The poems of Blathmac which Professor James Carney discovered in 1958 in manuscript G 50 in the National Library of Ireland and which he subsequently edited remain something of an enigma. Although they have been called the finest product of a golden age of Irish spirituality, they have yet to receive substantial critical attention. Blathmac has been praised for superb narrative sense and a sensitive and lucid style and more recently for a remarkable attempt to accommodate narrative verse into mainstream Irish poetics. An attempt has been made elsewhere to elucidate the structure of the poems. Here an attempt is made to reassess the context in which the poems were made.

Carney saw the poems as belonging to the Céli Dé or Culdee reform movement. The Céli Dé reform is generally described as a movement introduced in the latter half of the eighth century, centred on Tallaght. Its aim is thought to have been to counterbalance a tendency towards laicization of the monasteries: ‘it sought by a return to the primitive spirit of the anchorite to banish worldliness and to restore the pure ascetical spirit’. Carney’s argument for identifying Blathmac with the Céli Dé reform may be set out as follows:

- learned Irish monks were required to be able to write verse in Irish,
- Irish was used in the monastic schools as a teaching medium and verse was an important aid to memory,
- Blathmac’s verses were written in simple unpretentious deibide,
- they were obviously intended for a popular audience,
- Félire Óengusa, written 30–50 years after the Blathmac poems (c. 800) and undoubtedly part of the Céli Dé reform, has ‘frequent similarities of diction’.

On the other hand, Carney identified the following contrasts between the work of Blathmac and of Óengus:

- Blathmac wrote simply, Óengus wrote in more elaborate metres,
- Blathmac’s poems were written relatively quickly, Óengus’s poem probably involved years of intense research,

6 Carney, Blathmac, xv.
7 P. O’Dwyer, Céli Dé: a spiritual reform in Ireland 750–950 (Dublin 1983) xi.
8 Carney, Blathmac, xv.
• Blathmac’s poem was intended for private devotional use, Óengus’s poem was intended for liturgical use.

Mac Eoin has endorsed Carney’s view, observing that ‘the spirit of the poems is similar to that of other Old Irish documents’. He goes further and notes a parallel with *Saltair na Rann*:

biblical incidents are visualised by the poet as occurring in a social milieu similar to that with which he was familiar in Ireland. Furthermore, the distorting simplicity of the poet’s account of biblical incidents and the unreserved devotion of his spirituality foreshadows *Saltair na Rann* at a distance of over two centuries.

Carney suggests that Blathmac and Óengus ‘both probably belonged to the Culdee reform’. Mac Eoin says, unwarrantedly perhaps, that: ‘Professor Carney is surely right in identifying in Blathmac’s work the influence of the Culdee reform’. This view has been challenged by O’Dwyer:

It has been suggested that the Blathmac poems belong to the Culdee reform as there are frequent similarities in diction between these poems and the *Féilire*. To me this seems unlikely unless some more substantial link, such as location, may be added. It is to be expected that religious poems of the length of these and belonging to the same century would have a good deal of similar phraseology. Blathmac’s dates suggest the possibility of his being an influence on the literature which emanated from the reform.

O’Dwyer’s objection to giving the Blathmac poems a place within the Céili Dé movement is weakened when considered in the light of the substantial number of points of similarity between them and *Féilire Óengusso*. Both poets do the following:

• address an intermediary: Mary (*Blathmac* 1, 573, 574, 567); *rígrad* (kingfolk, i.e. the inhabitants of heaven) (*Féilire* Epilogue 381, 388),

• ask their intermediaries to come to them (on a visit) (*Blathmac* 591, *Féil. Epilogue* 33–36)

• stand in a relationship of *célisme* (clientship) to God (*Blathmac* 565–8; *Féil. Epilogue* 425–6, cf. *Féil. Epilogue* 307),

• conceive of their poems as ‘giving service’: *dáthracht* (devoted offering, *Blathmac*, heading above line 1); *díbhart* (vehement prayer/supplication, *Féil. Epilogue* 153–4, 417–8),

• credit God with the authorship of the poem (*Blathmac* 537–8; *Féil. Epilogue* 89–92),

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12 O’Dwyer, *Céili Dé*, 173.
conceive of their poem as a petitition (aicde, Blathmac 549; itge, Fél. Prologue 17).

make the following requests for:

- long life (Blathmac 553–4; Fél. Epilogue 204),
- escort/ welcome/ assistance from the Host of Heaven at the point of death (Blathmac 555–6; Fél. Epilogue 115–6, 563–4),
- a place amongst the Host of Heaven (Blathmac 556; Fél. Epilogue 271–2),
- Salvation for all reciters of the poem (Blathmac 539; Fél. Epilogue 113–4, 427–8),
- Salvation from Hell in particular (Blathmac 561, 564; Fél. Epilogue 481–2, cf. Épil 557–8),

- guarantee to the reciters of their poems the good offices of the intermediary by standing as ‘guarantor’ or ‘surety’ for the intermediary (asíre, Blathmac 572; náth, Fél. Epilogue 165–6),


- look forward to the punishment of those responsible for putting the martyrs to death (Blathmac 1023, 1031–2; Fél. Prologue 57–8),

- specify that for valid recitation the poem must be:

  - sung (Blathmac 561, 571; Fél. Epilogue 1, 4, 180),
  - in a state of purity (Blathmac 821–2; Fél. Epilogue 174),
  - during a vigil (Blathmac 557–8, 561–2; Fél. Epilogue 199, 165–6).

All these common features amount to something much more than ‘similarities of diction’. Although the poems are cast in different forms – Blathmac’s in that of a keen (coinuadh/caoine), Oengus’s in that of a martyrology (félire) – both poets have a common intention: that their poems will help to gain them a place in Heaven. This might be said to be the ultimate intention of any Christian prayer but both poets refer overtly to the composition of their poems and stress the role of the poem in the process of salvation. Not only this but, as the points of similarity above demonstrate, there is a high degree of congruence in the ways in which both poems work.

Both are conceived in terms of legal procedure like the Old Irish poem, Íuccain. Quin pointed out that this poem had not hitherto been fully understood because of the failure to bear in mind the high proportion of legal terms contained in it which to a large extent set the tone of the poem. He showed that ‘reference to the
early Irish legal system leads to a better understanding of what is in fact a far from simple poem.13

In the case of both Blathmac and Óengus, the poet is a céile who asks a more powerful céile or céilí (clients) to intercede on his behalf with the ‘lord’ which they have in common (God). The intermediary is asked to request the reward which only God may grant, namely a place in Heaven. The reward is to be not only for the poet but for all reciters of the poem. The poet ‘encourages’ the intermediary to act on behalf of himself and others by performing a service for him through the poem: Blathmac ‘comforts’ his intermediary, Mary, while Óengus ‘praises and commemorates’ his intermediaries, the ‘kingfolk’ (rígrad), the martyrs in Heaven.

The poet guarantees mediation to the reciter by standing as ‘guarantor’ (aitire) or ‘surety’ (rith) for the intermediary. At the same time, he lays down certain conditions which must be fulfilled by the reciter in order for the recitation to be valid or efficacious. The central, motivating idea behind the Félire of Óengus is evident in the final stanza of the Prologue and the first of the Félire proper:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Flaithem nóeb na ndíile,} & \quad \text{The holy prince (flaitheim) of the elements, Christ son of holy Mary,} \\
\text{Críst mac Maire nóibe,} & \quad \text{Jesus, beloved pillar, let him lead on} \\
\text{Ióide ré síl dóine} & \quad \text{before the race of men.} \\
(\text{Fél. Prologue 337–340}) & \quad \text{Before mens multitudinous race let} \\
\text{Re síl dáilach dóine} & \quad \text{the pre-eminent king (rí) lead. . .} \\
\text{tóide in ri remain} & \quad (1–2) \\
\end{align*}
\]

The poet’s idea is of Jesus ‘leading’ the síl dáilach dóine (multitudinous race of men). The problem of the human condition is for each person to understand how he is placed or decide how to place himself in this scheme of things; to decide whether he will be a ‘follower’ or ‘client’ (céile) of Jesus or not. In the closing stanza of the Epilogue, the author, Óengus, makes his own position clear. He defines his objective in life and indicates how his objective is to be achieved:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tan domm-t ocht irguis} & \quad \text{When the great boon (irguis) may} \\
\text{cid i caitic nó chorgus,} & \quad \text{come to me, whether at Easter or} \\
\text{rom-middat i pardus} & \quad \text{in Lent, may the kingfolk (rígrad) I} \\
\text{ind rígrad imordus.} & \quad \text{have commemorated convoy me into} \\
(\text{Epil 561–4}) & \quad \text{paradise.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Óengus has decided to become a ‘follower’ of Jesus who ‘leads’ the race of men. His objective is to reach Paradise in order to be at the side of his ‘leader’. He intends to achieve his objective by asking Jesus to grant him a boon or reward (irguis). The reward is that when he dies he may be convoyed or escorted to Heaven by the céile (rígrad) of Jesus. In order to demonstrate his worthiness for such reward, Óengus performs in return a service to the rígrad by ‘commemorating’ them in the form of a poem which is a martyrology.

