

Brilliant Flame

St Munnu in medieval literature  
and his church at Kilmun in Cowal

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Kilmartin Museum Trust

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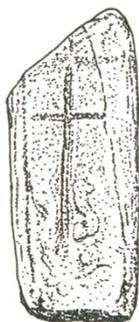
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## *Brilliant Flame*

**T**he church of Kilmun in Cowal has a history which makes it one of the most important and interesting churches in Argyll. What you see when you approach it is an elegant but not particularly grand nineteenth-century building in a well-kept graveyard. This is Kilmun, in Gaelic *Cill Mhunnu*, ‘the church of St Munnu’. But this church was erected on the site of a series of earlier churches in 1841, when it replaced a smaller building which, in spite of various repairs and renovations, had already become fairly ruinous in the early nineteenth century. That building in its turn had replaced a more substantial and solid building erected in the fifteenth century by Duncan Campbell of Lochawe as a collegiate church (a community of priests headed by a provost). Duncan’s charter of 1442 created the collegiate establishment ‘in honour of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and St Munnu’. He granted various lands to his new foundation to support its work and the clergy there. All that now remains of their medieval building, however, is the impressive crumbling tower standing a few yards to the west of the present church.

Even when the church itself was less than well-maintained, Kilmun remained an important church for the Campbell lords of Argyll, for many of the earls and later the dukes were buried here. Attached to the north-eastern corner of the modern church is an eighteenth-century mausoleum, where the bodies of several of them lie.

But for those seeking signs of the earliest Christian community here, there is one remarkable piece of evidence. A simple cross-marked stone has lain in the graveyard for centuries. It is hard to date the cross precisely, but its style is typical of the earliest Christian sculptures in the Gaelic world, and its presence at Kilmun suggests that there may have been a church here as early as the sixth or seventh century.



Though this simple carved cross is evidence of an early church or perhaps even a monastery at Kilmun, we cannot now tell what it was made for. It might have been a grave-marker, or perhaps a sign to the traveller at the entrance of the church's enclosure that he or she was entering a sacred space or sanctuary.

There may also be further evidence of an early church or monastery here, but that evidence still lies under the ground. In 2012 a resistivity survey (measuring the electrical resistance of the soil up to half a metre beneath the surface) revealed what seems to be a curved feature surrounding the church and much of the graveyard. It looks suspiciously like the outline of an early church enclosure, for the earliest churches in this part of the world usually had round enclosures rather than square. It may date from as early as the sixth century. The archaeology suggests therefore that the modern church of Kilmun stands on the site of a church founded by some of the earliest Christians in the Gaelic-speaking west of Scotland. But this archaeological material is the only evidence we have of an early church at this site. There is no very early written record of a church here – whether dedicated to St Munnu or to anyone else. Apart from the stone cross and the remains of a possible enclosure, there is little to be said about the early church at Kilmun itself. But it is worth noting that there may have been Christians in Argyll as early as the fifth century, and by the mid-sixth century it is fairly certain that Christianity had put down roots in Argyll, for Conall mac Comgail (who ruled here AD 558-574) was presumably a Christian when he gave the island of Iona to St Columba and his followers as a place to found their monastery. And in this context it is worth pointing out that this peninsula of Cowal (*Còmhall* in modern Gaelic) gets its

name from Conall's father, Comgall, and from his descendants who once ruled here and called themselves *Cenél Comgaill*.

But if there are no early records of the church of Kilmun, her patron saint does have a literary profile from an early period, and it is the medieval tradition about St Munnu that we will discover in the following pages. A warning is in order here, however. Medieval writing about a saint should not be treated as an eye-witness account of his or her life, nor as a more or less accurate biography. The stories and poetry and prayers associated with St Munnu are best seen not as a record of his life, but as the traces of his *cultus*, the traditions and practices of those who honoured him. These writings may contain some nuggets of historical information about the original saint, but we can't always tell what these are. We should therefore read such stories and poetry as expressions of the devotion and the world-view of the people who wrote them long after the saint's death, sometimes many centuries later.

In addition to his profile in medieval writing, there is another important dimension of St Munnu's cult which is found in place-names and personal names. Where a saint has been honoured in a church or a chapel, or at a holy well, or in rocks or burns in the landscape, his or her name may survive in place-names. There are several place-names commemorating St Munnu and they have an interesting distribution. We will look at them towards the end of this booklet, along with Gaelic personal names which also reflect devotion to the saint.

First, however, a brief note on the name Munnu.<sup>1</sup> It is in fact a kind of devotional nick-name, sometimes called a 'hypocorism' or 'hypocoristic name'. As medieval genealogists put it: *Fintan ainm baisde Munnu mac Tulchain* – 'Fintan was the baptismal name of Munnu son of Tulchán'.<sup>2</sup> It was a common practice in the early medieval Gaelic world to give saints such nick-names, apparently expressing devotion or affection. This could be done by adding Gaelic *mo* 'my' (or *do* 'your') to the beginning of the name, or by adding a diminutive suffix *-óc* or *-án* to the end of it, implying 'little' or something of the sort. Thus *Colum* (the name which appears in Latin as *Columba*) could become *Colmán* by the addition of a suffix, or *Mo-Cholum* by the addition of a prefix (his name appears thus in Kilmaccolm, 'the church of St Colum', in Renfrewshire. The name could be rendered even more unrecognisable if, as well as adding *mo-*, we added

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<sup>1</sup> I have adopted the common medieval Gaelic form *Munnu* in this text, but the name is also found spelt in such forms as *Mund*, *Munn* and *Munnua*, and in place-names *Mon*, *Mun*, *Mung*, *Mwn* etc.

<sup>2</sup> Ó Riain 1985 § 660.

the diminutive suffix *-óc*, while the *l* in the middle disappeared, giving *Mo-Chummóc*, a name which appears in the place-name Portmahomack on the Tarbat peninsula in Easter Ross. In some names the *mo-* prefix is attached not to the whole name but to its initial sound only. So Kentigern becomes *Mochá*, and Berach becomes *Mobhí*.<sup>3</sup> And this is the kind of process by which an early Christian monk called Fintan came to be more widely known as Munnu. The creator of the hypocorism took the initial *Fin-* part of his name and added *mo-*, resulting in the softening of the initial *f-* to *fh-* which is silent in Gaelic. These transformations of names can be hard to follow, and sometimes even medieval Gaels were confused by a hypocoristic name and began to treat a single saint as if he or she were two people, because they did not recognise the hypocoristic form of his or her name.

Note: All the following texts are my own translations from published Gaelic or Latin sources. Footnotes will refer the reader to the editions from which the translations have been made.

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<sup>3</sup> The prefixes *mo* and *do* cause lenition or softening of the following consonant. So the hard initial *c* of Gaelic *Caintigern* becomes a *ch*. The initial *b* of *Berach* becomes *bh*, which is pronounced /v/.

## THE SOURCES

### I *The Annals of Ulster, AD 635*

Many early monasteries and churches kept year-by-year records of events as they happened, but they also wrote retrospective entries into their records. The *Annals of Ulster* is a complex and multi-layered document compiling various such sources, including some from Iona from the seventh and eighth centuries. An entry in AD 635 records the deaths of two men, Fintan mac Tulcháin and Ernéne mac Craséni. There may be no other connection between these two men than the fact that they died in the same year, but in that case it is surely a remarkable coincidence that when Adomnán of Iona tells his story told about St Fintan (i.e. St Munnu) in his *Life of Columba* (which we will turn to in Section II) he follows it immediately with a story about Ernéne. We will discuss the possible significance of this when we turn to Adomnán's stories.

We should note that the name Fintan was a common one in the early medieval Gaelic world. There are dozens mentioned in the collection of genealogies of Irish saints, and the medieval *Life of St Ailbe* tells us that when Ailbe went to Rome he was accompanied by a lot of Irishmen, many of them having the same name. There were twelve called Colmán, twelve called Domongenius, and twelve called Fintan.<sup>4</sup> But the *Annals of Ulster* give the Fintan of AD 635 a father: he is Fintan mac Telcháin, which means we can identify him with some confidence. The brief annal entry reads:

*Quies Fintain m. Telchain 7 Ernaini m. Creseni.*<sup>5</sup>

The repose of Fintan son of Telchán and Ernaine son of Creséne.

\* \* \*

### II *The Life of St Columba*

St Munnu's earliest appearance in any actual narrative is in a story in the *Life of Columba* written by Adomnán. Columba had been the founding abbot of the monastery of Iona, and Adomnán was his successor as the ninth abbot (AD 679-704). Having lived on Iona for some years before becoming abbot, Adomnán must have inherited a number of stories about Columba from members of the community who were only one or two generations

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<sup>4</sup> Heist 1965, 121.

<sup>5</sup> *AU* 635. Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983, 118.

removed from the time of Columba himself (he died in AD 597). But Adomnán says that he heard this particular story from an old priest who had heard it from St Fintan or Munnu himself.

Nevertheless, though this is by far the earliest record of St Munnu, its earliness does not guarantee its historical accuracy any more than does Adomnán's claim that it came almost straight from the horse's mouth. But there are some features in the following story to which we might pay particular attention. Firstly we note that Columba refuses to allow the young Fintan to become a monk in Iona, not because he was unworthy but rather because he was destined by God to become an abbot himself, rather than being a monk under the rule of another abbot. The story stresses St Munnu's holiness, therefore, but it also locates him in a hierarchy of obedience slightly below St Columba. After all, he wanted to be a monk on Iona under Columba's rule; he never actually got to meet Columba but obediently accepted his command via Baithéne, his successor; and finally he went to the place assigned to him by Columba to found his monastery. Now, as Adomnán himself notes, St Munnu was held 'in high esteem among all the churches of the Gaels' (*per uniuersas Scotorum ecclesias*). If there was already a widespread cult of St Munnu among the Gaels in the late seventh century, Adomnán may have told this story because he saw the cult of St Munnu as a rival to that of his patron, St Columba. This might therefore be seen as a way of honouring St Munnu while at the same time incorporating him as a docile and lower-ranking actor in the narrative of St Columba.

Secondly we should note that Munnu was sent by Columba not to Kilmun, nor to anywhere else in Argyll, but to Leinster in Ireland. In spite of later medieval stories about Munnu having settled in Argyll and in spite of the fact that his supposed relics survived there, as far as Adomnán was concerned the centre of his activity was in Leinster, close to the sea. He probably had in mind the monastery of Taghmon in Co. Wexford – the name appears as *Tech Munnu* 'house of Munnu' in early Gaelic sources – which lies about six miles from the sea. Though Munnu was associated with other Irish places as well, it seems likely that Taghmon was the centre of his cult in the seventh century, when Adomnán was writing.

