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Landscapes of Cult and Kingship

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Continuity, cult and contest

JOHN WADDELL

The phrase 'a window on the Iron Age' formed the subtitle of Kenneth Jackson's Rede Lecture in Cambridge in 1964, which he titled *The Oldest Irish Tradition: a Window on the Iron Age*. In it, he famously argued that some Irish medieval literature, and in particular the tales of the Ulster Cycle, depicted a pre-Christian Iron Age world. For instance, for him, the great epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, 'The Cattle-raid of Cooley', with its heroic warriors, endemic warfare and archaic material civilization – as he put it – did reflect a genuine Iron Age. He did not, of course, suggest that the main protagonists in this tale, Queen Maeve of Connacht and the Ulster hero Cú Chulainn, were historical figures, though this was the firm belief of an earlier generation. William Ridgeway, appointed Disney Professor of Archaeology in Cambridge in 1892, attempted to demonstrate that the world of Cú Chulainn and the *Táin* was also the world of La Tène Iron Age Celts. There was, he asserted, a striking correspondence between the material culture of the Irish Iron Age and the culture depicted in the *Táin*, and the director of the Dublin Museum, Count Plunkett, then pointed out that if you visited the Department of Antiquities there with a copy of an English translation of the *Táin* in hand, 'you will at once recognize that in the book, as in the collection, you are brought face to face with the actual past'. Like the doctrine of 'the coming of the Celts', the belief in the archaeological value of the *Táin* and other tales of the Ulster Cycle is to be found in the work of R.A.S. Macalister, who wrote: '*The Cattle Raid of Cúalnge* illuminates for us, in a way that no other document does, the manners and thought of Europe in the later La Tène period'.[1]

Jackson undertook his lecture and its publication to direct the attention of archaeologists and others to the exceptional wealth of early Irish literature, this 'archaic fragment of European literature' as he described it. Since elements of Irish La Tène art survive into the early medieval period, he thought it reasonable that the memory of other pre-Christian traditions might have survived too. But his thesis has not faired well. It has been questioned if not discredited on linguistic, chronological and archaeological grounds. Just to illustrate one aspect of the latter, Jim Mallory, in a seminal paper in 1982, demonstrated how the swords described in the *Táin*, far from being La Tène-type weapons, were comparable to swords of the Viking period and generally later than the eighth century AD. In short, the swords of the Ulster Cycle are the swords familiar to the medieval redactors of

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1 J. Waddell, *Foundation myths* (2005), p. 190.

these tales. Further study confirmed this picture of an early medieval date for much of the material culture of the *Táin*, 'demonstrably or probably' later than the fourth century AD and, according to Mallory, the learned class who contributed to the formation of this epic literature were both producing an historical fiction and attempting to portray a past world. This was a complex world that may have included some memory of what constituted antiquity.[2] N.B. Aitchison, in a lengthy critique of Jackson's approach, argued that early Irish epic literature did not constitute a legitimate source for the study of pagan Celtic society either in Ireland or in Celtic Europe. For him, the Ulster Cycle was an early medieval literary composition.[3] This echoed the scholarly debate between 'nativists' and others about the degree that pagan oral traditions contributed to the literary corpus.

John Koch reviewed the near total deconstruction of Jackson's case and had to conclude that the only really salvageable part of Jackson's work was the memorable subtitle. However, it did seem likely that some features of these tales, such as head-hunting, chariotry, feasting and the champion's portion, might well have been a part of a pre-Christian world.[4] The essence of the question has been, I suppose, whether such elements represent a measure of survival and continuity in Ireland or were, in John Barrett's expressive phrase, like Homeric Greece, 'pasts dreamt of, artefacts for past glories'.[5] Not surprisingly, there have been few archaeological attempts to prise open Jackson's window since. One exception has been J.B. Finney's interesting use of early Irish literature and other ethnographic analogies to examine the ritual aspects of warfare in the Iron Age and to suggest that while the sword was an elite weapon, the sling did not have a similar high status.[6] Peter Parkes has undertaken a wide-ranging study of fosterage, where the ambiguities of foster-kinship are illustrated in the *Táin* when Cú Chulainn has to fight some of his foster-brothers, and Raimund Karl has compared Iron Age chariots to those in the *Táin* and other tales.[7]

There is of course much more to early Irish literature than epic stories of kings, queens and warriors. Besides the tales of the Ulster Cycle, place lore and legal tracts also raise questions of survival and continuity. Early Irish law, elements of which are clearly pre-Christian, depict an early medieval world that, in a famous phrase, was 'tribal, rural, hierarchical and familiar' – in the sense that the family, not the individual, was the primary unit.[8] It was this hierarchical society composed of king (*rí*), a noble class of warriors and skilled men, and a class of freemen that Barry Cunliffe tentatively applied to the social organization of the Iron Age hillfort at Danebury many years ago. He recognized that Celtic social structure may have

2 J.P. Mallory, 'The world of Cú Chulainn' (1992).   3 N.B. Aitchison, 'The Ulster Cycle' (1987).   4 J.T. Koch, 'Windows on the Iron Age' (1994).   5 J.C. Barrett, 'Aspects of the Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland' (1988), 217.   6 J.B. Finney, *Middle Iron Age warfare* (2006).   7 P. Parkes, 'Fosterage, kinship, and legend' (2004); R. Karl, 'Iron Age chariots and medieval texts' (2003).   8 F. Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law* (1988), p. 3.

differed considerably from place to place and time to time but – reasonably enough – thought this historical model might be marginally more relevant in southern England than African or Asian analogies.[9]

It also remains an inescapable fact that Irish late prehistoric studies continue to be influenced by that picture of a pagan world painted by medieval scribes. There are good reasons for this. When Barry Raftery published his major study of the Irish Iron Age in 1994 he subtitled his *Pagan Celtic Ireland* 'the enigma of the Irish Iron Age'. One of the greatest enigmas is the near complete absence of settlement evidence, leading Ian Armit to comment recently on the 'eerie silence' of the Irish Iron Age landscape.[10] Instead of the great hillforts that are such a monumental feature of a part of the British scene, settlement evidence is scanty and scholarly attention in Ireland has focused on an impressive body of fine metalwork, much of it probably the paraphernalia of an elite warrior caste, giving support to the old romantic notion of a heroic Iron Age world 'glory-crowned in war'. Much attention has also been directed towards the monuments of the great royal sites, Tara, Rathcroghan, Dún Ailinne and Navan in particular. Ironically, perhaps, these sites are archaeologically prominent because they also figure so significantly in early literature and, in studying their prehistoric archaeology, it is impossible to ignore their later literary expression. But here too of course we face all the problems of Jackson's window, in particular the chronological difficulties it poses. In rejecting Cunliffe's use of the picture we have of the hierarchical nature of Irish early medieval society to explain prehistoric Danebury, various writers have emphasized the thousand-year gap between the two worlds.

