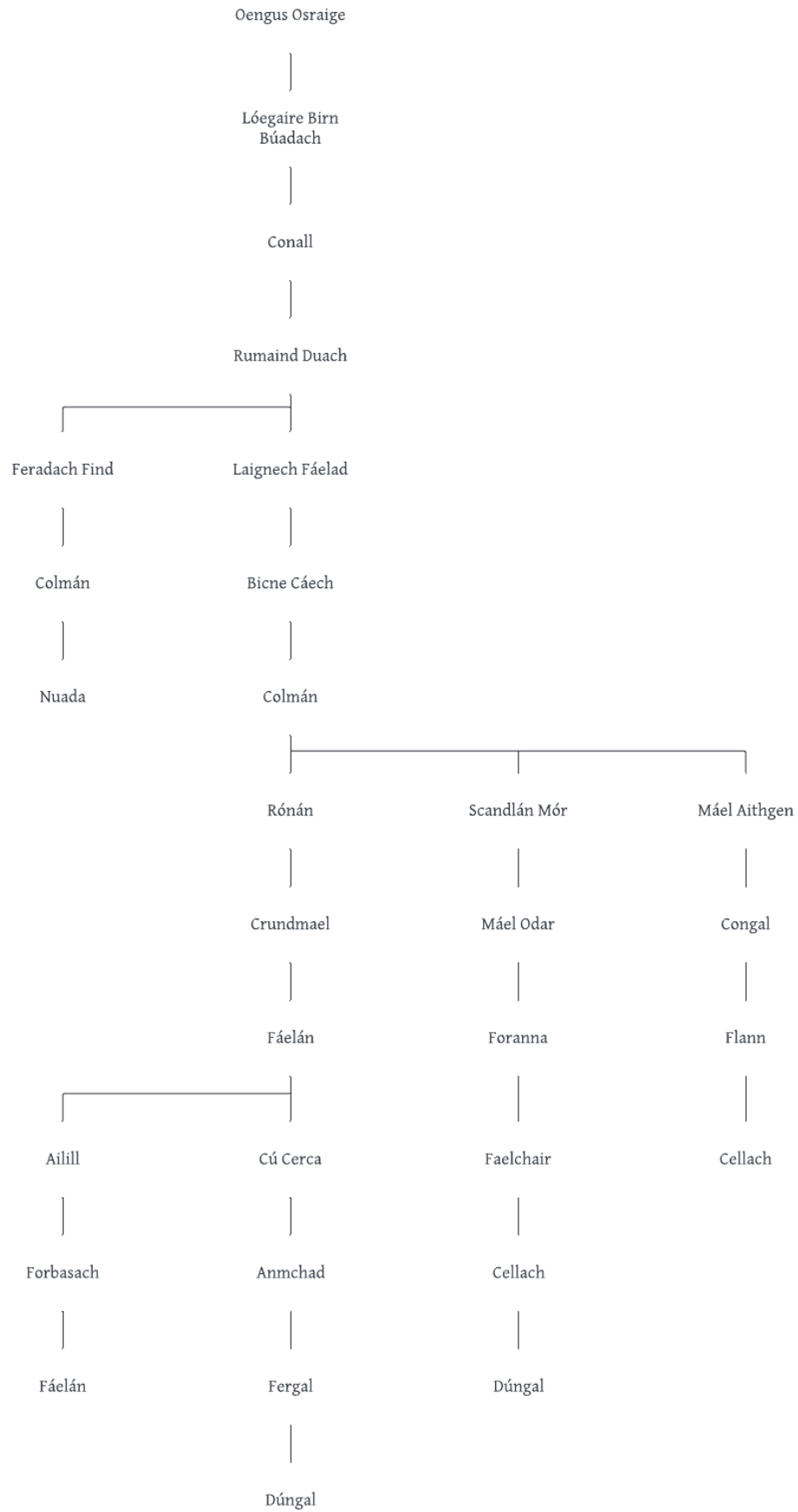


Fig. 2: Genealogical table of the early Osraige kings

As Ireland began to rapidly change in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, with the arrival of the Vikings and the emergence of new political dynasties, so too did the ways in which Osraige used their political alliances and conflicts to secure their position on a new political landscape.