Finally, as we noted in Section I, Adomnán seems to treat Munnu (or Fintan, as he calls him) and a saint called Ernéne as a couple. In his *Life of Columba* the sequence of stories illustrating Columba's holiness begins with two chapters, one about Fintan (i, 2) and one about Ernéne (i, 3). In the stories both saints are honoured and praised by Columba, and Adomnán says that in his own day both men were famous saints among the Gaels. Why would Adomnán so carefully begin his *Life of Columba* by telling

stories which so elevated these two men? Perhaps the context is important. At the time of writing, Adomnán and the monks of Iona were embroiled in a painful dispute among the Gaelic-speaking churches about how to calculate the date of Easter. In this dispute Fintan was reputed to have been a conservative supporter of the old 84-year cycle.<sup>6</sup> Ernéne on the other hand had trained at Clonmacnoise, a monastery which accepted the new 19-year cycle at an early stage of the dispute. Adomnán himself was personally committed to the 19-year cycle, but his monks at Iona and elsewhere continued to follow the 84-year cycle. By telling the stories of Fintan and Ernéne in succession, and by describing both men as saints, Adomnán may have been suggesting that taking one side or the other in the dispute was less important than brotherly love and faithfulness to Christ. By having Columba bless and honour saints from both sides of the dispute, Adomnán sought to place Iona, Columba's monastery and his own, above the strife and bitterness that the Easter dispute had brought with it.

### ***Vita Columbae i, 2: Concerning abbot Fintén son of Tailcháin***<sup>7</sup>

**S**t Fintén kept the integrity of his body and soul from his childhood, with God's help. He gave himself to the study of divine wisdom, and was later to be held in high esteem by all the churches of the *Scotti*. In the years of his youth he had this wish in his heart: to leave Ireland and to go to our St Columba in pilgrimage. Burning with this desire, he went to a certain elder who was a friend of his, a most prudent and venerable cleric of his own people who was called in Gaelic *Colum Crag*, so that he might hear advice from him as a wise man. When he had told him what he had in mind he got this answer from him: "Your desire is, I think, devout and inspired by God; who can forbid it or say that you should not sail away to St Columba?"

That very hour it happened that two of St Columba's monks arrived. When asked about their journey they said, "We have recently rowed over from Britain, and today we have come from the oakwood of Calgachus."<sup>8</sup>

"Is all well with your holy father Columba?" said Colum Crag.

"Truly," they said with many tears and great lamentation, "our patron is truly well, for in these last days he has departed to Christ."

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<sup>6</sup> See §§ 29-30 of the *Life of St Fintan* below.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson and Anderson 1991, 18-22. Note that Adomnán spells his name *Fintenus*.

<sup>8</sup> *roboreto Calgachi*, i.e. Derry.

When they heard these things, Fintén and Colum and all those who were there fell prostrate with their faces on the ground and wept. After a while Fintén asked, “Whom has he left as his successor after him?”

They answered, “Baithéne, his pupil.”

And they all exclaimed, “It is right and fitting.”

Colum asked Fintén, “What will you do now, Fintén?”

He replied, “If the Lord permits, I will sail away to Baithéne, the holy and wise man, and if he will receive me I shall have him as my abbot.” Then he kissed the aforementioned Colum and said goodbye to him, prepared for his journey, and sailing over without any delay arrived at the island of Iona.<sup>9</sup> And in those days his name was not known in these parts, so at first he was hospitably received as an unknown guest. The next day he sent a message to Baithéne wishing to speak with him face-to-face. Baithéne, who was friendly and approachable to pilgrims, said that Fintén should brought to him. As soon as he was brought in Fintén knelt on the ground. Commanded to arise by the holy elder, he sat down and was questioned by Baithéne who as yet know nothing of his people, his province, his name, his manner of life, or the reason for which he had undertaken the trouble of a voyage. He answered every question in order and humbly asked to be received. But on hearing these things from the guest, and recognizing him to be a man of whom St Columba had once prophesied, the holy elder said, “I should truly give thanks to God for your arrival, my son. But know this without doubt: you shall not be our monk.”

On hearing this the guest was greatly saddened. He said, “Perhaps I am unworthy, and do not deserve to be your monk.”

Then the elder answered, “I did not say this because you are unworthy, as you say. For though I would rather have kept you with me, I cannot disobey the command of my predecessor the holy Columba. The Holy Spirit prophesied about you through him. One day he spoke to me alone when I was with him, with prophetic lips, and said among other things, ‘Baithéne, you must listen carefully to my words. Soon after my longed-for and greatly desired passing from this world to Christ, a certain brother will come from Ireland who is now directing his youth in good ways and is being led in the studies of sacred reading. His name is Fintén, of the race of Moccu Moie, whose father is called Tailchán. I tell you, he will come to you humbly asking you to receive him as one of your monks. But in God’s foreknowledge he is not predestined to be a monk under another man as his abbot, but he himself has been chosen by God to be the abbot of monks and one who leads souls into the heavenly kingdom. You will not

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<sup>9</sup> *Iouam insulam.*

wish to keep this man in these islands of ours, lest you seem to go against the will of God. Rather communicate these words to him and send him back to Ireland in peace; and let him build his monastery in the lands of the Leinstermen close to the sea, and there feeding a flock of Christ's sheep he may lead countless souls to their heavenly homeland.”

Hearing these words the holy youth shed tears and gave thanks to Christ, saying, “May it happen to me according to the prophetic and wonderful foreknowledge of Saint Columba.” And in those days, in obedience to the words of the saints, and receiving a blessing from Baíthéne, he sailed away to Ireland.

I learned these things with certainty from an old religious priest and soldier of Christ, Oisséne mac Ernáin of the people of Moccu Néth Corb. He declared that he himself had heard these things from the mouth of St Fintén mac Tailchain, whose monk he was.

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### **III *The Martyrology of Óengus***

Other early information about the cult of St Munnu appears in a text commonly called ‘The Martyrology of Óengus’ (*Féilire Óengusso*). A martyrology is a text which lists the saints whose feasts are celebrated on each day of the year. This ninth-century Gaelic text differs from most martyrologies in various ways. Firstly, most martyrologies commemorate a generous number of saints for each day of the year, seeking inclusiveness – perhaps seeking to avoid offending any saint by leaving them out, saints being notoriously grumpy when dishonoured or neglected. This text, however, typically commemorates only one or two saints on each day.

A second difference arises from that first observation. A true martyrology is a text designed primarily for daily liturgical use in the church during Divine Office, or sometimes in a monastic refectory, where the entire community commemorates the saints of the day. The Martyrology of Óengus does not seem to be designed for liturgical use. Its poetic form suggests that a rather different use was envisaged by the author – perhaps by recital before an audience, perhaps in private prayer. Interestingly, there is a story in the Preface of the work as it now stands which tells how Óengus found a man's grave which was regularly visited by angels – clearly a holy man therefore. On asking what good this man had done to merit such angelic recognition, Óengus is told that he didn't do much good at all except that he used to recount the “saints of the world – those of them that he

remembered – on lying down and on rising.”<sup>10</sup> Óengus replies, “O my God of heaven ... whoever makes a song of praise for the saints in poetry, his reward will be great for it.” The buried saint in this story is presented as commemorating the saints privately or as a performer, in poetry or song, not as participating in a community’s liturgical act.

A final difference is that the typical martyrology is just a prosaic list of the saints to be commemorated on each day, mostly without comment or elaboration. But the Martyrology of Óengus offers a four-line verse of poetry for each day of the year. Note the rhyme-scheme (*promthae* and *crochthae*) and the use of alliteration (*Fintan fírór, Telcháin trén trednach*, and *cathmíl credlach crochthae*). The verses are loaded with praise of the saint or saints, rich in metaphor and honorific descriptions. The entry for 21st October is fairly typical in this respect. Since it is so short, I will give both the Gaelic version of Stokes’ edition and a translation:

Ánbreó co mbruth athre  
Fintan fírór promthae,  
macc Telcháin trén trednach,  
cathmíl credlach crochthae.<sup>11</sup>

Brilliant flame with the fervour of the Fathers,  
Fintan, true and tested gold,  
Telchán’s son, strong, abstinent,  
a battle-soldier, faithful, crucified.

It is worth pointing out that there is another feast of a saint called Fintan in the martyrologies. It falls on 21st February, and is celebrated in the Martyrology of Óengus and also in the roughly contemporary Martyrology of Tallaght. This may be the feast of a different saint, but Ó Riain is probably right to suggest that he was originally the same man as our Fintan-Munnu. If Fintan-Munnu was celebrated at Clonenagh on a different day of the year from his feast at Taghmon, this would have given rise at some point to the two cults being understood by their devotees as referring to two distinct saints, and stories would be made up to account for this supposed distinctiveness.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stokes 1905, 6-8.

<sup>11</sup> Stokes 1905, 217.

<sup>12</sup> Ó Riain 2011, 340. See section VII below, where a story about the ‘two Fintans’ meeting is an attempt to deal with precisely this later medieval confusion.

Togairm Fintain choraig  
post contemptum mundi,  
hi féil cain col-laindi  
Uiruli Iucundi.<sup>13</sup>

The calling of Fintan the righteous<sup>14</sup>  
after his disdain for the world,  
on the fair feast with splendour  
of Verulus [and] Jucundus.<sup>15</sup>

This feastday represents the same one as that of *Fintan Corach* found on the same day in the Martyrology of Tallaght: ‘Fintan the righteous, that is in Lemchail or in Clonenagh.’<sup>16</sup>

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#### IV *The Martyrology of Tallaght*<sup>17</sup>

This document is a more typical matryrology, in contrast to the more or less contemporary *Féilire Óengusso* discussed above. It generally lists numerous saints for each day of the year without much in the way of comment or biographical detail. The entry for Fintan on 21 October is therefore somewhat atypical in that it gives some detail about him to the effect that his own monks will be saved from the fire of judgement and that there were 233 of them (though there are only 221 in the actual list of names which follows).

The claim that the fire of judgement would not burn his followers is a useful reminder of what the cult of saints was about in the Middle Ages.

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<sup>13</sup> Stokes 1905, 62.

<sup>14</sup> Here *choraig* may represent (with missing length-mark) gen. sing. either of *córach* ‘peaceful, just, righteous’, or of *corach* ‘tuneful, melodious’.

<sup>15</sup> In the Roman Martyrology on 21 February, Verulus and Secundinus are the first two names in a list of several martyrs slain by Vandals at Hadrumetum (in modern Tunisia). *Iucundi* in the Martyrology of Óengus is probably an error for *Secundini*.

<sup>16</sup> *Clúain Eindhnech*. Best & Lawlor 1931, 18. Clonenagh is in Co. Laois, and the ruined church there has a large collection of early cross-slabs.

<sup>17</sup> Best & Lawlor 1931, 123.

The modern mind imagines the cult of saints as one in which saints are presented to us as models of goodness for us to imitate. But the medieval cult of saints more typically saw these holy men and women as powerful patrons, as members of God’s heavenly entourage – rather like members of a royal household in the early medieval Gaelic world. As friends of God, these saints could ask the Lord to show mercy to their own clients. The saint was therefore your protector, your patron, whose prayers on your behalf could save you from earthly danger and from the threat of damnation.

**F**intan .i. mac Tulchain . cum suis monachis qui sub iugo eius fuerunt .ccxxxiii. quos non uret ignis iudicii quorum ista sunt nomina [here 221 names are listed]. Haec est familia Mundu.

Fintan, that is the son of Tulchán, with his 233 monks who were under his yoke, and the fire of judgement will not burn them, and these are their names ... This is the *familia* of Munnu.