On this question, for instance, J.D. Hill stated: 'continuity and straightforward evolution cannot be assumed; they must be proven'.[11] The question of demonstrable continuity of tradition is therefore a crucial one. It has to be acknowledged that tradition may not be a constant, it is not immutable, it may be modified, recast and reinvented and the means of transmission may be difficult to determine. Various social practices described in early Irish narratives could well have roots in the Iron Age, the challenge is to show that this is possible and that continuity is demonstrable. Here, archaeological evidence is pertinent. A number of studies have addressed the question of the survival of Irish La Tène art into the early medieval period – as Jackson noted. This is the Ultimate La Tène style found in manuscript decoration, on zoomorphic brooches and on other metalwork. Since he wrote, continuity has also been detected in dress pin fashion[12] and it has been suggested that the deposition of early medieval brooches in wetland contexts (and at Knowth, Newgrange and Tara) could be a continuation of Iron Age votive

9 B. Cunliffe, *Danebury* (1984), p. 560.   **10** I. Armit, 'Social landscapes and identities' (2007), p. 130. **11** J.D. Hill, 'Iron Age societies and hillforts' (1995), p. 47.   **12** C. Newman, 'The Iron Age to Early

practice.[13] One illustration of artistic continuity is provided by Richard Warner, who outlines the stylistic connections between certain motifs on such Iron Age metalwork as the Bann disc and the so-called Petrie crown and later decorated objects such as the escutcheons on the famous Sutton Hoo hanging bowls.[14] This may seem a slender decorative thread, but what we have to remember is the symbolism of such motifs and the magical charge they probably had. This is readily apparent on the Petrie crown, where the disc below the surviving horn shows a cross set in a crescentic shape that has spiral terminals with bird's heads and a circular device between them. This is a solar symbol, a stylized depiction of the boat of the sun drawn across the heavens by birds, the circular device representing the sun. The larger motif is repeated in a more stylized manner on the second disc of the crown. Well documented in Bronze Age and early Iron Age continental Europe, this ornithomorphic solar imagery is found on other Irish and British metalwork as well and is just one of many indicators of widespread belief systems that transcend the various regional archaeologies that make up the Iron Age of these islands and adjacent parts of continental Europe.[15] Its potent solar symbolism is surely the major factor in perpetuating its use across such a wide area and time-span, and into the artistic repertoire of the early medieval craftsman. Significant links with a pagan past are now discernible in the funerary record, where the greater use of radiocarbon dating is clarifying crucial chronological questions. Continuity of burial practice has been identified, for instance, at Glebe South, near Balrothery in north Co. Dublin, where Iron Age cremations in two ring-ditches (some cremations dated to the period 300BC to AD400) were followed by unburnt extended burials, one radiocarbon dated to AD430–640.[16] Elizabeth O'Brien suggests that while extended burials at sites such as these may have been those of Christians, religious affiliation may have been of secondary importance in the face of a need for a political statement giving emphasis to dynastic continuity, whether real or contrived.[17] Nowhere, however, are continuity and deeply rooted links with a prehistoric past more in evidence than in recent work at several of those celebrated royal sites: Teltown, Tara and Rathcroghan.

TELTOWN (*TAILTIU*), CO. MEATH

Teltown, Co. Meath (ancient *Tailtiu*) is famed in early Irish documentary sources as the site of *Óenach Tailten*, the principal assembly of the Uí Néill kings of Tara

Christian transition' (1995).   **13** R. Ó Floinn, 'Patrons and politics' (2001).   **14** R.B. Warner, 'Ireland and the origins of escutcheon art' (1987).   **15** J. Waddell, 'The elusive image' (2009).   **16** J. Carroll, F. Ryan & K. Wiggins, *Archaeological excavations at Glebe South and Darcystown* (2008), pp 126–7.   **17** E. O'Brien, 'Pagan or Christian?' (2009), p. 145.

10.1 A photograph of the linear earthwork known as the Knockans, Teltown, Co. Meath, taken in 1939 and preserved in the photographic archives of the National Monuments Section, Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. The radiocarbon dates were obtained from the larger southern bank on the right of picture.

held during the festival of Lugnasad from at least as early as the sixth century. The assembly is not recorded throughout most of the tenth century and all of the eleventh but was briefly revived on two occasions in the twelfth.[18] Tailtiu has many legendary associations. It was here that the final battle between the sons of Míl and the Túatha Dé Danann took place. It also figures in early legend as the burial place of the mythical Tailtiu, wife of the last Fir Bolg king, Eochaid mac Erc, and foster-mother of Lug. In *Lebor Gabála*, her burial mound is said to lie north-east of the assembly mound (*foradh Taillten*).[19] The *Vita Tripartita* ('Tripartite Life') of St Patrick, compiled some time prior to the early tenth century and perhaps as early as the beginning of the ninth, records the saint's visit to the location of the royal *óenach*, his founding of the church at Donaghpatrick and his blessing of the royal fort of *Ráith Airthir*, which he prophesied would be a place of assembly.[20] There is a rich body of folklore attached to Teltown and in more recent times the tradition

18 D.A. Binchy, 'The fair of Tailtiu' (1958), 115. See also E. Bhreathnach, 'Transforming kingship and cult', pp 138–40, in this volume.   **19** M. MacNeill, *Festival of Lughnasa* (1962), p. 311.   **20** C. Swift, '*Óenach Tailten*' (2000), p. 111; idem, 'The local context of *Óenach Tailten*' (2000), 25. On *Ráith Airthir*, see also G. Dowling, 'The architecture of power', pp 219–20, this volume.

of former assemblies survived in the memory of 'a Teltown marriage', a temporary arrangement for a year and a day.

