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PAPERS IN MEDIAEVAL STUDIES 26

# Celtic Cosmology

## Perspectives from Ireland and Scotland

*Edited by*

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JOHN WADDELL

## *The Cave of Crúachain and the Otherworld*

As is well known, the otherworld may have many manifestations in early Irish literature; it may be a land under the earth or the *síd* mound, a land beneath lakes or the sea, an island, or off the coast (Carey 1982–3: 39). Though often represented as a land of peace and plenty, it has a darker side and sometimes a series of malevolent beings may emerge and involve themselves in human affairs (Ó Cathasaigh 1977–9: 144). Not surprisingly, archaeological evidence is hard to come by, but the cave of Crúachain from medieval Irish literature brings us close to this conceptual underworld. Today this cave, in the royal complex of Rathcroghan, ancient Crúachain, is popularly known as Uaimh na gCat or Oweynagat (“the cave of the cats”).

The early ninth-century tale *The Battle of Mag Mucrama* records one of several legends associated with this celebrated site. A numberless band of supernatural wild pigs emerges from the cave of Crúachain and wreaks havoc and destruction on the surrounding land:

*Mag Mucrima didiu .i. mucca gentliuchta do-dechatar a hÚaim Chrúachna. Dorus iffirn na Hérend sin. Is esti dano tánic in tellén trechend ro fásaig Hérend, conidro marb Amairgene athair Conaill Chernaig ar galaib óenfir ar bélaib Ulad [n-]uili.*

*Is esti dano do-dechatar ind énlathi chrúan coro chrínsat i nHérend nach ní taidlitis a n-anála, condaro marbsat Ulaid dano ... asa táblib.*

*Is esti íarum do-dechatar na mucca-sa. Nach ní immathégtís co cend secht mbliadna ní ássad arbur na féir na duille trít. Bale i rrimtis ní antais and acht no thégtís hi túaith [n-]aile. Dia n-irmastá a rrim, ní rímtís fo chomlín .i. 'ataat a trí and', ar in fer. 'Is mó, a secht', ar araile. 'Atát a noí and', ol araile. 'Óen muc déc'. 'Trí mucca déc'. Att-róithe a rrim fínd inna[s]-sain. Far-fémditís dano a nguín, ar dia ndibairgtís ní arthraigtís.*

I am very grateful to Conor Newman and Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha for their helpful comments on a draft of this work and for their forbearance with my preoccupation with footwear. They are absolved of any responsibility for the awedly speculative nature of this paper. Fig. 2 was kindly prepared by Angela Gallagher.

*Fecht and didiu luid Medb Chrúachan 7 Ailill dia rím .i. i mMag Mucríma. Ro rímthea leo íarum. Ro buí Medb inna carpat. Ro lebla[i]ng mucc díb tarsin carpat. 'Is immarcraid in mucc-sain, a Medb', or cách. 'Niba hí-seo', ol Medb, la gabáil a colpthae na muicce co rréimid a croccend fora étan conda farggaib dano in croccand inna láim cossin cholpdu 7 nocon fess cía deochatar ónd úair-sin. Is de-sin atá Mag Mucríma.*

Now Mag Mucríma [was so called from] magic pigs that had come out of the cave of Crúachain. That is Ireland's gate to hell. Out of it too came the swarm (?) of three-headed creatures that laid Ireland waste until Amairgene father of Conall Cernach, fighting alone (?), destroyed it in the presence of all the Ulaid.<sup>1</sup>

Out of it also had come the saffron-coloured(?) bird-flock and they withered up everything in Ireland that their breath touched until the Ulaid killed them ... with their slings.

Out of it then had come these pigs. Whatever [land] they traversed no corn or grass or leaf grew on it until the end of seven years. Wherever they were being counted they would not stay there but would go into another territory. If the attempt to count them succeeded the counts did not agree, for example: "There are three of them," said one man. "There are more, seven of them," said another. "There are nine of them," said another. "Eleven pigs," "thirteen pigs". Thus it was impossible to count them. Nor were they able to slay them for when cast at they disappeared.

On one occasion Medb of Crúachu and Ailill went to Mag Mucríma to reckon them. They were counted by them then. Medb was in her chariot. One of the pigs jumped across the chariot. "That pig is an extra one, Medb," said everyone. "It won't be this one," said Medb, seizing the pig's shank so that its skin split on its forehead and it left the skin in her hand along with the shank and it is not known where they went from that time onwards. It is from that Mag Mucríma is [named] (O Daly 1975: 48–9).

The war-goddess, the Mórrígan, is another fearsome entity associated with this famous cave. According to the *Metrical Dindshenchas*:

*Luid co Crúachain cróda / iarsind úath-blaid ágda  
in Mórrígan mórda, / ba slóg-dírmach sámda.*

<sup>1</sup> On the word *tellén/ellén*, see note in Séamus Mac Mathúna's article in this volume, p. 67 n30.