\* \* \*

## V *The Life of St Munnu*

The *Codex Salmanticensis* or ‘Salamanca Codex’ is a fourteenth-century Irish manuscript, formerly in Spain and now in Belgium (Brussels, Royal Library 7672-4). It contains a collection of several Lives of Irish saints. Ten of them are commonly known as the ‘O’Donohue Lives’, so called after the person who inserted them in the collection, Diarmaid Ó Dunchadha. It has been argued that these Lives are early, perhaps eighth or ninth century in origin. Recently, however, some scholars have argued for a later date, some time after the mid-twelfth century.<sup>18</sup> Whatever the date, the cult of Fintan *alias* Munnu is well attested in this collection, as it contains not one but two lives of the saint, headed in the manuscript as *Vita Prior Sancti Fintani seu Munnu Abbatis de Tech Munnu* (‘the first Life of St Fintan or Munnu, abbot of Taghmon’) which is one of the O’Donohue Lives, and *Vita Altera Sancti Fintani seu Munnu* (‘another Life of St Fintan or Munnu’, hereafter *VA*),

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<sup>18</sup> For the early dating of O’Donohue Lives, see Richard Sharpe 1991. Against this Pádraig Ó Riain has suggested a twelfth-century date for at least some of this group, and in the context of the Lives of Fintan Munnu see Ó Riain 2011, 505.

which is not part of the O'Donohue group.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the two Lives contained in the *Codex Salmanticensis* there survive two other Latin versions of Munnu's Life, but the *Vita Prior* seems to be the source of all the other three.

As neither of the Lives of 'Fintan or Munnu' in the *Codex Salmanticensis* has to the best of my knowledge had an English translation published, I will offer a translation of the *Vita Prior* in full. For the sake of completeness (while seeking to avoid tedious repetition) I will also offer translations of those parts of *VA* in which it differs in some interesting way from the *Vita Prior* from which it was copied, and I will offer those parts in footnotes to their corresponding passages in *Vita Prior*, so that they can easily be compared with the original document.

In what follows, personal names and place-names will be rendered in a modern standard form (where that is known) with the textual form in italics in a footnote; where I can find no standard modern representation of a name I will give the name as found in the document in italics in the body of the translation.

### ***Vita Prior: The First life of St. Fintan or Munnu, Abbot of Tech Munnu***

**S**aint Fintan, a priest of the most high god, the son of Tulchán, of the descendants of Niall,<sup>20</sup> was born of the kindred of Conall.<sup>21</sup> His mother was called Fedelm<sup>22</sup> of the stock of Maine son of Niall,<sup>23</sup> The house in which St Fintan was born was built on a great rock, and after the house was gone that rock was honoured by everyone with great honour; and there has been no snow on that rock up to today because of the grace of the holy infant who was born on that rock.<sup>24</sup>

2. One day when Saint Colum Cille<sup>25</sup> had come in a chariot across the plain where Fintan was, he said to his driver, "Get down and bring that fair little

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<sup>19</sup> They are respectively in Heist 1965, 198-209 and 247-56. I am grateful to Dr Rachel Butter for access to her unpublished translation of the *Vita Prior*, together with her notes on place-names.

<sup>20</sup> *de nepotibus Neill*, i.e the Uí Néill, the descendants of Niall Noígiallach.

<sup>21</sup> *de genere Conalli*, in Gaelic *Cenél Conaill*, the putative descendants of Conall Gulban, son of Niall Noígiallach.

<sup>22</sup> *Fethelm*.

<sup>23</sup> *de genere Maini filii Neill*, the Uí Néill kindred known in Gaelic as *Uí Maine*, the supposed descendants of Maine, another son of Niall Noígiallach. Their territory was in southern Connaught.

<sup>24</sup> *VA*: 'When snow falls on it, it does not last even for an hour.'

boy into the chariot to me.” And Columba asked, "Whose is this boy?" And they said to him, "He is the son of Tulchán." Then Columba said, "*My little man is mighty.*"<sup>26</sup> Tulchán will be a famous man because of his son."<sup>27</sup>

3. Now this Fintan, when he was a boy, was looking after his father's cattle, alone in a wood. But the boy left the beasts unattended and went off every day to study at the house of a man called Cruimther Grellán<sup>28</sup> who lived in *Achud Broan*.<sup>29</sup> But knowing this, Tulchán spoke sharply to the boy saying, "Why did you leave the cattle among wolves in the wood?" The mother, however, gently made excuses, saying, "None of our beasts has been lost yet." Then Fintan said to the father, "Don't be afraid, because as long as you are in the world none of your beasts will be lost to wolves or any kind of wild animals if you leave me to study with the servants of God." And the next day Tulchán saw two wolves looking after his cattle just like ordinary dogs. From that day Tulchán's cattle were looked after all the time by wolves, and the boy was sent off to study.<sup>30</sup>

4. One day *Mochoma*<sup>31</sup> came from the region of Connacht and found the boy Fintan at Uisnech of Meath,<sup>32</sup> and he blessed the boy. Now the boy

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<sup>25</sup> *Columba Kille*, that is Columba of Iona.

<sup>26</sup> This phrase in italics translates *noll mo fèran*. It is one of a handful of Gaelic elements in the text.

<sup>27</sup> *VA*: 'When he saw him he embraced him and said devoutly, "Blessed son, the Holy Spirit, dwelling richly in you, will cause you to be counted among the greater saints of this land." And having uttered many other things in commendation of the holy boy, he bade him farewell having first given him a blessing.'

<sup>28</sup> *Cruimther* is actually the Old Gaelic word for 'priest', a loan-word from Latin *presbyter*.

<sup>29</sup> Unidentified, but perhaps near Uisnech of Meath named in §4 below. The first element is Gaelic *achadh* 'field'.

<sup>30</sup> *VA* adds: 'And [Tulchán] having seen such miracles taking place around the boy, not only gave him freedom to go to God's saints, but also, having forsaken the world, became himself a devout monk.'

<sup>31</sup> This is a hypocoristic name-form, and the context shows that it is a hypocorism of Comgall (*Comgallus*) since Mochoma is most naturally understood as being the same person that Fintan goes away with in the following sentence. *VA* does not use a hypocorism at all here, but refers simply to *Comgallus*.

wanted to go with Comgall to study, and he went off with him. And when they had walked on the road, and they had celebrated the hour of Terce beside Áth Féne,<sup>33</sup> the boy Fintan asked that in the great heat of the sun he might have a drink of water. Comgall said to him, "Wait until mid day." On that day Comgall with his people were very hungry on the journey, and no-one offered them hospitality. When they had celebrated the mid-day office at *Glassaid Assil* the boy asked again for a drink of water, and Comgall said to him, "Wait a little until Nones."<sup>34</sup> Then they celebrated Nones at *Combur Da Glass*,<sup>35</sup> and Comgall said to Fintan that he should wait without a drink until Vespers. And when Vespers had been sung Comgall found a great meal prepared by God for them on the road, together with the best drink. Then Comgall said, "It is fitting for us what we did today, that I should rule by Christ that we chastise ourselves with thirst, for because of this thirst this excellent feast has been sent to us by Christ after our great hunger. Therefore fill my cup, and give it to the boy who has brought about this meal for the hungry." The boy Fintan therefore studied with Comgall, and learnt his rule.

5. After this, Fintan came to the school of Saint Columb Cille,<sup>36</sup> which was in Cell Mór Díthrib,<sup>37</sup> and there he read divine scripture with Columba. On a certain day, St Columba, according to his custom, was filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit and for a great deal of the day he sang of all the things which the Holy Spirit dictated to him.<sup>38</sup> And after he had finished Columba said, "Who was next to me when I sang the words of the Holy Spirit?" Baíthéne<sup>39</sup> replied to him, "That boy, the son of Tulchán, was

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<sup>32</sup> *Huisnech Midi*. Uisnech, Ushnagh Hill in Killare parish, Co. Westmeath. According to legend a pillar-stone here marks the very centre of Ireland. Once an an important assembly-site, it has an extraordinarily rich archaeology covering a wide area.

<sup>33</sup> *iuxta vadum Fene*. Perhaps the Áth Féne in Meath which appears in the Irish saga *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as the site of a raid by Conchobar.

<sup>34</sup> *Ad nonam*, the ninth hour.

<sup>35</sup> The name means 'at the confluence of two burns'.

<sup>36</sup> *Columbe Kyle*.

<sup>37</sup> *hi Kyll Mair Diathrib*. Apparently in Kilmore parish, Co. Roscommon. Cell Mór Díthruib is also mentioned in Adomnán's *Life of Columba* i, 50. The abbot of this monastery was violently killed (his *iugulatio*) in AU 735.

<sup>38</sup> 'Sang' (*cecinit*) perhaps suggests a kind of prophetic chant, a heightened form of utterance, possibly poetic, rather than everyday prosaic speech.

<sup>39</sup> *Bithinus*. Baíthéne, who was Columba's successor as abbot of Iona.

closest to you on your right hand side." Then Columba said, "He will be a spiritual teacher, and the most learned and pre-eminent of all this school."<sup>40</sup>

6. Then Fintan went off to study with the wisest man in all Ireland and Britain,<sup>41</sup> who was a vigorous abbot in Devenish on Lough Erne,<sup>42</sup> and he stayed with him reading the scriptures for nineteen years, and there were nine other young men with him. And they were under the strictest rule, to the extent that they were not permitted to sift their flour, but the flour with its chaff were mixed with water in a basin, and cooked on stones heated by a fire. And this was their daily food.

7. After this Fintan went away to the island of Iona<sup>43</sup> to become a monk of Colum Cille there. But Columba had gone to heaven before he got there. However, Columba had left his words with Báethéne saying, "After my death there will come from Ireland a man with fair curly hair and rosy cheeks,<sup>44</sup> Fintan son of Tulchán, whom I have seen more often in heaven than on earth. Now he will come here for this purpose, that he might become a monk here, but you shall not receive him. And this will not seem good to him, for the nature of that man is harsh. But you will tell him that he himself will be an abbot and the head of a people, and he will not be the follower of another man. He will then go to the southern part of Leinster next to the sea, because that is where his honour and his [place of] resurrection are. And although my earthly portion is greater, my love and my power with God are not greater than his."

8. So Fintan went back to Ireland and lived in Inis Cuinrigi,<sup>45</sup> and he founded there a church<sup>46</sup> called *Ath Kaien*.<sup>47</sup> One day he went out onto a

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<sup>40</sup> VA adds: 'So St Munnu remained for a time with St Columba, carefully laying up in the storehouse of his heart the example of his virtues and his teaching of the scriptures.'

<sup>41</sup> VA names him: *Filell Miannaich*.

<sup>42</sup> *hi Domhinnis for Lochaib n-Erni*. VA calls the place *Cluoin Hinis* and says Fintan remained there for eighteen years.

<sup>43</sup> *ad insulam Ie*.

<sup>44</sup> VA: 'holy in his ways, brilliant in his prophetic gift, with a fair body, curly hair and rosy cheeks'.

<sup>45</sup> *in insula Cuinrigi*, unidentified.

<sup>46</sup> Here and elsewhere I translate *locum* 'place' as 'church', for one does not naturally speak of 'founding a place' in English. Furthermore, the word *locus* was used in early medieval Latin to mean 'church'.

high mountain of this island to pray, and there he heard the shout of the men of Hell<sup>48</sup> on the day on which the battle of Slemain<sup>49</sup> was fought. Then Fintan left that island saying, "I will not live in a place where I have heard the shout of the men of Hell."

