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Author(s)	Elizabeth FitzPatrick
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Author(s): Elizabeth Fitz Patrick

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Formaoil na Fiann: Hunting Preserves and Assembly Places in Gaelic Ireland

Elizabeth FitzPatrick

Introduction

The organization of land resources, and cultural practices relating to land-use in the early medieval kingdoms and later medieval lordships of Gaelic Ireland, is a complex area of inquiry.¹ Clues to the nature of topography and land-use lie in Irish-language place-names. Therefore, a consideration of the meaning of place-names is essential to the generation of an atlas of any Gaelic territory. This paper is concerned with the physical and cultural landscape manifestations of the word *formaoil* (Old Irish *formáel*), which is used as a noun and an adjective and occurs in the place-names of thirty-five townlands in Ireland. It is also cited in historical and literary contexts and more especially in *fiannaíocht*, where it is conceived as a hunting preserve and the liminal world of Fionn Mac Cumhaill and his *fián*. While *formaoil* place-names cited in *fiannaíocht* do not always have an onomastic reality, it is the etymology of the word and the context in which it is deployed that makes its instances in that genre significant. The term alludes to hunting grounds, and it will be seen that several *formaoil* locations are identifiable as hunting preserves of early medieval kingdoms and later medieval lordships.

Formaoil has been given two very different meanings by translators of *fiannaíocht*—Ann Dooley and Harry Roe have taken it as *formáil*, meaning ‘wages,’² in their new translation of *Acallam na Senórach*, while Standish Hayes O’Grady in his translation takes it to

¹ Tom McErlean, “The Irish Townland System of Organisation,” in *Landscape Archaeology in Ireland*, ed. Terence Reeves-Smyth and Fred Hammond, British Archaeological Research, British Series 116 (Oxford: B.A.R., 1983), 315–40.

² E. G. Quin, ed., *Dictionary of the Irish Language: Compact Edition* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1990), see s.v. *formáil*, 333: 348.29.

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be *formáel*, which he translates as ‘bare’ or ‘bald.’³ In a landscape context, the word clearly has the meaning ‘bare’⁴ or ‘bare-topped,’⁵ and furthermore, the nineteenth-century antiquary, John O’Donovan, gave it a more specific reading as ‘round hill,’ which best reflects its topography.⁶ The Irish townland names derived from *formaoil* are variously anglicized as Fermoyale, Formal, Formil, Formoyale, Formweel, Forramoyale, Ballyformoyale.⁷ The terrain of these townlands is marginal, characterized by sparsely vegetated rocky pasture, bog and shrubby woodland, generally but not exclusively, in upland. In some instances uplands carrying the place-name are now the sites of impenetrable commercial coniferous woodland. As might be expected of a hunting preserve, rivers and streams, and especially lakes, are also found in *formaoil* landscapes.

Usually, the highest point of a land parcel that carries the place-name *formaoil* is marked with a trigonometrical point on the Ordnance Survey six-inch maps and is identifiable in the field as a round, denuded hillock. It is this feature that is also contrived in *fiannaíocht* as *Suidhe Finn*, or the seat from which Fionn views the hunt. In the prosimetric text *Acallam na Senórach*, the compilation of which Joseph Nagy dates to the thirteenth century,⁸ Cailte takes

³ Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, ed. and trans., *Tales of the Elders of Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 183; Standish Hayes O’Grady, *Silva Gadelica (I-XXXI): a collection of tales in Irish with extracts illustrating persons and places*, 2 vols. (London: Williams and Northgate, 1892), 2: 244-45.

⁴ Quin, *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, see *formáel*, 333:348.9.

⁵ See *formhaol* as translated by Niall Ó Dónaill, *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (Dublin: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1977), 573.

⁶ *Ordnance Survey Name Books*, Sligo 1: Achonry to Killaraght (n.p. 1836-1837), 25.

⁷ William Donnelly and Henry Wilkie, *Census of Ireland: General Alphabetical Index to the Townlands, and Towns, Parishes and Baronies of Ireland* (Dublin: Alexander Thom, 1861).

⁸ Joseph Falaky Nagy, “Life in the Fast Lane: the *Acallam na Senórach*,” in *Medieval Celtic Literature and Society*, ed. Helen Fulton (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 117-31, at 117.

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the king of Connacht to *Formaile na Fiann*, which he laments as once the choicest hunting-ground of the *fian*:

*Is annsin tangadur na sluaig reompo co Breicsliab
.i. Sliab Formaile i Connachta / risa raiter Sliab
Formaile i Connachtaib isin tan-so / & co Suidhe
Find a mullach in t- shleibe*

Again they came on: to spotted mountain that is
bald-topped mountain in Connacht / which is today
called bald-topped mountain of the Connachtmen /
and to Fionn's Seat on the mountain summit.⁹

Suidhe Finn place-names, as recorded by the first Ordnance Survey of the nineteenth century, tend to be the summits of low hills, often marked by cairns, and rarely mountain tops above 300 meters above sea level. *Formaoil* and *Suidhe Finn* place-names meet in some landscapes such as 'Carnsefin,' which overlooks the townlands of Formoyle East and West on the north-western coast of the Burren in Co. Clare.

The wilderness aspect of hunting grounds in Gaelic Ireland, expressed in the place-name *formaoil*, contrasts with the designed deer parks of English and other western European elites where hunting was also an expression of status.¹⁰ This key difference in the hunting landscape is highlighted in an observation made by John Dunton during his sojourn with a member of the Uí Fhlaithbheartaigh gentry in the Moycullen district of Iarchonnacht at the end of the seventeenth century. Dunton wrote,

Oflaghertie invited me to walk a small mile to view
their deer. I willingly consented because I did not

⁹ Cited from the Corpus of Electronic Texts edition of *Acallam na Senórach* I, compiled by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 486. 6530-32; see "CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts," <http://www.ucc.ie/celt>, accessed January 1, 2013. The digital edition is based on Whitley Stokes, *Acallam na Senórach*, in *Irische Texte* series 4, vol. 1, ed. Whitley Stokes and Ernst Windisch (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1900), xiv, 1-438. The translation is based on O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, 2:244-45.