Blathmac shares the same view of the world and of the process of salvation. Both Blathmac and Óengus interpret salvation in terms of a quasi-legal procedure based on the relationship between ‘lord’ and ‘follower’ (céile). They share a

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common cultural milieu. It is possible to go further and suggest an even greater degree of affinity between the two which amounts to the 'substantial link' of which O'Dwyer is sceptical.

Blathmac's incomplete second poem contains a sequence (stanzas 246–255) which names some of the martyrs and the manner of their deaths. The particular names and the order in which they are named are not random but serve Blathmac's poetic and religious purpose. Adam is named first, as the first victim of the power of Satan. Abel's is the first blood of the martyrs to be shed. The martyrdom of the Holy Innocents prefigures the Crucifixion of the one child who escaped and also suggests the plight of the bereaved mother. John the Baptist, although martyred during the lifetime of Jesus, is mentioned immediately after the Crucifixion, chronological order being sacrificed in deference to the supreme martyr, Jesus. Finally, Stephen is mentioned as the first post-Resurrection martyr.

Stanzas 248–251 name the apostles and also Paul, Barnabas and Mathias, including the authors of the Synoptic Gospels. Recalling the manner and death of these martyrs, the closest célim of Jesus, is intended by the poet to comfort his mother, Mary. This is also true of the recalling of Giurgius, the seven sons of Machabeus and Quiricus: mention of Giurgius makes a connection with the Holy Innocents who form a troop (drong) in Heaven headed by Giurgius (Fél. Epilogue 265–268); the story of the seven sons of Machabeus stresses the supportive role of the mother and the steadfastness of her sons and is therefore a particularly appropriate quotation in the context of giving 'comfort' to Mary on the loss of her son. Similarly, Quiricus is mentioned as another martyr put to death before the eyes of his mother.14

Blathmac's list of martyrs is substantial but he is quite aware that it is by no means comprehensive:

Ma ad-féis scéil fothai fir
boithium de estecht marrtir,
a ndo-cúid di Christ céilib
martrai inna primféilib,
as-ingúid rim lia drám
(103–7)

If I am to tell the true fundamental account (scéil) that I had of the death of martyrs, all the servants (célim) of Christ who suffered martyrdom on their principal feasts (primféilib) (it passes reckoning to count it)

Blathmac's statement that he has had (boithium, 1014) a 'true fundamental account' (scéil fothai fir, 1013) of the deaths of martyrs must mean that he acquired it in either oral or written form, or both. Given the implied extensiveness of the material and its complexity (implied by its calendrical organisation into 'feasts' and 'principal feasts' (cf. primféilib, 1016), it is quite possible that Blathmac had access to his scéil in written form. In other words, there are strong indications that Blathmac had access to a martyrology. From Blathmac's statement it can be deduced that the supposed martyrology was:

- in the form of a scéil (account),

14 Cf. Félire June 16, Fél. Epilogue 265 and cf. also (as Carney has pointed out) the way Blathmac presents the victories that God has won for the Jews 'in somewhat the same manner in which a Bardic poet would present the catbhreim or list of victories of his hero', J. Carney (ed.), Early Irish poetry (Cork 1965) 55.
true (fhr),

fundamental (fathair), (i.e. definitive?),

a list of all the célí (martyrs) of Jesus together with details of their deaths:

each martyr has one or more fēil (feast day),

the primfēil (principal feast) was the one on which the martyrdom took place.

The Féilire of Óengus conforms very closely to these characteristics. The following events are referred to in it as scél:

the Resurrection (scél ndermarr – a mighty tale, March 27),

the manifestation of Michael (scél promthae – a proven story, May 9),

the death of Thomas (scél ningir – a tale of torment),

Óengus claims his work to be ‘true’ (fhr): is féilire firchert (‘tis a truly accurate martyrology’, Féil. Êpilologue 156). His work is ‘fundamental’ in the sense that it is based on the best sources available to the author:

Féilire ro scrítus
i céin ocus acus
(Êpil 109–110)

I have searched out martyrologies afar and anear.

Each quatrain contains information in varying degrees about each named martyr, from simple mention of the feast day or ‘principal feast’ to details of the death.

The martyrs in Féilire are described as célí:

célí ind Ríg fáithgil
(Êpil 239)

the célí of the bright-realmed rí

Each has one or more feast (fēil):

cech caipet col-luíthi
sloindfhéil cech laithi
(Prolologue 299–300)

every chapter swiftly will declare every days feast.

fria nsetecht co nóigi
ro cinnset a fēil
(Êpil 107–8)

by their departure (estecht cf. estecht martir, Blathmac 1014) they (ie the martyrs) have determined their feasts.

In the case of a martyr with two or more feasts, the ‘principal feast’ is the one on which his martyrdom is commemorated. For example, the principal feast of Mark (primfēil Mairc) is June 10. Mark also has feasts on April 25 and October 3. Óengus identifies the sources which he used for the compilation of his Féilire and states that they themselves were martyrologies (Êpil 137–144). It has been demonstrated that the principal one of these was the late eighth century Martyrology of Tallaght.15

15 O’Dwyer, Céil Díc, 139.
If Óengus used the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, Blathmac, writing between thirty and fifty years before Óengus, might also have had sight of it or some similar document.

Assuming that Blathmac did use a martyrology as a source for his poems, the document seems to have inspired awe in him. He says of the *scéil* from which he had learned of the deaths of the martyrs:

\[
\text{as ingaib rín lia dráim} \quad \text{(1017)}
\]

Óengus reacted in a similar way to his source:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Cè betis secht tengtha} & \quad \text{Though there were seven tongues in} \\
\text{im gín sócc súilgind,} & \quad \text{my sage, studious mouth, it is until} \\
\text{co bráth, mó cech delmàimm} & \quad \text{Doom – greater than any noise – if I} \\
\text{issed ma doruirminn.} & \quad \text{should recount them (i.e. the martyrs omitted from *Féile*).}
\end{align*}
\]

Blathmac has a similar formulation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lit fertae mac Dè bì, de} & \quad \text{A hundred sages cannot tell the number of miracles of the son of the living} \\
\text{ní r-aisnedat cèt ecnæ} & \quad \text{God.}
\end{align*}
\]

(Blathmac 141–2 and cf. also 371–2)

Given the points of similarity between the *Féile* and the postulated source used by Blathmac, it seems likely that it was much more detailed than the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, which is an abbreviated form of the *Hieronymian Martyrology* – a list of bare names in the genitive case for each day with only some marginal notes and glosses appended. If Blathmac used a source as postulated, it probably represented a stage intermediate between the *Martyrology of Tallaght* and the *Féile*.

The argument for a ‘substantial link’ between the work of Blathmac and Óengus may be summarised as follows. The *Féile* may be viewed as a logical development of the ‘spirituality’ of the Blathmac poems. In the course of his keen (*coirniud*) Blathmac introduces a martyrological sequence (stanzas 245–246).

He does so because, in the case of a violent death, part of the keen procedure is denunciation of the enemy of the deceased who is responsible for the death and assurance of the bereaved mother that the unjust killing will be avenged. The enemy in this case is Satan. Satan is denounced for his opposition to his Creator (977–8). In addition to that of Jesus, Satan is also held responsible for the deaths of many of Jesus’s preceding céli (patriarchs and chief prophets) in the Old Testament (981–4) and succeeding céli from the New Testament onwards (the Christian apostles and martyrs).