9. While he was walking along the road, a certain rich man called Énán mac Nisse came up to him. The cattle of this rich man had a disease.<sup>50</sup> Then Fintan blessed a certain river and the rich man's beasts were healed by its water, and until the end of his life this water healed men and beasts. And the rich man offered a field to St Fintan, and he founded a church there, that is *Acheth Liacc*,<sup>51</sup> and he left seven men of his *familia* there.

10. And Fintan came to his own people, where he was born, but he did not look at that land, except only the road on which his feet were walking; nor did he greet anyone there, neither father nor mother, neither brothers nor sisters, who were all alive there at that time.<sup>52</sup>

11. After this he came to the region of Éile<sup>53</sup> and he founded a church there which is now called Tech Taille mac Séigíne,<sup>54</sup> and he was there for five

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<sup>47</sup> *Ath Kaien*. Unidentified, but the name (if not the same place) appears again in §31 where it is the name of St Columba's dwelling in the 'Land of Promise'. The name, Old Gaelic *ath cain*, means 'fair, beautiful, or gentle ford'.

<sup>48</sup> *VA* misunderstands this passage and says he heard 'the cry of the afflicted from hell' (*clamorem afflictorum de inferno*). But in *Vita Prior* what he hears is the shouting of living warriors and men of violence, and these are the 'men of hell'. By his departure from the place he is rejecting the violence of the world. These 'men of hell' are perhaps to be compared with the *mac bais* in Gaelic sources, 'the son of death' – a term for a bloody and violent person.

<sup>49</sup> A battle of Slemain appears in some annals for the year AD 497, though not in the original text of *AU*. It also appears in the *Táin*. The name is preserved in Slanemore and Slanebeg near Mullingar, Co. Westmeath.

<sup>50</sup> *VA*: 'He earnestly begged the man of God to provide him with some remedy against this plague.'

<sup>51</sup> Unidentified. Gaelic *achadh lice* 'field of [the] flat stone, slab'.

<sup>52</sup> *VA*: 'the holy man crossed over as a stranger, so that he would see neither his parents nor his kindred nor anyone he knew.'

<sup>53</sup> *Hele*, a territory in Co. Offaly.

years. And his mother then sent word to him there asking him to say where she might come to greet him. He sent word back to her, "Come to the place called Louth,<sup>55</sup> but don't come any closer, and I will go out to you at that place." So his mother came, and three daughters of Tulchán with her, that is to say, two penitent women and one virgin. While the mother was awaiting the arrival of Fintan in the *civitas* of Louth,<sup>56</sup> her virgin daughter was struck by pain, died and was buried there. The next day Fintan arrived, and when he saw the new grave he recognised it, saying, "This is Conchenn." Then the sorrowing mother came to him saying, "I beg you in the name of the Lord that you raise my daughter for me." Fintan said to her, "Go away, and come to me tomorrow."<sup>57</sup> Then Fintan cast everyone away from him, and that night he prayed there alone. The next day she returned home healthy with her mother. And Fintan said to his mother, "Be sure not to come to me again. For if you come to me another time, I will go away from whatever province I am in, across the sea to Britain."

12. And he raised another dead person in Kilbixy.<sup>58</sup> For one day, when Fintan had come there the inhabitants of the place craftily said to him, "O holy man, behold one of our sick is lying in his house and he gives no response. Come therefore, and bless him." However, they were silently concealing the death of this man. Then Fintan went off to that house, not knowing that the man was dead, and he blessed him simply with the sign of the cross, and immediately that dead man rose up healthy and blessing God.

13. When St Fintan had been living for five years in his place in the region of Éile a certain handmaid of God called Ciar<sup>59</sup> came to him one day with five other nuns. The guest attendant went out to greet her. The nun said to him, "Go to the strong man who lives here and tell him to give me this place, because he is stronger with his fifty young men than I with my five nuns, and let him build himself another place." Hearing this Fintan said to

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<sup>54</sup> *Tech Tailli maicc Segeni*. A saint called Teille mac Ségáin is recorded in genealogical sources. The place is in Durrow parish, Co. Offaly.

<sup>55</sup> *Lugmath*, Louth in Co. Louth. Its patron saint was Mauchteus or Mochte.

<sup>56</sup> Usually *civitas* is 'a city', but it is used in the medieval Gaelic world of large monasteries.

<sup>57</sup> *VA*: 'and tomorrow you will see the grace of God.'

<sup>58</sup> *in Cella Bicsiche*, for *Cell Bigsige*. This is probably Kilbixy in Co. Westmeath.

<sup>59</sup> *Kyear*. For Old Gaelic *cíar* 'dark', used of men and women. *VA* calls her *Emer*.

his brothers, "It is true what the nun has said. Get up, let us leave this place because this will not be our [place of] resurrection, and now is not [the time for] spiritual sloth. Let us leave our work with the handmaids of God, and take nothing with you from the place except your axes and books and chrismals, and our common clothing, and two oxen only to pull a cart with the books." And when the handmaid of God asked a blessing from him, he replied to her, "The blessing of God be on this place, and it will be blessed in the sight of God and of men. You, however, have not deserved a blessing from me. And though I cannot close Heaven against you, nevertheless your name and your rank will not be on this place, and few people will know your tomb." And she said, "So who is it, then, who will inhabit this place?" Fintan said, "A man who today gave three shouts of joy on the rampart of *Midlochre*,<sup>60</sup> he will have this place." This is Teille mac Ségáin,<sup>61</sup> who afterwards came to this place.

14. Then Fintan went off to the territory of Leinster. And on a certain night he remained beside the crosses on the plain of Meath,<sup>62</sup> and on that same night a certain leader of the Fothairt<sup>63</sup> called Dímma son of Áed Crón<sup>64</sup> came to that place with sixty men. Fintan said to them, "Eat one of the oxen which are hauling the cart with the books." Now the warriors could not refuse him and they ate the ox. This is the Dímma who offered the place to Fintan where he is now. The next day one ox pulled the cart. And as they were walking along the road a certain man came to them with beasts and untamed bullocks. He said to them, "Have one of these bullocks for your wagon." And as soon as that bullock was placed under the yoke it became mild and tame.

15. After this Fintan went off to the southern part of Leinster, to the sea, according to the word of Colum Cille, and he was there next to the sea in a place which is called *Arid Crama* among the Uí Bairrche.<sup>65</sup> Now the *familia* of the holy abbot Comgall of Bangor, was in that place, and a pupil

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<sup>60</sup> *super aggerem*, literally 'on the heap'; perhaps on the road or causeway of *Midlochre*. *Agger, -eris* 'mound, rampart, dam, dyke, causeway, road'.

<sup>61</sup> This is the man after whom the site was eventually named (see §11 above). The story explains why the place is called Tech Taille mac Ségíne, and is not named after Ciar, the nun who took it from Fintan.

<sup>62</sup> *in campo Mete*.

<sup>63</sup> A people of Co. Wexford.

<sup>64</sup> *Dimma filius Aidi Croin*.

<sup>65</sup> *Nepotes Baridie*. But *VA* has *Nepotes Barrchi*, which is more correct.

of Comgall, Áed Gobban by name, was the head of that place. He went into exile and left Fintan in his place until he should return from exile. So Fintan was in that place for twelve years, and God gave him copious fruit of land and sea, and a great abundance such as has not been in that place either before or afterwards.

16. One day Guaire son of Éogan<sup>66</sup> came, wanting to obtain the kingdom of Leinster.<sup>67</sup> He ravaged the people in St Fintan's neighbourhood and carried away with him their cattle and oxen. Then the widows and orphans of the people came to Fintan and wept before him. Fintan called four men to himself and said to them, "Go and greet Guaire and tell him to give us back, in the name of the Lord, the cattle which he has seized. If he listens to our request, tell him that he will be king until his old age, and he will not be slain, and his descendants will hold the kingdom of the Uí Chennselaig<sup>68</sup> until the day of judgement. But I know that this hard man will not hear you nor send back these people's beasts. And in the hour when you greet him, he will be having his head shaved in your presence, and you will say to him, "If you do not return to us the people's cattle which you seized, your head will not be shaved again, but before the hairs of your head grow you will be killed, and your head will be cut off, and you will not be king." So those men he had sent went off and greeted Guaire. And it was fulfilled just as Fintan had said, and Guaire did not send back the beasts, and he was killed on the fifth day.

17. After the death of Saint Comgall abbot of Bangor his *familia* came to Saint Fintan and said to him, "A choice of three things is given to you. Namely, come with us and you will be abbot of Bangor after Comgall." Fintan replied to them, "I will not go into the place of another, and into the fruit of his labour. I will be in the place which the Lord shall give me, with my monks, to be fed by the work of our hands." And they said to him again, "This place will be given to you, and you will be a monk of St Comgall." But Fintan said to them: "Since Columb Cille did not accept me, I will take no other abbot except the Lord." A third time the *familia* of Comgall said to him, "If you will not receive all this, leave this place." Fintan said: "I will do that when I have committed this place to the man who entrusted it to me, that is to Áed Gobban." They said, "Seek that man, even from Rome, and meanwhile we will remain until you come back." Then

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<sup>66</sup> *Guori filius Eugin.*

<sup>67</sup> In *VA* he seeks rule over the Uí Chennselaig.

<sup>68</sup> *nepotum Kenselaich*, a powerful Leinster kindred.

Fintan got up with five men and went on the road to go to Rome to seek Áed Gobban. And soon afterwards, when they had travelled one field from the place, they saw Áed Gobban coming towards them, after twelve years in exile, and in the same hour they returned together to their home. Then Fintan said to them, "Your place after our departure will not grow greater, nor will it have territorial property, and the sea will not give to it its fruit."<sup>69</sup>

18. Then an angel of the Lord came to Fintan, saying, "Arise and take your monks and go to the place which is called *Aicheth Liacc Ech Dromma* in the region of Fothairt, because there is your ordination and your resurrection." So Fintan went to that place and stayed there.

19. One day when St Fintan was alone there in the woods, working with his hands, he saw three men in white clothes coming towards him and he asked them for a prayer. They said to him, "Come with us a little while." And when he had walked a little with them, they said to him, "Your *civitas* will be in this place." And they marked out seven spots in his presence in which the chief places of the *civitas* were later built,<sup>70</sup> and Fintan put crosses in those places.

20. One night Fintan and his people cried out to the Lord in loud voices beside a cross. And in contrast on the same night a certain leader of the Fothairt, living in a nearby place, that is Dímma son of Áed Crón,<sup>71</sup> made a shout of joy with his followers around the head of a slain warrior. Then that leader, with remorse in his heart, said, "These two shouts of joy cannot happen at the same time - that is to say, our shout of joy around a head according to the will of the devil, and the joyful shout of the psalms by Fintan according to the will of God." And in the morning that leader Dimma came and offered [Fintan] the field in which his *civitas* now is, and he said, "What will you give me for this offering?" Fintan replied to him, "The kingdom of heaven will be given to you for your land." Dímma said, "That is not enough for me, unless you grant me length of life in all my desires, and that my body be not killed, and you correct me towards the clerical state so long as I wish that, and after death I am buried among your monks in a holy place." Fintan said to him, "All of these things will be

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<sup>69</sup> This entire section is omitted by *VA*.

<sup>70</sup> *VA*: 'They marked out for him the site of his *civitas* and of its principal buildings.'

