Tírechán [St Tírechán] *(fl. c. 690)*

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Tírechán [St Tírechán] *(fl. c. 690)*, bishop and writer, was the author of the so-called *Collectanea* about St Patrick that forms part of the Book of Armagh. His feast day is 3 July, but his sainthood may have been acquired late: he is not in the Genealogies of the Saints, nor in any martyrlogy before the twelfth century. Reportedly a native of Tirawley, co. Sligo, he became a bishop, though no see is named. The *Collectanea* implies that he belonged to the Uí Amolngada (in the north-west of the present-day co. Mayo), and to a branch (descended from Conall, son of Éndae, son of Amolngaíd) who were servants of Patrick. His kinship may thus explain why Tírechán became, with Muirchú maccu Machtheni, one of two major Patrician hagiographers of the late seventh century. He was a disciple of Ultán, bishop of Ardbraccan in Brega (in what is now co. Meath), who died in 657, from whom he claims to have derived information, both by word of mouth and from his book, the exact nature of which is unknown. On the other hand, the *Collectanea* was probably written c.690: before 696, the beginning of the reign of Loingsech mac Óengusso (of Cenél Conaill), since he takes for granted the supremacy of the southern Uí Néill dynasties; also probably before 693, since he seems to assume that the king of Leinster belongs to the Uí Dúnlainge. The reign of the Uí Dúnlainge king of Leinster, Bran mac Conaill maic Fáeláin, from 680 to 693, was preceded and followed by kings of a rival dynasty. The date is probably after 688 since he refers to 'the recent plagues' in the plural (*Collectanea*, chap. 25). Adomnán, writing c.700, speaks of two major plagues in his lifetime, presumably those of 664–6 and the one he dates himself, 686–8.

The *Collectanea*—first given this title by Archbishop James Ussher (1581–1656)—is not a life such as that written at much the same date by Muirchú. It purports to recount a journey taking Patrick round the northern half of Ireland, beginning in Brega (on the coast north of Dublin), going west across the midlands through the kingdoms of the southern Uí Néill, across the Shannon into the lands of the Connachta, round the northern coast as far as what is now co. Antrim, then south-west to Armagh, and finally back to Brega. At the end Tírechán briefly takes Patrick via Leinster to Cashel, seat of the kings of Munster. The journey is a convenient framework: he himself admits that Patrick crossed the Shannon not once, but three times. The purpose was to assert that Patrick was the founder of numerous
churches as well as the arbiter of the fates of some local dynasties. Tírechán's loyalty, however, was to Patrick and his familia in general rather than to Armagh in particular, which he mentions only once, and then only in passing. The churches to which he gave his greatest attention were Donaghpatrick (Domnach Pátraic), in co. Meath, and a church by 'the Wood of Fochluth' (chap. 42), which may well have been Tírechán's own local church. Donaghpatrick was adjacent to two other sites mentioned by Tírechán. The first was Tailltiu, the site of the annual assembly and fair, the greatest such event in Ireland, and by Tírechán's time an essential element in the high-kingship, monopolized since 637 by the Uí Néill. The other site, Ráith Airthir, was the royal seat of the kings of Brega; the current ruler, Finnechtae mac Dúncada, was also king of Tara (as the high-kings were called). Tírechán's text expressed the hope that an alliance between the Uí Néill of Brega and the heirs of Patrick might dominate Ireland; he may also have envisaged Donaghpatrick being the chief Patrician church rather than Armagh.

Tírechán apparently did not know Muirchú's work, and the reverse may also be true. In any case their intentions, both literary and political, were quite different: while Muirchú was the champion of Armagh, Tírechán wished to uphold the claims of the heirs of Patrick, without any special reference to Armagh, by attaching the saint on the one hand to many small, often ancient, churches and, on the other, by harnessing the power of the leading Uí Néill dynasty of the time behind the familia of Patrick. Tírechán's text offers the first detailed picture of the ecclesiastical and political geography of Ireland. Later lives of Patrick, notably the tripartite life, were principally based on a combination of Muirchú’s life and Tírechán's Collectanea. Some of the personalities he records as disciples of Patrick may well be early figures, but it is difficult to see how this can be demonstrated.

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