¹⁰ Oliver H. Creighton, *Designs Upon the Land: Elite Landscapes of the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2009).

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expect to heare of [a] deer park in so wild a place;
we walked over mountains and through boggs, thro
thick and thin, sometimes out and sometimes in until
I lost the heels of my shoos, which tyred me soe that
I thought I should never come to the miles end.¹¹

Formaoil in Fiannaíocht

In *The Cult of the Sacred Centre*, Proinsias Mac Cana contrasts the undefined liminal landscape setting of *fiannaíocht* with the known geography of the tales of the Ulster Cycle. He sees the landscape through which the *fian* move as “ostensibly that of the Irish countryside ... generally furnished with real placenames, yet it exists in a fourth dimension.”¹² Seán Ó Coileáin remarked that “It might equally be said of the events of the *Fianaigheacht*, at least from the twelfth century onwards, that even if they had happened we would scarcely have any idea where they did.”¹³ In a proposal that *formaoil* place-names cited in *fiannaíocht* have any onomastic reality in the Irish landscape, Rolf Baumgarten’s understanding of the learned practice of ‘etymologizing’ as a literary device of *fiannaíocht* must be taken into consideration.¹⁴ As he demonstrated, many place-names in *fiannaíocht* are not proper names but the product of etymology. Through the figure of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, a warrior-hunter who lives outside of society in the wilderness with his *fian*, the meaning of *formaoil* is communicated as untamed terrain, a hunting ground. *Formaoil* is Fionn’s sobriquet—he is defined by that place. He is variously described as ‘Finn of Formoyle’ (*Find a*

¹¹ Andrew Carpenter, ed., *Teague Land: or a Merry Ramble to the Wild Irish (1698) by John Dunton* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 60-61.

¹² Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Cult of the Sacred Centre: Essays on Celtic Ideology* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2011), 249.

¹³ Seán Ó Coileáin, “Place and Placename in *Fianaigheacht*,” *Studia Hibernica* 27 (1993): 45-60, at 45.

¹⁴ Rolf Baumgarten, “Placenames, etymology, and the structure of *Fianaigheacht*,” in *Fiannaíocht: Essays on the Fenian Tradition of Ireland and Scotland*, ed. Bo Almqvist, Séamas Ó Catháin and Pádraig Ó Héalaí (Dublin: Folklore of Ireland Society, 1987), 1-24, at 23.

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Formail)¹⁵ in *Acallam na Senórach* and ‘prince of Formaoíl’ (*Fionn flaith Formaoile*) in *Duanaire Finn*.¹⁶ *Formaoil* can be in many places and is, in the context of *fiannaíocht*, mostly a state of being rather than a specific geo-reference. However, the underlying reality of the *fian* as a social institution of early historic Ireland, and considerations by Joseph Nagy and Kim McCone of the evidence for their ideals and ways of life, predicate actual places in the landscape associated with their hunting exploits.¹⁷

Although the young aristocrats classed as *féinnidi* and *diberga* are quintessentially vagrant and without property, and generally in conflict with settled society represented by the *túath*, they are sometimes found performing services for kings, and must otherwise be found in marginal lands of *túatha* given to hunting and wilderness ways of life. In other words, designated hunting preserves of kingdoms may have been the habitat of the early historic *fian* in Ireland. Where those hunting preserves are, is perhaps intimated by *formaoil* landscapes, whether indicated by place-names that embrace that term, such as Formoyle on the north shore of Lough Gill (Co. Sligo), or by places that have comparable topographies and are distinguished by later deer parks and by monument names referring to Fionn Mac Cumhaill and his *fian*. Shantemon in East Bréifne (Co. Cavan), a round bare-topped hill in rugged country overlooking Shantemon Lough, is a typical *formaoil* landscape, although it does not have that place-name reference. The lower southern slope of the hill was used as a deer park in the nineteenth century. A small rock-cut enclosure of unknown antiquity crowns the summit and a stone

¹⁵ Ó Corráin, *Acallam na Senórach* I, 27: 2544.

¹⁶ Gerard Murphy, ed. and trans., *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Finn, Part III*, Irish Texts Society 28 (London: Irish Texts Society, 1933), 92, 93.

¹⁷ Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1985); Kim McCone, “The Celtic and Indo-European origins of the *Fíán*,” in *The Gaelic Finn Tradition*, ed. S. J. Arbuthnot and Geraldine Parsons, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), 14-30, at 20, 22; Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Maynooth Monographs 3 (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990), 205-6.

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alignment called ‘Finn McCool’s Fingers’ is situated on the northern declivity of the hill (Fig. 1). Shantemon is recorded as the venue for the inaugurations and oireachtais of the Uí Raghallaigh lords of East Bréifne in the sixteenth century.¹⁸



Figure 1: ‘Finn McCool’s Fingers,’ a stone row on the lower slopes of Shantemon hill, in East Bréifne (photo: author)

Folk associations struck between ‘giants,’ Fionn Mac Cumhaill and *formaoil* landscapes, and the attribution of prehistoric megalithic tombs and stone alignments to Fionn and his *fian*, are also important indicators of hunting grounds. Nicholas Dowdall, writing in 1682 about Formoyle O’Farrell, south of Rathcline in Co. Longford, remarked that “This place is of great note in Irish History, it being the dwelling place of the Famous Giant Henry Maccoole and his Offspring and is called in Irish writings *fformalenetiene* which signifies the Chief place of the Giants.”¹⁹ Formoyle O’Farrell was situated in the Ó Fearghail Buidhe lordship of southern Anghal (south and west Co. Longford) and in the earlier territory of the Uí

¹⁸ James Carney, ed. and trans., *A Genealogical History of the O’Reillys: Written in the Eighteenth Century by Eoghan Ó Raghallaigh and Incorporating Portion of the Earlier Works of Tomas Fitzsimons* (Cavan: Cumann Sheanchais Bhreifne, 1959), 42-43, 47-49, 90-91, 94-96.

