

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Gilla meic Liac [Gelasius]

(1087–1174)

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/10504>

Published in print: 23 September 2004

Published online: 23 September 2004

Gilla meic Liac [Gelasius] (1087–1174), archbishop of Armagh, was an important exponent of ecclesiastical reform in twelfth-century Ireland. He was a member of the Cenél nEógain of the northern Uí Néill, but his precise genealogical affiliation has been a matter of some ambiguity. He is called Gilla meic Liac mac Ruaidrí or mac meic Ruaidrí ('son or grandson of Ruaidrí') in some chronicles, though it has been suggested that this was Gilla meic Liac mac Annaid meic Flaithbertaig meic Ruaidrí of the SílnÁeda Ollain. However, another source calls him mac Diarmata meic Ruaidrí, while notes to the list of successors of Patrick call him (*mac ind fhir dana* 'son of the poet') of Uí Birn (possibly Clann Birn of Cenél nEógain). He became abbot or *erenagh* of Derry in 1121, probably on the resignation of Finn Ua Conaingen, and held the post for sixteen years.

In 1137 Gilla meic Liac was chosen by Máel Máedoc Ó Morgair (St Malachy) to follow him as archbishop, or *coarb* ('successor of Patrick'), of Armagh against the traditional hereditary line of Clann Sínaig, possibly indicating that he had been an advocate of reform during his tenure at Derry. Hints in one chronicle suggest that his succession was not as smooth as traditional accounts imply and that the Clann Sínaig claimant Niall mac Áeda meic Máel Ísu had briefly succeeded in 1136. Whatever the exact turn of events, the succession of Gilla meic Liac in 1137 marked a victory for the reformers; and in the 1150s and 1160s he presided over a series of clerical assemblies and synods which sought to implement ecclesiastical reform and bring the Irish church into closer association with developments in the rest of Europe. For example, in 1152 he convened, with Cardinal Giovanni Paparo, a synod attended by 300 ecclesiastics which laid down new rules for clerical behaviour including the putting away of concubines, prohibition of demands for payment for anointing and baptizing, and legislation against simony. In 1158 Gilla meic Liac convened the Synod of Breemount, Meath, attended by twenty-five bishops and the papal legate Gilla Críst Ua Connairche, which passed further reform legislation as well as confirming Flaithbertach Ua Brolcháin as head of all Columban churches in Ireland. This last provision was an attempt to bring the traditional system of monastic federations in line with standard

diocesan structures. A further synod was held in 1162 at Clane, Kildare, which, in addition to 'enjoining rule and morality upon the Irish', reaffirmed the primacy of Armagh.

Gilla meic Liac was indeed active in maintaining the jurisdiction of Armagh. In 1140 he made his first circuit (*cuairt*) of Connacht, obtaining jurisdiction over the churches in that province from the king Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair. He made further circuits of Connacht in 1151 and 1172, and of Cenél nEógain in 1150 and 1162. In 1162 he consecrated Lorcán Ua Tuathail, *coarb* of St Caemgen, as archbishop of Dublin. Gilla meic Liac also had close relations with secular rulers, particularly Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, king of Cenél nEógain and later high-king of Ireland. In 1157 he presided over the consecration of Mellifont, Louth, on which occasion generous donations were made by Mac Lochlainn as well as by Donnchad Ua Cerbaill, king of Airgialla, and Derbforgaill, wife of Tigernán Ua Ruairc. The same event also witnessed the excommunication (presumably at the instigation of Gilla meic Liac) of Donnchad Ua Maíli Shechlainn, king of Meath, who had earlier slain Cú Ulad Ua Coindelbáin, king of Loegaire, while under the protection (*comairge*) of the archbishop and others. It also seems likely that he presided over a number of peace negotiations between Irish kings. Gilla meic Liac was among the Irish bishops addressed in a letter of 20 September 1172 by Pope Alexander III, urging them to support Henry II in governing Ireland and to excommunicate those who would violate the oath they had sworn. He died two years later, on 27 March 1174 (the Wednesday after Easter), and was succeeded by Conchobar Ua Conchaille (*d.* 1175), and, in the following year, by Gilla in Coimded Ua Caráin (*d.* 1180).

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