*Luid Odras 'na h-iar-n-gait, / iarmairt nárbu ada,  
's a gilla dúr dorthain, / torchair i Cuil Chada.  
Cada ainm a gilla / rofinna mór fíche:  
ruc Odras, úair áithe, / for lurg a búair bíthe.  
Iarsín, d' éis a gilla, / luid in ben gléis glanda  
co Síd Cruáchan cumma, / co fríth úath-blad alla.  
Roléic cotlud chuice / in groc-dub cen glicce  
i nDaire úar Fálgud / dia fúair sárgud sicce.  
Dosruacht ina tathum / trúag tachur for tulaig,  
in Mórrígan úathmar / a h-úaim Chruáchan cubaid.  
Rochan fuirre ind agda / tria luinde cen logda  
cach bricht dían, ba dalbda, / fri Sliab mBadbgna m-brogda.*

There came to blood-stained Cruachu, according to the weird and terrible tale,  
the mighty Morrigan, whose pleasure was in mustered hosts.  
Odras came to despoil her by arms, to an issue that was not lawful, with her  
stark ill-fated henchman, who fell at Cuil Cada.  
Cada was her gillie's name – many a fight he knew; Odras brought him, in a  
bitter hour, on the track of her herd of heifers.  
Afterward, when her henchman was gone, the lady came, in shining trim, to Sid  
Cruachan likewise, and a weird event befell yonder.  
Imprudently the dark-wrinkled one let sleep come over her in cold Daire Fal-  
gud, where she met mortal outrage.  
The horrid Morrigan out of the cave of Cruachu, her fit abode, came upon her  
slumbering: alas, the combat on the hill!  
The owner of kine chanted over her, with fierceness unabating, toward huge  
Sliab Bodbgna every spell of power: she was full of guile (Gwynn 1924:  
198–201).

These are but two of a number of literary references to the otherworldly nature of this subterranean place and, surprising as it may seem, some of these tales may hold a clue as to some of the former uses of the site and the role it played in early medieval cult practices. Today Uaimh na gCat is one of the more dilapidated and unimpressive sites in the complex of monuments generally known as Rathcroghan in Co. Roscommon (Waddell et al. 2009: 79). It may be counted among a small and scattered body of archaeological evidence that is a possible reflection of an other-worldly cosmology in different places and at different times.

Cruáchain figures as a royal settlement, a great burial ground and a place of assembly or *óenach* in early literature. The inconspicuous nature of Uaimh na gCat, a small natural cave with a souterrain attached, stands in stark contrast to other



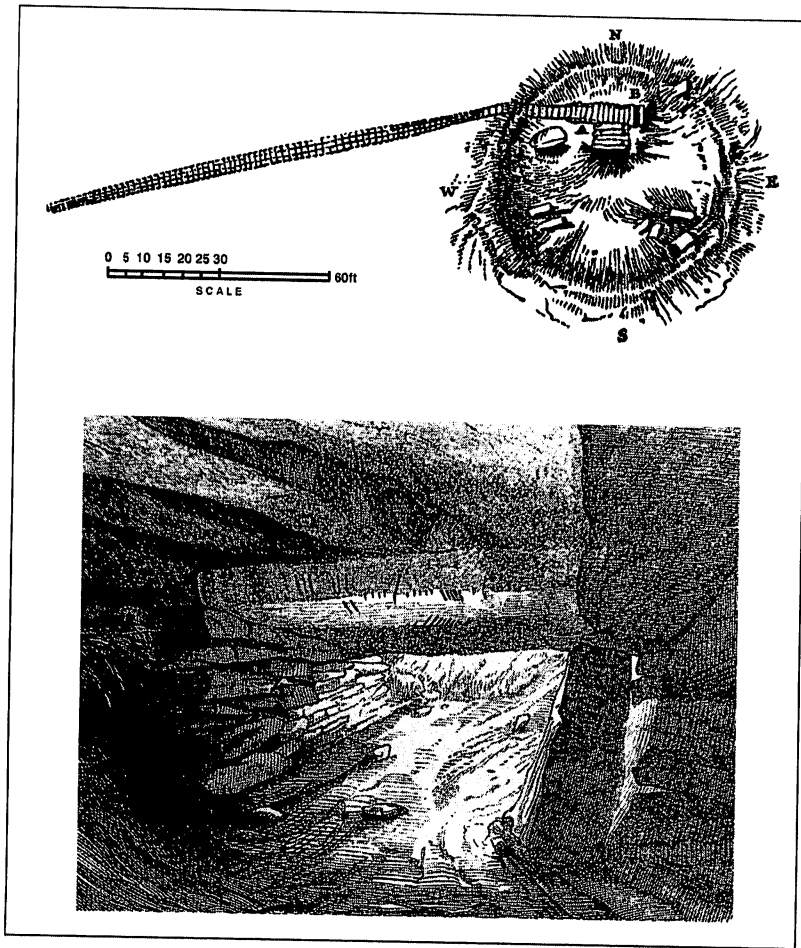


Figure 1: Samuel Ferguson's illustrations of Uaimh na gCat (Oweynagat) in 1864. The schematic plan (above) depicts the enclosure, the souterrain entrance and the natural cave extending – as he believed – to the west. His sketch of the present entrance (below) shows the ogam inscription on the lintel at the junction of two passages.