¹⁹ Dublin, Trinity College MS 883/ii, ff. 258-61, “Description of the County of Longford, by N[icholas] Dowdall Esqr., 1682.”

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Chuinne of Muintir Giollagáin, a branch of the Conmhaicne in the Irish midlands.

Formaoil Landscapes

Two significant hunting grounds, both designated *Formaoil na Fiann*, are set in Leinster and in Connacht, the first in the *Book of Leinster* and the second in the earliest recension of *Acallam na Senórach*. Seathrún Céitinn in *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* noted the place called “Formaoil na bhFian in Uí Cheinnsealaigh which was given to Fionn Mac Cumhaill by the king of Leinster.”²⁰ Edmund Hogan in his *Onomasticon* referenced its earlier record in the *Book of Leinster* as a hill given by the king of Leinster to Dubthach Maccu Lugir, and he identified it as the townland of Fermoy and Coolintaggart, which once formed a single townland of 310 acres on the manor of Esmonde in the parish of Kilkevan, north of Gorey in Co. Wexford.²¹ The place-name Fermoy is now obsolete, but the townlands of Coolintaggart and Coolintaggart Hill remain. The landscape has also been reclaimed and improved, so that much of its former wilderness elements have been replaced by pasture. What is significant about this identification, however, is that Fermoy or ‘*Formaoil na bhFian in Uí Cheinnsealaigh*’ lies in the heart of the landscape of the ‘Lagan of Leinster’ which was the core patrimonial land of the Uí Cheinnsealaigh on the Wexford-Wicklow border.²² The assembly place of the Uí Cheinnsealaigh lies north of ‘*Formaoil na bhFian*’ in Loggan Lower townland. Pallis [*pailís*], to the southwest of Loggan, is indicative of a royal residence of the high medieval period and is recorded as the landholding of the Meic Eochadha poets in the

²⁰ Patrick S. Dinneen, ed. and trans., *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn: The History of Ireland* by Geoffrey Keating, D. D., Volume II, *containing the first book of the history from sect. XV to the end*, Irish Texts Society 8 (London: Irish Texts Society, 1908), 330, 331.

²¹ Edmund Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1910), 428.

²² Pádraig Ó Macháin, “Bás File,” *Éigse* 27 (1993) 101-14, at 101.

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sixteenth century.²³ Service families often re-occupied *pailis* residences (usually moated sites) after they had been vacated by lords in favor of the more fashionable tower-house at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Meic Eochadha were the hereditary inaugurators of the Uí Cheinnsealaigh, and their role is encapsulated in the assembly site name, Leac Mhic Eochadha, as recorded by Seathrún Céitinn.²⁴ The inauguration site, the *pailis* celebrated in the townlands of that name, and the presence of the landholding of a service family in the form of the poet-inaugurator, point to the dynastic centre of the Uí Cheinnsealaigh. In this context, ‘*Formaoil na bhFian*’ is likely to have been a hunting preserve on the royal demesne of that dynasty.

Establishing an onomastic reality for ‘*Formaile na Fiann*’ in Connacht, as cited in the earliest recension of *Acallam na Senórach*, is a more challenging task, because there are no less than five locations in the counties of Roscommon, Sligo and Leitrim that could qualify as this place. These are Lough O Flynn and Ballyformoyle in Co. Roscommon, the Bricklieve mountain region of Lough Arrow and Formoyle north of Lough Gill in Co. Sligo, and Formoyle north-west of and overlooking Glencar Lake in Co. Leitrim. What is perhaps more important about pursuing ‘*Formaile na Fiann*’ of the *Acallam* is that it leads to an understanding that *formaoil* places on the Connacht landscape, as elsewhere in Ireland, can be proposed as hunting grounds of Gaelic elites.

The chronicles note significant events in relation to a place called ‘*Sliabh Formaeile*’ in Connacht for the year 1051 and ‘*lucht na Formaili*’—a people distinguished by that place-name—in 1461. In 1051 “a victory was gained over the Connmaicni of Sliabh

²³ Thomas F. O’Rahilly, “Irish Poets, Historians, and Judges in English Documents, 1538-1615,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics and Literature* 36 (1922): 86-120, at 91.

²⁴ Patrick S. Dinneen, ed. and trans, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn: The History of Ireland* by Geoffrey Keating, D. D., Volume III, *containing the second book of the history*, Irish Texts Society 9 (London: Irish Texts Society, 1908), 14-15; Elizabeth FitzPatrick, *Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland c.1100-1600: A Cultural Landscape Study* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), 91-92, at 104.

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Formaeile by Aedh Ua Conchobhair, where a slaughter was made of the Conmhaicni.”²⁵ The antiquary John O’Donovan, in a footnote to that entry in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, wrote “This was the ancient name of Sliabh-Uí-Fhloinn, in the west of the county of Roscommon, where a sept of the Conmhaicne were seated at this period.”²⁶ By this he means the area around Lough O Flynn, north of Ballinlough and in the south-west end of Machaire, the former lordship of the Uí Conchobhair of Síol Muireadaigh. The exact location of ‘*Sliabh Formaeile*’ of the Conmhaicne is the marginal land represented by the townlands of Mountain Upper and Lower bordering on the River Suck, together with Cloonsuck and the townlands with the promising names of Kilmore (‘great wood’) and Cloonelt (‘meadow or lawn of the hind’) on the north-east side of Lough O Flynn.

The later chronicle entry for 1461 in the *Annals of Connacht*, relating to ‘*lucht na Formaili*,’ refers to a raid conducted on that community by Domhnall Cam Mac Donnchadha, lord of the Connacht lordship of Tír nAilella: “A great prey was taken from the people of Formael by the sons of Domhnall Cam Mac Donnchada and some of the sons of Brian Mac Donnchada.”²⁷ It has been proposed that ‘*lucht na Formaili*’ was located at Ballyformoyle, south of Keadew in north Roscommon.²⁸ The historical geography of this townland places it in the heartland of the Meic Dhiarmada lordship of Magh Luirg, bordering the south-east side of the lordship of Tír nAilella. The townland of Ballyformoyle, with its characteristic

²⁵ John O’Donovan, ed. and trans., *Annala Rioghachta Eireann: Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters; From the Earliest Period to the Year 1616*, 7 vols. (Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1848-1851, repr. Dublin: De Búrca Rare Books, 1990), 1051, pp. 860-61; hereafter cited as *AFM*.