The principal monuments in the complex lie just to the north of the River Blackwater approximately midway between the towns of Kells and Navan. The site of Patrick's church is occupied by the nineteenth-century St Patrick's Church at Donaghpatrick. Nearby is a substantial multivallate enclosure with a large mound in its interior, identified as *Ráith Airthir*. About 2.5km to the north-west is *Rath Dubh*, a large, more or less flat-topped and slightly oval mound with an average basal diameter of about 100m. Between these two monuments is a large, 2km-wide loop of the Blackwater: the townland of Teltown occupies the whole area of this loop and a little more, forming a broad expanse of land that may well have been the location of the ancient fair with its horse races and other activities. Several marshy hollows are believed to be artificial ponds and one of them lies some 400m to the south-south-west of a pair of linear earthworks known as the Knockans in the townland of Oristown (fig. 10.1). This earthwork has been mentioned in the archaeological literature from time to time but rarely described in any detail. Comprised of two parallel and slightly curving earthen banks, one larger than the other, it was not marked on the Ordnance Survey maps and not recorded in the *Sites and Monuments Record* for Co. Meath (1986) or in the *Archaeological Inventory of County Meath*.[21] The failure to officially record and protect the Knockans had serious repercussions, for Meath County Council granted a planning application by the landowner to build at the site and earth-moving machinery began clearing the area in May 1997, resulting in the destruction of the greater part of the monument. Work was immediately suspended once the significance of the site was brought to the attention of Dúchas, the Heritage Service, who then commissioned some rescue excavations and the reconstruction of both earthworks.[22]

It seems as if the northern bank was once a broad, low, gently-sloping earthwork with a length of about 80m to 100m, a height of about 2.5m and a width of about 12m; the southern bank, the more massive and steeper of the two, was about 72m long, 3.5m high and had a maximum basal width of about 30m. A portion of this bank survived and its construction seems to have begun with the deposition on the old ground surface of layers of silts and silty sand retained on their southern side by a loosely built stone revetment. These were followed over a period of time by numerous layers (up to 60cm thick) of fine, water-lain sediments and moss along the northern slope of the silt and stone embankment.

21 M. Moore, *Archaeological inventory of County Meath* (1987), pp 126, 136, 159.   22 A brief preliminary report is provided in J. Waddell & M. O'Brien, 'The Knockans, Teltown, Oristown' (2000). A full report is in preparation.

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No artefacts or bone were found and it may be that this deposit was formed by seasonal water level changes in a small adjacent marshy pond. The next phase in the development of the southern bank occurred when further layers of silt were deposited along its top and a stake-and-wattle structure erected on its north-facing slope. Some additional layers of silt and turves were added and some further sediments possibly deposited by fluctuations in the water levels of the pond accumulated on the slope. A row of four small stakes was then driven into the southern side of the embankment and this feature was sealed by a black layer containing wood fragments. Some hazel from this context produced a late prehistoric radiocarbon date of 810–482BC and 440–412BC. There followed a distinct change in the type of material deposited. Layers of ash and charcoal were seemingly transported to the site and carefully laid to a depth of about 60cm along the length of the top of the embankment and eventually sealed by several layers of turves. Some additional lenses of sediment due to pond encroachment on the northern slope of the embankment produced some hazel charcoal, which provided an early medieval radiocarbon date of AD640–770. A further change in the nature of deposition on the bank then took place and a series of layers of material was deposited over the mainly organic core; a sample of hazel charcoal from one of these produced another early medieval radiocarbon date of AD790–978.[23] The main phase of bank construction then followed with the addition of up to 2m of earth. This seems to have occurred shortly thereafter and there was no evidence in the various machine-exposed sections to suggest that any significant period of time had elapsed or that the process of augmentation was a particularly lengthy one.

The construction or modification of parts of this very large linear earthwork in or about the eighth century and again in the ninth or tenth century represents some very unusual medieval activity. At the very least, this is the deliberate reuse of a prehistoric monument or possibly the deliberate construction of a prehistoric form, though to what purpose is impossible to say. That said, it is still difficult not to suggest some sort of ritual function for the Knockans. Their ultimate medieval date was one of the strands of evidence that prompted Conor Newman to re-evaluate the date and purpose of the so-called 'Banqueting Hall' on the Hill of Tara. In an imaginative reading of that famous monument, he argues that the 'Banqueting Hall' or *Tech Midchúarta* is probably one of the later monuments on the hill (fifth to eighth century AD) and was designed to unite the remains on Tara into a formal, religious arena.[24] A semi-subterranean space, this is the one monument on the hill where the views to the outside world are denied. Starting

23 The C14 dates are as follows: 2530±60BP (GrN–15923), with calibrated date ranges of 810–482BC and 440–412BC; 1335±40BP (GrN–15649), calibrated to AD640–770; and 1140±40BP (GrN–15650), with a calibrated date of AD790–978.   24 C. Newman, 'Procession and symbolism at Tara' (2007).

at the north (that is, the lower) end, this is the ceremonial avenue, the final part of the processional journey to the summit sanctuary in which the visitor, in an almost literal sense, enters Tara. Proceeding along the avenue, glimpses of the tombs of the ancestral kings and queens of Tara are caught through the gaps on the right-hand side. Reflecting on the lives of the ancestors, they remind a royal party of the burden of responsibility that comes with World Kingship, and of the fact that in re-enacting an inauguration ceremony they are about to take their place in history. The Hill of Skreen is visible to the east; this is limbo that awaits those who break the taboos of kingship or fail to live up to the principle of the ideal just ruler. Cormac mac Airt, the most famous of the legendary kings of Tara, in whose reign trees sagged under the weight of their fruit and rivers burst their banks with fish, lost his kingship and was banished to Skreen after being blinded by a bee sting, and thus physically blemished. To the west lie the burial mounds known as the 'Sloping Trenches' or *Clóenfherta*, which according to one legend were the dwelling of Lugaid mac Con, which collapsed catastrophically when he delivered a false judgment against a simple herdswoman. He survived as king only for a year, for 'no grass came through the earth, or leaf on tree, nor grain in corn'.[25] Emerging from the *Tech Midchúarta*, the procession would turn righthandwise around the ramparts of *Ráith na Ríg* and thence into the inner sanctuary through its entrance in the east where the climax of the inauguration ceremony took place beside the Mound of the Hostages, when the king placed his foot on the *Lia Fáil*, which, according to tradition, cried out to announce his rightful reign. The various monuments in the complex, of course, date from all periods and this is the enduring legacy of Tara. Each one represents the contribution of a former generation and tells its own story, a story that was told and retold in early medieval times.