An indication of the power of the ‘lord’ is the number of céli in his ‘following’.¹⁶ Blathmac’s listing of martyrs is a way of praising his lord. He mentions twenty New Testament and early Christian martyrs and then gives up. The constraints of his poem do not allow him to continue. The very act of giving up, however, identifies a need, a need which could only be met by the composition of a separate devotional work. Such a work would need to identify comprehensively all the known céli of Jesus and do so in a devotional context (in contrast to the bare form of the *Martyrology of Tallaght* with its basic liturgical function).

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¹⁶ Cf. D. A. Binchy, *Críth Gablach* (Dublin 1941), 98–9 (and also dám, 82).
No doubt the Félire of Óengus did have, as Carney says, the same liturgical use as the Martyrology of Tallaght; Óengus's preoccupation with accuracy and completeness show that he hoped his martyrology would stand comparison with the best martyrologies of his day. However, the basic intention behind his composition seems to have been devotional rather than liturgical. Like Blathmac, he hoped that his poem would be ‘sung’ and sung ‘every day’ (Epil 155), not just consulted in the manner of the Martyrology of Tallaght. Both poet's must have derived satisfaction at the thought of their monastic confreres, contemporaries and successors, singing their poems frequently and receiving, eventually, the asked-for rewards.  

Blathmac’s poems spring from the poets perception of the need for the ‘universal keen’ for Jesus to be completed. In other words, Blathmac took the idea that he was a céile of Jesus to its logical conclusion in one particular direction. It is not difficult to imagine Óengus reading Blathmac’s poems and being struck by the inadequacy of the praise of Jesus’s celi in the martyrological sequence in the second poem. Such a perception might well have inspired him to compose his Félire and to base it on the same sort of ‘legal’ procedure as Blathmac had done. Whatever the exact nature of the relationship between the two, the centrality of the concept of célsine (clientship) to both the Poems of Blathmac and the Félire of Óengus, which is generally regarded as a Céli Dé document, compels us to find a context for the Poems of Blathmac within the literature of what is known as the Céli Dé reform movement.

The significance of the Céli Dé, however, continues to be misunderstood. They are generally considered to have been a ‘monastic order’ which was responsible for a ‘reform movement’.

17 Cf. Hennig’s comment on the Félire: ‘This whole idea originated from the fundamental conception of the precariousness of life without the assistance of the saints, or, conversely, is expressive of an extremely realist conception of the efficacy of the intercession of the saints.’ J. Hennig, ‘The Function of the Martyrology of Tallaght’, Medieval Studies 26 (1964) 324. However, this observation begs the question of why Óengus should have had such ‘an extremely realist conception of the efficacy of the intercession of the saints’. The answer must be that the Félire originated from the fundamental conception of célsine. Óengus believed himself to be literally a celi of God. Working on secular analogy, he believed that more powerful céli than he (i.e. the saints in Heaven) could speak effectively to their common lord (God) on his behalf.


20 K. Hughes, The Church in Early Irish society (London 1966), 173. Cf. also: ‘Now groups of ascetics calling themselves céli Dé (anglicised culdees) meaning “clients of God” were formed. . . Not only were new religious houses of culdees formed. . .’ K. Hughes, Early Christian Ireland: introduction to the sources (London 1972), 51.

21 Hughes, Church in Early Irish society, 174.
isolation from secular politics,

private devotion: martyrologies; litanies,

unities (déntu), i.e. loose organisation based on: personal associations – not paruchia; no common level of discipline; soul friends (anamchara); friendly relations with Columban paruchia.\textsuperscript{19}

Southern Half distribution (probable Munster origin).

O’Dwyer analysed the meaning of Céli Dé as follows:\textsuperscript{21}

céle translates Latin servus as in servus Dei;
a synonym for céel Dé is mog dé;
céel Dé and manach are convertible terms, cf. servus Dei and monachus;
céle indicates servus in the sense of total dependence;
Céli Dé transferred in meaning from `monks in general’ to ‘a particular body of monks’ (although the history of the qualification is not at all clear), to ‘monks of the stricter observance’ (9th century), to ‘the poor of the monastery’ (early 11th century).

O’Dwyer accepts Hughes’s general view\textsuperscript{24} but admits to certain difficulties: ‘it is no easy matter to decide who were the culdees and how great a part they played in this movement’. He recognises the usefulness of Kenney’s suggestion that the culdees were ‘all who were leading a strict monastic life under spiritual direction and in accordance with the ideals of such men as Maelruain, Elair of Roscrea and Maeldithruib of Terryglass’, but at the same time is perplexed that the term Céli Dé can be used to describe:\textsuperscript{25}

an entire monastic community, e.g. Terryglass;

a separate community situated a few miles away from the older monastery, e.g. Roscrea;

a group residing within the monastic enclosure, e.g. Armagh.

Similarly, O’Dwyer is puzzled by a reference to Céli Dé in the glosses to the secular Laws which distinguishes them from the poor and later references which identify them with the poor.” The three notices in the Annals referring to céel Dé he describes as ‘extremely interesting but most difficult to explain or interpret’.\textsuperscript{27}

It is true, as O’Dwyer points out, that the Irish term céel Dé is derived from Latin servus Dei. It is a mistake, however, to assume, as O’Dwyer does, that the servus Dei was understood in the sense of English ‘servant’. This mistaken assumption leads to his confusion about the meaning of the term céel Dé and to a fundamental misunderstanding of the religious movement itself. O’Dwyer says:

\textsuperscript{19} F. J. Byrne, \textit{Irish Kings and High Kings} (London 1973), 162.
\textsuperscript{22} O’Dwyer, \textit{Céli Dé}, xiii.
\textsuperscript{23} O’Dwyer, \textit{Céli Dé}, xiv.
\textsuperscript{24} O’Dwyer, \textit{Céli Dé}, 18–19.
\textsuperscript{25} O’Dwyer, \textit{Céli Dé}, 21.
Céile is certainly used in the sense of servus with the idea of total dependence. Though a complete dependence, it is not a mere servile dependence. It is the recognition and admission of their position in life, their acceptance of it and their absolute abandonment to divine providence.

This interpretation is wide of the mark. Jackson gave the clue to Hughes in observing that ‘the céile Dé was the man who took God for his fláith, who entered into a contract of service (célsine) with him’. The importance of this observation seems to have gone unnoticed. If the implications of it are considered, it is immediately apparent that céile cannot indicate ‘total dependence’. Such an idea was alien to the native Irish concept of célsine. There was a basic division of Irish society between the ‘noble’ and the ‘base’, between súer-chéile and dóer-chéile. Unqualified, céile usually indicates súer-chéile, i.e. a ‘noble’ man. Byrne explains the situation thus:

In practice, every freeman was either a lord (fláith) or the client (céile) of a lord, and was thus involved in a nexus of mutual responsibilities extending beyond the confines of his fine (agnatic kindred group). The man who lacked such ties of kinship and clientship was an outlaw, or at the best an exile (déorad). The support given to a man by his kin and his lord, and the sanctions which that entailed, ensured a reasonable rule of law in the small rural community of the tuath. Freemen, and not merely nobles, were land-owners: the client received a loan of stock from his lord. Cattle were apparently more valuable than land. The céile giallnai (later called dóer-chéile or unfree [sic] client) paid a food rent and performed certain menial services. He also provided the lord and his retinue with free hospitality at stated seasons. The súer-chéile – the ‘free’ or ‘noble’ client – paid a higher rate of interest on his stock and gave the lord political support, becoming a member of his retinue (dám); for the word céile, like the feudal Latin comes, means ‘companion’.