²⁶ *AFM* 860 n. c.

²⁷ A. Martin Freeman, ed., *Annála Connacht: The Annals of Connacht (A.D. 1224-1544)* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1944), 1461.32: *Pred mor for lucht na Formaili la clainn Domnaill Chaim Meic Dondchada 7 la blad do chlainn Briain Meic Dondchada*; hereafter *Annals of Connacht* are cited as *AConn*.

²⁸ Freeman, *Annála Connacht*, 506 n. 1.

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round hill and marginal landscape associated with the place-name *formaoil*, is situated just south-east of Kilronan, which was the landholding of the Ó Duibhgeannáin *ollamh* in *senchas* to the Mac Diarmada, a significant service family who were also *comharbai* of Kilronan. The proximity of service families to *formaoil* landscapes is a pattern that is discernible in the organization of land in several lordships. Ballyformoyle, in that context, also merits consideration as a hunting preserve of the Meic Dhiarmada lords of Magh Luirg.

The lands of ‘*lucht na Formaili*,’ raided by Mac Donnchadha in 1461, are, however, more likely to have been at Formoyle north of Lough Gill (Fig. 2), in the march between the Ó Conchobhair Sligeach lordship of Cairbre and the Uí Ruairc lordship of West Bréifne, both of which bounded the north end of the Meic Dhonnchadha lordship of Tír nAilella. The landscape of Formoyle on the north shore of Lough Gill was situated in the *túath* and medieval parish of Calraighe (Calry) and was very much borderland in the later medieval period. For reasons that will become clear, it was contested between the lordships of upper Connacht and the lordship of West Bréifne, which was a pale shadow of the once powerful and extensive Uí Ruairc kingdom of Uí Briuin Bréifne that had declined after 1173.²⁹ The lordships of Cairbre, West Bréifne and Tír nAilella were frequently in conflict and therefore it is likely that Formoyle by Lough Gill was the target of the Mac Donnchadha’s raid on ‘*lucht na Formaili*’ in 1461. Earlier, in 1346,

Vast war broke out between Ualgarg O Ruairc and Ruaidri son of Cathal O Conchobair. They fought a battle at Calry, in which O Ruairc was defeated and all his gallowglasses were killed—that is to say, [those commanded by] Mag Buirrci and the son of Niall Cam—and most of his own followers were slain along with them. O Ruairc himself was pursued and killed the same day by Maelruanaid Mac Donnachada.³⁰

²⁹ FitzPatrick, *Royal Inauguration*, 211.

³⁰ AConn 1346.2: *Cocad adbalmor do fas etir Ualgard h. Ruairc ⁊ Ruaidri mac Cathail h. Conchobair, ⁊ troid do thabaird da cheli a Calraighe Locha Gile ⁊*

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Calraighe, which was split between the lordships of Cairbre and West Bréifne in the late medieval period, was the patrimony of the Ó Ruairc, erstwhile king of Uí Briuin Bréifne. It is recalled in an augural ode by Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird (1550-1620) to Brian Ó Ruairc, in which the poet describes him as *Rí Calraighe na gcreach líonmhar*.³¹ The late medieval tower-house residence of the Ó Ruairc was situated on the eastern shore of Lough Gill in the townland of Kilmore, while Ó Ruairc's chronicler and *ollamh* in poetry and music, Ó Cuirnín, resided on Inishmore or Church Island, directly south of Formoyle on Lough Gill (Fig. 2).

In 1416, the church on Inishmore was burned and "O Cuirnín's books, including the Lebar Gearr of the Muintir Cuirnín, and his splendid valuables, his ornamental cup, his timpe and his harp were burned in it."³² In this borderland of conflict and old allegiances, the Uí Chuirnín of Inishmore became victims of territorial geography after the retraction of Uí Briuin Bréifne, and were exposed to attack by Connacht septs harrying the borderlands of West Bréifne. At the end of the sixteenth century, a person of that family name features in a list of pardons: one Thomas O Curnyne with an address at 'Slyweformile,' which is perhaps '*Sliab Formaile*' as cited in the *Acallam*.³³ The presence of a service family in close proximity to a *formaoil* landscape (a hunting ground) probably of Uí Briuin Bréifne during their period of expansion and, subsequently, of

maidm do thabairt ar h. Ruairc and sin 7 a galloclaich uli do marbad and .i. Mag Buirrci 7 mac Neill Chaim 7 a muintir uli do furgla do marbad mar oen riu, 7 h. Ruairc fein do lenmain 7 a marbad la Maelruanaid Mac Dondchada in la-sin.

³¹ "King of Calraighe, of numerous cattle raids"; Eleanor Knott, *An Introduction to Irish Syllabic Poetry of the Period 1200-1600* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1928), 23.

³² AConn 1416.23: *Tempall Insi Mori for Loch Gili do loscad in hoc anno 7 screptra h. Curnin for lebar nGirr Muintire Curnin 7 a seoit uasli 7 a copa cumtaig 7 a timpan 7 a chlarsech do loscad ann beus.*

³³ Kenneth W. Nicholls, ed., *The Irish Fians of the Tudor Sovereigns During the Reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Philip & Mary, and Elizabeth I*, Volume 3: 1586-1603 (Dublin: Éamonn de Búrca, 1994), no. 5497, 128.