<sup>71</sup> *Dimma filius Aidi Croin*.

granted to you. Where you are now, there you will be buried." So Fintan built there, as the angels had ordered him.<sup>72</sup>

21. These are the petitions of St Fintan, which the Lord granted him: that the younger of his people should not die before the elder, but [they would die] in order of age; that no-one of his kindred should be alive seven years<sup>73</sup> before the Day of Judgement; that whoever should be buried in his burial ground which Fintan himself marked out with his hand would have eternal life; and that as far as the sound of his bell is heard, which was always in his company and which was not struck except at the departure of a soul, whoever is buried within that boundary, Hell would not close over him after the Day of Judgement.<sup>74</sup> Therefore he directed that his monks should not be buried in other places.

22. There was a certain man doing penance with Fintan called Beccán son of Bleidíne.<sup>75</sup> And that man [was] living with other penitent men, fifty in number, who ate bread and drank water mixed with a little milk. But when Beccán was ill Fintan had compassion and blessed his cup; and from that day for seven years there was new milk in his cup, although clear water was poured out for him from the same jug as was used for the other penitents.<sup>76</sup>

23. A certain youth of the monks, Fintan son of Éogan<sup>77</sup> by name, asked Fintan to send him on a visit to his native land. Fintan said to him, "Go, but be careful not to drink anything except water until we greet one another." And he blessed young Fintan's cup. Now after the youth had gone some way on his journey, Fintan died and went to Heaven. When the youth returned to his *familia* he heard of the death of Fintan, and he didn't want to drink anything except water because Fintan had told him to drink nothing but water until they greeted each other. The youth was thus content with water for thirty years. Then, on a certain day, an abbot of the people called

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<sup>72</sup> *VA*: 'Now St Munnu built a monastery in the place which the angel had marked out, and it is even now called Taghmon (*Thec Munnu*), that is the house of Munnu'.

<sup>73</sup> *VA*: 'seven days'.

<sup>74</sup> *VA*: 'that those buried at a time when the voice of his bell was heard, which he always used to have with him, should not be closed in hell on the day of judgement'.

<sup>75</sup> *Becanus filius Bledení.*

<sup>76</sup> This story omitted by *VA*.

<sup>77</sup> *Fintanus filius Eugen.* In *VA* he is called *Finanus*.

*Mocommoc* carelessly tasted the water that was in the boy's cup, and he saw that it was the best wine, and this liquor changed him from head to foot. And the abbot told this to the youth. Hearing this the youth was perturbed and said to the abbot, "Give me the sacrifice,<sup>78</sup> because on the third day I shall go to Heaven, now that another man on earth has got to know this. For there has been such a taste on my water for thirty years from the day when Fintan went to Heaven." [This took place] because Fintan blessed his cup.<sup>79</sup>

24. The king of the Fothairt, *Dímma Camchoss* by name, had two sons: one called *Cellachán*<sup>80</sup> who was brought up in *Airbre*<sup>81</sup> with *Cuan*,<sup>82</sup> an anchorite; the other son, *Cillíne*<sup>83</sup> by name, was brought up in *Taghmon*<sup>84</sup> with Fintan. One day king *Dímma* came with the aristocrats of Fothairt – sixty in number – to *Cuan* of *Airbre* and there they saw *Cellach* son of *Dímma* in a hyacinth-coloured habit decorated with purple arrows, and on his shoulders a brooch<sup>85</sup> with brass fittings, and on his feet shoes decorated with Parthian leather and brass.<sup>86</sup> And the clothing of the boy pleased them, and they said, "This son of ours is being fostered well." After this the Fothairt came with their king to *Taghmon*, and they sat in front of the door of the place. And wagons drew near them, and there were boys in front of the wagons singing psalms with loud voices, and their fasteners were attached to the yokes.<sup>87</sup> In front of a wagon they saw *Cillíne* son of *Dímma*

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<sup>78</sup> *Sacrificum*, that is holy communion, given before death as *viaticum*.

<sup>79</sup> *VA*: "“For a long time the mercy of God, by the merit of St Munnu, has given me the taste and strength of wine in the water [in this cup]. And I have learned by the Spirit that when anyone else should perceive this I should die three days later.” And so, rejoicing in the Lord, he went to heaven.”

<sup>80</sup> *Kellacanus*. The name is a diminutive of *Cellach*. *VA* calls him *Chellac*.

<sup>81</sup> *in Airbriu*, Forth barony, Co. Wexford.

<sup>82</sup> *apud Cuoanum*.

<sup>83</sup> *Killinus*.

<sup>84</sup> *in Domo Mundu*, ‘in the house of Munnu’; but this phrase is a Latin rendering of Old Gaelic *tech Munnu*, of the same meaning, the origin of the name *Taghmon*. It was a common and socially important practice in the early medieval Gaelic world for children to be fostered out to other families, or to churchmen. It was an arrangement governed by formal legal agreements, and respect for social status was a significant part of these.

<sup>85</sup> *ceraculum*, which I take to be a variant of *seracula* ‘lock, clasp, fastener’.

<sup>86</sup> This detailed description omitted by *VA*.

<sup>87</sup> Presumably the boys are pulling the wagons, like oxen.

wearing a black cowl the colour of a sheep, and in a short white tunic with a black border, and in rough shoes. And his clothing displeased them, and they said, "The amount of love for us in these two places is quite clear in the way the two boys are being fostered." Then Dímma said to them, "There will be great punishment for these things that you are saying, for Fintan hears all our words in his house." Then Fintan said to the guest attendant, "Go and bring the Fothairt into the house, and treat them well. But it does not please them the way their boy is being brought up by us. The boy in Airbre is brought up better. Tell them therefore that the dear son who is in Airbre will not possess Heaven and earth, and the whole people of Leinster will kill him. But the son who is brought up here will be the head of a church and a wise scribe, and a bishop and anchorite, and he will possess the kingdom of God." And so it came about.

25. After these things King Dímma asked for a small gift from St. Fintan, and Fintan gave him his linen tunic, in which Fintan had slept one night, and he said to the king, "Look after this tunic carefully because a day will come when this tunic will be lucky for you and will free you from great danger." After this the abovementioned Cellach son of Dímma became a warrior and killed Áed Sláne son of Crunnmáel,<sup>88</sup> the king of Leinster. Then Crunnmáel, having called up an army of all the Leinstermen, came and besieged the Fothairt in Inis Barri on *Loch Edidach*.<sup>89</sup> But Dímma Camchoss escaped from the island on his horse, and escaped through the hosts of all the Leinstermen, and no-one saw him because Fintan's tunic hid him. His troop however, that is to say eighty men of the nobles of the Fothairt, were bound in chains on Inis Barri, and two men of them were killed every single day, and Cellach son of Dímma was killed. Dímma the son of Aed Crón, a friend of Fintan, was also bound with them. Then Fintan said to his people, "Arise, let us go, because the man who gave us this place is held in bonds to be killed tomorrow." Then Fintan came to the camp of the kings, taking twelve men with him. And when the kings saw the chariot and the clerics from afar they knew that it was Fintan and that he had come to free Dímma son of Aed Crón. Then Crunnmáel said, "Bring the man, and conceal him and kill him before Fintan arrives, and meanwhile make a shout of triumph to show that he is killed." Hearing the celebration Fintan said, "What is that song?" Someone answered him, "It is a celebration after the killing of a man." Fintan said, "Until today I have not

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<sup>88</sup> *Odo Slane filium Cruindmail.*

<sup>89</sup> *in Inso Bairri for Loch Edidach.* This may be a reference to Loch Echach in Co. Wexford.

heard this cry. And from this day for ever the kings of this people, except for Crunnmáel and another man after him, will not hold the kingdom longer than seven years." Crunnmáel was called to Fintan, and he said to him, "Return Dímma to us, whom you have bound." Crunnmáel replied: "He has been slain." And Fintan said, "This cannot be, because that man will not be slain ever. Those men, therefore, who were sent to kill him have not been able to raise their hands, nor could the swords and spears wound him." Hearing this, Crunnmáel offered that man to Fintan along with his inheritance and offspring for ever.

26. There was a certain layman, a tenant<sup>90</sup> of St Fintan called *Mal Marke*, who, with Cellach son of Dímma, killed Áed Sláine. This layman was held in chains by Crunnmáel on Inis Liacc hAin.<sup>91</sup> Then Fintan said, "Go and free your<sup>92</sup> tenant, *Mel Marke*, who is placed in danger." So five holy clerics went out from among his monks and they stopped at the harbour of Inis Liacc hAin, and the king knew it was the *familia* of Fintan. And King Crunnmáel said, "Bring the fettered man into a boat on the sea and kill him there before the clerics come." And when they had brought him out onto the sea a little later, the boat stood still in one place, nor could it be moved to this place or that, and the hands of the men withered around their weapons, and thus through the middle of the day they remained fixed, immobile. Then the king did penance and returned the man to the clerics.

27. A certain woman suffering from a flow of blood was brought in a camp bed to the *civitas* of Fintan. Then Finnian, the guest attendant, went to Fintan and asked him to bless some water for the woman. Fintan said, "Do you want to make me an exorcist for the women of Leinster?" Then Finnian the attendant left him, but secretly carried off with him [Fintan's] garment which was on his bed, and he placed it on the woman. And immediately she was cured, and she returned home on foot, healed.

28. An angel of the Lord always used to come to greet Fintan on two days in the week, that is Sunday and Thursday. Now it happened that one Thursday the angel did not come to him, and then he did come on Sunday.

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<sup>90</sup> *monachus*. While this generally means 'monk', the Gaelic word *manach*, though derived from *monachus*, can also mean a church tenant. The author here has simply latinized the Gaelic word, and as he is said to be a layman, he is not a monk in the sense of a man under the monastic vow.

<sup>91</sup> *in insula Liac hAin*.

<sup>92</sup> *vestrum* 'your', probably in error for *nostrum* 'our'.

Fintan said to him, "Tell me for what fault of mine was it that you did not come to me on the usual day." The angel replied, "It was not through negligence of you that I did not come, but in these days a very dear guest entered into heaven, on account of whose arrival all the angels were greatly occupied with exultation and joy, and they did not come this week to greet the saints of Ireland. It was Lugaid mac Coiche of Clonfert."<sup>93</sup> Fintan said, "It appears clearly that he alone truly fulfilled God's commandments. Go therefore and come back to me with a response, so that I may know why it was more valuable to rejoice in the arrival of Lugaid than to come to greet me." The angel then came back to him saying, "It is because a man's face was not made to blush in the presence of Lugaid,<sup>94</sup> and his monks will not be fewer in Heaven than your monks. You, on the other hand, use shame to reproach your monks." Then Fintan said, "I know what I will do..."<sup>95</sup> [The angel said,] "You will not go into exile, but on the coming Thursday night<sup>96</sup> a message from God will come to you that the rejoicing in Heaven on the arrival of Luguid will not be greater than it will be on your arrival on the day of your death." On that night Fintan was struck by a very painful leprosy, and it remained with him for twenty-four years. And in all that time, according to those who saw, Saint Fintan neither scratched his body with his hands nor washed in a bath, except on one day only, that is to say, the [day of] the Lord's supper.<sup>97</sup>

29. At one time there was a great council of the people of Ireland in the plains of Ailbhe<sup>98</sup> and there was an enormous argument between them for a whole year concerning the new Easter and the old Easter. For Laisrén of

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<sup>93</sup> *Lugid mac Coiche Clona Ferta*. VA calls him: '*Molua filius Cuoche Cluona Ferta*'. Clonfert was an important monastery, founded by St Brendan in the sixth century, in Co. Galway, close to the River Shannon.