Much of what we know today about the relationship between Osraige and Déisi Muman comes from the Annals of the Four Masters, and while these annals take the form of a later seventeenth-century compilation, the compilers of the text seem to have had access to some no longer extant sources, meaning that they contain a significant amount of information about the two kingdoms that is not available elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> It is possible that these annals contain some extraneous material, but there is little reason to believe that the compilers, based in northern Connacht, would have fabricated details about kingdoms unrelated to their region.<sup>6</sup> Before the relationship appears in the annals, however, it is clearly evident from at least the eighth century that tension existed between the two. This is particularly clear in the story of the Expulsion of the Déisi.

The Expulsion of the Déisi, which claims to describe the history of the Déisi people, refers to several instances of fighting between the kingdom and Osraige. It is described how the Déisi, having been expelled from both Tara and Leinster, came into contact with the king of Cashel, Oengus mac Nad Froích, who wished to woo Ethne the Dread of the Déisi.<sup>7</sup> Oengus therefore promised her three wishes in an attempt to win her love.<sup>8</sup> One of these wishes was to have the land on which the people of Osraige were living at the time, and for the Osraige to be driven from that land so that the Déisi could settle there. The men of Osraige reacted to this by

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<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the sources* (London, 1972), p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Kuno Meyer (ed.), 'The expulsion of the Dessi', *Y Cymmrodor*, Volume 14 (London, 1901), p. 115; Rebecca Wall, 'The origins of town life in Ireland: spatial integration and urbanization in the kingdom of the Déisi, 700 – 1100' (PhD, TCD, 2011), p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> Meyer, 'The expulsion of the Dessi', p. 115.

going into battle with the Déisi, and seven battles were fought as a result, with the Déisi emerging triumphant.<sup>9</sup> However, it is also described how the druids of the Déisi turned themselves into a red cow, which attacked the men of Osraige and routed them from Munster. In the text, it is stated: ‘amal ossa is amlaid rorathatar ass,’ which paints the men of Osraige as cowards who ‘ran away like deer’.<sup>10</sup> This attitude is further compounded when we consider the use of the deer in this sentence. It is thought that the name of the kingdom of Osraige originally meant ‘deer people’, allowing us to read this inclusion in the Expulsion as a joke by the author at the expense of the people of Osraige.<sup>11</sup> It is generally accepted that the contents of the Expulsion are not based on reality, and that the Déisi Muman were always present in Munster.<sup>12</sup> However, this eighth-century reference to tension between the Déisi and Osraige suggests that during this period, the kingdoms viewed each other as enemies.

A similar treatment of the relationship between the two kingdoms can be seen in the Life of St Declan of Ardmore. The surviving copy of this hagiography dates to the twelfth century, but Patrick Power in his introduction to the text posits that the original was likely composed in the eighth century.<sup>13</sup> The text includes a description of a specific event during which Declan, the patron saint of the Déisi Muman, needed a place to stay overnight while passing through Osraige territory. However, instead of being welcomed by the people of Osraige, he was driven out of the village ‘by force of arms’.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the hagiographer explicitly names Osraige as the kingdom which rejected the Déisi saint could be interpreted as a sign of animosity between the two kingdoms. The story goes on to say that Declan then

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Meyer, ‘The expulsion of the Dessi’, pp 121–3.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Schrijver, ‘Varia V: Non-Indo-European Surviving in Ireland in the First Millenium AD’, *Ériu*, 51 (2000), p. 195; G.R. Isaac, ‘Varia I: Some Old Irish Etymologies, and Some Conclusions Drawn from Them’, *Ériu*, 53 (2003), p. 154.