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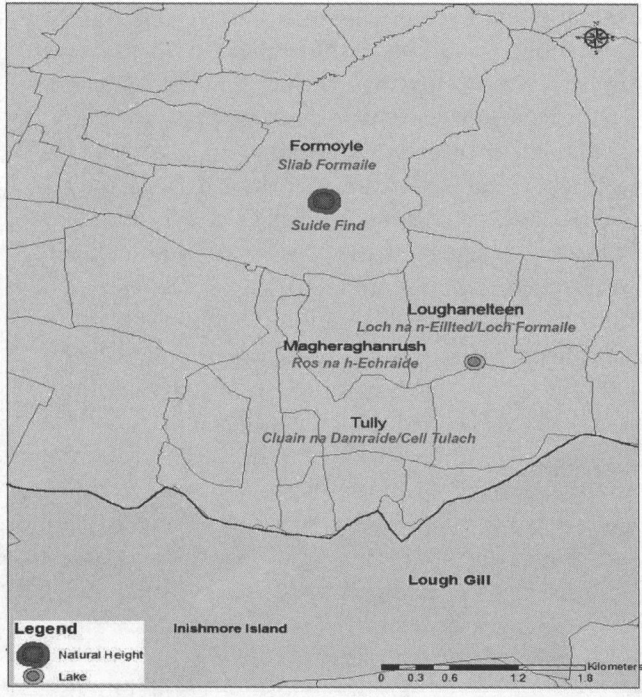


Figure 2: Map showing the townlands and their place-names around Formoyle north of Lough Gill, with accompanying Irish place-names taken from the description of ‘Formaile na Fiann’ in *Acallam na Senórach* (drawing: Paul Naessens)

Ó Conchobhair Sligeach of Cairbre, emphasizes the frequency of this land-organization pattern in Gaelic territories.

Formoyle townland, opposite Inishmore Island on the northern shore of Lough Gill, is challenging hilly terrain of ca. 1250 acres overlooked from the east by Keelogyboy Mountain (Fig. 2). The topographical feature *formaoil*, which gives its name to this place, is a prominent crag 715 feet above sea level. The only antiquity in this terrain is a court tomb designated ‘Giant’s Grave’ which lies north of *formaoil*. The land falls gradually southwards from this eminence to Magheraghanrush townland, which has the alternative name of

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Deerpark, reflecting the creation of a deer park there in the eighteenth century and a local topography suited to deer.³⁴ The townland is flanked on either side by two small lakes, Colgagh Lough to the west and Lough Anelteen ('lake of the hinds') to the east. Magheraghanrush is also distinguished by a very fine prehistoric megalithic tomb that crowns a limestone ridge in the townland (Fig. 3). The records of the first Ordnance Survey indicate that it was known locally as the 'Druid's Altar' and 'Giant's Grave.' It is the largest court tomb in Ireland and consists of an elongated court, with a pair of twin galleries placed at the east end and a single gallery set opposite them.³⁵ The monument is without its cairn covering. There is a wedge tomb ca. 600 meters to the south of it.



Figure 3: The Giant's Grave—an impressive Neolithic court tomb on a ridge in the townland of Magheraghanrush or Deerpark (photo by author)

³⁴ Ordnance Survey Name Books, Sligo 1, 20.

³⁵ Seán Ó Nualláin, *Survey of the Megalithic Tombs of Ireland*, Volume 5: County Sligo (Dublin: Stationary Office, 1989), 47.

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Excavation took place at both of these monuments in the nineteenth century. Remains of an adult male, a child, two other individuals, and deer bones and sea shells, were recovered from the wedge tomb.³⁶ Magheraghanrush and its environs is a very concentrated funerary and ritual landscape that also contains two stone circles, two ring-barrows, three mounds and a cairn. This numinous cultural landscape of megaliths and mounds, a place associated in folklore with giants, can also be proposed as the tribal assembly place or venue for Óenach Loch Gile, mentioned only in the ‘Life of St. Cellach of Killala,’ which tells the story of the early historic king of Connacht, Eogan Bél.³⁷ He defeated the Uí Néill of Ulster at the battle of Sligo and was buried twice, first at Ráth Uí Fiachrach and subsequently at Óenach Loch Gile (*ocus ro hadnaicedh hé thall i naenach locha Gile ocus a bhél fri lár*; and away there in the flat land of the assembly of Lough Gill he was buried and with his mouth downwards).³⁸ Eogan, who had been injured in the battle of Sligo, “prescribed the manner of his burial” and was interred “in the open field in the borders of clan-Fiachrach, with his spear red in his hand and his face toward the North; ‘for,’ said he, ‘so long as my grave shall confront them, I having also my face turned to them, against Connacht they shall not endure in battle.’”³⁹ His prophesy was fulfilled because any time Connacht and Ulster battled, Ulster lost. However, the kings of the North determined to break that curse by reburying him in their own territory and “so they did, and away there in the flat land of *loch Gile* [Lough Gill] he was buried with his mouth downwards.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Ibid., 48.

³⁷ O’Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, 1: 49-69.

³⁸ Ibid., 1: 50-51; my translation.

³⁹ Ibid., 2:52; *iar sin atbert Eogan a adnacad ocus a gae derg ina láim isin mhuig: ocus mh’aiged for in tuaiscert ocus ar taeb nairceat .i. ua Fiachrach ann sút . ocus in oiret rabursa ocus mh’aiged forrusom ní gébat fri cath inaghaid Connacht ocus aigead m’uaige forru*; ibid., 1: 50.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 2: 52.

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With a hunting ground and an *óenach* located on the north shore of Lough Gill, and the association of this border landscape with the controversial burial place of a king of Connacht, it is tempting to propose that it is also ‘*Formaile na Fiann*,’ the premier hunting preserve of Fionn MacCumhaill and his *fian* as contrived in the *Acallam*. Several of the place-names cited in that text reflect townland and field names recorded by the first Ordnance Survey in the modern landscape north of Lough Gill. The author or authors of the *Acallam* give two place-names, one old and one new, for each of the points in this landscape. The relevant passage reads:

*Is annsin tangadur na shuaig reompo co Breicshliab
.i. / Sliab Formaile i Connachta, risa raiter Sliab
Formaile i Connachtaib / isin tan-so, & co Suide
Find a mullach in t-shleibe, & / mar do t-shuidhidur
ann ro moidedur déra co tróm falcumur tar / a
gruaidib do Chailti ac feicail inn inaid a m-bíth Find
mac / Cumail ina t-shuidhe. “Ocus créd do- beir cáí
ort, a m’ anam, a / Chailti?” ar ri Connacht, “& in
ac feicail in inaid a m-bid Find / ina t-shuidhe &
Formaile na Fiann?” “Iss ed immorro,” ar Cailte, /
“uair rogha selga na gnath-Fheinde in sliab-so, &
Loch na n-Eillted, / risa raiter Loch Formaile isin
tan-so, & Cluain na Damraide, risa / raiter Cell
Tulach isin tan-so, & baile sin Conain Máil meic /
Morna, & Ros na h-Echraide risa raiter inn Airm
isin tan-so, / bail a m-bidis drong d’ a echaib na
Feinde, & Dún Saltrain Sálfhata, / risa raiter Cell
Chaimin ar Succa, & co Moin na Fostada, / risa
raiter Moin in Tachair Conneda isin tan-so, & co
Carraic / ind Fhomorach, risa raiter Dún Mor isin
tan-so.”⁴¹*

Again they came on: to spotted mountain that is bare
mountain in Connacht, which is today called bare

⁴¹ Ó Corráin, *Acallam na Senórach* I, 486.6530–45.

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mountain of the Connachtmen, and to Fionn's Seat on the mountain summit; and as they sat there Caeilte, surveying the place in which Finn was wont to have his seat, wept. "Caeilte, my soul" said the king of Connacht, "what makes thee weep? Is it perhaps the sight of that spot where Finn sat: of Formaile of the Fianna?" "That indeed it is," he answered: "for this mountain was their choicest hunting-ground: round about the lake of the hinds which now is called loch of the Formoyle; and the meadow of the harts presently called cell tulach or 'the church of tulachs,' which was Conan Mael mac Morna's town; and the 'promontory of the steeds' now in 'the place' where a part of the Fianna's horses were kept; on to the dún of Saltran Long-heel, now called Cell Chaeimhín or 'Saint Caeimin's Church' upon the River Suca; then on to Móin na fostadha or 'the moor of the staying, known as Móin an tachair or 'moor of the affray; and so to Carraic an Fhomorach or 'Rock of the pirate,' at this time called dún mór."⁴²

The townland names on the north shore of Lough Gill (Fig. 2) approximate with some of the place-names provided in the *Acallam*: 'Formaile' is Formoyle, 'Lough na n-Eilltedh' is Loughanelteen, 'Ros na nEchraidhe' is Magheraghanrush—but other seekers of 'Formaile na Fiann,' as described by the *Acallam*, have proposed alternative locations such as Bricklieve east of Lough Arrow (Co. Sligo) on the basis that the place-name 'Breicsliab' is cited.⁴³ While this identification may never be satisfactorily resolved, the addition of Formoyle at Lough Gill to the debate brings *formaoil* landscapes and their role in medieval Gaelic society into sharper focus.

⁴² Translation based on O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, 2: 244-45.

⁴³ O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, 2: 244-45; Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum*, 124-25. Note that Hogan corrects O'Donovan, who claimed that *Formaile na Fiann* lay west of Lough Arrow.

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Hunting, Assembly and *Fiannaíocht*

Who conducted the hunting and where it was carried out in the early medieval kingdoms and later medieval lordships of the island are fundamental questions. If, hypothetically, it was the *fian* who performed that role in early historic Ireland, by the later medieval period, particular hereditary officials of the Gaelic lord's household had that duty. The fifteenth-century inauguration ode *Gabh umad, a Fhéidhlimidh, ionnsuigh an carn gan fhuireach!*, probably composed by Torna Ó Maoilchonaire (d. 1468) in anticipation of the inauguration of Feidhlimidh Fionn, son of Ó Conchobhair Ruadh, compares Mac Branáin, chief of Corcu Eachlann and keeper of Ó Conchobhair's hounds, and his company to the *fian* of *Formaoil*:

*Cúlchoimhead ag Eachlannchaibh / Taoiseach
ceithearn is conmhaor / gasradh dhaoineach
dheaghtapaidh / samhail na Féine a Formaoil*

Corcu Eachlann has the rear-guard, leader of
footsoldiers and steward of hounds, a numerous
swift-moving company—like the Fian from
Formaol.⁴⁴

Here in the context of an inauguration ode, a direct comparison is made between a hereditary official performing a service for Ó Conchobhair's household and the *fian* in their wilderness hunting ground. Myles Dillon equates *Formaoil* in this poem with *Sliab Formaile* of *Acallam na Senórach* and follows Standish Hayes O'Grady's and Edmund Hogan's identification of the place as Breicshliab east of Lough Arrow;⁴⁵ but, as argued above, it may be Formoyle adjacent to the tribal assembly place of Lough Gill that the poet had in mind.

⁴⁴ Myles Dillon, "The Inauguration of O'Connor," in *Medieval Studies Presented to Aubrey Gwynn*, ed. J. A. Watt, J. B. Morrall and F. X. Martin (Dublin: C. O. Lochlainn, 1961), 186-202, at 196, 202; Katharine Simms, "*Gabh umad a Fhéidhlimidh* - a fifteenth-century inauguration ode?" *Ériu* 31 (1980): 132-45.

⁴⁵ Dillon, "The Inauguration of O'Connor," 202 n. 20.