large earthworks in the complex and to its literary status as an entrance to the otherworld with a remarkable wealth of associated legend. Indeed its ruinous archaeological remains inspire little awe today. Samuel Ferguson visited the site in 1864 and has provided an invaluable account of the surface features of this monument

that have suffered considerable damage since then. His sketch plan (figure 1) clearly depicts the cave entrance and groups of scattered stones set within a circular earthwork, some of which he thought – quite erroneously – to be “the traces of several interments” (Ferguson 1864: 162). A small roadway, built during the earlier part of the twentieth century, crosses the monument and is responsible for erasing most of the northern half of the earthwork visible in Ferguson’s time. The field to the south of the road, from which the cave is now entered, has also suffered extensive damage in more recent years, largely through poaching by cattle. Fortunately, the sub-surface features, both the souterrain and cave, appear to have changed little since Ferguson’s visit, as is evident from his sketch plan. The enclosure is no longer visible but would appear to have had a maximum internal and external diameter of about seventeen metres and twenty-one metres respectively and, as depicted by Ferguson, it would appear to have been defined by a low bank, roughly two metres wide, without an accompanying ditch, internal or external. Then, as now, the cave was entered via a hole in the roof of a partly collapsed souterrain. This was the case in the eighteenth century as well, for one visitor recorded “having lighted some candles we descended first on all fours through a narrow gallery, which for the length of twelve or fourteen feet is the work of man, being masonry said to be done by the Druids, who performed here some of their secret rites. A yard or two further we could walk erect, the cave being seven or eight feet high, and about four feet broad; the walls and roof (work of nature), of a brownish colour, smooth and shining, as if varnished, the ground of solid rock, like the rest, smooth, always descending; but the unevenness not unlike steps favouring our descent, and preventing us from slipping” (Wilde 1870: 247).

Today the same low gap beneath a broad limestone lintel permits access to a short three-metre stretch of souterrain and it is quite unlikely that this entrance is original; it seems to be a point at which the roof has collapsed or lintels have been removed and a number of lintel-sized slabs lie nearby. The second lintel of this short passage bears the ogam inscription read by R.A.S. Macalister as VRAICCI MAQI MEDVVI, “[the stone] of Fráech, son of Medb” (Macalister 1945: 16). This short section of souterrain joins at right angles to a second passage that in turn joins a natural narrow fissure in the limestone bedrock to the north-west. How far this second passage extends to the south-east (the right-hand side on entering) is unknown, as it is blocked with collapsed debris. The last capstone visible in this collapsed section also bears ogam letters, the remains of a second fragmentary inscription (which Macalister read as QREGAS MU ...). The position of a number of large earth-fast stones and lintel-like slabs in the field south of the road suggest this souterrain passage may have continued for some distance to the south-east and in fact there may be quite a complex of souterrains awaiting discovery here. There are traces of another souterrain just three metres to the north-west of the current entrance and

it is possible to peer through a small gap below a stone lintel, which serves as a roofing slab, into a rubble-filled chamber.

The main passage continues to the north-west (to the left on entering) and descends fairly steeply to join a long narrow natural cave. The passage is largely of artificial construction for about the first ten metres before joining the limestone cave to continue for a further thirty seven metres. In this initial section, the natural fissure appears to have been widened in places and dry-stone walling built on a footing of natural rock on either side supports large slabs that span the roof. This modified section of passage increases in height and widens considerably before joining the natural cave where the ceiling descends coinciding with an abrupt drop in floor level. Here a level plinth of bedrock on either side of a constricted passage (40cm wide) leads, in a series of at least five rough flagstone steps, to the natural unmodified cave below. It is conceivable that this junction between souterrain and cave proper may once have accommodated a trapdoor laid horizontally on the plinth when shut and leaning against the vertical wall when open. The natural cave broadens to a narrow elongated chamber, 2.85m in maximum width at its lowest level. Its walls incline from the cave floor to a narrow apex spanned by naturally deposited rocks and boulders about five metres above. The floor of the cave is boulder strewn and muddy and displays no evidence of a paved or metalled surface. The cave ascends and narrows again from this elongated chamber to terminate relatively close to ground level about 50m from the present souterrain entrance. It is possible that a number of lintel stones were positioned to span the cave roof at the point where the cave narrows towards its existing end.

Even though the full extent and number of souterrains here are unknown, it is still possible to identify some very significant features at Uaimh na gCat. Since no trace of an external ditch has been found, the small embanked enclosure may not have been a normal ringfort. The presence of ogam inscriptions – rare in Connacht – is exceptional, and the attachment of a man-made souterrain to a natural cave is unusual as well: it would seem that the junction between the two, with its downward steps and narrowness, was of some significance. These features and the wealth of associated legend all set Uaimh na gCat apart.

Souterrains built of unmortared stone are a relatively common monument often associated with settlements of ringfort type or with ecclesiastical sites. They are generally believed to have served as either storage places or refuges or both and the great majority are dated to the early medieval period, 500–1000 CE. Between 3000 and 3500 have been identified to date in every part of the island and these are undoubtedly minimum figures. Ogam stones have been discovered in about 113 examples mainly in the south and south-west. These inscribed stones are often used as lintel or roof stones, and it has been generally accepted that they were appropriated to serve as convenient building material (Clinton 2001: 68).