RATHCROGHAN (*CRUACHAIN*), CO. ROSCOMMON

Rathcroghan (ancient *Cruachain*) is a royal complex on elevated ground in central Roscommon.[26] It was here that the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* began. In this epic narrative, Medb of Connacht, believing her possessions to be inferior to those of her husband Ailill, decides to acquire the brown bull of *Cuailnge* by force, and mounts an expedition for this purpose. Both she and Cú Chulainn, the defender of Ulster, are associated with this place, which is remembered in the literature as an assembly place, a great burial ground and a royal settlement. Rathcroghan Mound, the focal

25 M. O Daly (ed.), *Cath Maige Mucrama* (1975), p. 59.   26 J. Waddell, J. Fenwick & K. Barton, *Rathcroghan* (2009).

monument, is a broad, flat-topped, circular mound with an average basal diameter of 89m and a height of some 5.5m. There are at least twenty-eight burial mounds, both simple circular monuments and ring-barrows, in the complex as a whole. Some eleven ringforts are settlements of the early medieval period and several small irregular examples could even be of later medieval date. The large enclosure called *Relig na Ríg* and another ringfort each have an associated souterrain. Unlike some other royal sites, the Rathcroghan complex contains a large number of monuments that testify to its continued importance into the first millennium AD. Another early medieval monument is *Úaimh na gCat* (Oweynagat), 'The Cave of the Cats', a natural cave about 37m long with a souterrain attached. This is an inconspicuous monument but famous in early literature as an entrance to the Otherworld, with a remarkable wealth of associated legend. The presence of an ogham inscription on two of the souterrain stones is confirmation, if such were necessary, of the early medieval date of the structure. The legendary associations of Oweynagat are a remarkable testimony to its former significance. It is an interesting possibility that some of these legends may provide a clue as to some of the uses to which the cave and souterrain were once put. In the tale *Echtrae Nera* ('The Otherworld Adventure of Nera'), the warrior Nera twice visits the *síd* and twice warns the nearby settlement of *Ráith Crúachain* of its impending destruction, and this might suggest that prophetic activities once took place here, something well documented in the Greek and Roman world, where caves were often instrumental in producing altered states of consciousness. The number of legendary heroic warriors linked to the site (including Cú Chulainn) may suggest another related purpose for the souterrain and cave that involved warrior initiation 'rites of terror' including deprivation and isolation. While all this is admittedly speculative, it might conceivably have happened in prehistoric times and it could be that such practices were also a feature of the early medieval world at Rathcroghan when martial heroism was as highly prized as in earlier times.[27] In early medieval times, as in earlier periods, the various earthworks at Rathcroghan, like those at Tara, were points of reference in both a ritual and a mythological landscape in which territorial and genealogical rights were expressed in both monument and myth. There is no reason to suppose that the power of ancestors had diminished; if anything, they played as great a role as ever in the social and cosmological order of the tribal societies of the time.

27 J. Waddell, '*Úaimh na gCat* and the Otherworld' (forthcoming).

THE PAGAN CONTINUUM

Given the archaeological evidence for continuity from pre-Christian to early medieval times at Teltown, Tara and Rathcroghan, a corresponding continuity of tradition in early Irish literature is hardly surprising. This extraordinarily extensive corpus of myth, legend, law, genealogy and history – unique in its scope in medieval Europe – cannot be disregarded and must have something to tell us about the prehistoric past. As Tomás Ó Cathasaigh has said, much of this vernacular literature 'is firmly rooted in ancient myth and remains robustly pagan in character'.[28] The same may be said of much of the hagiographical literature which 'remained to a very large degree unashamedly pre-Christian in its themes and, more importantly, in its *dramatis personae*, ninety or more per cent of whom are demonstrably, or implicitly, pagan in origin'.[29] The relationship and interaction between the pre-Christian oral and Christian written traditions in the Old Irish period have been the subject of much debate and scrutiny. Proinsias Mac Cana has remarked that the primary reason for the incorporation of one into the other was the high status enjoyed by oral tradition and learning long before the coming of writing and because the institution of sacral kingship was so important in early Irish society, it is unsurprising to find the mythology and ritual of sovereignty so well represented in the extant literature.[30] To see the literary evidence as a simple window on a pagan past is to ignore the complexity of the questions raised by this fusion of old and new, but the recognition of a noteworthy continuum on many levels implies that the narratives and themes of this written corpus are worth studying, not just for what they might reveal about a pre-literate past – through a somewhat more opaque window than envisaged by Jackson – but also for what they might tell us about the survival of pagan practices in Christian times. In the hagiographical field, the Life of St Mac Creiche of Liscannor, Co. Clare, is just one of many examples of this. Liam de Paor has described him as a 'very lightly Christianized' figure whose pagan lineage shows plainly and whose mother was one of various manifestations of a mother-goddess. One of these was Fionmhaith or Findmhaeth daughter of Báed (Inghean Bhaoth), whose cult was associated with nearby Killnaboy, and de Paor would see a grotesque female figure carved on the ancient church there as a representation of this goddess figure and an extraordinary medieval illustration of a pagan theme:[31]

> an explicit sheela-na-gig is carved over the south doorway of the ruined medieval church of Killnaboy. The curve of the pointed arch carries through

28 T. Ó Cathasaigh, 'Pagan survivals' (1984), p. 291.   **29** P. Ó Riain, 'Celtic mythology and religion' (1986), p. 249.   **30** P. Mac Cana, 'Mythology and the oral tradition' (1995).   **31** L. de Paor, 'Saint Mac

the line of her open limbs and the medieval congregation must have entered her womb in entering the church, much as the Neolithic congregation entered the womb of the mother goddess through the long passage which gave access to the chamber at New Grange or Knowth.

The early fifteenth-century *Book of Lecan* refers to a cairn in the area of Mullaroe, near Ballysadare, Co. Sligo, that was supposedly named after Ruadh, the wife of the legendary Dath-Í, the last pagan king of Ireland. What is of interest about this brief account is that it also suggests that the cairn, at the dawn of history, was associated with prophetic visions. As quoted in translation by John O'Donovan:[32]

> The mother of Fiachra Ealgach, the son of Dathi, was Ruadh, the daughter of Airtech Uichtleathan, who died at his birth. From her is named Mullach Ruadha, in Tir Fiachrach of the Moy, from her being buried in the top of that hill; and over her is the carn of stones which is on the top of the hill. Tulach na molt was its name before that time … Cnoc na n-Druadh was another name for this hill, because the Druids of Dathi, King of Erin were used to be on it obtaining knowledge, for it was here they predicted to Dathi that he would attain to the kingdom of Erin, Alba &c.