<sup>12</sup> Francis J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (2nd ed. Dublin, 2001), p. 181.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Introduction’ in Patrick Power (ed., trans.), *Life of St. Declan of Ardmore, with an introduction, translation and notes*, by Rev. P. Power, M.R.I.A., University College Cork (Dublin, 1914), p. xxv.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Power (ed., trans.), *Life of St. Declan of Ardmore, with an introduction, translation and notes*, by Rev. P. Power, M.R.I.A., University College Cork (Dublin, 1914), p. 54.

prayed to God for vengeance, resulting in the deaths of sixty members of the community, after which the remaining inhabitants repented and granted Declan land in Osraige to build the church of Cill Colm-Dearg.<sup>15</sup> This represents a spiritual submission of Osraige to a major symbol of the kingdom of the Déisi Muman, and indicates that, as is the case in the Expulsion, the author of the Life of St Declan viewed the Déisi as superior to Osraige, suggesting that tensions between the two kingdoms were at the forefront of political affairs at the time.

The first instance of interaction between Dál Birn and the Déisi kings that appears in the annals occurs in 735 in the Annals of Tigernach, in an entry which describes the battle of Belach Éile between Munster and Leinster.<sup>16</sup> The Éile people had a small kingdom in modern-day county Tipperary, making it likely that this battle took place on Munster lands close to the north-western border of Déisi Muman.<sup>17</sup> This entry reports the casualties of the battle to include Cellach mac Fáelchair, king of Osraige, and two sons of Cormac mac Rossa, king of Déisi, and while the event is also recorded in the Annals of Ulster and the Annals of Inisfallen, the Annals of Tigernach is the only source to reference the Déisi's involvement.<sup>18</sup> Osraige seems to have swapped loyalties in the fifth or sixth century from Leinster rule to Munster rule although their relationship with the kings of Cashel was unstable, and they paid no tributes to them, and it is therefore likely that during this battle, the army of Osraige supported the king of Munster.<sup>19</sup> It is also most likely that the Déisi Muman supported Munster, both to maintain their status as vassals of the king of Cashel, and to protect their northern border from Leinster's advances.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Gearóid Mac Niocaill (ed., trans.), 'The Annals of Tigernach', *Corpus of Electronic Texts*, p. 238 <<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100002A/index.html>> [Accessed 13 February 2022].

<sup>17</sup> Edmund Hogan, 'Onomasticon Goedelicum locorum et tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae: An index, with identifications, to the Gaelic names of places and tribes', *Documents of Ireland* (University College Cork) <<http://publish.ucc.ie/doi/locus/E>> [Accessed 13 February 2022].

<sup>18</sup> Mac Niocaill, 'The Annals of Tigernach', p. 238; Seán Mac Airt (ed., trans.), Gearóid Mac Niocaill (ed., trans.), *The Annals of Ulster* (Dublin, 1983), p. 189; Seán Mac Airt (ed., trans.), *The Annals of Inisfallen* (MS. Rawlinson B. 503) (Dublin, 1944), p. 108.

<sup>19</sup> Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, p. 181; Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *Ireland before the Vikings* (Dublin, 1972), pp 31–2.

<sup>20</sup> David E. Thornton, *Kings, Chronologies and Genealogies: studies in the political history of early medieval Ireland and Wales* (Oxford, 2003), p. 125.

As a result, this is the first instance of the two kingdoms working together against a common enemy in support of their overking.