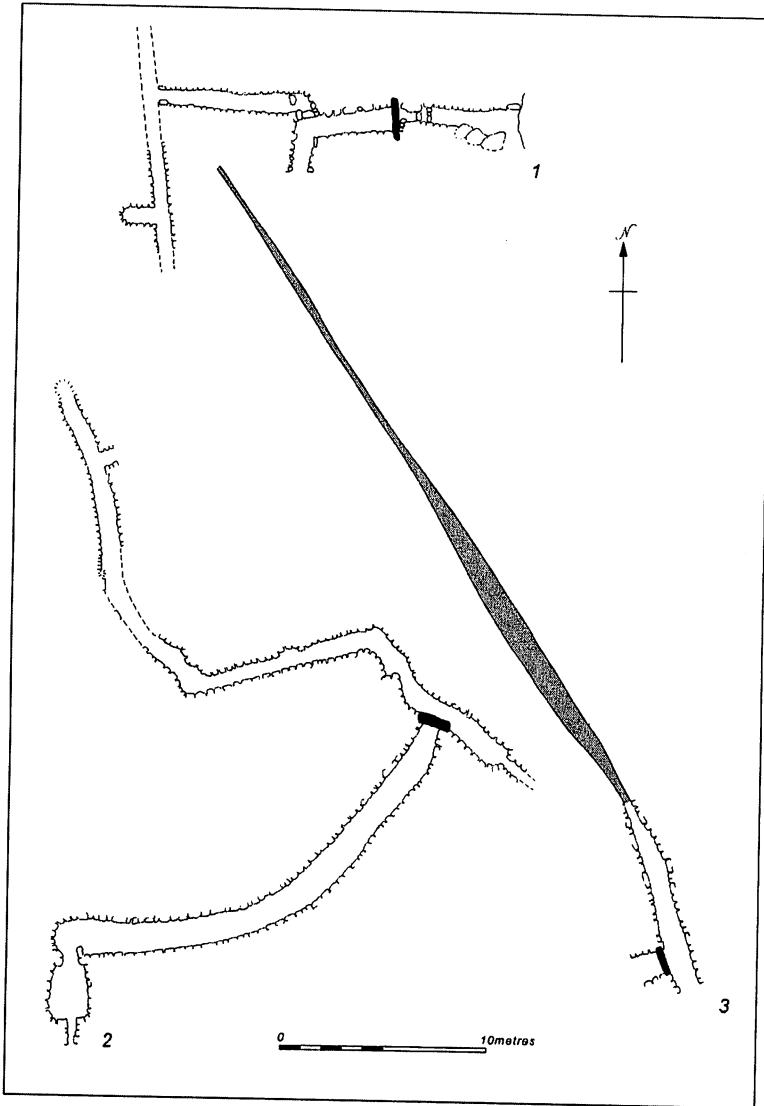


Figure 2: 1. Plan of souterrain at Dunalis, Co. Antrim (after Lindsey 1936). 2. Plan of souterrain at Ballybarrack, Co. Louth (after Buckley & Sweetman 1991). The ogam stones at the junction between passages are marked. 3. Uaimh na gCat: the short stretch of accessible souterrain is attached to a long narrow cave extending north-westwards; the position of the ogam stone is also marked in black.

The Uaimh na gCat souterrain may be firmly dated to this general early medieval time span, and its ogam stones may well have been taken from someplace else when it was decided to attach a souterrain to a natural cave that probably already had some cultic importance. The use of an ogam stone as a roofing stone was not a casual constructional device however. The lintel stone bearing the Fraoch inscription was deliberately placed at a junction, presumably to mark a key point in the structure, a recurring feature in several other souterrains as well (figure 2).

Unfortunately, the precise position of many ogam stones in these structures has not been documented, but in a majority of the handful that have some information recorded, the ogam stones are placed more often than not at a significant location in the monument and, it seems, deliberately positioned to expose the inscription. For example, at Dunalis, Co. Antrim (figure 2), a junction and a significant change in floor and roof level were marked by an ogam-inscribed lintel (Lindsey 1936) and in a very large souterrain at Ballybarrack, Co. Louth (one of three in an oval enclosure), an ogam-inscribed lintel also occurred at a junction between two chambers (Buckley & Sweetman 1991: 103). As Mark Clinton (2001: 73) observed, it is a distinct possibility that some souterrain builders actively sought out ogam stones for use as a type of charm. Since some at least were clearly placed at certain places in a deliberate act of “burial” or consignment to the earth, I suggest they are unlikely to have been selected for building purposes alone, and in all likelihood their purpose was to serve as talismans with a protective function.

As already mentioned, while these underground chambers are generally considered to have been refuge places or storage places, the practice of subterranean storage, where it occurred, may have had a ritual dimension too. This was a feature of grain storage pits in the Iron Age hillfort of Danebury, Hampshire, for instance, where propitiatory offerings (including animal and human remains) were apparently made to chthonic powers to protect the grain placed in their underground domain (Cunliffe 1997: 156, 193). The very act of underground deposition in early medieval Ireland may also have been associated with a belief in the protective powers of the otherworld, powers that might be invoked or enhanced with inscribed stones. Indeed they may also have been seen as some protection against the netherworld powers let loose by the digging of the pit for the souterrain.