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28 O’Dwyer, Céile Dé, 17, italics mine (B. L).
29 Hughes acknowledges the point in Church in Early Irish society, 173 and repeats it in Early Christian Ireland: Introduction, 91. Byrne observes that the reformers styled themselves Céile Dé ‘perhaps as an implied rebuke’ to the secular lawyers who equated the relationship between a manach (monk) and his abbot with that between a céile or client and his lord, Irish Kings, 157. However, Byrne was not concerned there to follow through the implications of his observation. Ó Fiaannachta came close to noticing that the céile ‘belonged in a special way to the Lord and to the Saviour who has come to his rescue, his Fortachtúir, his Slánaitheoir’. The ‘céile is dedicated to God’, P. Ó Fiaannachta, ‘The Spirituality of the Céili Dé’, in M. Maher (ed.), Irish Spirituality (Dublin 1986) 213. In discussing the earliest occurrence of the term céile dám (W. Stokes and J. Strachan (ed.), Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus i, (Cambridge [1901-03] rept. Dublin 1975), 62.29) he says: ‘the word servant in this official translation may be too precise’. However, the alternatives which he offers (vassal, subject, client) are too vague. They are presented as synonyms and as such are misleading. The céile was not a ‘subject’ in the sense of the Roman Law suddá, or ‘vassal’ in the sense of the feudal vassus (cf. M. Bloch, Feudal Society (London 1962) 158, 181.
30 This may be qualified by the observation that a man could choose a member of his fine as his fláith; he did not necessarily have to go beyond the confines of his fine. See D. Ó Corráin, Ireland Before the Normans (Dublin 1972) 42–3.
31 ‘Unfree’ is a misleading translation of dóer since the dóer-chéile had to be a ‘free’ man. ‘Base’ is to be preferred. Although Byrne translates dóer-chéile by ‘unfree client’, Irish kings, 28, see also 175.
32 Byrne, Irish kings, 28.
It will be seen that cēlsine, which is usually translated 'clientship', was a basic institution in the Irish polity. Since cēle (client or companion) implies flāth (lord), cēlsine may be regarded as a native Irish term for the institution of 'lordship'. It will also be seen that fundamental to the concept of cēlsine is the idea of 'mutual obligation', not, pace O'Dwyer, 'total dependence'. When an Irish monk translated the Latin servus Dei by cēle Ði he had in mind a figure more analogous to the free (i.e. 'noble') cēle with whom he was familiar in his own secular society, rather than to a pre-cursor of Francis of Assisi.

That this was so is evident from the sort of persons referred to as servus Dei in the Latin texts that were being rendered into Irish. Servus Dei is common to both the Old and New Testaments and is found frequently in the Latin Fathers. For example, it is applied to St Gregory the Great, who, as O'Dwyer points out, was very popular in Ireland, judging from the references to him in the literature and also from the fact that he was granted Irish nationality with a pedigree. The construction of a pedigree for St Gregory was a way of honouring him by analogy with secular aristocratic practice.

The concept of the cēle Ði was a profoundly aristocratic one. There are no 'servile' or 'menial' or 'totally dependent' connotations to the term. Rather, it connotes 'inter-dependence'. In the tradition of Christian spirituality in western Europe the concept is audacious, signifying membership of the 'retinue' (dām) of God as his 'companion'. That the cēle Ði was a spiritual aristocrat is indicated by the existence of the complementary term mog Ði (literally, slave of God), which may be taken as a reflection of the social and economic divisions within secular society between the sēir-chēle (noble client) and the dēir-chēle (base client) and the mog (slave). Not every man could be a cēle Ði. The Cēli Ði were a select group from among all the men on earth who were 'followers' of God and who could in suitably humble fashion call themselves collectively mogae Ði (slaves of God). In other words, the Cēli Ði were 'saints', men of high status within the 'following' of God marked out from the other mogae Ði by virtue of their spiritual wealth or holiness of life. Interpreted in this way, most of the difficulties admitted to by O'Dwyer about the meaning of Cēle Ði can be resolved. For example, whenever reference is made in the literature to 'the cēle Ði', the term is most likely to mean

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33 O'Dwyer, Cēli Ði, 17
34 See Byrne, Irish kings, 158 where Byrne identifies a Carolingian influence on the ideals of the Cēli Ði. Cf. also Hughes's comment on the 'aristocratic' nature of the poem In Eude in Church in Early Irish society, 239.
35 The nature of their relationship with God was intimate; for example, St Óc suckling the baby Jesus and Blathmac contemplating a personal visit from Mary, the mother of Jesus (lines i–2: 591–596). By secular analogy, this indicates that they had the status of the sēir-chēle rather than the dēir-chēle. That is to say, they enjoyed personal association, or Tischgesellschaft, with the flāth. For the distinction between sēir-chēle and dēir-chēle see R. Thurneysen, 'Aus dem irischen Recht I: das Unfrei-Lehen', Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie 14 (1923), 238–276. See also Binchy, Crīth Gablach, 80, 96–8, 107.
36 As might be expected if this distinction were correct, use of the term mog Ði compared with cēle Ði is rare. The glossators do seem to have been sensitive to a distinction in the Latin servus Ði. For example, where servus Ði is referring to Christians in general, it is glossed by mug ði (Stokes and Strachan, Thesaurus i, 694.21), but where servus Ði refers to Bronus, who was obviously an important person who was bishop and a socius of Patrick, it is glossed cēle Ði (Stokes and Strachan, Thesaurus ii, 265.3).
37 O'Dwyer, Cēli Ði, 19–25.
simply ‘the Saint’. Its use may be explained in contexts where either the name of the saint was unknown or where it was so familiar as to not require stating.

Keening (coinition) and clientship (céistine) are both central to the Blathmac Poems and were pre-eminently legal concepts. The following legal, or quasi-legal terms have been identified in Blathmac and discussed by Carney and Byrne: fingal (kin-slaying, Carney, Early Irish Poetry, 53); deoch sêto (drink for the road, Early Irish Poetry, 44); cobfolaid (mutual obligations, cf. frithfolaid, Byrne, Irish Kings, 44–4); eisdin (repulse, Irish Kings, 29) These are only the tip of an iceberg. At the time Blathmac wrote, the Christian Church in Ireland had appropriated, or was still in the process of appropriating to itself, the native, secular concept of ‘lordship’ (flaith, céistine). Céiste was such a fundamental term within the secular legal framework that the very coining of céile Dé implied the development of a parallel, sacred, theological framework. The coinage of the term may originally have been unthinking, a straightforward translation of the Latin servus Dei. At some stage, however, some men must have begun, prompted perhaps as Byrne suggests by the way in which monks had been classified by the secular lawyers (or by themselves), to work out the theological implications of the terms within the context of the secular legal system. This development must be seen as part of the wider process of interaction between the secular lawyers on the one hand and the ecclesiastical lawyers on the other. No treatise on political thought survives from the Old Irish period. It is highly unlikely that one ever was produced. However, assumptions about the nature of power, defined in terms of sacred and secular ‘lordship’ (céistine) underpin the Poems of Blathmac. So coherent are they that they may be considered as forming a system of ideas, a theory of power. The basic principle of the theory is that there is only one true lord (flaith), God, who claims legitimately the following of all men. The one flaith has created the Universe and now sustains it by the power of his ‘truth’ (fir). His power of fir is mediated on earth by certain men who rule or govern others. The efficacy of their rule depends

18 The earliest occurrence of servus Dei is about AD 800 in the Milan glosses (see O Fiannachta, ‘Spirituality of the Céile Dé’, 22–23, but see also N. K. Chadwick, The age of the saints (London 1966) 87). The gloss in question (M i 302r) is in the Latin context ‘sic ut etiam nobis moris est dicere: iste illius est, iste sit illum pertinent, id est, domini est potentii’. It seems to explain ‘iste illius est’ as ‘this person belongs to that other: is bás linni ept inti charas nech ocu fortè forcatar side iaram hieltad ind fur sin foridet amal asmberar is cæle dæ in fer bisin’. (It is customary with us to say that he whom anyone loves and helps is thrown afterwards into the possession of that man who helps him, as it is said that man is a servant [sic] of God – Stokes and Strachan, Thesaurus i, 65.27–9). The phrase ‘as it is said’ in this first attestation of céile Dé indicates that the term had been current for some time. It may also be noticed that the lord is the one who helps or protects (cf. fortsi (protects), God called Fortachtríg). The lord ‘loves’ (charus) the céile. Love was an appropriate emotion between the lord and his carait (friends), that is his closest céile who are members of his retinue (daim), cf. Blathmac i. 569. See also Ó Corráin’s comment: ‘throughout the history of Gaelic Ireland the nobility looked upon the peasantry and upon their servants with the greatest disdain’, Ireland before the Normans, 48. This suggests that céile Dé was already understood in the developed sense of ‘saint’, in the sense discussed above, by the time it is first attested in the Milan glosses.


on the extent to which they have access to the power of fir. The principle of the fir of God as flaithe in this way expresses a central doctrine of Christianity, the Lordship of Christ.41