In the ninth century, references to a relationship between Osraige and Déisi Muman begin to appear more regularly in the annals, particularly the Annals of the Four Masters. For example, they make reference to a battle between the two in 846 in which Osraige, led by Dúnadach mac Dúnlainge, defeated the Déisi.<sup>21</sup> Twenty years later, it is recorded Cerball, also described as a son of Dúnlainge, led the army of Osraige to plunder the Déisi.<sup>22</sup> This Cerball mac Dúnlainge, great grandfather of Giolla Pátraic, appears to have caused particular trouble for the Déisi, leading another raid into their kingdom in 872, plundering as far west as Belach Eochaille, at modern-day Youghal in east county Cork.<sup>23</sup> A similar event is recorded in the Fragmentary Annals under the year 864, in which it is said that Cerball led a raid into Déisi which resulted in ‘the total devastation of Uí Oengusa’.<sup>24</sup> The Uí Oengusa inhabited the lands around modern-day Stradbally in west Waterford.<sup>25</sup> These raids indicate that when the Dál Birn army raided Déisi Muman from Osraige, they pushed as far west as possible. This may have been an attempt on their part to force the borders of the kingdom westwards, gaining territory for themselves.

Cerball and the Déisi appear to have put their differences aside for a brief period in 876 when, according to the Annals of the Four Masters, they defeated the men of Munster in a battle at Inneoin.<sup>26</sup> Inneoin is located near Clonmel in County Tipperary, in Déisi Muman territory and served as a site of inauguration for their kings.<sup>27</sup> This battle was not the first time that the

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<sup>21</sup> John O’Donovan (ed., trans.), *Annala Rioghachta Eireann: Annals of the kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters, from the earliest period to the year 1616* (Dublin, 1856), p. 477.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 515.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 519; For detailed discussion of Cerball mac Dúnlainge’s role in Osraige and his relationship with the Déisi, see Catherine Swift, *Woodstown: Viking Chiefs, Irish Kings & Exported Princesses* (Waterford, 2004), pp. 5–13.

<sup>24</sup> Joan Newlon Radner (ed.), *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* (Dublin, 1978), p. 117.

<sup>25</sup> Paul MacCotter, *Colmán of Cloyne: A Study* (Dublin, 2004), p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> O’Donovan, *Annala Rioghachta Eireann*, p. 524.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, *Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland C. 1100-1600: A Cultural Landscape Study*

site acted as a battleground, with Máel Sechnaill mac Máele-Runaid going to Inneoin in 853 to receive the hostages of the Déisi.<sup>28</sup> It was also the legendary site of the battle between the druids of the Déisi and Osraige that features in the Expulsion of the Déisi, which was previously discussed.<sup>29</sup> It is possible that during this period, Dál Birn held enough power in the region to become a legitimate threat to the Munster kingship, making the kingdom of the Déisi a buffer zone between the two. In this case, an alliance between Dál Birn and the kings of Déisi Muman would have been in the best interests of both peoples.<sup>30</sup>

This brief alliance seems to have been abandoned again by 887, when the Déisi reportedly slaughtered the people of Osraige, and killed Cerball's son Braenán.<sup>31</sup> The relationship between the two kingdoms appears to have become more complex in the end of the ninth century, when Cellach, another son of Cerball's, joined with the Déisi and the Vikings of Waterford to fight at Gabrán, 'where Maelmordha, son of Maelmhuidh, and a great number of others along with him, were slain.'<sup>32</sup> Gabrán refers to the location of modern-day Gowran in Leinster, so it is likely that the battle involved the army of Leinster in some capacity.<sup>33</sup> Cellach is recorded later by both the Annals of Inisfallen and the Fragmentary Annals as having died in 908 at the battle of Mag Ailbe, where he fought on the army of Cormac mac Cuilennáin alongside the Déisi against the men of Connacht and Leinster, so it is possible that Leinster was viewed as a common enemy by the Déisi, the Norse and by Cellach in 893.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, Cellach was not yet king of Osraige in 893. His uncle Riagán mac Dúnlainge reigned until 894, after which his brother Diarmait ruled until he was deposed in 905.<sup>35</sup> It is possible that Leinster

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(Woodbridge, 2004), p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> O'Donovan, *Annala Rioghachta Eireann*, p. 487.