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Contemporary hunting practices in Gaelic elite society are also revealed by the writers of *fiannaíocht* in their descriptions of the hunting exploits and prowess of Fionn and his *fian*. Deer (*dam*) in the form of hind (*eilit*), roe (*mang*) and fawn (*allaid*), as well as wild swine/boar (*mucc, torc*), hare (*mil*), wolf (*brecc*) and badger (*brocc*) are fair game in *Acallam na Senórach*. Two types of hunting are referenced: the ambush and the chase. A deer ambush is ordered by Cailte in order to catch a stag. He asks Coscrach to send messengers to Munster to collect his seven hunting nets or toils. Having acquired the nets, Cailte then disposes

*tiugh na bfer ocus imat na con in teolus do shaeil in
damh do thoidecht. ocus do chóraig a líonta fiadaig
ar alltaib ocus ar esaib ocus ar innberaib in
fherainn. ocus do riacht in fiad mór dá ninnsaigid
mar a ticed gacha bliadna . ocus atchonnairc
Cailte in dam allaid ac tuidecht co háth in daim
ar Sláine ocus ghabus in coscraig .i. a shleg ocus
tuc rot murchair do'n dam ocus sé ag lenmain isin
lón . . .*⁴⁶

the bulk of the men and greater part of the hounds in the direction from which he supposed that the stag would come. Upon the precipices and waterfalls and invers of the country he stretched his nets, and the great deer (as his habit yearly was) came at them. Caeilte, seeing him come to *áth an daimh* on the Slaney, grasped the *coscrach* [spear] and as the deer was entangled in the toils smote him with a mighty throw . . .

⁴⁷

The method displayed here is a deer-ambush involving a group of hunters who drive the stag towards the toils where the animal becomes entangled and is easily killed by Cailte who wields a spear. Fifty nets (*lin*) to catch deer (*l. lin fri h-aige altai esti amach*) are mentioned in the ninth-century king tale *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*,

⁴⁶ O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, 1:184.

⁴⁷ Translation adapted from *ibid.*, 2: 208.

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which is found in the fourteenth-century Yellow Book of Lecan.⁴⁸ The use of toils in deer hunting and ceremonial coursing is of course an ancient practice attested in other cultures, one of the finest images of which is a Neo-Assyrian alabaster wall panel of the first half of the seventh century BC from the north palace at Nineveh, northern Iraq, which shows a herd of deer being hunted into a long net.⁴⁹

The use of a hunting mound or mound of chase (*dumha selga*) is referred to in both *Acallam na Senórach* and in “The Chase of *Sid na mBan Finn*,” the earliest version of which is found in London, British Library Egerton MS 1782, compiled in 1419 at Pollmounty Castle in Ballynalour just south-east of the monastery of St Moling in Carlow.⁵⁰ The *dumha selga*, presented as a feature of the hunting landscape in both of these compositions, could accommodate more than one person: Arthur, son of Beine Brit and his companions in the first instance,⁵¹ and Fionn accompanied by Cailte and Oisín in the second.⁵² The contemporary reader of medieval *fiannaíocht* may have understood the purpose of *dumha selga*, but it is open to interpretation for the modern reader because it is, at once, a hunting installation and a mound in a ceremonial landscape. In “The Chase of *Sid na mBan Finn*,” Fionn organizes an extensive chase throughout Sid na mBan Finn, Sid ar Femen and in the eastern part of the Plain of Femen and upon the slopes of Luachair Dedad:

⁴⁸ “Fifty nets for deer”; D. A. Binchy, ed., *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*, Medieval and Modern Irish Series 18 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), 1.9.1; Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2000), 276-77.

⁴⁹ British Museum ME 124871; John Fletcher, *Gardens of Earthly Delight: the History of Deer Parks* (Oxford: Windgather Press, 2011), 64-67.

⁵⁰ Kuno Meyer, ed. and trans., *Fianaigeacht: Being a Collection of hitherto Inedited Irish Poems and Tales Relating to Finn and his Fiana, with an English Translation*, Todd Lecture Series 16 (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1910, repr. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1993), xxxi.

⁵¹ Ó Corráin, *Acallam na Senórach* I, 24:237-38: *Dála Artúir meic Benne Brit, do eisidh ina dhuma shealga / annsinn cona mhuintir* “As regards Beine Brit’s son, Arthur, he just then, with his people, sat on his hunting-mound.”

⁵² Meyer, *Fianaigeacht*, 56, 57.

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Dosuidhigheadh ocus dosrethnaigheadh in tsealg leó fo fheadhuibh ⁊ fo fásaigib ⁊ fo fānglenntuiph na ferann ba coimnesa dóip ⁊ fo muighib réidhe roáilli ocus fo chailltib clithardlúithe ocus fó dhoiredhuib dosleathna dimóra. Ocus dochúaid gach duine fo leth d' fianaib hErenn ina dumha sealga ⁊ ina lathair licthe ⁊ ina berna báegail mar no gnáthaighdis cosgur gacha sealga do chur roimi sin.

The chase was arranged and spread by them throughout the woods and wildernesses and sloping glens of the lands nearest to them, and throughout smooth, delightful plains and close-sheltering woods and broad-bushed, vast, oak forests. And each man of the *fiana* of Ireland went separately to his mound of chase [*ina dumha sealga*] and his site of throwing [*ina lathair licthe*] and his gap of danger [*ina berna báegail*], as they were wont to arrange every victorious chase before that.⁵³

Fionn also recounts how

Lá da rabusa ⁊ sib-si ac seilg ⁊ ac fianchoscur a fedhuib ⁊ a fásaigib ocus do badusa im dumha sealga ⁊ dias fénned imaroen rim ann .i. Cailti ⁊ Oisín and sút. Uair dobidis dias fa sech ar timcheall d'fianuip hErenn maroen rim-so acum foraire ⁊ acom forchoimet isna hinadaib sealga a mbinn. Is dóib ranic m' fforchoimet] ocus m' foraire in lá-sin, Cailti ⁊ Oisín, ⁊ do bāmhar ag eistecht re mongur na míled ⁊ re seiselbe na sochaide ⁊ re greadhan na gillanraide ⁊ re gotha na ngadhar ocus re fetgaire na fer fiadaig ⁊ re laidhedh na læchraide arna mórchonuib ⁊ re nuallgairib na gasraide ⁊ re sestan na sealga ar gach tóeb dinn . . .

⁵³ Ibid., 52, 53.