Following some exploration by a local informant in the nineteenth century, O'Donovan believed that the remains of a cairn and megalithic tomb, in Carrowculleen townland on the southern slopes of Red Hill, were the site of these ancient divinatory practices. Almost nothing remains of the cairn, but the tomb has been identified as a Neolithic court tomb.[33] Perhaps a more likely contender, however, is another megalithic tomb on the northern slopes of that hill unknown in O'Donovan's time. It would have overlooked the early Columban church site at Skreen, which got its name, *Scrín Adhamhnáin*, because in the eighth century the church was presented with a shrine or reliquary that held relics of various saints including a tooth of St Patrick collected by St Adomnán some decades before.[34] The remains of a later church survive there. This megalithic monument is a court tomb situated in Farranyharpy townland and today consists of a few stones of a chamber set within the remains of a large cairn approximately 33m in length.[35] This could have been an impressive 'carn of stones' in early medieval

Creiche of Liscannor' (1979), 120.   **32** J. O'Donovan, *The genealogies, tribes, and customs of Hy-Fiachrach* (1844), pp 97–9, 416–17. See also N. Ó Muraíle (ed.), *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach* (2003), i, p. 593. **33** S. Ó Nualláin, *Survey of the megalithic tombs of Ireland, vol. v* (1989), p. 47.   **34** L. Gwynn, 'The reliquary of Adamnan' (1914), 457; idem, 'The reliquary of Adamnan' (1915), 199; J. Carney, '*A maccucáin, sruith in tíag*' (1983), 25.   **35** This information was kindly supplied by Paul Walsh, National Monuments

times and conceivably the place were those druidic prophecies took place. Whether or not this ever was the case, what is of interest is the fact that the *Book of Lecan* records a prehistoric cairn in this area being used for this purpose.

One wonders if the occasional reuse of prehistoric burial mounds and cairns for the practice of iron-working for instance might be a further ritual use of such sites. Invariably undated, this sort of magical metallurgy has been recorded at a number of megalithic tombs and one early blacksmith was described as 'a man learned in occult arts and a prophet of note'.[36] Indeed, the thousands of fragments of small bone slips recovered from a passage tomb at Loughcrew, Co. Meath, far from being a craftsman's 'trial pieces', are far more likely, given their context, to have had some cultic purpose, as Barry Raftery has noted.[37] Some bear La Tène art usually dated on rather uncertain stylistic grounds to about the first century AD. The great majority of these small slips are plain, however, and were produced by carefully shaping and polishing pieces of cattle rib-bones. It is not inconceivable that they were used in some divinatory practice. Tacitus records a ritual akin to casting the bones in his *Germania*:[38]

> For omens and the casting of lots they have the highest regard. Their procedure in casting lots is always the same. They cut off the branch of a nut-bearing tree and slice it into strips; these they mark with different signs and throw them completely at random onto a white cloth. Then the priest of the state, if the consultation is a public one, or the father of the family if it is private, offers a prayer to the gods, and looking up at the sky picks up three strips, one at a time, and reads their meaning from the signs previously scored on them.

There are other medieval allusions to ritual practices at what are likely to be older archaeological sites. A great plague in 1084 prompted the following exceptionally interesting entry in the *Annals of Tigernach*:[39]

> *Teidm mor isin bliadain sin, cor' marb cethraime fer n-Erenn. Is and rogab artús tes, 7 ro sir fo chethri hairdib Erenn. ISse fath fodera fochainn an tedma sin .i. deamna thancatar a híndsib tuaiscertachaib an domain .i. trichath 7 .x. cét ar fichit cét cach catha, amal ro índis Áenghus Occ mac an Dagh[d]a do Gilla Lughan ro tathaigedh an sith gach bliadain aidhchi samna, 7 adchonnairc-sin fein aen-chath a Maistin dib .i. cath robai ac milliud Laigen.*

Section, Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. **36** B.G. Scott, *Early Irish ironworking* (1990), pp 149, 185. **37** B. Raftery, 'Iron Age Ireland' (2005), p. 159. **38** H. Mattingly & S.A. Handford (ed. and trans.), *Tacitus, the Agricola and the Germania* (1971), p. 109. **39** *Ann. Tig.* (1896), 416.

*IS amlaidh doces do mac Gilla Lughan íat, 7 gach leth da roichedh a tesbach 7
a mbruth as and ro gabadh a nem. Ar robái claidim tenedh a braighid gach fir
dib, 7 airdithir neolla nime gach fer dib. Conidh esin fochond an tedma sin.*

A great pestilence in this year, which killed a fourth of the men of Ireland.
It began in the south, and spread throughout the four quarters of Ireland.
This is the causa causans of that pestilence, to wit, demons that came out of
the northern isles of the world, to wit, three battalions, and in each battalion
there were thirty and ten hundred and two thousand, as Oengus Óc, the son
of the Dagda, related to Gilla Lugan, who used to haunt the fairy-mound
every year on Halloween. And he himself beheld at Maistiu one battalion of
them which was destroying Leinster. Even so they were seen by Gilla Lugan's
son; and wherever their heat and fury reached, there their venom was taken.
For there was a sword of fire out of the gullet of each of them, and every one
of them was as high as the clouds of heaven. So that is the cause of this
pestilence.

As Donnchadh Ó Corráin has remarked of this and other plagues, 'if the educated
and literate could look to demons and pagan gods to explain the ravages of the
plague, how much wilder and more terror-stricken must have been the feelings
and reactions of the ignorant masses?'[40] It is also particularly striking that half a
millennium after the introduction of Christianity, some of the old gods were
evidently alive and well and, even more noteworthy, that in the eleventh century
this Gilla Lugan should still apparently be a regular and persistent visitor to an
otherworldly mound at the great feast of Samhain (1 November). It is possible
that Newgrange may have been the mound in question.[41] There is also an
intriguing allusion in the *Metrical Dindshenchas* to another burial mound,
somewhere in the Boyne valley, once known as *Ferta Escláim*, 'where good men
used to cast questions'.[42]

In a poem written *c.*1273 by Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, the poet has a
vision that a certain prince of Oirghialla will become king. He falls asleep in the
green fort of Eamhain *a madain chiúin Chéiteamhain*, 'on a quiet Mayday
morning'.[43] It is significant that his prophetic vision occurs on the first day of May,
the polar opposite of Samhain, and within the sacred precincts of the great enclosure
at Navan. Another poem of prophecy, of early thirteenth-century date, referring to
Cathal Úa Conchobair (d. 1010), is mainly about relations between the Síl Muiredaig
of Cruachain and the Dál Cais of Munster and represents the goddess Áine of
Knockainy (Co. Limerick) as a protecting spirit of the Síl Muiredaig. It begins:[44]

40 D. Ó Corráin, 'Ireland *c.* 800: aspects of society' (2005), p. 582.   41 J. Carey, *A single ray of the sun* (1999),
p. 21, n. 32.   42 *MD*, ii, p. 21.   43 G. Murphy, 'A vision concerning Rolf Macmahon' (1943–4), 79.   44 B.

