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Ua Brolcháin, Flaithbertach

(d. 1175)

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Ua Brolcháin, Flaithbertach (d. 1175), abbot of Derry and head of Columban churches in Ireland, was an important exponent of ecclesiastical reform in twelfth-century Ireland. The Uí Brolcháin were of the Cenél nEógain of the northern Uí Néill, but Flaithbertach's precise genealogical affiliation is not certain. Occasional reference to him as *mac in epscuip hUí Bhrolcháin* (that is, 'son of the bishop Ua Brolcháin') suggests he was perhaps son of Máel Coluim Ua Brolcháin (d. 1122), or of Máel Brigte Ua Brolcháin (d. 1139), both styled 'bishop of Armagh' in the annals. He succeeded as abbot of Derry and *coarb*, or successor, of Colum Cille on the death of Máel Ísu Ua Branáin in 1150 and probably had the support of Gilla Meic Liac, reformist archbishop of Armagh and himself ex-abbot of Derry, as well as that of Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, king of Cenél nEógain. Indeed, his success was very much linked to the patronage of Mac Lochlainn, and Ua Brolcháin's genealogical connection with the Cenél nEógain (traditional supporters of Derry) was doubtless important in this regard. The title *coarb* of Colum Cille had previously been bestowed on the abbots of Kells, not Derry, so clearly Ua Brolcháin's succession marked an important moment.

From the start Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin was active in asserting his jurisdiction as *coarb*, initially in the north of Ireland where Mac Lochlainn's influence extended. In 1150 he made a circuit (*cuairt*) of Cenél nEógain, receiving tribute from Mac Lochlainn. This was followed in the next year by a circuit of Síol Cathasaig (in what is now co. Antrim), receiving tribute for its ruler Cú Ulad Ua Lainn, and in 1153 of Dál Cairpre and Uí Eachach Ulad (in modern co. Down), with tribute from the ruler Ua Duinn Sléibe. By 1157 Mac Lochlainn had achieved the status 'king of Ireland', and Ua Brolcháin's situation was duly enhanced. Thus, in the very next year, at the Synod of Breemount, Meath, presided over by Gilla Meic Liac and the papal legate Gilla Críst Ua Connairche, he was recognized as head of all Columban churches in Ireland and given 'a chair', that is, status equivalent to a bishop. This was evidently an attempt by Gilla Meic Liac to make the relationship of the *coarb* of Colum Cille to his churches analogous to that of a bishop to his diocese. In 1161 at an assembly of clerics and laymen at Dervor, Meath, Mac Lochlainn confirmed Ua Brolcháin's jurisdiction over the Columban churches in Meath and Leinster (said thus to be free from exaction of secular

dues); and in the same year he made a circuit of Osraige, thus confirming his jurisdiction in southern Ireland. In 1164, Ua Brolcháin was invited by Somarlaide (Sumerled) Mac Gillai Adomnáin, king of Argyll and the Isles, to become abbot of Iona. Since such a move would have disrupted the new organization being established in Ireland, it was opposed by Gilla Meic Liac and Mac Lochlainn and was never realized.

Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin was also noted for extensive architectural work at Derry, in collaboration with his patron Mac Lochlainn. As early as 1155 the door of Derry church was made at his behest, but the main work was done between 1162 and 1164. In 1162 over eighty houses at Derry were demolished to enable the construction of an enclosing wall around the main ecclesiastical site. In 1163 a lime-kiln (*tene-aeil*), measuring 60 feet square, was constructed in the space of twenty days. Finally, in 1164 the great church (*tempull mór*), measuring 90 feet in length, was built in just forty days by Ua Brolcháin and Mac Lochlainn. It seems that some of this work may have been in vain, for Derry suffered serious burning in 1166, ironically the same year that Mac Lochlainn was slain. Ua Brolcháin sought to have his secular patron interred at Derry, but was overruled, since it was traditional for the Cenél nEógain kings to be buried at Armagh. Little is heard of Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin after this point and he himself died in 1175, in the *dubreicles* or 'dark church' at Derry, following an unknown illness.

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