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Assembly Places and Elite Collective Identities in Medieval Ireland

Elizabeth FitzPatrick*

Abstract - This paper investigates relationships between assembly places and expressions of collective identities among Gaelic elites during the period from the 9th to the 16th century in Ireland. I note patterns of continuity and change in users of assembly sites located in the “Midland Corridor” of Ireland, a historically important route between the early medieval provinces of Mide and Munster. Assembly sites, distinguished as exceptional places by their distinctive topographies and funerary aspects, were the focus of displays of ancestral attachment among Gaelic ruling dynasties. Who convened assemblies and where they were held were influenced by deference to mythological identities arising from the pseudo-historical binary cosmography of the island, changes in territorial boundaries, and the tendency for powerful families to dominate.

Introduction

The cultural practice of assembly among medieval Gaelic peoples of Ireland involved returning to particular cult landscapes, usually expansive and of prehistoric origin, on occasions of dynastic and political meetings and for seasonal rituals. The use of some assembly places over remarkably long periods of time means that an appreciation of what they represented to medieval and early modern society can only be understood by taking a long view of them from about the 9th century (when historical references to assemblies first become somewhat frequent) to ca. A.D. 1600, after which traditional assemblies of Gaelic ruling families cease (FitzPatrick 2004).

Ancestral attachment and pedigree of place were integral to the assembly practices of elites in medieval Gaelic society. The venues chosen and revisited for tribal gatherings, conferences of kings, inaugurations, and law courts were exceptional and often long-established places, generally distinguished by prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments and by early medieval burials, in which generations of elite gatherings were experienced. The names of eponymous ancestors and mythological heroes with whom ruling dynasties aligned were ascribed to particular monuments and landscapes in medieval toponyms and were the inspiration for topographical lore of places (*dindsenchas*). The investment of prehistoric monuments with ancestral, mythological, and supernatural associations is a theme that has been explored for medieval and prehistoric peoples elsewhere in northern Europe. During the 1990s, the re-use of monuments—their “after-lives”—became an important question in prehistoric archaeology (Bradley 1993, Hingley 1996, Roymans 1995). Re-use and modification of monuments of earlier periods, such as Neolithic long barrows, Bronze Age burial mounds, and Roman structures, has been demonstrated for middle and later Anglo-Saxon England (Semple 1998, 2013; Williams 1998), while

in Sweden it has been shown that burials of the Scandinavian Bronze Age and Iron Age often constituted part of, or were situated close to, assembly places (Sanmark 2009:209).

Deference to heredity in the choice of assembly places did not always prevail, because assembly culture was not immutable. Profound political change, such as the attrition of the authority of local kings by more powerful over-kings from as early as the 8th century, the collapse of the institution of kingship and the gradual transition to lordship between the late 12th and the end of the 14th century, along with the tendency for the boundaries of territories to shift, all influenced who attended assembly places, the sites used, and the period of time over which they were frequented. Lack of continuity also raises questions about the nature of ancestral attachment to assembly places and, as Whitley (2002:119) has argued in relation to the “omni-present ancestor” haunting British prehistoric archaeology, the role of ancestors in assembly practices in Ireland requires some comment. Ancestors could be flexible and moveable in medieval Ireland, and where an assembly was convened had much more to do with territory and the need to claim, consolidate, and maintain borderlands of kingdoms and lordships. Therefore, ancestors could be fabricated in the genealogies of acquisitive dynasties, or ruling families could be attached to appropriate mythological heroes, in tandem with the expansion or contraction of territory. Sanmark’s (2009:207) work in Södermanland has likewise challenged the argument for long-term continuity of assembly sites, pointing out that some sites previously ascribed long biographies now seem to be new thing sites that emerged with changes in the balance of power.