<sup>29</sup> Meyer, 'The expulsion of the Dessi', p. 121.

<sup>30</sup> Wall, 'The origins of town life in Ireland', p. 93.

<sup>31</sup> O'Donovan, *Annala Rioghachta Eireann*, p. 541.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 552.

<sup>33</sup> Edmund Hogan, 'Onomasticon Goedelicum'

<sup>34</sup> Mac Airt, *The Annals of Inisfallen*, p. 145; Radner, *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, p. 155.

<sup>35</sup> For detailed discussion of these kings of Osraige, see Carrigan, *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Ossory*, pp 41–3.



had allied themselves with Riagán, and that Cellach, wanting the throne that had belonged to his father, may have gone to battle for this cause. In this case, this incident would not represent an alliance between the kingdom of Osraige and the Déisi, but specifically between Cellach and the Déisi, against the king of Osraige. The Fragmentary Annals, in part of what Joan Radner describes as an ‘Osraige chronicle’, describe how a period of fighting between the Déisi and Osraige broke out in 912, when Cormac mac Mothla of the Déisi raided Osraige.<sup>36</sup> This resulted in an alliance between Osraige and Cormac’s rival to the kingship, Máel Ruanaid mac Néill, described in the annals as ‘the son of the king who had previously been king over the Déissi’, who killed Cormac’s brother Cuilennán in battle.<sup>37</sup> By this point, Cellach’s brother Diarmait had been reinstated as king of Osraige, and it is likely that this alliance was motivated by some level of disdain held by Diarmait towards Cormac and his involvement in the battle at Gabrán.<sup>38</sup>

By the late 930s, the alliance between Osraige and Déisi Muman appears to have been repaired, largely as a result of the threat posed to them both by Cellachán, king of Munster. In 939, the Annals of the Four Masters describe how Muirchertach Ua Néill ‘plundered and ravaged’ both the kingdoms of Osraige and Déisi as far as ‘Leas-Ruadhrach’ in order to force them to submit to him.<sup>39</sup> Patrick Power suggests that Leas-Ruadhrach is the root of the name Lisronagh, located in county Tipperary.<sup>40</sup> Lisronagh is in the present day located in the barony of Iffa and Offa East, which was the territory of the Uí Fothaid Tíre in the tenth century, placing this event on Déisi land.<sup>41</sup> This submission to the king of the Uí Néill angered Cellachán,

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<sup>36</sup> Radner, *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, p. xiii.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 177; Thornton, *Kings, Chronologies and Genealogies*, p. 172.

<sup>38</sup> Radner, *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, p. 153.

<sup>39</sup> O’Donovan, *Annala Rioghachta Éireann*, p. 641.

<sup>40</sup> Patrick Power, *The Place-names of Decies* (London, 1907), p. 285.

<sup>41</sup> Edmund Hogan, ‘Onomasticon Goedelicum’.

prompting him to slaughter the Déisi in revenge.<sup>42</sup> Later in the year, the Déisi and Osraige are recorded as having joined in battle against Cellachán in an entry that states:

‘Another battle was gained by the Deisi and the Osraighi over the King of Caiseal, where many were slain.’<sup>43</sup>

Cellachán was an extremely powerful king and it is unlikely that Dál Birn or the kings of the Déisi could have won against his army alone. However, the combined strength of their armies was clearly enough to overpower him and having both suffered massively at the hands of both Cellachán and Muirchertach in this year, it is probable that they agreed to work together to protect their kingdoms.