The inscriptions themselves, where translatable, seem to provide no further clues as to the role of the stones – with the possible exception of that dedication to Fraoch in Uaimh na gCat. It is, of course, speculation, but if this is an allusion to the hero of the eighth-century *Táin Bó Fráech* (The Cattle Raid of Fráech), then here we have a reference to the foremost legendary warrior of Connacht whose name is literally petrified in the roof stones of the souterrain. He is not the only warrior associated with this cave: Amairgene, who defeated those three-headed monsters,

has already been mentioned. Three heroes in the tale *Fled Bricrenn* (Bricriu's Feast) are tested here by terrifying nocturnal cats:

*Dobretha a cuit dóib ind aidchi sin, ocus dolléicthe tre-caittini a húaim Crúachan dia saigid, i. tri bíasta druidechta. Techit iarom Conall ocus Loegaire for sparríb na tigi ocus fácbait a m-biad oc na bíastaib, ocus feoit fón samail sin cusarnabárach. Nirtheig Cuculainn assa inud frissin m-bíasta rosiacht chuci, acht in tan dosnéid in beist a bragit cosin n-esair, dounsi Cuculainn béim dín claidiub na cend doscirred di mar bad do charraic. Nothairned sí síis di súdi. Nirthomail ocus nírúan Cuculainn fon cruth sin co matain. Rothinsat na cait, o robo maten, ocus atcessa iat-som fon cruth sin arabarach* (Henderson 1899: 72).

One night as their portion was assigned to them, three cats from the Cave of Cruachan were let loose to attack them, i.e., three beasts of magic. Conall and Lóegaire made for the rafters, having left their food with the beasts. In that way they slept until the next day. Cú Chulainn did not flee from his place from the beast which attacked him. But when it stretched its neck out for eating, Cú Chulainn gave a blow with a sword on the beast's head, but [the blade] glided off as it were striking stone. Then the cat set itself down. In the circumstances Cú Chulainn neither ate nor slept. As soon as it was early morning the cats were gone. The three heroes were seen in such a condition the next day (Koch & Carey 1994: 82).

These tales of monstrous cats, destructive pigs and some of the other bizarre creatures are echoes of the cave's links with the powers of chaos. The antagonistic juxtaposition of an entrance to the otherworld with a nearby kingly settlement may be an expression of the sacred and the social aspects of the community, the otherworld signifying disorder, the king representing cosmic order and well-being. As Jacqueline Borsje (2008: 207; 2009b: 182) has pointed out, those supernatural and destructive pigs in the *The Battle of Mag Mucrama* cannot be killed, but counting them would make them depart. This, however, turns out to be impossible, but when Medb and Ailill attempt this, one pig jumps over their chariot, the queen grabs a leg and the pig leaves it in her hand together with his skin. As a result, the swine disappear forever and here Medb and Ailill are portrayed in their sacral function of protecting the land. Though placed in a non-Christian past, this aspect of myth and its depiction of righteous rule would have had a very pertinent meaning in the real world of early medieval Ireland. Of course, the otherworld was also a place of refuge and protection; in *Táin Bó Fraích* (The Cattle Raid of Fraéich), for instance, the wounded hero is carried therein by "three times fifty women" to come out

“quite healed without defect or blemish” the following day (Byrne & Dillon 1937: 8). The cave may well have had ambivalent functions. In the tale *Echtra Nera* (The Adventure of Nera), this warrior twice visits the *síd* and twice warns the nearby settlement of Ráth Crúachan of its impending destruction (Carey 1988; Koch & Carey 1994: 117). This might suggest that prophetic practices once took place here, something well documented in the Greek and Roman world where caves were often instrumental in producing altered states of consciousness (Ustinova 2009).

The warrior associations may hint at yet another related purpose for the souterrain and cave at Uaimh na gCat. If, as Georges Dumézil has claimed (1942: 126, 131ff.), a hero's combat with a triple-headed monster is a transformation into myth of an ancient warrior initiation rite (which once might have involved a mock combat with a tricephalic wooden image), then the tale of the triple-headed creatures killed in single combat by Amairgene may imply that the cave was once the location of initiation rituals as well. Such rites of passage may also involve other forms of testing besides combat, such as deprivation and isolation, and anthropological studies have documented the potent effectiveness of such “rites of terror” (Whitehouse 1996). The number of legendary heroic warriors linked to the site raises the interesting possibility that such rites were once part of the cult practices performed here, and while it might be natural for us to assume that all this might have happened in prehistoric times, it is quite possible that they were a feature of the early medieval world at Rathcroghan, when martial heroism was as highly prized as in earlier times. A part of the ritual may have involved the introduction of the initiate to the spirits of the warrior dead, and the Fraoch inscription may have had a role in this. The subterranean testing of a warrior inevitably recalls that other entrance to a hellish otherworld at St Patrick's purgatory in Lough Derg, Co. Donegal, and the trials of Knight Owein that were so popular and so widely translated in medieval Europe. Given the scanty and conflicting descriptions, we cannot be sure if the original “cave” here was a souterrain. Whether the medieval practices, first recorded in the twelfth century, had pre-Christian roots is also uncertain (De Pontfarcy 1988) but, as the Rees brothers remarked, St Patrick's purgatory may be a Christianised version of the kind of ritual with which the adventures of the warrior Nera were originally connected (Rees & Rees 1961: 304).