In this paper, I investigate the relationship between elite collective identities and 3 assembly places in the “Midland Corridor” of Ireland. These are Ráith Áeda (Rahugh) in the county of Westmeath, and Colmán Eala (Lynally) and Mullach Croiche

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(Mullaghcrohy) in the county of Offaly (Fig. 1). Historically, the sites were located in the province of Mide ruled by the powerful Southern Uí Néill kings of Tara. It will be seen that over the period from the 9th to the end of the 16th century, different factors, from deference to mythological identities to dominance of one sept over another and geopolitical change in territorial boundaries, influenced the collectives that gathered at these sites for different forms of assembly. Ráith Áeda was the *locus* of an early medieval *rigdál* (a conference of kings) in the 9th century (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983:317), and Colmán Eala was celebrated in the 9th century as one of the principal *óenach* (tribal assembly) sites of Ireland (Meyer 1906:x–xi, 4–5). Both assembly places had after-lives as lordly inauguration venues. Mullach Croiche was adopted as the inauguration site of a sept who appear to have been excluded from accessing the landscape of Colmán Eala for that purpose as a result of the acquisition of a part of their territory by a dominant overlord in the later medieval period (FitzPatrick 2004:30).

An explanation of the different types of assemblies that were convened over this long period of time, the kind of cultural landscape that their venues represent, and what is meant by collective identity in the context of Gaelic peoples, is a necessary preface to the case studies that underscore the relationships between assembly places and elite collective identities in medieval Ireland.

Collective Identities and Gaelic Elites

In early medieval Ireland, the *túath* or petty kingdom was the basic territorial unit, and it has been defined as a population group that formed a distinct political entity (Byrne 1973:7–8). Names of early medieval kingdoms, often in the form of eponyms, refer to their heroic founders, real or imagined. The island-wide early medieval map of territories was a great jigsaw of collective names that mostly stemmed from the personal name of a progenitor who was cited as the one from whom the people of a kingdom ultimately claimed their descent. For example, the midland people known as the Cenél Fiachach, “the race of Fiacha”, claimed Fiacha mac Néill (son of Niall of the Nine Hostages) as their progenitor, and their territory carried his name (Byrne 1973:93, Woulfe 1923:688). Throughout Ireland, territory and landholding was framed by a concept of geography as lineage (Leerssen 1994:17).

The most primordial of tribal identities was based on a mythological north–south division of the island between the sons of Míl of Spain, Éremón and Éber, in remote prehistory. By A.D. 8th century that division was described in terms of the sons

of Éremón and Éber, Conn and Mug. Conn had possessed the northern half of the island, or Leth Cuinn, and Mug ruled the southern half, Leth Moga (Doherty 2005:274–276). The sinuous glacial moraine known as the Eiscir Riada (ravaged by modern quarrying), which crosses Ireland from near Dublin through the midlands into the county of Galway, was designated as the boundary between the two halves in the pseudo-historical presentation of the past. The tale of the battle of Mag Lena, at which Conn fell defending Leth Cuinn, is appropriately set on the north side of the Eiscir Riada. Mag Lena is an expansive plain extending between Tullamore and Durrow in northern County Offaly. The binary cosmography of the island was later elaborated in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, *The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, compiled in the late 11th or 12th century (Toner 2005:233–234). In the early medieval concept of territorial division there is concern with expressions of group affiliation and collective identities relating to eponymous ancestors. The powerful Uí Néill dynasty and the Connachta claimed Conn as their ancestor, while the Eóganachta dynasty of Munster cited Mug as their progenitor (Doherty 2005:274). In the Irish medieval past, genealogies were, where necessary, fabricated for nouveau dynasties in order to align with a northern or southern collective identity, and ancestral associations with funerary monuments in prehistoric cult landscapes used for assembly were contrived in order to maintain assumed primordial relationships (FitzPatrick 2004:97).

Although group identification with the *túath* was eclipsed by the formation of lordships in Ireland after the Anglo-Norman settlement of the late 12th and 13th centuries, the Gaelic lordship or *oireacht*, in many instances, continued to use the name of the alleged progenitor of the ruling family—hence the names Tír Eogain (Eogain’s country) and Tír Conaill (Conaill’s country) for two of the most powerful lordships of later medieval Ulster. In origin, the term *oireacht* meant a public assembly, a court of law or a territorial council (Simms 1987:176), but in the sense that it is used to define the later medieval Gaelic lordship, it implies the assembly of the people and their territory which, like the earlier *túath*, emphasizes the indivisibility of people and place in the Gaelic tradition.