This alliance with Déisi Muman seems to have been maintained at least until 965, when it is described in the annals how Murchad mac Finn, king of Leinster, raided the kingdom of Osraige.<sup>44</sup> In response to this, Mathgamain mac Cennétig, king of Munster led an army supported by both Osraige and Déisi Muman from ‘Ath-Buana’, which Edmund Hogan places at Aughboyne on the River Suir, to Castlecomer in county Kilkenny.<sup>45</sup> As had been the case in the past, the common interest of protecting their respective kingdoms seems to have been the motivating factor behind this co-operation. While Osraige were directly involved in the conflict, having been the victims of the raid, it was in the best interests of the Déisi to keep Murchad out of Osraige. The kingdom of Osraige traditionally acted as a buffer zone between Leinster and Munster, and if it had been successfully infiltrated by the king of Leinster, then the Déisi would have been left vulnerable to similar raids. Two years later in 967, Murchad mac Finn again led an army into Osraige and was once again defeated by Mathgamain and his

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<sup>42</sup> O'Donovan, *Annala Rioghachta Eireann*, p. 641.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 642.

<sup>44</sup> O'Donovan, *Annala Rioghachta Eireann*, p. 690.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

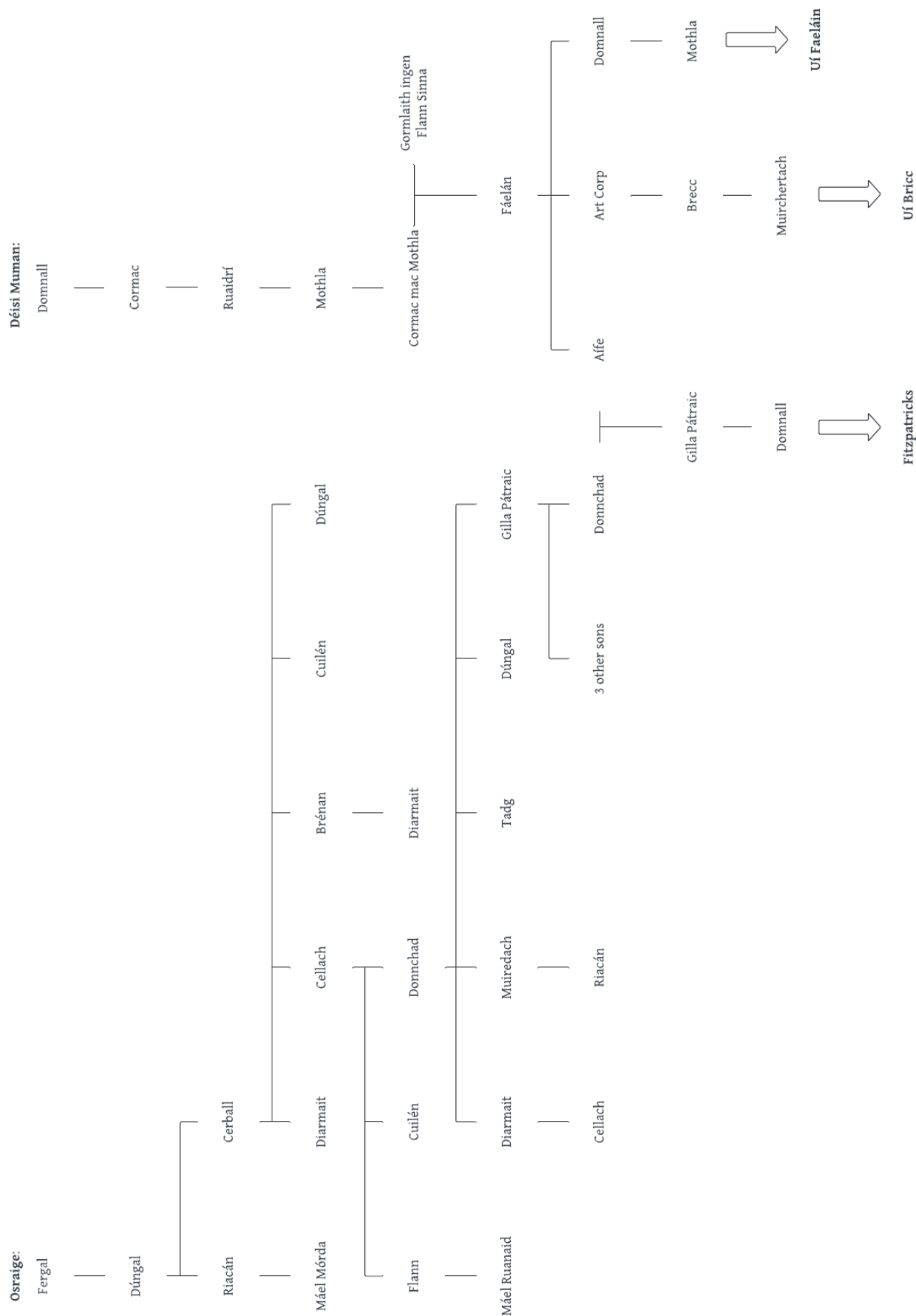


Fig. 3: Genealogical table illustrating the relationship between the kings of Osraige and the kings of Déisi Muman

allies.<sup>46</sup> The annal entry which describes the event lists these allies as ‘the two Eili, the Déisi, and Imhar of Port-Lairge, with the foreigners and the Osraigh.’<sup>47</sup> This marks the first major conflict involving Ímar, the Viking king of Waterford. The Viking settlement at Waterford sat on the border of the kingdoms of Osraige and Déisi Muman, and this collaboration was likely an attempt by Ímar to protect his town from invading Leinstermen.

Relations between the Waterford Vikings, Osraige and the Déisi began to deteriorate in 995 however, as Gilla Pátraic mac Donnchada, ancestor of the Fitzpatricks and described by the Annals of the Four Masters as ‘the lord of Osraighe’, was murdered. His death is attributed to Donndubán, Ímar’s son, in collaboration with Domnall mac Faeláin, king of the Déisi.<sup>48</sup> Donndubán was then murdered in retribution by a member of the Uí Failge.