The Christian idea of a supreme authority must have challenged pre-Christian law, a fundamental feature of which was the absence of a central enforcing authority in matters of private law.42 The truth of the lord (fir flathemon) was a native Irish concept and in practice it was highly localised. Every ‘noble’ was a flaithe. The king (ri) was a lord (flaithe) differentiated from others mainly by the extent of his authority. The basis of his authority was the same.43 The Christianised concept of fir flathemon did not, however, require a centralisation of authority in practice. It would be sufficient if the title flaithe came to be reserved to the use of the Deity only.44 As Carney pointed out, flaithe is not used by Blathmac for the secular lord. His usual non-royal term for lord is tigerna. The same distinction can be observed in the Annals of Ulster.45 Although God as flaithe called all men to be his céli, it would not be practicable for all men to become his immediate and intimate céli (suér-chéli) while on earth.46 This honour could only be attained by a few, a spiritual elite — the Céle Dè. Other men continued to need intermediate lords, either lay or ecclesiastical. Former flaithe could continue to function much as before, provided that they recognised the ultimate authority of God as flaithe. In this way the Christianised theory of fir flathemon was one of synthesis; integrating rather than differentiating the sacred and secular aspects of power.47 In practical politics the structure of authority continued to be highly localised, but with the difference that it was now centred on a Christian supreme authority. For the reason that the supreme authority was supernatural, allegiance could be given to it without any surrender of secular power being necessary in practice. The power of truth (fir) could continue to be manifested in a multiplicity of local lords.

Blathmac seems to have taken this basic synthesis for granted. What it provided was the conceptual framework for communication between the poet and his audience. Blathmac worked within it, exploring the implications of the Christianised principle of fir flathemon with regard to one of the duties of the seculc céle

41 Blathmac describes Jesus as fríseu ech breibheann (more just than any judge, 32), rí ba Dia, ba firéidinne (a King who was God, who was true man, 68), don bithflaithe is fíndor (he is the true door to the eternal flaithe, 840), is fíndflaithe flíthiethin (he is the true lord of a fair flaithe, 908).
43 See F. J. Byrne, ‘Tribes and tribalism in early Ireland’, Ériu 22 (1971), 133.
44 The process of the christianization of the title flaithe requires a separate study.
45 S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill, The Annals of Ulster (to ad 1131) (Dublin 1983) 352, s.a. 796 (note 997) §1. Flaithe is not used of a secular lord in the eighth century or later. There the usual non-royal term for lord is tigerna (Latin duc) until the second quarter of the ninth century when toiséch begins to replace tigerna. Note also the following comment: ‘The Christian faith offered a key to well-being, one of the prime functions of kings if we are to believe the import of the vernacular tracts’, W. Davies, ‘Clerics as Rulers: some implications of the terminology of ecclesiastical authority in early medieval Ireland’, in N. Brooks (ed.), Latin and the vernacular languages in early medieval Britain (Leicester 1982), 91.
46 By secular analogy, the dám (retinue) of a ri runch (king of great nobles) was supposed to consist of thirty suér-chéli. See Binchy, Crith Gablach, 82.
47 Christianization of the principle of fir flathemon would have been a more pervasive influence than the ‘hallowing’ or ‘consecration’ of a ri since it would penetrate not only the public functions of the ri but also the public and private functions of every grade of noble.
towards his fláith: the keen (coënúd). This in itself may be taken as an indication of a concern to harmonise secular practice with sacred belief. The Christian theory of power which may be extrapolated from Blathmac’s poems was sufficiently sophisticated to be capable of explaining to Irishmen, lay or cleric, the history of the world from the Creation to the present, the nature of man’s condition in the present and his possible ultimate destiny.

Given this interpretation, certain commonly held notions are called into question, not least a basic view of the Poems of Blathmac. Carney said: ‘I will not define Blathmac as a good or bad poet: it is sufficient to say that his conception of poetry is, in a good sense, primitive…’ While this remark may be true of the poet’s ‘perception of the mystery, the awesomeness and the power of the chanted word’, there seems little else about the poems which could fairly be described as ‘primitive’. Once the importance of the secular keen (coënúd) is realised, the poems can be seen to have an extremely complex structure and well crafted development. Blathmac gives the impression of a man well able to justify in the learned terms of his own society the ways of God to man. We may no longer be justified in judging the ‘Irishness’ of his poems to consist in ‘a certain naivete’ or ‘a quaint simplicity’. Given the shared milieu of the Poems of Blathmac and the Martyrology of Oengus, a further question is raised about Blathmac’s poetic intention. Of Oengus, Greene said:

The intention could not be clearer: it is to substitute a set of Christian heroes for the pagan ones, to form an Irish literature which will be exclusively Christian in subject.9

There is little evidence of the same intention in Blathmac’s work or any suggestion that he felt hostility towards the pagan past. On the contrary, the tenor of the poems suggests a man who is confident that the Christian present and the pagan past have been harmonised, a man who would have been happy to accept the belief that the first three Irishmen in Heaven were Conchobar, Cormac mac Airt and Morand:10

Conchobar’s soul was taken to Hell (ißen) until Christ encountered her [= soul] as he brought the captive host (brod) so that Christ took the soul of Conchobor with him to Heaven.11

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9 Carney, Early Irish poetry, 49.
10 Carney, Early Irish poetry, 53.
11 Carney, Early Irish poetry, 56.
12 Carney, Early Irish poetry, 78.
13 According to the tale Aided Conchobuir, Conchobar was ‘one of the two men that had believed in God in Ireland before the coming of the faith’, K. Meyer, Death tales of the Ulster heroes, [Royal Irish Academy Todd Lecture Series 14] (Dublin 1906) 8.12.) At the end of his account of the reign of Cormac mac Airt, in Geoffrey Keating’s Foras Feasa ar Éirinn : the history of Ireland (ed., D. Comyn vols 1–2; P. S. Dineen, vols 2–4, [London 1902–14]) ii, 344), following sources which are still extant makes the following statement: ‘On account of Cormac’s deeds, and judgments, and laws, God gave him the light of the Faith seven years before his death. And accordingly, he refused to adore gods made with hands; and he set himself to reverence and honour the true God; so that he was the third man in Ireland who believed before the coming of Patrick’. For further discussion of these traditions see R. M. Smith, ‘The Speculum Principum in early Irish literature’, Speculum 2 (1927), 444–5.
14 Meyer, Death tales of the Ulster heroes, 17.
Blathmac does not specifically mention Conchobar, but there seems little reason to believe that he would have wanted to exclude him from the mór brat taken by Jesus from Hell (line 700). Given his concern that all men should keen Jesus and that his death should be avenged, it seems likely that Blathmac would have approved of the account of Conchobar’s reaction on receiving news of the Crucifixion:

And thereupon Conchobar said:

The men of the world would know what I can do, in fighting against the Jews for the sake of the crucifixion of Christ, if I were near Him! Then he rose and made the onslaught, until Mesgegra’s brains jumped out of his head, so that Conchobar died forthwith. Hence the Gaels say that Conchobar was the first pagan who went to Heaven in Ireland, for the blood that sprang out of his head was a Baptism to him.  

The description of the baptism of Conchobar is so strikingly parallel to Blathmac’s description of the Baptism of Adam (225–8) that it would seem unlikely that Blathmac would have rejected it. It is even possible the Balthmac may have had the Death of Conchobar in mind when he said:

\[
\begin{align*}
  Ce \textit{ ro-cloither trÓg nÓ trÓst} & \quad \text{Though one hears of any pitiful or lamentable thing, more terrible was} \\
  huilliu crotch Æsu Crist; & \quad \text{the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.}
\end{align*}
\]

Blathmac’s poems seem to belong in a literary milieu where pagan past and Christian present are harmonised, where Conchobar is described as the foster-brother (comalta) of Jesus.  If Conchobar and Jesus were believed to have been fostered by the same father, this raises a question about Byrne’s contention that ‘euhemerisation [of the Celtic gods] was a half-hearted device for salving the consciences of Christians interested in the pagan past’.  Once Jesus was accepted as foster-brother of the greatest pagan flath, Conchobar, and his superiority to Conchobar conceded, there would seem to have been no compelling reason for Irish Christians to cease being interested in their pagan past.  Once Jesus was acknowledged as the most powerful flath, attention was naturally then focused on him and his celi, but it would seem more likely that Conchobar and his celi (the other pagan heroes) were regarded as still worthy of interest as a lesser branch of the family of Jesus, rather than that Christianity required their rejection and the salving of the conscience of anyone who continued to take an interest in them.