Even though early medieval underground structures may have been built to gain something from the chthonic powers of a netherworld, a generally utilitarian explanation (for storage or refuge) is accepted for almost all souterrains. Mark Clinton (2001: 60) would consider Uaimh na gCat and the uncertain example in Lough Derg as the only exceptions to this rule. However, a souterrain is attached to the northernmost of two Neolithic passage tombs in Dowth in the Boyne Valley and

other examples are joined to both the western and eastern tombs in the great mound at nearby Knowth (Eogan 2007, fig. 1.3; Stout 2002, figs 6 and 8) and this deliberate connection to an older monument with supernatural qualities suggests something more than a desire for greater storage space. These souterrains must have acquired some special value. Significantly, the innermost areas of both Knowth tombs contain a series of graffiti comprising names in insular script and in ogam of eighth- and ninth-century date (Byrne et al. 2008) that must give further emphasis to the exceptional nature of these conjoined monuments. It should also be borne in mind that some souterrains on ecclesiastical sites in particular could also have had an extra ritual dimension. A puzzling stone-built lintelled chamber abutting one wall of a church called *Templenatinn*y (Teampall na Teine) in the monastic enclosure on Inishmurray, Co. Mayo, was built on a high raised terrace and appears to lead towards the door of another nearby church, Teach Mo-Laise. Jerry O'Sullivan and Tomás Ó Carragáin (2008: 143, 342) suggest it may be a later medieval structure built as an "Inishmurray purgatory" in imitation of Lough Derg.

It seems likely that Uaimh na gCat was a focus for cult practices in pre-Christian times and these may have included sensory deprivation and altered states of consciousness associated with divination, oracular activity and warrior initiation rituals. It is also possible, of course, that the tales that hint at this sort of usage may be not just echoes of much older prehistoric customs but an indication that some or all of them were practised in early medieval times as well, when aspects of a mythical past were relevant to the present and the otherworld continued to have power over the living.

If the early medieval otherworld is archaeologically elusive, there is abundant evidence for prehistoric cult practices with a subterranean focus not just in Ireland and Britain but across a wide area of northern and western Continental Europe as well. The digging of a pit or a ditch was one way of accessing this underworld; the extraordinarily widespread practice of depositing hoards of metal objects or other materials in them has deep prehistoric roots and reflects an extensive preoccupation with chthonic powers (Bradley 1990). "Votive offerings," "ritual deposits," "structured deposition," "gifts to the gods," are all terms used by archaeologists to describe a variety of practices on dry land, in rivers, lakes and bogs, that reached their height in late prehistoric times. Inevitably it is difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct what detailed form these practices took, and it is obviously even more difficult to establish what perception of the otherworld these ancient peoples may have had. We may never know whether it was thought to be a parallel world, a mirror world or a land of the dead, or what sort of powers were thought to reside there, but the enormous amount of ritually deposited material suggests this world below was a major preoccupation in many prehistoric lives.



In Ireland, a pair of hoards of gold bracelets carefully placed in small pits in the earth on Cathedral Hill, Downpatrick, Co. Down, or the great deposit of bronze objects found in a watery context at Dowris, near Birr, in Co. Offaly, are just two examples of many that demonstrate this island shared in wider European cult practices. The latter, found in the early nineteenth century, is the largest collection of bronze objects ever found in Ireland; originally it may have comprised over two hundred objects including tools, swords, spears, buckets and cauldrons, sometimes fragmentary. Found in reclaimed bogland near a lake that is now no more but in the early nineteenth century formed a large area of deep open water, it would probably have been a much more extensive body of water located at the foot of several low glacial ridges encompassed by bog in prehistoric times. It was certainly situated on the edge of a vast expanse of midland bog. This immense and inhospitable area stretched northwards and was broadly demarcated to the south and east by the higher, undulating good agricultural land that formed a broad arc at the foot of the Slieve Bloom mountains. The lake's liminal location – on the interface between the wild and the tamed – may have invested it with special meaning, and the area of open water may have been perceived as an opening in the earth giving access to an other- or under-world. The bog would have been a place shaped by non-human forces, and both water and bog may have demanded a votive offering from time to time to placate the supernatural beings who lived there.

The term “hoard” was applied to the Dowris find because it was assumed that it represented a collection of objects all buried at the one time, but the range of material and its watery context suggest that it may have been a diverse set of objects sacrificed over a period of time, perhaps several centuries, around 1000 BCE. To dispose of a complete bronze bucket or cauldron, even one that had seen some use as the centrepiece of a long series of elite ceremonial feasts, must have been an act of particular significance (Waddell 2010: 233). Its submergence in the lake may have been part of a public ceremony officiated by someone of religious and/or political importance. The depositing of a broken spear or sword, on the other hand, might conceivably have been a more private commemorative event coinciding with its use in a victorious combat or with the death of its warrior owner. A woodworker's axe or gouge may have been a craftsman's tribute, and scrap bronze or polishing stone the offering of a metalworker. Some poorly finished axeheads may even have been specially made or selected for ceremonial discarding. In short, the diverse range of objects may denote a hierarchy of participants as well as a protracted series of different sorts of performance, some communal in the hope of benefiting a social group, some perhaps of a more individual nature.