<sup>94</sup> VA: "'Because he never brought shame on any man. And although he had many monks under him, he treated them wisely and kindly, as a father with his sons. You, however, correct your monks with shame and with harshness, though the servants of God should not be treated so.'"

<sup>95</sup> The rest of Fintan's speech is lacking here. VA: 'St Munnu said to him, "Therefore I will go out of the country and I shall have no more zeal to correct monks.'"

<sup>96</sup> VA: 'on Monday'.

<sup>97</sup> ... *in cena Domini*, i.e. Maundy Thursday, when a ritual washing of the feet took place anyway. VA: 'except once a year in honour of Easter'.

<sup>98</sup> *in campis Ailbe*, in Gaelic *Magh Ailbhe*, now Moyvalvey in Co. Meath.

Leighlin<sup>99</sup> with his people defended the new Easter and the new order,<sup>100</sup> but other elders of Ireland praised the old Easter and the old order. Saint Fintan did not come immediately to this council, and all the people were waiting for him, for he was the principal and first of those who defended the old Easter. Then Suibne son of Domnall, king of the Uí Bairrche [said], "How long are you going to wait for this leprous cleric? Even if he arrives, the Easter of Laisrén will hold pre-eminence until the day of judgement." Laisrén said to him, "Be quiet, because Fintan can hear what you say, wherever he is, and you will receive punishment from him."<sup>101</sup> And that day, before Vespers, Fintan came to the council, and Fintan and Laisrén greeted each other. And when king Suibne asked for a prayer from Fintan, Fintan said to him, "Why are you asking for a prayer from a leprous cleric? When you spoke abuse against me, Christ blushed at the right side of God the Father, because I am a true limb of Christ."<sup>102</sup> Therefore before the harvest is complete you will die, and your own kinsmen will kill you, and your blood will be mixed with butter-milk, and your head will be tossed into the River Barrow<sup>103</sup> and it will not appear thereafter." And thus it was fulfilled, for in that month his brother's son killed him next to a smallish river which is called *Blathach*,<sup>104</sup> and his head was left at the River Barrow.

**30.** The next day Fintan said to Laisrén before all the people, "Now is the time for this council to finish, and for everyone to return to his place. Therefore in brief I say three things to Laisrén. That is, let two of our books be put on the fire - a book of the old order and one of the new order, so we might see which book escapes from the fire. Or otherwise, let two of our monks be enclosed in one house, and let the house be set on fire, and we will see which of the two will be delivered from the fire. Or else let us go together, Laisrén and I, to the grave of a dead monk, formerly a just man, and let us raise him up so that he might tell us which Easter is celebrated this year in Heaven." Laisrén said to him, "I will not go into judgement

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<sup>99</sup> *Lasserianus Lethglinne*, sometimes known by his hypocorism Molaisse. *VA* adds: 'who had 1,500 monks under his rule'.

<sup>100</sup> *VA*: 'which had recently come from Rome'.

<sup>101</sup> *VA*: '.... you will not escape God's vengeance'.

<sup>102</sup> *VA* adds: 'and any harm to a member gives pain to the head'.

<sup>103</sup> *flumen Berve*, a major river in Leinster, the second longest in Ireland after the Shannon.

<sup>104</sup> The name of this river fulfills the prophecy about mixing with 'buttermilk' (the prophecy was given in Latin using the word *babtuta*), for Old Gaelic *bláthach* also means 'buttermilk'.

against God's *brutum*,<sup>105</sup> for because of the greatness of your work if you were to command that Sliabh Mairge<sup>106</sup> be moved to the plains of Ailbhe, and the plains of Ailbhe to the place of Sliabh Mairge, God would do this for you." Then Fintan said, "Let each person therefore do what he believes and seems right to him."

**31.** One day Fintan came at daybreak to the house of a certain holy anchorite; he came from among the Britons, and lived with Fintan at the very edge of the *civitas* and made carts for the brethren.<sup>107</sup> And there was a fire in his house which had been lit to dry wood for a cart. When he saw Fintan suddenly coming into the house, he bent his knee and said to him, "Sit a while in the chair so your feet might be warmed up." And while Fintan was sitting next to the fire, the man held his shoes<sup>108</sup> and saw wet sand in them, and taking it away he wrapped [the sand] in his handkerchief and said, "O Saint Fintan, tell me I beg you, what is this sand in your shoes?" Fintan said to him, "Promise me that you will not tell this to anyone during my lifetime." And when he had promised Fintan said to him, "I have just now come from the Land of Promise in which we four together have built our places: that is to say, Columb Cille and I - our two places stand together near a ford; while Cainnech<sup>109</sup> and Brénnainn Moccu Altai,<sup>110</sup> their places stand near another ford. The name of Columba's place is called Áth Cáin<sup>111</sup> and the name of my place *Port Subi*; the name of Cainnech's place is called *Set Bethath* and the name of Brénnainn's place is *Aur Phardus*.<sup>112</sup> If therefore temptation comes to you which you cannot resist,

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<sup>105</sup> *contra brutum Dei*. This must be a rendering of Old Gaelic *brithem* 'judge'. Laisrén refuses to undergo a judicial trial against someone he regards as 'God's judge'. Latin *brutus* has almost universally negative connotations – 'heavy, inert, stupid, dull, brutish' – and is surely not intended here.

<sup>106</sup> *mons Marce*, 'the mountain of Mairc'. The origin of the name Slieve Margey, Co. Laois.

<sup>107</sup> *VA*: 'he was a woodworker' (*fabrum lignarium*).

<sup>108</sup> *calvos* 'bald', presumably in error for *calceos* 'shoes' as the rest of the story indicates.

<sup>109</sup> *Kannechus*.

<sup>110</sup> *Brandinus Macu Althe*, i.e. Brendan of Clonfert.

<sup>111</sup> *Ath Cain*, 'beautiful ford'.

<sup>112</sup> The second part of this name is the Old Gaelic *pardus* 'paradise, heaven'. *VA* adds: 'And the power of God took us there and brought us back. And this is sand which I brought from there so that it could be with

you will go to that holy land. In this place you are permitted always to have twelve new carts, and twelve bronze cooking pots to prepare for an expedition. You will go, therefore, to Slieve League<sup>113</sup> in the region of the Cenél Bóguine<sup>114</sup> to a harbour which extends into the sea, and there you will set sail, killing your oxen, and it is permitted to you to eat the meat of the oxen (for perhaps because of your haste in setting out you will not be able to prepare your provisions), and in the hides of your oxen you will sail favourably to the holy land of promise." Now the anchorite told this story after the death of Fintan, and he showed the sand that had been in the shoes of Fintan.

**32.** St Fintan had this gift, that he knew the day of death of every one of his people. He said to a strong man whose death was approaching, "Behold the time has come for you to go to heaven."<sup>115</sup> And on the third day that man went to Heaven. Fintan also said to a man who for had lain in bed for a long time, "Get up and do the work of that man who has died." And immediately the sick man got up, strong and healthy, and worked with the brothers.

**33.** Fintan also had this gift, that he knew the thoughts of all of his brothers, and he told each one of them everything that went on in their hearts, and he himself heard their confessions. Likewise Fintan reported to the brothers the number of guests who were to come, before they arrived, and their appearance.<sup>116</sup> Likewise every word that was said in his absence he knew and heard as if he were present.

**34.** Likewise, if Fintan blessed the heart of a monk, whatever vice was weighing heavily on his heart would not overcome him from that hour until the day of his death. Likewise if he greeted any guest with a sharp and sudden word, he would never eat food until the guest was gently soothed.

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me in my cemetery. And after the death of the holy father, the monk brought back the sand and did with it just as he had ordered while he was alive<sup>?</sup>.

<sup>113</sup> *ad Montem Lapidum*, 'the mountain of stones' i.e. Gaelic *sliab liac*, on the coast of Co. Donegal.

<sup>114</sup> *in regione generis Bogeni*. The supposed descendants of Énna Bóguine, son of Conal Gulban mac Néill Noigiallaig.

<sup>115</sup> *VA*: "One day St Munnu said to a healthy brother, "Arrange the house of your conscience, for after three days you will go to God."

<sup>116</sup> *VA* omits this sentence.

And he would say, "I, in the past hour was the son of Tulchán according to the flesh; but now I am a son of God according to the spirit." Every word of St Fintan was a prophecy and his every step and his every work was a miracle.<sup>117</sup>

35. When the day of his death came, he called his people to him and he blessed them.<sup>118</sup> And when he had received the body and blood of Christ he fell asleep, and an innumerable host of angels came to meet him. And when a mob of demons rushed towards him in the air, Saint Fintan looked up to the Heavens. The demons seeing the face of Fintan fled hither and thither in great fear, and no strength remained in them, and until the end of the week they were not able to make war on anyone. On the arrival of Fintan [in Heaven] the whole *familia* of Heaven was joyful, and there he dwells endlessly in the sight of the eternal King, our Lord Jesus Christ ruling for ever and ever. Amen.<sup>119</sup>

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## VI *Life of St Laisrén or Molaisse, abbot of Leighlin*

In the *Codex Salmanticensis* there is another Life which mentions St Munnu. This is the *Life of St Laisrén or Molaisse*, whose monastery at Leighlin is in Co. Carlow in the south-east of Ireland. He appeared in the Life of St Munnu printed above as his opponent – albeit a very respectful one – at a council where the date of Easter was being debated.

In the story below from the Life of St Laisrén there is no hint of the Easter dispute. It is found in section 4 of the Life, and while it does express some admiration for Munnu, it is the miracle of Molaisse that is the centre of attention. Nevertheless, the story shows that the cult of St Munnu was known to the devotees of St Molaisse when the story was written, and that he was honoured enough to be made the teacher of Molaisse.<sup>120</sup> Molaisse

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<sup>117</sup> VA omits this section.

<sup>118</sup> VA: 'He commanded the people to come to him and he told them to observe the divine commandments and to walk in the way of the saints'.

<sup>119</sup> VA: 'And when the sacraments had been administered to him, in the hands of his disciples he released his spirit to heaven on 21st October. There with the angels and the saints he rejoices in the glory of God the Father, to whom with the Son and the Holy Spirit be majesty and power for infinite ages of ages. Amen'.

<sup>120</sup> Heist 1965, 340-43, at 341.

has a brief encounter with his uncle, Bishop Blane of Kingarth, and performs a miracle before him. The story then continues:

**A**fter this, warned by an angelic commandment in a vision, the mother took her boy back to her own country<sup>121</sup> and handed him over to St Munnu to be educated. Instructed by his teaching and shaped by the example of his life, [Molaisse] used to work uncommon miracles. For one day, when they were both at the mill and the place did not have a stream of water [to drive it], he went out with his staff at the command of his master and dug a turf out of the ground there, and a great quantity of water sprang forth and flowed in abundance to the mill.