<sup>49</sup> This shows that while the Déisi were still willing to co-operate and work with the Norse in Waterford, they had turned against Osraige, harking back to earlier ninth-century raids by the Waterford Vikings into Osraige.<sup>50</sup> It is likely that Domnall mac Faeláin viewed his alliance with the Vikings as strategic in that their position in Waterford could serve as protection from invading Osraige and Leinster armies, thus making an alliance with Osraige less significant for the security of his kingdom. However, it is unusual that he was willing to support the murder of Gilla Pátraic. As a son of his sister Aífe and Donnchada mac Cellach, king of Osraige, Gilla Pátraic was Domnall’s nephew. The very fact that Aífe was married to Donnchada implies that attempts to create a lasting peaceful alliance between the two kingdoms had been made and it is therefore interesting that Domnall would take the side of the Vikings against his own kinsman. It is equally interesting that in revenge for this murder, no member of the Uí Faeláin was killed,

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<sup>46</sup> O’Donovan, *Annala Rioghachta Eireann*, p. 693.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> O’Donovan, *Annala Rioghachta Eireann*, p. 735.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> A. Walsh, *Scandinavian relations with Ireland during the Viking period* (Dublin, 1922), p. 25.

only Donndubán mac Ímar, though it is possible that this familial link may have influenced this.

By the eleventh century, the relationship between the Déisi and Osraige no longer appears in the annals. While this could be easily assumed as a sign of peace between the two kingdoms, it is much more likely that their relationship continued to fluctuate, and that the annalists simply deemed it to no longer be relevant information worthy of recording. It is possible that larger conflicts such as the battle of Clontarf and the following decades political upheaval that Ireland experienced eclipsed much of the smaller conflicts in the country. It is clear, however, that much of the interactions between the Déisi and Osraige were closely linked to the relationship between the two kingdoms and the Munster overlords. Common enemies meant that Dál Birn and the kings of Déisi Muman were willing to work together when necessary to protect their kingdoms, but the competitive and fast-changing nature of the early medieval political landscape meant that both were also willing to sever alliances when necessary.

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