Lakes, wells, groves, hills, burial mounds and royal sites all had supernatural associations and were points of access to the otherworld (Carey 1987c) and the great oval earthwork known as Ráth na Rí on the Hill of Tara may be another good

archaeological example of another form of engagement with the subterranean supernatural. Limited excavation has demonstrated that this huge monument was enclosed by a large earthen bank with an internal ditch and with a timber palisade on the inner edge of the ditch. It was a laborious undertaking dating to sometime in the first century BCE. The ditch alone was rock-cut to a maximum depth of 2.7m with a width of about seven metres at ground level. This reversal of the natural order, placing a ditch inside rather than outside a rampart, has long been recognised as a means of demarcating a sacred space, perhaps for containing supernatural forces and even protecting the outside world. However, as Gerard Dowling (2006) has argued, this enormous ditch, cutting into Tara, may have had a potent magical significance of its own, intruding as it did into the world beneath. The earthen bank outside and the timber palisade within may not just have delimited the consecrated space of the interior but may also have offered some protection from the forces emanating from the ditch. The suggestion of the special nature of the ditch itself is reinforced by the large amount and the composition of material recovered from it in two relatively small excavation trenches. Disarticulated human bone, the skeleton of an infant and quantities of animal bone were the principal finds and Edel Bhreathnach (2002: 117) has noted that the presence of the remains of butchered dogs and horses may have had particular cultic associations. Like the extraordinary discoveries in pits and ditches in some late prehistoric Continental cult sites – such as the great pit at Vertault (Côte d’Or, France) that contained the carcasses of ten pole-axed stallions (Ménier 1992) – these bones at Tara may also have been consigned to the ditch as offerings to otherworldly powers.

As already mentioned, the otherworld was often seen as a land of peace and plenty in medieval Ireland, a place of perpetual feasting. It was also a timeless region and, sometimes, the mirror image of the human world. In *Echtra Nera* (The Adventure of Nera), much of the action occurs at the great feast of *Samain* (1 November), the beginning of winter, when the barriers between the two worlds are at their weakest. Emerging from the *síd*, Nera brings the “fruits of summer” (*toirthe sam-raid*) with him; it is evident that when it is summer in one world, it is winter in the other (Carey 1988: 72). This particular sort of otherworldly inversion is rarely mentioned, but it is alluded to in the early thirteenth-century *History of the Danes* of Saxo Grammaticus where the king Hadingus is approached at supper by a woman bearing hemlock inviting him to see in what part of the world such fresh plants might grow in winter: she enveloped him in her cloak and “vanished away with him beneath the earth”; they both found themselves eventually in a sunny otherworld region where such herbs grew (Davidson & Fisher 1996: 30; Ellis 1943: 172). Jens Peter Schjødt (2007: 143) has drawn attention to the significance of another element of the Hadingus story. His journey to the otherworld ends when he and the woman who had taken him there come to a wall. She cuts the head off a cock and

throws it over the wall. The cock crows and lives, and Hadingus abruptly finds himself in the real world again. There is a striking inverted parallel between this myth and the ritual to be found in the celebrated tenth-century account of a Viking ship burial by the Arab traveller Ibn Fadlan. This complex funeral of a chieftain of the Rus people involved the bringing of the corpse and grave offerings to the ship along with the sacrifice of a slave girl who is eventually burnt with chieftain and ship. Part of the ritual included the decapitation of a hen by the girl who threw away the head; some men then threw its body into the ship. Schjødt emphasises the contrasts here. In Ibn Fadlan's account of the funeral ritual, a woman is about to join the dead, the body of a hen is thrown by men into the ship, the world of the dead. In the Hadingus myth, a man is about to leave that world and a cock's head is thrown by a woman into the land of the living.

It is an intriguing possibility that this notion of reversal or inversion between two worlds may have been a widespread belief and one occasionally reflected in the archaeological record. The Scandinavian Bronze Age has a remarkable iconographic repertoire on stone and bronze that includes a complex solar cosmography with representations of motifs such as boats, solar imagery, human figures and horses. In some instances a solar boat is depicted travelling from left to right, that is from east to west, in its daytime journey across the heavens, but it may also be shown moving from left to right, which represents its nighttime journey through the underworld, from whence it emerges at dawn to resume its cosmic course (Kaul 2006). Images of the solar boat with bird's-head prow and stern on a series of bronze vessels in Central Europe also seem to reflect a similar theme (Wirth 2006). The celebrated "chariot of the sun" from Trundholm in Denmark is perhaps the best known illustration of this Bronze Age belief. The gold-plated bronze disc is drawn by a horse from left to right, an image of the sun's westward route across the heavens in the northern hemisphere. When reversed, the obverse of the bronze disc, which was apparently never gold-covered, is pulled from right to left and again – it is argued – represents the sun's journey under the land or under the sea towards the dawn in the east (Kaul 1998: 30; Waddell 2012). In the famous Iron Age burial at Hochdorf (Baden-Württemberg, Germany), the dead man was interred with all the status symbols of the Hallstatt-period elite: a drinking set, a wagon and rich personal ornaments. Craftsmen were summoned to the burial site to make some of the ornaments including strips of decorated sheet gold for the dead man's shoes (figure 3). Since golden shoes were a symbolic attribute of kingship in various manifestations of Celtic tradition (Koch 1987: 33), this individual was probably of the highest status, as indeed the other grave goods such as wagon and drinking set suggest. The shoes had perished, but the decorative golden attachments indicated that the right shoe had been placed on the left foot and vice versa (Biel 1982: 82). Eugène Warmenbol (2007: 392) has remarked that it is unlikely this was a simple mistake