In Greene’s view, the Féile of Óengus does not belong to such a milieu, but an alternative interpretation is possible.  In support of his view, Greene cites the passage in the Prologue which describes the fate of pagan kings:

\[
\begin{align*}
  \textit{Mórrig inna gente} & \quad \text{The great kings of the pagans wail} \\
  \textit{bithgolait il-loscud} & \quad \text{ever in burning.}
\end{align*}
\]

Greene goes on to say:

\[54\] Meyer, Death tales of the Ulster heroes, 17.  
\[55\] Meyer, Death tales of the Ulster heroes, 16.  
\[56\] Byrne, Irish kings, 10.  
\[57\] Carney, Early Irish poetry, 77.
now comes an equally eloquent comparison between Nero and other pagan
and the heroes of the Irish tradition:

\[
\begin{align*}
R\ò \ m\ç h\ò d, \ môr \ tîrb\ò d, & \quad \text{The honour of valiant Loeguire has} \\
nîd \ Lôëg\ò ri \ ròg\ò laïg, & \quad \text{been quenched – a great fall; the} \\
ainm \ P\ò tr\ò i c \ dîn \ aùrd\ò airc & \quad \text{splendid noble name of Patrick is} \\
àt-som \ fôr \ fôrbairt. & \quad \text{increasing.}
\end{align*}
\]

The honour of valiant Loeguire has been quenched – a great fall; the splendid noble name of Patrick is increasing.

\[
\ldots \text{... and so it goes on; with one hammerblow after another the great names of the past are recalled only to be rejected and their successors Patrick, Brigit, Keiran, are extolled.}
\]

‘Rejected’ seems too strong. Greene neglects to point out that Óengus makes an important distinction between the heroes of Irish tradition and other pagan kings like Nero: none of the former he describes as being in Hell for eternity. He is quite clear, however, that Herod (83), Pilate (83) and Nero (117–8) are in Hell for eternity and he explains why: they are there as punishment for having put to death Jesus and his céili, the martyrs. While Óengus condemns Loeguire for opposing Patrick, (169–70), he does not hold pre-Christian heroes such as Ailill (178), responsible for the deaths of Jesus or the martyrs. He has no need to ‘reject’ them by regarding them as condemned to Hell for eternity. He simply points out that they have fallen victim to the transitoriness of the world:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{In bith tríag hi tåam} & \quad \text{The wretched world wherein we are,}
\text{is dùshairn a rìg} & \quad \text{transitory is its kingdom.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\text{Cit îallaig rìg talman} \quad \text{Though haughty are earthly kings}
\text{i tìchtaib at glainiu,} \quad \text{(rìg) in robes that are brightest, they}
\text{àt-béal úr tuilliu,} \quad \text{will perish after abundance, each}
\text{tèit cèch rìa n-arailiu.} \quad \text{goes before another.}
\]

Óengus stresses that the only fluith to have conquered death is Jesus, that only his fame will last for ever and that therefore he deserves the following of all men:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{in ri conic aìngliu} & \quad \text{the King (ri) that ruleth angels is lord}
\text{is coinìdhu cèch thòire} & \quad (\text{coinìdhu}) \text{of every land.}
\end{align*}
\]

Óengus does not deny efficacy to secular lords or kings (ri): that is implied by the phrase ‘after abundance’ (iar tuilliu, 247). His point is that no secular lord or king deserves the utmost devotion and loyalty of a céile because none can offer the céile eternal well-being (slàin). Óengus himself is prepared to make a temporary sacrifice of his status in the eyes of his fellow men on earth in the knowledge that

\[\text{A similar tolerant, almost nostalgic attitude is found in the eighth century Fiacc’s Hymn: \textit{is cell mòr Dùn Lethglæse}: nìmìd îd dìbhùr ìdmair (Downpatrick is a great church; it is not dear to me that Tara should be desolate). This is emphasised by the attempt of the eleventh century glossators to reverse the sense: \textit{nì hìnìsàin îm ìdmair cid fàs} (not dear to me is Tara though it be desolate). Stokes and Strachan, \textit{Thesaurus ii}, 317-7, 36, 40-41.}\]
their temporal power will inevitably fail. As an intimate ‘companion’ of the one true lord (†cēle Dē), he stands a better chance of eternal reward than they do. He recognises the legitimacy of secular kings (†rig), but as a †cēle of God without human intermediary he may regard himself as superior to them:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{cit nóir rig in domair} & \quad \text{Though great are the world’s kings,} \\
\text{a ndúine achchisiu} & \quad \text{whose strongholds thou seest,} \\
\text{fo chéit ci taisliu} & \quad \text{a hundred times nobler are Jesus lowly} \\
\text{amáin isil Isu.} & \quad \text{soldiers.}
\end{align*}
\]

(149–52)

Not only does Óengus recognise the legitimacy of secular lords and kings, he also seems prepared to tolerate their ‘fame’ which may live on after their deaths:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Donnchad dric riad rogdae,} & \quad \text{Donnchad the wrathful, ruddy,} \\
\text{nó Bran bádach Berbae,} & \quad \text{chosen, or victorious Bran of the Barrow,} \\
\text{ní beir dim sinm lebráe} & \quad \text{visiting their tombs takes not from} \\
\text{athrigid a m-mennrae.} & \quad \text{me the weariness of weakness.}
\end{align*}
\]

(221–4)

Here Óengus refers to a contemporary practice of visiting the tombs (†memrae)\(^9\) of kings and says that he himself has done this but from it he has derived no ultimate benefit (salvation from death). While he himself prefers to visit the grave of Mael Ruain (235–8), a higher ranking †cēle of the true †flaith, he does not condemn the practice of others in continuing to visit the graves of secular lords or kings.

In short, this evidence does not support Greene’s view that Óengus was engaged in the formation of an Irish literature which was to be exclusively Christian in subject.\(^60\) Óengus seems rather to belong with Blathmac in a Christian milieu which could tolerate the pagan past precisely because the dominance of Christianity was not threatened by it. The heroes of the pagan Irish past seem to have been regarded in much the same light as the kings and prophets of the Old Testament to whom Blathmac refers (38–4). These are figures of whom Jesus is regarded as the most perfect example. Although Blathmac and Óengus both devoted their works to the person of Jesus and his †céli, Mary and the martyrs, it would seem difficult to imagine either of them being intolerant of monastic colleagues studying stories of the fame of secular †rig and pre-Christian heroes.

It would seem unlikely also that men like Blathmac and Óengus would have been intolerant of the author of the ninth century poem ‘Hail Brigit’, whom

\(^9\) Mem(m)ra signifies ‘a monument over the dead, a tomb; often a shrine (containing a saint’s relics), E. G. Quin, et al. (ed.), (Contributions to a) Dictionary of the Irish Language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials (Dublin 1913–76) (DIL) s.v. mem(m)ra. Although Stokes indexes Donnchad as ‘a heathen king’ (Féilire 416), he may well be the Donnchad, son of Donnall, referred to in the Lebor Brecc Preface (Féilire 2–4, 11): \(\text{Is hín immo maimer i ndennais Óengus in Féilire. Ó aiimer Aeda Ordnige maic Neill Fraoisiag, ar e ro gab rige nírren i ndníuid Donnchuda maic Domnaill, uair tíe Óengus ín brosluch tholstach in Féilir le hó, Donnchuda.} \) [Now this is the time at which Óengus composed the Martyrology, to wit, the time of Aed the Dignified, son of Niall the Showery – for ‘tis he that got the kingship of Ireland after Donnchad, son of Donnall] – since Óengus enters on the first prologue of the Martyrology at Donnchad’s death (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, Annals of Ulster s.a. 796 [recte 797] §1). Donnchad’s family may also be referred to in the Prologue: \(\text{In gornrig ro mtechta / in Donnacill ro pláthta (233–4)} \) [The famous kings have been stilled: / the Donnalls have been plagued.]