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On a day when I and you were engaged in hunting
and victorious chase in woods and wildernesses, and
when I was on my mound of chase [*dumha selga*]
and two warriors of the *fian* together with me there,
even Cailte and Oisín—for there used to be with me
a couple of the *fiana* of Ireland turn and turn about,
watching and guarding me in the hunting-grounds
[*isna hinadaib sealga*] where I was—on that day it
fell to Cailte and Oisín to guard and watch me; and
we were listening to the noise of the warriors, and to
the din of the multitude, and to the bustle of the
attendants, and to the voices of the hounds, and to
the whistling of the hunters, and to the inciting of the
hounds by the warriors, and to the shouts of the
young lads, and to the turmoil of the chase on every
side of us⁵⁴

The hunting method suggested in both of these descriptions is coursing, or hunting by sight, whereby men and hounds chase the prey towards an ambush of spear throwers who cast from the summit of their mounds. Coursing with hounds is regarded as one of the earliest forms of hunting and is, for instance, depicted in an early historic context on the ninth-century Pictish cross-slab from Hilton of Cadboll, Ross. Outside of *fiannaíocht*, a hunting mound is noted in the eleventh-century *Lebor na Cert* in respect of the list of tribute items due to the king of Cenél nAeda: “seven slaves, seven bond-women, three horns, three swords, and three dogs for his hunting-mound in the forest [*fria dumha a ndairibh*].”⁵⁵

The hunting mounds in these instances are found in the woods and wilderness, but the *dumha selga* celebrated at the assembly site and inauguration place of the Uí Chonchobhair is found in the ritual landscape of Ard Caoin (which of course does not preclude woodland) in the lordship of Machaire. The earliest allusion to

⁵⁴ Ibid., 56, 57:

⁵⁵ Myles Dillon, ed. and trans., *Lebor na Cert: The Book of Rights*, Irish Text Society 46 (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1962), 60, 61: .uii. mogaid, .uii. mná daera, / trí curin is trí claidim cain, / trí coin fria dumha a ndairibh.

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Dumha Selga on Ard Caoin comes from Tírechán, Patrick's seventh-century biographer, and in *Vita Tripartita* it is the place where Patrick blesses the sons of Bríón.⁵⁶ Dumha Selga is also the subject of a twelfth-century *dindshenchas* poem where it is defined, in origin, as a royal barrow [*rig-duma*]: the grave of Fer Fota, and subsequently as a hunting mound "since the chase of Drebbriú's six swine."⁵⁷ A much later chronicle reference cites Dumha Selga as the place where Seán Mac Branáin, chief of Corca Eachlann, keeper of Ó Conchobhair's hounds and leader of his *ceatharnaigh* or mercenary foot soldiers, died in 1448.⁵⁸

Two important points arise out of this: burial mounds and hunting mounds are interrelated, with the former enjoying secondary use as hunting platforms. In *fiannaíocht*, an association between a hill or mound of assembly [*tulaig airechtuis*], a grave and a hunting ground is also made in "The Chase of *Sid na mBan Finn*," where Finn while seated on the eminence explains to a large band of his assembled *fian* that it is the grave of the warrior Failbhe Finnmaiseach who was killed in that place by the giant boar of Formaile.⁵⁹ The second point is that the re-use of burial mounds as stands or platforms for hunting in cult landscapes tentatively suggests that coursing of wild animals may have played a part in elite assembly practices, or that such places were habitually used for coursing by kings and lords. Assembly sites have been niched primarily as places where tribal gatherings were held at particular times of year such as Lughnasa and where kings and lords were inaugurated, but they may also have been venues for occasions of

⁵⁶ Ludwig Bieler, ed. and trans., *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin: Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1979), 196-99; Kathleen Mulchrone, ed. and trans., *Bethu Phátraic* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1939), 66-67.

⁵⁷ Edward Gwynn, ed. and trans., *The Metrical Dindshenchas: Text, Translation and Commentary*, Part 3, Todd Lecture Series 10 (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913, repr. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1991), 386-87.

⁵⁸ *AFM* 1448.

⁵⁹ Meyer, *Fianaigeacht*, 54, 55.

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wild animal coursing.⁶⁰ It has been argued above that Óenach Loch Gile was adjacent to the wilderness hunting-ground of Formaoil na Fiann and that the Ó Raghallaigh inauguration and *oireachtais* site, as recorded in the later medieval period, incorporated hunting lands and a prehistoric stone alignment with the later attribution, 'Finn MacCool's Fingers,' noted by the first Ordnance Survey of the nineteenth century. Further work is required on the archaeology of coursing before a consistent relationship or general pattern between hunting preserves, coursing and assembly places can be proposed.

In conclusion, marginal landscapes distinguished by the place-name *formaoil* can be brought back into view as hunting grounds, thereby contributing to an atlas of land organization in Gaelic territories. Several of the *formaoil* landscapes explored in this paper are located on the household lands of Gaelic lords, a geography which is clearly indicated by the presence of service family landholdings such as those of the Uí Chuimín, Uí Dhuibhgeannáin and Meic Eochadha. Using landscape and literature, particularly *fiannaíocht*, the physical manifestation of *formaoil* is revealed as a round, sparsely vegetated or bare hill, in terrain typically characterized by woodland or scrubland and rocky pasture, and generally overlooking a lake. Later deer parks associated with country houses were sometimes created in proximity to these environments as seen, for instance, at Magheraghanrush south of Formoyle by Lough Gill. The interplay between hunting mounds and burial mounds, intimated in the literature and by the archaeology, raises the interesting possibility that assembly places and *formaoil* locations sometimes overlapped and that they may have hosted coursing of wild animals. *Fiannaíocht* is also an important source for hunting methods. Particular emphasis is placed on the deer ambush using toils, and the mound of chase is a recurrent feature of the hunting landscape. The liminal world of Fionn and his *fian* at Formaile na Fiann is perhaps a window onto the real environment,

⁶⁰ The presence of lengths of parallel linear earthworks such as the 'Knockauns' at Taitu (Teltown, Co. Meath), the 'Mucklaghs' at Cruachain (Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon) and Teach Míodhchúarta at Teamhair (Tara, Co. Meath) might be explained in terms of such a cultural practice.

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the ways of life and rituals of early historic *féinnidi* and later medieval Gaelic elites who had designated hunting grounds in their lordships, indicated in part by the place-name *formaoil*.

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