> *A fhir, ná suid ar in síd,*
> *Síd nEochaill co n-ilar gním,*
> *ba síd fir buaile bechtaig*
> *óic ildelbaig ilrechtaig.*

> O man, do not sit on the fairy mound,
> Síd nEóchaill of the many deeds;
> it was the mound of a visionary (who was) precise,
> young, many-shaped and having many forms.

Once again, the suggestion of the use of a mound, possibly a prehistoric burial site, for pagan ritual purposes by someone with occult powers is of some interest because, like the invocation of the goddess Áine, it implies the persistence of older beliefs and practices. Not surprisingly, perhaps, saints seem not to have taken to such prehistoric monuments. Whether St Donard ever colonized a passage tomb on the summit of Slieve Donard must remain uncertain, even though Estyn Evans did think this was one of the few instances where 'a Christian saint took his holy war into the enemy's camp, made the corbelled tomb on the mountain top his cell, and gave the chief summit of the Mournes a name and a sanctity that have endured through the centuries'.[45] This story might be seen as a neat illustration of the triumph of Christianity over paganism, but we may have an over-idealized impression of the progress of Christianity in Ireland in the first millennium AD and, notwithstanding the fundamental social and economic changes that took place, it may have been a much slower and more erratic process than commonly depicted.

In the prologue to the early ninth-century *Félire Óengusso* ('Martyrology of Óengus'), its author declares:[46]

> *Ro milled in gentlecht*
> *Cíarbo ligdae lethan.*

> Heathendom has been destroyed,
> though fair it was and widespread.

Here, Óengus was certainly indulging in some pious hyperbole. He rejoices in the triumph of Christianity and contrasts several flourishing Christian sites with pagan centres that he claims are deserted. In summarizing his verses, Kathleen Hughes thought the ruins of these great sanctuaries must have still have been in evidence:[47]

Ó Cuív, 'A poem of prophecy' (1987), 40. Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha kindly drew my attention to this poem and that by Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe. **45** E. Evans, *Mourne Country* (4th ed., 1989), pp 90–1. See also MacNeill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, pp 84–96, 153. **46** W. Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Óengusso* (1905), p. 26. **47** K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland* (1972), p. 205.

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> The great settlement of Tara has died with the loss of its princes;
> great Armagh lives on with its choirs of scholars ...
> The fortress of Crúachain has vanished with Ailill, victory's child;
> a fair dignity greater than kingdoms is in the city of Clonmacnoise ...
> The proud settlement of Aillenn has died with its boasting hosts;
> great is victorious Brigit and lovely her thronged sanctuary.
> The fort of Emain Macha has melted away, all but its stones;
> thronged Glendalough is the sanctuary of the western world ...

In studying these and other pairings in the *Félire*, Marc Schneiders also makes the point that the fact that these contrasts could be made meant that the ancient sites still played a prominent role in people's minds and if they did not, the message of Óengus would not have been understood at all.[48] But there is compelling evidence, both archaeological and historical, that some of these major sites, far from being an ancient memory, were active centres of ceremonial and other activity well into the medieval period. The same may probably be said of many minor sites as well and Mullaroe, near Skreen (Co. Sligo), may be an example of this. While a belief in the magical properties of mounds may have been a widespread one in medieval Europe,[49] it is possible, in Ireland at least, that their medieval usage for ritual purposes may occasionally have left some archaeological expression.

An enclosure known as Caran Fort and an adjacent mound are situated on a low glacial ridge in the townland of Toberrory on the northern periphery of the Rathcroghan complex (fig. 10.2a/b). The fort is an unusual D-shaped enclosure with maximum external dimensions of 50m north-north-east/south-south-west by 48m west-north-west/east-south-east, with corresponding internal dimensions of 42m and 41m respectively. It is defined by an earthen bank with a shallow external ditch most clearly visible on the east and south-east. Geophysical survey suggested occupation activity. The discovery of a bullaun stone lying loose on the ground surface immediately outside the enclosure to the south was a puzzling find. Such basin stones, assumed to be mortars for grinding food or other substances, are often associated with ecclesiastical sites. This, of course, might also suggest that in some cases these enigmatic stones had some ceremonial purpose. Their occurrence at the Uí Bhriain inauguration site of Magh Adhair, Co. Clare, at a possible Ó Floinn inauguration site at Dunmull, Co. Antrim,[50] and at a Lugnasad assembly site at Altadavin, Co. Tyrone, hints at such a usage too.[51]