\(^60\) Carney, Early Irish poetry, 78.
Greene thought to have been a ‘lover of the old tradition. . .’ making his poem conform outwardly to the prevailing religious fashion. It might be argued that Blathmac and Óengus in their own ways were ‘lovers of the old tradition’ rather than members of the ‘puritan movement’ which Greene held to have been responsible for ‘the decline of Irish literature in the ninth century’.

Greene’s description of the Céile Dé movement as ‘puritan’ must be called into question. Blathmac and Óengus, at least, do not seem to have been condemning secular values as evil in the puritan manner and trying to abolish them in order to replace them with alternative values. Their poems depend on the ‘secular’ (pre-Christian) values of keening the dead and commemorating the deeds of famous men. They accepted secular values and saw in the person of Jesus their most perfect manifestation. For them, Jesus was the supreme lord (fláith), not because he was different, but because he was better than any other human fláith. It would be more accurate to say that Blathmac and Óengus were engaged in the formation of an Irish literature with the intention of making it predominantly, rather than exclusively, Christian in subject.

The works of Óengus and Blathmac both share the same basic theme of the universal keen for their common fláith, Jesus, although Óengus only refers to it incidentally:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Cíat isliu fláid dáinib} & \quad \text{Though they [the lowly soldiers of Jesus] are lowlier before men with} \\
co \text{ ndelmain a ngretha} & \quad \text{the noise of their crying, they will} \\
\text{bit áird dia sín fláithra} & \quad \text{be high above the height of the} \\
\text{trí háith na mbetha.} & \quad \text{Kingdom (fláith) through ages and ages.}
\end{align*}
\]

The men who became direct céli of God (Céli Dé) committed themselves to a life characterised by the ‘noise of crying’ (delman ngretha, 154). In a sense they are ‘lordless men’, separated by death from their fláith who has gone before them. The ‘noise of their crying’ is the keen (coënín) due to their fláith which keeps alive his ‘fame’. This raises a question about Byrne’s contention that in Irish literature we hear less of the theme of loyalty to one’s lord, or the plight of the lordless man, than we do in Anglo-Saxon. Certainly, these are important themes in Blathmac. They are the driving forces which lead Blathmac to petition Mary for a safe welcome into the home of his fláith after death (563–8). As Blathmac describes him, Jesus, the perfect fláith, is a composite, well-integrated figure:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ferr fláith, fisidiu cech druí,} & \quad \text{better he than any prophet, more} \\
\text{ri ba hеспoc, ba lánud.} & \quad \text{knowleable than any druid, a} \\
\text{sainemlu cech doen a chruith brestu} & \quad \text{king (ri) who was bishop and full} \\
\text{cech soer a balebruth} & \quad \text{sage.}
\end{align*}
\]

61 Carney, Early Irish poetry, 78.
62 Byrne, Irish kings, 29.
Ó Cathasaigh has elucidated a distinction between the heroic biographies of ‘king-heroes’ like Cormac mac Airt and ‘martial heroes’ like Cú Chulainn. What emerges from Blathmac’s heroic biography of Jesus is a combination of the king-hero and the martial hero. It is this combination which accounts for the comparatively wide range of terms for ‘lord’ (flaith, tiada, coindiu, tigerna, toísech) which Blathmac uses to describe Jesus. It is probably more than coincidental that Blathmac presents such a figure of Jesus as the ideal model for both the secular and ecclesiastical lord at a time when the offices of king (rí) and abbot (ab) were being increasingly combined in Ireland.

This in turn raises a question about the nature of what is commonly called the Célu Dè movement. According to O’Dwyer, ‘this reform movement was introduced to counterbalance a tendency towards laicization of the monasteries’. If this were the case, it needs to be explained why Blathmac should have presented such a composite ideal of kingship and lordship in the person of Jesus. This composite ideal is implied by the emphatic statement that Satan will be ‘neither king nor abbot’ (ni bhé, ni bhé ab, 975). It also needs to be explained why a king-abbot (rí-ab) like Feidlimid mac Crimthann should be listed among the thirteen members of the oenit Mael Ruain and be called a ‘scribe’ and ‘anchorite’.

As well as the ‘laicization’ of monasteries, account needs to be taken of the development in the concept of ecclesiastical inauguration of secular kings which becomes visible in the historical evidence in the late eighth century. Blathmac suggests a context in which a deliberate integration of secular and ecclesiastical lordship in the person of the king-bishop was in progress, rather than a context of two antagonistic processes of laicization and clericalization. If so, this brings into question Byrne’s view that ‘all attempts to christianise Irish kingship were to amount to little more than enamelling’. It would seem that Blathmac for one, at least, was able to contemplate the concept of the king-bishop with whole-hearted approval, precisely because there had been a profound change in the source – but not the character – of Irish kingship and lordship, brought about by the christianization of the principle of fir flaithmon.

The prevailing misunderstanding of the meaning of Célu Dè has a major misleading consequence: it places undue emphasis on the humility and self-abasement of the Célu Dè which obscures the fundamentally aristocratic nature of their motivation. A man became a cèle Dè in order to improve his status. There was no higher status to which a man could aspire in this world. In order to prepare for

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62 Carney pointed this out: ‘Christ in his humanity comprises the perfection of the heroic and ecclesiastical virtues’, Early Irish poetry, 53.
63 See Hughes, Church in Early Irish society, 157ff and 211ff.
64 O’Dwyer, Célu Dè, xi and cf. also 15, 16.
65 O’Dwyer, Célu Dè, 40–45.
66 Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, Annals of Ulster 306, s.a. 846 (recte 847) §1.
67 See Byrne, Irish kings, 159.
68 Byrne, Irish kings, 255.
this higher status and to earn it, the céile Dé set himself apart from his fellow men. He underwent a severe ascetic regime which was designed, like the training of a soldier, to prepare him for a spiritual battle with the forces of evil (goblin) on behalf of his faith in Heaven and his fellow men on earth. The céile Dé was apart, but at the same time was an integral part of the society which had produced him. He acted as an intermediary for his fellow men. This, at least, is the picture which emerges from the internal evidence of Blathmac. The poems seem to be the product of a slow, more or less continuous development in Irish spirituality in which the sacred and secular spheres were becoming increasingly inter-connected, rather than the product of a 'reform' or 'religious revival'71 when the fire of asceticism 'once more burst into flame'72 and when 'no compromise with the world was possible'.73

As long ago as 1961, Chadwick pointed out that in ascribing a 'reform movement' to the second half of the eighth century and the whole of the ninth century, Robin Flower may have laid 'too much weight on the fact that much of our evidence is conditioned by the growth of the habit of keeping annals and recording obits in the later period'.74 Hughes did not accept this as an argument against evidence for 'reform',75 but did not explain why. O'Dwyer endorsed Flower's view, again with argument based on annal evidence: 'it is obvious that a movement tending towards the expansion of the anchorite ideal grew up in the first half of the eighth century'.76

One may doubt this. The increasing number of obits of anchorites and scribes in the Annals of Ulster in the eighth and ninth centuries may be explained simply as a function of the increasing attention to detail and widening of the range of information given by the annalists. An examination of the terms for 'lord', both regal and non-regal, in the Annals of Ulster over the same period reveals a parallel increase,77 yet it does not become necessary to argue for an increase in the ideal of lordship or kingship. In the absence of more substantial evidence in favour of a 'reform movement' or 'religious revival', Chadwick's view of continuity in the Irish ascetic tradition may be preferred:

In the eighth century, when the development had become more systematised, and also when our documents give us much fuller information, the Anchorites have developed into an organised body, and this no doubt gives rise to the idea that they originated in a reform movement at this period. . . . The literary movement with which they are associated is not the expression of a new development, but the formulation in writing of their traditional beliefs and discipline.78

It seems too much of a coincidence that laxity and corruption in the Church should have become an acute problem at exactly the time when the historical

71 Hughes, Church in Early Irish society, 174.
72 Hughes, Church in Early Irish society, 173.
73 Hughes, Church in Early Irish society, 176.
75 Hughes, Church in Early Irish society, 174 n. 1.
76 O'Dwyer, Céil Dé, 55.
78 Chadwick, Age of the saints, 88, 73.
record becomes much fuller. It would seem more likely that there was a continuous tension in the Church between the CéliDé (the ascetics or holy men who were revered as saints (naeb) and called fir-cleirech, fir-manach) and those whom the ninth century Monastery of Tallaght calls the ‘lax folk’ (lax aei). Further, it is likely that this tension increased as the synthesis of the sacred and the secular developed. Since this synthesis drew the laity more and more into the life of the Church, it may be supposed that an increase in ecclesiastical laxity and corruption was an inescapable consequence. However, this negative influence seems to have been off-set by a complementary intensification of asceticism by some within the Church which managed to achieve a balance of forces. It would seem to have been this balance which sustained the development of the synthesis between the sacred and secular aspects of society.