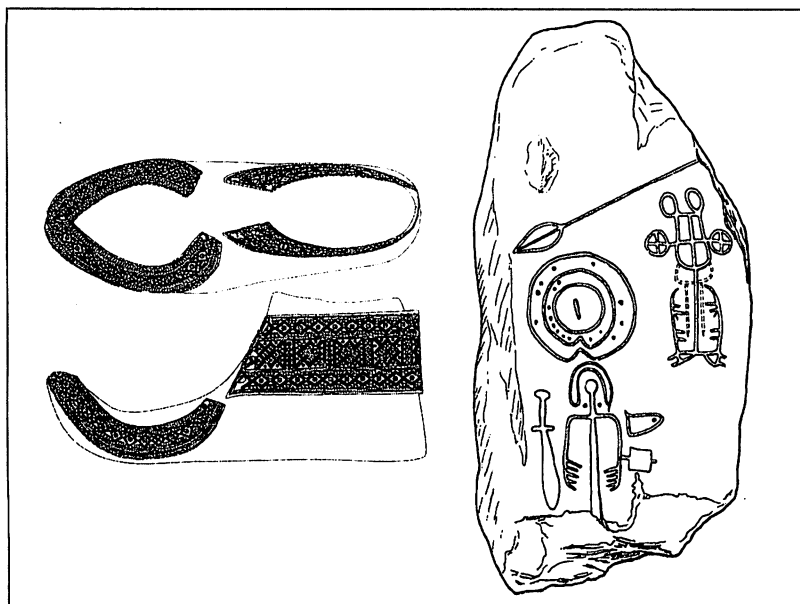


Figure 3: Left: a reconstruction of one of the shoes bearing gold decoration from the princely grave at Hochdorf, Baden-Württemberg (after Biel 1982). Right: an engraved slab from Cabeza de Buey, Badajoz (after Harrison 2004) depicting a helmeted warrior with sword, spear, shield and chariot; the shield is shown reversed with the grip rather than the frontal boss visible.

in this highly ritualised context. He draws attention to Hittite mythology where the god of fertility and agriculture Telipinu disappears in winter having put his sandals on the wrong feet. He undergoes a symbolic death and spends a time in the land of the dead with predictable effects on nature until he is located and brought back to this world (Hoffner 1998: 14). There may be an echo of this notion of reversed footwear in Slavonic folklore too, where the *leshyy* or *leshii* are malevolent demon-gods, spirits of the forest, who are particularly active in the spring after dying in autumn like the leaves on the trees among which they lived. Their style of dress included clothing worn back to front and shoes worn on the wrong feet (Dixon-Kennedy 1998: 166; Alexinsky 1968: 290). It must be confessed there is a great distance, in every sense of the word, between an ancient Anatolian myth and more recent eastern European folk beliefs, but it is possible that this idea of reversed footwear associated with an otherworldly journey was once a commoner motif now lost in the extraordinary welter of myth and folklore about shoes – from widespread

tokens of good luck to the “hel-shoes” of the dead worn on their way to Valhalla in Nordic mythology (Sartori 1894).

There is an obvious difference between the wearing of shoes on the wrong feet and the wearing of just one shoe with the other foot unshod, but it is possible that the rite of the single shoe or sandal, like reversed footwear, is another form of inversion. In addition to its role in royal inauguration ceremonies in Irish tradition, Proinsias Mac Cana (1973: 162) has noted various references to otherworld figures associated with a single piece of footwear. For instance, it was said of Ábartach mac Ildathaig, one of the supernatural Tuatha Dé Danann, “It was you who, in seeking to escape to Doireann, alternated the golden sandal so that each of your feet had the turn of it”. Another otherworld figure also wore one golden sandal which, as he walked, was on whichever foot touched the ground; another wore a silver sandal in a similar fashion; and yet another wore a silver sandal on his left foot and a golden one on his right. As Mac Cana suggests, this may be a motif in some way related to the Indian taboo that prohibited a king treading the ground unshod lest his potency be drained away into the earth, but in early Irish tradition its supernatural associations are not in doubt.

There is now an appreciation in archaeological studies that prehistoric burials may be more than just events for social display, and that grave goods may bear some relationship not just to a past life but also to who the deceased might become in an afterlife. His shoes may suggest that the Hochdorf prince was deliberately prepared for an otherworld journey to a mirror realm where all might be inverted. Half a millennium earlier, a series of funerary or commemorative stelae in south-western Iberia are engraved with schematic motifs including stylized figures of warriors, swords, spears, chariots and circular shields (Harrison 2004). It is clear that the shields are frequently shown not with their central frontal boss but with the rectangular handle or grip on the back of the object clearly depicted (figure 3). The shield is reversed because the dead warrior presumably belongs to the otherworld.

Careful scrutiny of funerary evidence may provide some more clues for a deeply rooted concept of an inverted otherworld, a belief conceivably widely distributed in time and space – as descriptions of the proto-Indo-European otherworld, a paradisiacal place where things are “totally *other*” (Lincoln 1980: 164), would suggest. It is true of course that “the otherworld is impervious to archaeological exploration,” as T.F. O’Rahilly (1946: 281) once wrote, but while it had no material existence, archaeology has the capability to identify processes and practices in the past, and those for whom the otherworld was a reality may have left us some material evidence of their belief. The souterrain and ogam inscription at Uaimh na gCat would seem to be an early medieval physical expression of this.