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## VII *Twelfth-century notes in Félire Óengusso*

The text known as *Félire Óengusso*, as discussed above, was produced in the earlier part of the ninth century. But a considerable body of notes was added to it, probably in the twelfth century. The notes added for the feast of St Fintan or Munnu contain some interesting material which is offered below – not, it should be remembered, as information about the saint, but rather as an insight into the way that devotion to his memory combined with creative imagination in later centuries.

The material contains a story about how Munnu acquired the name Fintan, probably because people had by this time forgotten that Munnu was a hypocorism formed out of the name Fintan. There is also a genealogy (which should be treated as a contemporary fiction), and poetry attributed to Colum Cille in which he speaks of Fintan. The first verse describing Fintan as ‘difficult for my community’ must refer to the story about Fintan’s being sent away from Iona by Columba and Baíthéne. The next sentence is an explanation of the four-line verse that is given in the main text for his feastday (see no. III above). The following two quatrains concern the saint’s efficacy in rewarding and punishing kings, and presumably reflect the political realities of the time when they were composed.

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<sup>121</sup> The author must mean *Scotia*, ‘Scotland’ (north of the Clyde), since he indicates in §1 that she was ‘the daughter of Áedán (*Edani*) king of *Scotia*’.

**F**intan, i.e. Mundu, i.e. Fintan, i.e. Munnu son of Telchán the druid. And this is why he was called Fintan: it was because of a union<sup>122</sup> which he and Fintan of Clonenagh made in Laois, so that the name of each of them was given to the other in commemoration of their friendship, that is Munnu mac Tulcháin from Taghmon in Uí Chennselaig and in Meath.

The son of Telchan. Munnu and Digde.<sup>123</sup> The son of Telchan, son of Dega, son of Tren, son of Dubthach, son of Ban, son of Fiacha Araide, son of Feidlimid Rechtaid, son of Carthach, son of Daigre, son of Erc, son of Imchad, son of Lam Feola, son of Clíathaire, son of Focha, son of Dubthach Donn.

Colum Cille said:

O little client of mighty God,  
O son of Telchán, O churl,  
She bore a difficult [son] for my community,  
the mother who bore you, O Fintan - i.e. O Munnu.

*crochtha* – crucified: the leprosy that was on him, and Mochua mac Lonain healed him of his leprosy.

Gift of knowledge, gift of a house  
from me to the grandson of Lonán of Meath;  
gift of a son through whom Ireland will be full,  
the reward for his rising before the grandson of Tulchán.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> *aenta*, ‘union’. A common theme in Gaelic saints’ lives is their formation of a bond or association with each other. This story about an exchange of names between two men called Munnu and Fintan is an attempt to explain why our St Munnu is also sometimes called Fintan. The story is presumably told because by the author’s time people no longer understand that Munnu was a hypocorism of Fintan, essentially the same name in a devotional form. In fact as we mentioned above Fintan son of Tulchán and Fintan of Clonenagh were probably originally the same person.

<sup>123</sup> A gloss in the Book of Leinster says ‘Munnu, whose sister was Dígi’ (*Munnu cuius soror Dígi*) (Stokes 1905, 227).

<sup>124</sup> This must be an error for ‘the son of Tulchán’, i.e. Munnu. To rise before someone was to show respect. The implication of this verse is that a king, the grandson of Lonán, showed respect to Fintan, and was rewarded

There fell by fair Fintan  
a king for every tooth that was in his head.  
And by him will fall, shortly before Doom,  
a king to whom Tara, wave of flowers, is due.

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### VIII *The Aberdeen Breviary*

The first printed book to be made in Scotland was a liturgical text. The *Breviarium Aberdonense*, was published in 1510 – in Edinburgh, in spite of its name. It was the outcome of a project by Bishop William Elphinstone of Aberdeen (d. 1514) to gather, as James IV had hoped, ‘mes bukis [mass books] and portuus [breviaries] efter the use of our realme, with additionis and legendis of Scottis sanctis now gaderit to be ekit thairto’.<sup>125</sup> Large amounts of ‘information’ about saints who were culted in Scotland were contained in the two volumes comprising this collection, with prayers and readings for the offices. St Fintan-Munnu (*Mundus*) appears twice in the *Breviarium*, once on his own feastday on 21 October with a prayer and six proper readings, and once in a walk-on part during the feast of St Fillan on 9 January. All the texts proper to the feast of St Munnu are given below, together with the relevant part of the office of St Fillan.

One slightly strange feature of this text is that although it has St Munnu returning to Ireland after his visit to Iona and apparently remaining there and performing some of the miracles recorded in the *Vita Prior*, the Aberdeen Breviary has him die and receive burial ‘in the church of Kilmun which he had earlier founded’ (*in ecclesia de Kilmond quam ipse prius fundauerat*). This sixteenth-century source is the first narrative document in the record to suggest that Munnu returned to Scotland, and the first to state that he was buried there – assuming that *Kilmond* in the sixth reading refers to Kilmun in Argyll and is not just a corruption of Taghmon, the saint’s Irish foundation. The *Aberdeen Breviary* tended to stress Scottish – as opposed to Irish – aspects of saints’ Lives, and this may partly explain it; but the story of Munnu’s presence in Cowal is presumably earlier than that

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by his son ‘filling’ Ireland with his power. I do not know who the Lonán in question was.

<sup>125</sup> Macquarrie 2012, xv.

because his staff was treated as a relic at Kilmun – as we shall see in due course.

**Saint Munnu, abbot, at Kilmun**<sup>126</sup>

**O** God, ineffable creator of all things, who by [your] grace give life to those whom you will, with blessed Munnu, your confessor and abbot, praying for us, we beseech you that his prayer for us may be acceptable to you.

First Reading: The venerable father Munnu, abbot of monks, was born of Tulchán, his father, and Fedelm, his mother. When in his early adolescence he was required by them to look after their herds, filled with the Holy Spirit he went to a certain holy man in order to hear the divine law, leaving his herds in a desert place without protection. When he was scolded by his father for having abandoned the animals he replied, “For as long as you allow me to labour in the divine laws, for so long your unguarded cattle will not be slain by wolves.”

Second Reading: The following day, the father of the man of God went to the desert place in order to see the animals. On getting there he saw two wild wolves, acting as herds, guarding his cattle. Realising the holiness of his son, the father abandoned the world and went off to a strict monastery, adopting the habit of a holy way of life, and became a monk. The blessed Munnu, however, took himself to the blessed abbot and most religious father, Comgall.

Third Reading: Afterwards he went to the holy abbot Sinell,<sup>127</sup> who among all the Irish saints was held most famous for his life and religion. Under his rule he spent eighteen years living in a holy and pious way among heavenly things. When these years were over, he came to the island of Iona in Scotland where he might receive the habit of religion from the blessed Columba.

Fourth Reading: But the blessed Columba having been taken from this world to his homeland, Saint Munnu sought Ireland again. As he was walking along the road, a certain rich man came up to him, Enan by name, asking him to heal his animals from a sickness by his divine power. The blessed Munnu, turning aside to a nearby ford and blessing the ford with his hand, commanded that the animals should drink from it and so doing recover their health.

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<sup>126</sup> *Sancti Mundi abbatis, apud Kilmund.*

<sup>127</sup> *Sillenum.*

Fifth Reading: Furthermore, before he came to his mother and sisters he knew prophetically that one of his sisters, a maiden, had gone the way of all flesh. So the day after her burial he came to her tomb, moved by pity, and on bended knees he earnestly prayed to the Lord, and the tomb opened up of its own accord, and the maiden rose up alive, and he restored her again to her mother.

Sixth Reading: A little later he raised another dead man from death to life. He preserved a certain soldier from death from the snares of his enemies. He freed a woman from illness who was suffering from an issue of blood. He also healed someone who had been struck with leprosy by the word of an angel. He earned such grace in the Lord's sight that twice every week a heavenly attendant was sent to him by the Lord. Supported by these and other miracles at a mature age, he yielded his spirit to God on 21 October, and he was given honourable burial in the church of Kilmun which he had earlier founded.

### **St Fillan, abbot and confessor**

**B**ut when [Fillan] had spent his youthful years with [Bishop Ibar] he took himself to Saint Munnu, a very devout abbot, from whom he received the rule of holy religion and the monk's habit. In his monastery he privately built a cell a little way off, not far from the cloister, so that he might more easily work in divine contemplation.' [There follows an account of Fillan being observed performing a miracle while writing in the darkness: his left hand shone with a bright light like a torch, while he wrote with his right hand. There is no further mention of St Munnu.]

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### **IX Register of the Great Seal**

A collection of Scottish royal charters given under the Great Seal survives in the National Archives of Scotland. One of these charters, dated 1497, provides us with evidence of the cult of St Munnu at Kilmun in Cowal. The printed version gives a rather misleading form of the charter, but I will offer a translation directly from the relevant part of the manuscript.<sup>128</sup> In this charter the king confirms the sale by John Colquhoun of Luss of several

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<sup>128</sup> *RMS* ii no. 2385. The MS is National Records of Scotland C2/13/314. See Márkus 2009 for fuller discussion of this charter and its implications.

farms in Argyll to Archibald Earl of Argyll. These include ‘the lands of Inverchapel’ (terris de *Inuerquhapill*), now a farm on the east side of the River Eachaig about 5km from Kilmun.<sup>129</sup> Later in the charter a particular part of Inverchapel is mentioned:

half a mark of land in the territory of *Inverquhapil* occupied by a certain procurator, with the *bachall* of St Munnu, who in Gaelic is called *Deowray*.<sup>130</sup>

This passage is interesting for various reasons. It is evidence for the existence of a *bachall* or crozier, the staff of office of a bishop or abbot, this one being associated with St Munnu. Such objects were kept for centuries and often used as symbols of office by the successors of the bishop or abbot, affirming their right to that authority. They were also used as relics for healing sickness, for swearing oaths, for protecting armies or putting a stop to war. Some relics were kept by churchmen, but others came into the hands of laymen, hereditary stewards or caretakers who wielded the relics or processed with them as required on formal occasions. The hereditary caretaker was known in Gaelic as the *deòradh*, a word Anglicised as *dewar*. In our charter the official is referred to as the *Deowray* – clearly the same word. In return for his service of St Munnu’s *bachall* he holds a piece of land on Inverchapel farm, and later in the same charter this land is given a name, *Pordewry*, which appears to be Gaelic *por deòraidh* ‘dewar’s cropland’.

The importance of the *bachall* of St Munnu may also be reflected in the seal shown on the cover of this booklet. This seal, the only one of its kind to the best of my knowledge and the earliest artistic representation of St Munnu, belonged to the Collegiate Church of Kilmun, and it was used by Archibald Campbell, the provost of that church in 1579.<sup>131</sup> He used it on a charter of his by which he rented the teinds of the parish of Dysart in Glenorchy to Colin Campbell of Glenorchy. The church of Glenorchy had belonged to Kilmun since the fifteenth century. On this seal, below

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<sup>129</sup> OS grid reference NS1486. The name does not refer to any ‘chapel’, however. It probably means ‘the mouth of the Horse Burn’ which would be the stream now known as Inverchapel Burn, presumably having once been \**Allt a’Chapuill* or similar. Gaelic *capull* means ‘horse, mare’.

<sup>130</sup> ‘*dimediatate vnus mercate terre in territorio de Inverquhapil occupate per quem procuratorem cum baculo Sancte Munde Scotice vocat. Deowray*’.