Binchy argued that it was unlikely that ascetic leaders in the eighth or ninth centuries would have introduced ‘a system of commutations designed to shorten (and in some cases . . . to lighten) the traditional forms of penance’. The CéliDé could have introduced such a system as a logical extension of the work which Blathmac saw himself as engaged in, of involving all men as far as possible in the universal keen for Jesus Christ.\(^7\)

Hughes was puzzled by contradictions which she observed while describing the ‘religious revival’. Referring to the contrast between the author of the poem M'œnurŸn im aireclŸn (All alone in my cell)\(^8\) and Fedlimid, king of Cashel, she said: ‘while one achorite dwelt alone in his hermit’s cell, renouncing this wretched world, another, who held a kingdom, assumed abbacies, burned churches beyond his own borders and slew their inhabitants’. Viewed in the context of a theory of power which synthesised the structures of sacred and secular lordship, such apparent contradictions become more readily comprehensible. It would seem unlikely that Blathmac was troubled by this type of contrast. Carney has said that his poems ‘show that we are in touch with exactly the type of man and mind that brought into being the copious eighth and ninth-century glosses’. From the internal evidence of the poems it is possible to go further in describing Blathmac’s background.

Binchy set the following problem in his introduction to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici:

Were those who originally committed the canonical tracts to vellum clerics, like those who drafted and wrote down the Anglo-Saxon dooms? Or were they rather professional lay jurists who, though their predecessors had opposed the new dispensation as a threat to the powers and privileges of their ancient order, were now compelled by the steadily increasing growth of Christianity throughout the fifth and sixth centuries to accept the Church and its teachings,

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\(^10\) G. Murphy, Early Irish lyrics (Oxford [1956], repr. Dublin 1996) 18.

\(^11\) Hughes, Church in Early Irish society, 193. See also K. Hughes, Sanctity and Secularity in the early Irish Church, Studies in Church History 10 (1973), 31–32.

\(^12\) Carney, Blathmac, xiv.
while seeking to preserve as much as possible of the traditional pre-Christian
mos maiorum. Binchy himself suggested that the most plausible solution to the problem is that
‘already in the seventh century the boundary between clerics and laymen was as dif-
cult to draw as it was for Giraldus Cambrensis in the twelfth’. Charles-Edwards
has developed Binchy’s hypothesis by arguing for a multiplicity of links between
the different intellectual traditions in Ireland, including formal education for cler-
ics outside monasteries. Considering both his skilful reference to secular legal
procedures and the context of the prevailing theory of sacred and secular power in
which he wrote, it may be supposed that Blathmac would have been at ease in the
company of professional secular lawyers (cf. breitheam, 32).

Similarly, the extent to which Blathmac depends upon allusion to secular liter-
ature in his poems may lead us to suppose that he would have been equally at ease
in the company of men such as those who were involved in producing the earliest
compilation of secular literature, the early eighth-century Cin Domna Snechta. Indeed, it is striking that Blathmac was born into the royal family of the Fir Rois
whose territory lay within thirty or forty miles of the monastery of Druimm Snechta
(Drumsnat, Co. Monaghan). The Poems of Blathmac seem to bear out Hughes’s obser-
vation that ‘while Irish clerics would accept the subject matter of their studies
from the Continental Church, the form of their learning might be influenced by
the native schools’. Blathmac, like Óengus, wrote a poetic prayer in which he
explored the problem of how Divine power was to be related to the structure of
secular power as he found it in his own society. In his precise use of lord (flaithe,
fiada, coinidiu, tigerna, toisech) and cēle may be seen something of the Irish ‘pas-
son for analysing, distinguishing and sub-dividing’ applied to harmonising the
principle of Christian Scripture with native Irish political concepts.

Finally, Blathmac’s particular concentration on the native secular institution of
cēlēine may shed some light on the little understood origin of Irish nature poetry.
Murphy has explained that ‘it depended for its origin on acceptance of a philo-
sophical truth concerning creation, and secondly on the existence of a class of
men educated to appreciate poetry and diligent in improving the methods of their
art’. Regarding the first pre-condition, Murphy meant that ‘during that period
in which nature poetry flourished, God was a Creator, a Ruler, and a Craftsman
and the world was beautiful with a beauty borrowed from, but distinct from, His’.
To this may be added on the evidence of Blathmac’s poems the observation that the
‘borrowing of beauty’ was, to put it the other way round, the ‘giving of truth’
(fir) by the sacred lord (flaithe) to his cēlē. The ‘elements’ which make up ‘nature’

85 D. A. Binchy, Corpus Iuris Hibernici (Dublin 1978), I, ix.
87 On the authorship of this compilation see P. Mac Cana, ‘Mongan mac Fiachna and Immram Brain’,
Ériu 23 (1972) 103ff.
88 Carney, Blathmac, xiv.
49.
90 Hughes, ‘Some aspects of Irish influence’, 49.
were regarded anthropomorphically as céilí of their Creator. The célé Dé, therefore, regarded himself as a ‘companion’ of these other céilí (the elements) as well as of God. Because the surface of the earth was the boundary zone between Heaven and Earth, the elements were, in a sense, the outermost inhabitants of Heaven. As such the célé Dé would prefer their company to that of his fellow men. The concept of the céilíne of nature may account for the contentment of the hermit with his hut in the wood. It is the gift of the supreme fláith to a célé Dé:

Though you delight in your own enjoyments, greater than all wealth, for my part I am grateful for what is given me from my dear Christ.

The hermit regards the companionship which he has in his hut as superior to that of the most powerful secular lord or king:

Tame swine lie down around it, goats, young pigs, wild swine, tall deer, does, a badger’s brood.

Peaceful, in crowds a grave host (sluag) of the countryside, an assembly (díl) at my house; foxes come to the wood before it – it is delightful. . . .

The nature poetry which emerges in Ireland in the ninth century (or possibly earlier) may be seen, in part at least, as the fruit of exploration by men like Blathmac of the tension between the claims of native secular lords and God, the supreme Christian lord and king. In other words, a key to understanding both the spirituality of early Irish nature poetry and that of Blathmac’s poems may be found in the underlying synthesis of the sacred and the secular. The nature and process of this synthesis is increasingly better understood. McCone has given a magisterial overview of the emergence of ‘a coherent ideological framework thoroughly in tune with the various spiritual and secular interests of a monastically oriented learned class whose socio-political concerns and connections extended well beyond the confines of the cloister’. Blathmac’s poems were ‘public’ in the sense used by Ó Corráin of the later so-called ‘hermit poetry’. He was one of the ‘cultivated and scholarly men writing to meet the needs and taste of a cultural elite’. As Tristram has pointed out, he was most likely in touch with Anglo-Saxon vernacular religious epic which had come to a great flowering in the early eighth century. Blathmac may now be seen to have played a significant part, like Óengus, in this process of ‘the sewing together of Church with State’ (comuaim n-eclasa fri tíasbit) and he may yet come to be recognised as an even greater poet than his re-discoverer and editor would allow.

Brian Lambkin
Ulster American Folk Park, Co. Tyrone

92 Murphy observed (in the ‘Origin of Irish nature poetry’, 91) that: ‘the making of nature poetry is bound up in a special way with various monks and hermits of the 6th and 7th centuries’. This agrees with Chadwick’s view of continuity in the Irish ascetic tradition.

93 K. H. Jackson, A Celtic miscellany (London 1951) 68–75, cf. Murphy, Early Irish lyrics, no. 8.

94 K. McCone Pagan past and Christian present (Maynooth 1990), 82.

95 D. Ó Corráin, ‘Early Irish hermit poetry?’, in Breathnach, McCone and Ó Corráin, Sages, saints and storytellers, 264.

96 Ó Corráin, ‘Early Irish hermit poetry?’, 264.

97 Ó Corráin, ‘Early Irish hermit poetry?’, 442.

98 McCone, Pagan Past, 83.