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48 M. Schneiders, '"Pagan past and Christian present" in *Félire Óengussa*' (1995), p. 168. **49** P. Sims-Williams, 'Some Celtic otherworld terms' (1995), p. 66. See also S. Semple, 'A fear of the past' (1998); idem, 'Locations of assembly' (2004). **50** E. FitzPatrick, *Royal inauguration* (2004), pp 56, 116. **51** MacNeill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, p. 153. See also C. Newman, 'The sword in the stone' (2009).
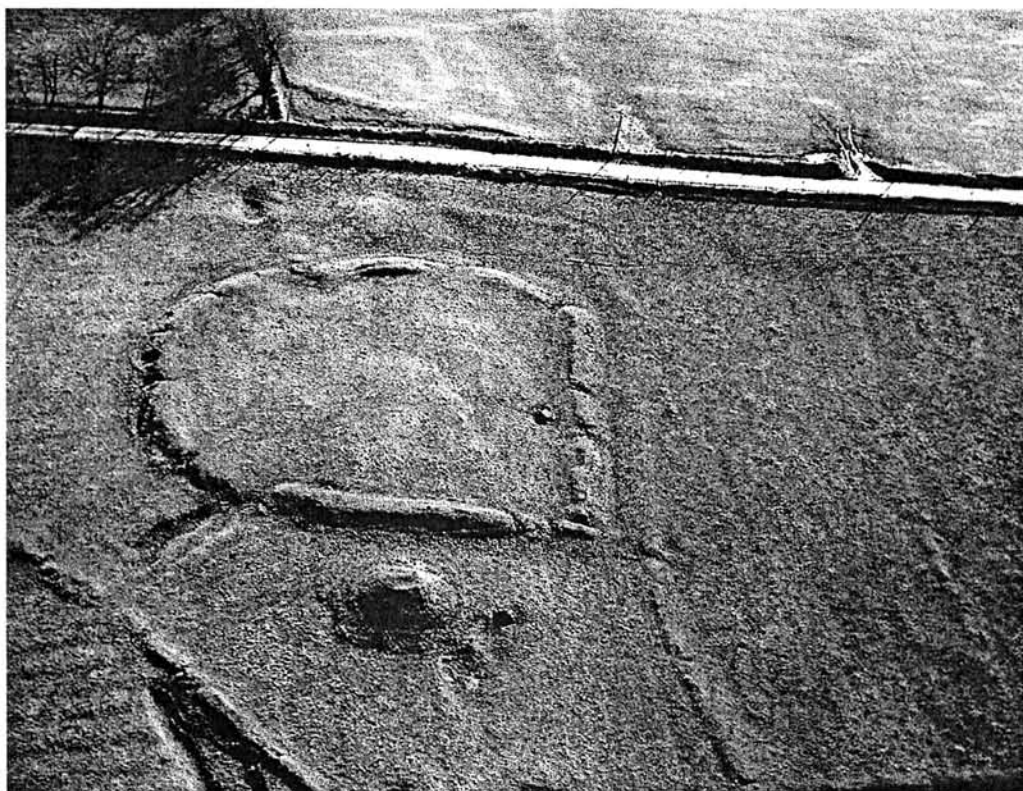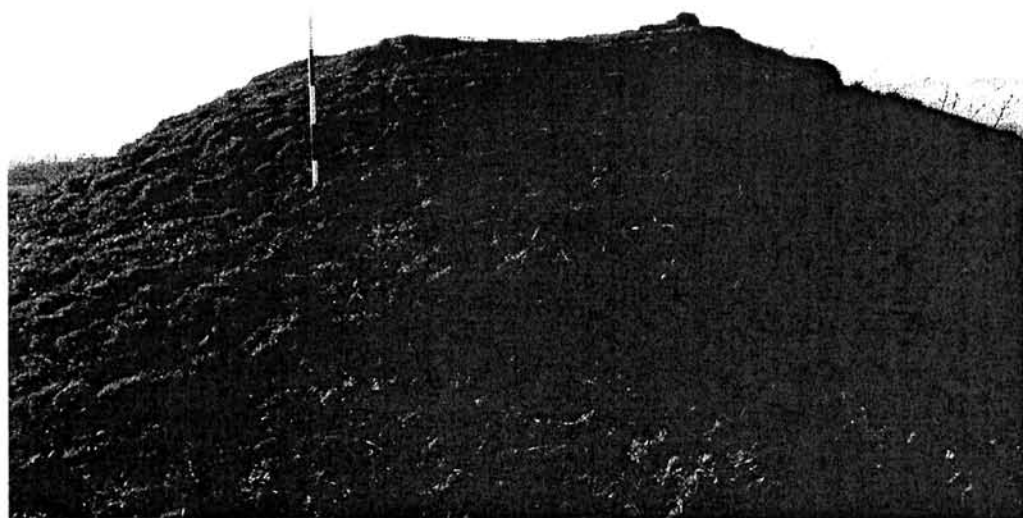
10.2a/b Caran Fort and mound, Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon. The mound with its modified summit lies just outside but close to the rampart of the enclosure.

A further unusual feature of Caran Fort is the presence of a large burial mound immediately to the north. The circular mound, the base of which lies just 4m north of the rampart of the enclosure, is a steeply sloping tumulus with a basal diameter of 12m and a height of roughly 2m. At first glance, the mound appears to be more or less flat topped. In fact, its summit is occupied by a very shallow penannular depression delimited by a number of stones; its internal dimensions are 1.7m north-north-east/south-south-west and 2.4m east-south-east/west-north-west, with a 1.5m-wide gap on the east. Caran Fort is situated just over a kilometre from and within sight of the medieval church site at Templemoyle that lies on the eastern fringes of the Rathcroghan complex.

To cite two other examples, the historian Hubert Knox has drawn attention to a pair of imposing conjoined ringforts at Rathbrennan near the summit of a hill just east of Roscommon town and has described a circular mound in the interior and near the rampart of the easternmost example.[52] According to him, the top of the mound was 'slightly hollowed in the middle' but in fact the depression, clearly visible today, is a penannular one about 1.7m across and facing east (fig. 10.3) towards Roscommon town. The monument is not located on the summit of the hill but on its eastern slopes overlooking the site of the sixth-century ecclesiastical foundation of St Commán, now in the town centre just over 3km away. As Knox pointed out, Rathbrennan would appear to be the fort and mound referred to in the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century *Acallam na Senórach*, on which St Patrick and Caílte were said to have sat when journeying through Roscommon. In Dooley and Roe's translation:[53]

> they continued to the south of the Wood of the Kin-Slaying, now called the Forest of Commán [Roscommon], where the nine sons of Úar, son of Indast, had killed each other, for which reason it was called the Wood of Kin-Slaying. They then continued on to the Fort of Glas, now called the Fort of Brénainn [Rathbrennan]. A tent was erected there for the King of Connaught, and Patrick and Caílte went and sat on an earthen mound by the perimeter of the fort.

There they tell the story of how the fort was named and other tales. This may be a recollection of the ceremonial use of this mound and even an attempt to give a Christian gloss to the memory.

A large multivallate enclosure at Rathra, near Castlerea, Co. Roscommon, contains two mounds in its interior, the larger of which has a basal diameter of

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52 H.T. Knox, 'Rath Brenainn' (1915).   53 A. Dooley & H. Roe (trans), *Tales of the elders of Ireland* (1999), pp 38–41.

10.3 The mound within the ringfort at Rathbrennan, Co. Roscommon; the enclosure rampart is visible on the right. The penannular depression in the mound's summit is evident though slightly damaged by animal activity.