<sup>131</sup> National Archives of Scotland GD112/51/39/8 (1st March 1579).

Archibald's signature at the foot of the charter, the coat of arms is that of the Campbells (two *gyronnys* or crosses of eight, and two galleys). Above the the coat of arms stands a robed figure carrying a crossier or staff. This must be St Munnu and the staff he holds must represent the *bachall* mentioned above as the relic of the saint kept by the *deòradh* nearby.

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### **X *The Burgh of Kilmun***

In the year 1490 the settlement of Kilmun was erected by a charter of James IV as a 'free burgh of barony'.<sup>132</sup> In theory this gave Kilmun a series of rights and duties, the right to a limited degree of autonomy and local decision-making by burgesses, and various fiscal advantages, though it is not clear how fully it was able to exploit its new status or live up to its expectations. One aspect of this charter, however, is that it shows the symbolic importance of St Munnu in the public life of the community, since his feastday on 21 October becomes the occasion for the popular gathering at one of two yearly fairs at Kilmun. This would have been an opportunity not only for religious devotion but also for buying and selling in the fair, for food and drink and popular revelries, and sometimes for sporting events. The charter makes mention of none of these things, but it is likely that what had begun as a local celebration of St Munnu was being observed on his feastday in 1490, drawing people into Kilmun from the surrounding countryside. If that was the case the erection of the burgh merely gave formal recognition and additional economic importance to an event that was taking place already. The relevant part of the charter gives the following mandate:

**A**nd let them have a cross and a weekly market every Monday for ever, and two public fairs every year for ever, that is one on St Munnu's day, and one on the day of the Finding of the Holy Cross, called Beltane.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> National Records of Scotland c2/12 no. 254.

<sup>133</sup> *Et possideant crucem et forum in perpetuum singulis ebdomadis die lune, et duas nundinas publicas quolibet anno in perpetuum, unam viz. die Sancti Mundi et aliam die Inventionis sanctae Crucis Beltane nuncupat.* Beltane was one of the old 'quarter days' of the Gaelic year, marking the beginning of summer on 1st May. But the Church had celebrated a feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross on 3rd May since the seventh century,

\* \* \*

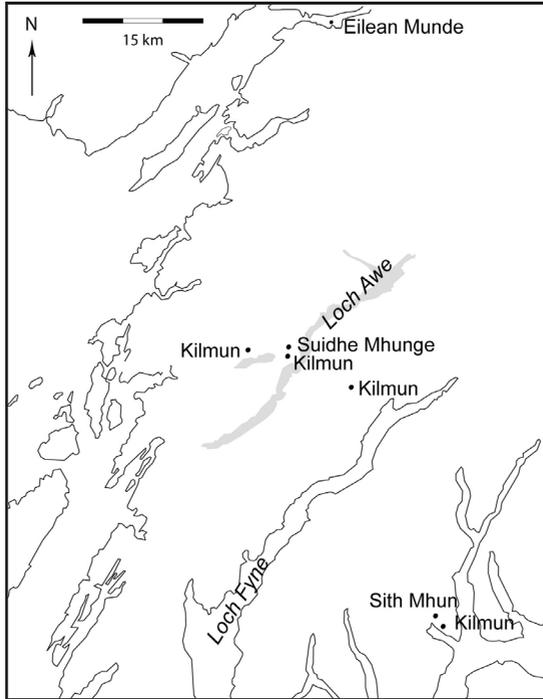
## **XI *Place-Names***

As indicated earlier, there are a number of Scottish place-names which reflect medieval devotion to St Munnu. There are three places called Kilmun, and an island called Eilean Munde (the most northerly occurrence). There is also a *Suidhe Mhunge* in the heart of this territory, ‘Munnu’s Seat’, and possibly another place of the same name (though with a different spelling) near Kilmun in Cowal, mentioned in the *Old Statistical Account* in the 1790s as *Sith-Mhun*.<sup>134</sup> What is remarkable about the dedications to Munnu in Scotland is that unlike many important saints (Columba, Brigit, Adomnán, Maelrubha) whose cults are reflected widely across the country in a broad scatter, Munnu-dedications are entirely restricted to Argyll, and to a particular band of territory within Argyll, as this map shows.

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commemorating the finding of Christ’s cross by Helena in Jerusalem in AD 326.

<sup>134</sup> *Old Statistical Account* ii, 383.



This distribution seems to require some explanation. It is not hard to imagine circumstances in which the cult of a saint like Munnun, who was primarily associated with Irish places, would become celebrated in Gaelic Scotland. But why in this particular part of Scotland? Apart from Eilean Munde in the north, by Ballachulish, all the Munnun dedications in Argyll are in what became core Campbell territory. Starting in Lochawe and spreading out from there, might the Campbells have carried the cult of Munnun with them as they expanded their control of lands and churches, and used him as a kind of family logo to symbolise their control? Against this explanation, however, is the simple fact that Kilmun in Cowal had its dedication at least as early as the 1230s, long before the expansion of Campbell power into the area.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>135</sup> A charter by Duncan son of Ferchar and Laumannus (i.e. Lamont) son of Malcolm is recorded in the *Paisley Register*, granting their ancient rights as patrons of the ‘ecclesia de Kilmun’ to the monks of Paisley. It can be dated 1232 x 1241.

A more plausible scenario is that an earlier powerful family in this part of Argyll had some connection to one of the Irish kindreds associated with St Munnu and with his churches over there. This might have arisen long before the Campbell takeover of the territory, and the adoption of this Irish saint in Argyll could only have been encouraged by the tradition that Munnu visited Iona and was admired by Saints Columba and Baithéne – a ‘fact’ that would have endeared Munnu to Argyll folk. This scenario would not exclude the Campbells from the later development of the cult, of course. As their power in Argyll expanded they would simply have adopted the local saint as their own patron, as so often happened when new secular rulers took over territories and churches associated with earlier saints. Their enthusiastic adoption of the cult of St Munnu was then reflected in their selection of Kilmun in Cowal as the place to endow a collegiate church in the fifteenth century, and the place to bury their family dead. It may also be significant that many of the Munnu dedications are near Campbell strongholds at Dunoon, Innis Chonnel, Caisteal na Nighinn Ruaidhe, Stronmagachan and Inveraray.

It might also be significant that Kilmun in Cowal is at the south end of an important early routeway, from the Clyde, via Holy Loch, northwards up the River Eachaig and along Loch Eck, then on a ferry across Loch Fyne to Inveraray and up Glen Aray where another Kilmun is situated, and from there to Loch Awe and nearby Loch Avich where there are two other Kilmuns and a Suidhe Mhunge. In this way we could see much of the distribution of Munnu’s cult as relating to an axis of movement through the southern and central Argyll landscape, perhaps connecting churches belonging to a now unknown pre-Campbell kindred whose territories extended in a linear way along this route.<sup>136</sup>

It may be that there are other place-names which refer to St Munnu in the guise of Fintan or Fintag (*Fionntag*) another plausible hypocorism of Fintan. Such places include Killundine in Morvern and Killintag in Ardnamurchan. We cannot be certain about what saint was being commemorated in these places, however, and in any case as we have seen later medieval hagiographers were already regarding Fintan and Munnu as the names of two different saints, rather than as a name and its hypocorism which both referred to one man. The people who named Killundine and Killintag in the Middle Ages may have intended no connection at all with the saint of Kilmun.

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<sup>136</sup> For detailed discussion of these place-names and their possible implications, see Butter 2010.

## XII *Personal names and family names*

One of the ways in which medieval people expressed devotion to a saint in the Middle Ages was to name their children after him or her, or to adopt a name themselves which connected them to a saint. But in the medieval Gaelic world people tended not to express this by taking the name of the saint directly. Devotion to Columba would not typically be expressed by choosing the name Columba or Colum. Rather a devotee would call his child (or himself) Mael Coluim (Maolcholuim in modern Gaelic, Malcolm in English spelling), which means ‘servant of Colum’.<sup>137</sup> Another name-element expressing the same kind of devotion was *gille* ‘lad’, and thus ‘servant’. Thus Gille Brigte ‘servant of Brigid’ was a popular name. For the sake of completeness in this survey of medieval devotion to St Munnu, we should record the presence of such names in his honour too.

The Gaelic name in question is, classically, *Gille Mhunnu*, ‘servant of Munnu’, which appears in family names as *Mac Gille Mhunnu* ‘son of the servant of Munnu’. This surname is represented in countless variant spellings. One aspect of it which puzzles those unfamiliar with Gaelic sound-changes is the fact that the *Mh-* of *Mhunnu* (the genitive case of the name) is actually pronounced /v/, and that /v/ sound can sometimes be ‘devoiced’ to become an /f/ sound. So during the medieval and early modern period we find a bewildering variety of spellings of the name such as Macelmwyn, Makilmone, McKilmoun, Makmun, VcIlInund, McIlImune, M’Ilmowne, M’Gilmin, NcIllmoon, Mackilune, Mcilmin, McIlImvn, Vic a Fwne, M’Ilfun. The name *Mac Gille Mhunnu* was also simplified to form the surnames MacMunn (also MacPhun, M’Fun and such like) and the even more simplified name, Munn. A great many of the bearers of these names in the historical record come from southern and central Argyll, and several from the Cowal area. Indeed it is thought that some of them were of Lamont origin, indicating strong roots in Cowal.<sup>138</sup>

Recalling that Munnu is a hypocorism of Fintan, we might also regard the name *Mac Gille Fhintain* ‘son of the servant of Fintan’ as a trace of reverence for the saint. This name appears as MacClinton, McAlinden and such like, together with the abridged form Clinton. And if the name

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<sup>137</sup> The word *mael* here signifies ‘bald, shaven-headed’, reflecting the rite of shaving hair as a gesture of submission or devotion.

<sup>138</sup> Black 1946, 546.

Fionntag is also a hypocorism of our Fintan, as it may be in some cases, then the name MacClintock (*Mac Gill' Fhionntaig*) may also trace his cult, with variants such as MacGilliondaig, M'Ilandick, M'Illandag, M'Lentick, MacIlliuntaig, etc. It seems that some families of this name Anglicised their names to 'Lindsay' as early as the seventeenth century.<sup>139</sup>



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<sup>139</sup> Black 1946, 471.

## References and Further Reading

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### **Other Internet Resources:**

[www.historickilmun.org](http://www.historickilmun.org) The Historic Kilmun project has done much to restore the church building and the adjacent the mausoleum. It is responsible for the creation of the Historic Kilmun Visitor Centre

[www.saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk](http://www.saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk) The website of a Glasgow University research project which offers an online database of all place-names in Scotland which commemorate a saint.

[www.kilmartin.org](http://www.kilmartin.org) Kilmartin Museum is the publisher of this booklet. The Museum's mission is to protect, interpret and enhance people's enjoyment of the extraordinary archaeology and natural history of Kilmartin Glen and the surrounding area.

<http://iona.org.uk/island-centres/the-abbey/> The website of the Iona Community introduces you to Iona and the Abbey. Note that the journey through Cowal going north is one of the best ways to travel to Iona from the Central Belt of Scotland. And given the connection between Munnu and Iona in his *Life*, Kilmun might be a good place to start out on a journey to Iona.