10.4 Rathra, Co. Roscommon: the larger of two mounds in the interior of this multivallate monument is close to the inner rampart and has a clearly visible penannular enclosure on its summit.

21.5m and a height of about 3m; it is situated about 15m from the inner rampart and on its summit is a small penannular enclosure about 8.5m in diameter, opening to the east-south-east (fig. 10.4). This summit depression is a larger and better defined version of the smaller features at Caran Fort and Rathbrennan. As at Rathbrennan, the Rathra enclosure is not built on the summit of a hill but lies on the south-western slopes of Mewlaghadooey Hill overlooking the lands adjacent to the early church site at Baslick some 3.5km to the north.

Since Catherine Swift drew attention to a medieval reference to a burial mound, probably in Meath, as a mound of judgment and to other general references to the use of a *tulach* – which of course could have been either an artificial mound or a natural hillock, where laws were expounded[54] – I initially thought that the mound beside Caran Fort was a mound modified for use in some ritual such as the promulgation of legal judgments. There are, after all, two eighth-century allusions to 'the promulgation of Patrick's law at Crúachain' and two references in the following century to the exaltation of Ciarán's law there.[55] Such practices may well offer a possible explanation for the alterations to the summit of this monument and indeed to similar modifications elsewhere. All three sites, however, share the peculiar feature of a mound situated close to a rampart and all are located within relatively short distances of significant church sites. Assuming they are prehistoric mounds that underwent some later modification to their summits, and bearing in mind the eleventh-century activities of Gilla Lugan every Samhain, we should not exclude the possibility that the mounds at Caran Fort, Rathbrennan and Rathra were once locations for pagan cult practices in medieval times.

The process of christianization in Ireland is often depicted as a tale of triumphal progress wherein, by the seventh century, the new religion 'had been fully integrated into society and had a defined place in its legal structure' and by which 'the first Christian advance was over and Ireland was formally Christian'.[56] In a process of religious syncretism, it triumphed over paganism 'largely by its fusion with older traditions'.[57] This development is evident in many ways, not least in the cult of relics, in the attributes of local saints and in the christianization of local pagan cult centres.[58] There is no denying the dominant position of the new religion at an elite level in society where, at times, it seems to have been enthusiastically and peacefully embraced. As Proinsias Mac Cana has said,

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54 C. Swift, 'Pagan monuments and Christian legal centres' (1996), 18.   **55** Waddell et al., *Rathcroghan*, pp 54–5; J.P. Mallory, 'A provisional checklist' (1988).   **56** K. Hughes, 'The Church in Irish society, 400–800' (2005), p. 321.   **57** J.N. Hillgarth, *Christianity and paganism* (1986), p. 120.   **58** C. Doherty, 'The use of relics in early Ireland' (1984).

in most of its aspects, the story of Irish Christianity is one of compromise and syncretism with indigenous tradition and usage, but in some matters the conflict was more total, and nowhere more so than in those areas where the Church encroached on the traditional precinct of the druids.[59]

However, the ready acceptance of a general syncretic model easily obscures how complex, prolonged and uneven this process may have been. If monuments like that cairn at Mullaroe and the mounds at Caran Fort and Rathbrennan had an overtly non-Christian afterlife and were expressions of a pagan intimacy with a supernatural world, then their situation adjacent to and sometimes overlooking important Christian foundations might suggest they mark contested landscapes in early medieval times. This may be the case at Carnfree, Co. Roscommon, as well. The small cairn known as Carnfree – possibly a prehistoric monument – is located a short distance from an ecclesiastical site and is recognized as the medieval inauguration site of the Síl Muiredaig from whom the O'Conor kings of Connacht were drawn. It is particularly noteworthy for the celebrated inauguration of Feidlimid Ó Conchobair recorded in the *Annals of Connacht* in 1310, which reads in part:[60]

> *Et ar feis d'Feidlimid mac Aeda meic Eogain re coiced Connacht doronne a oiti a frithailem an odchi-sin do rer cumne na senduine 7 na senleeabar, 7 is i sin banais rige is oiregdo doronad a Connacht riam cusan laithi-sin.*

> And when Fedlimid mac Aeda meic Eogain had married the Province of Connacht his foster-father waited upon him during the night in the manner remembered by the old men and recorded in the old books; and this was the most splendid king-ship marriage ever celebrated in Connacht down to that day.

This remarkable reference to the proclamation of a king in a *banais ríge* or royal marriage is an extraordinary echo of an archaic rite in which the man who would be king ritually mates with a goddess of sovereignty who is the personification of the land. This symbolic union legitimized his reign and ensured the fertility of the kingdom. Though tantalizingly brief and uninformative, the allusion to the memory of old men and records in the old books clearly suggests something much more than a vague recollection of an ancient practice and may imply a tradition of inauguration preserved and treasured by a literate caste into the fourteenth century. Significantly, as is well known, this is a tradition that is of pagan and pre-

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59 P. Mac Cana, 'The sinless otherworld of *Immram Brain*' (1976), 96.   60 *AC*, pp 222–3. On Carnfree, see FitzPatrick, *Royal inauguration*, pp 60–8, and Waddell et al., *Rathcroghan*, pp 113–35.

Christian inspiration and may well be considered 'another testimony to the slight penetration of Christian culture into Irish life'.[61]

Perhaps some of these mounds were not neutral or marginal monuments but places of dissent deliberately selected to confront or negotiate with the ever-expanding new order. At present, at least, any certainty in these matters is difficult to achieve – both the archaeological and textual evidence is fragmentary. Terms such as continuity and contest raise all sorts of complex and far-reaching questions. The difficulties in excavating a medieval text to reveal any indigenous, pre-Christian elements are immense.[62] On the archaeological front, and recognizing that it may not always be possible to disentangle Christian from non-Christian, considerable progress will still be made with scientific excavation and with the greater application of radiocarbon dating to illuminate the thorny question of continuity. The exploration of some of the many levels where the prehistoric Iron Age to medieval continuum may be identified will be a fascinating field of study.

61 K.W. Nicholls, *Gaelic and gaelicised Ireland* (2003), p. 32.   62 See, for instance, Marion Deane's paper, 'From sacred marriage to clientship', pp 1–21, in this volume, and J. Carey, 'Donn, Amairgen, Íth and the prehistory of Irish pseudohistory' (2010).