Meetings

The assembly place, perhaps more than any other cultural landscape in the early medieval kingdoms and later medieval lordships of Ireland, expressed synonymy between people and territory. It was the center and often the borderland where geopolitical space was demarcated and attachment to a dynas-

tic archetype was enacted (Mullin 2011:1–12). Of course, the center and the boundary could and did move and could be established anew in an appropriate cult landscape when new territory was acquired, when septs split, or when royal lands were annexed as a result of Anglo-Norman colonization in Ireland. Every *túath* or petty kingdom and each over-kingdom and provincial king in early medieval Ireland had an open-air assembly place. Meetings of the early medieval *túath* have different names signifying their purpose—the *airecht*, which was a law court and occasion for parleys between warring parties; the *oirdeadh* or *rioghadh*, which was an ordination or enkinging; and the *óenach*, which was a periodic or seasonal meeting of a *túath* or a larger territory such as a province. The *óenach* was one of the more significant meetings, held on the occasion of the quarterly feasts of the old Irish year—Imbolc, Beltaine, Lughnasa, and Samhain. Each quarter of the year began with a festival at the assembly place of the *túath*, but it is the *óenach* at Lughnasa about which most is known (MacNeill 1962:311–349). In modern Irish the word *óenach* means “a fair” and has commercial connotations, but in Old and Middle Irish it is interpreted as a political assembly with ritual associations, distinguished by horse and chariot races and trading/markets and social festivities (Bhreathnach 2014:73; Quin 1983:485). In fact, the primary meaning of the Old Irish word *aige*, the act of driving or racing horses, is used in the 9th- and 10th-century native chronicles to indicate the convening of an *óenach* (Etchingham 2011:40). What is important is that the games of the *óenach* are associated with funerary culture.

High-level meetings of early medieval kings also took place but appear to have been unique to the 9th century in Ireland and convened by the Southern Uí Néill king (Bannerman 1966:122–123, Charles-Edwards 2000:279–281). Termed *rigdál* in the Irish language, four such colloquies of kings are noted in the native chronicles—those convened at Birr (County Offaly) in A.D. 827, at Cloncurry (County Meath) in A.D. 838, at Armagh (County Armagh) in A.D. 851, and at Ráith Áeda (County Westmeath) in A.D. 859 (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983:285, 297, 311, 317).

Occasions of assembly in later medieval Ireland reflect the new political reality of lordships. There were just 60 Gaelic lordships in later medieval Ireland, in comparison to hundreds of former early medieval *túatha* of petty kings and larger territories of over-kings. The *óenach* ceased to be an institution of kingship after the 12th century. Whether it continued as an occasion for popular gathering to celebrate seasonal rituals is not known, but late survivals of Lughnasa festive assemblies held by regional com-

munities in Ireland in the modern period, which have been viewed as survivals of earlier assembly practices in some instances, may suggest that not all *óenach* sites were abandoned outright after the 12th century (MacNeill 1962). The characteristic meetings of later medieval lordships include the *oireachtas*, which was an assembly or parliament, and the *gairm anma/ ord an anma*, which was a proclamation of the name or ritual of the name indicating the election of a lord or chief (Simms 1987:32–33, 175). A particular site within the former *óenach* venue of the patrimonial *túath* of a lord was often but not always carried through as the assembly place of the lordship. Magh Adhair in the county of Clare is an example of an assembly landscape that enjoyed such continuity (FitzPatrick 2004:52–59).

Topography

There are topographies and archaeologies unique to early medieval assembly places that can make them visible again in the modern landscape. Assembly places tend to be located in rocky pasture in terrain where the geology is broken and very close to the surface, a fact often indicated by the presence of quarries and mines in their landscapes and the frequency of the Irish word *brecc/breac* in place-names, usually translated as dappled or speckled (Quin 1983:82), but which I would argue is more accurately read as brecciated, in reference to rock composed of angular fragments or clasts of stone. Place-names incorporating the words *finn/fionn* (bright, white, lustrous) and *bán* (white) occur in *óenach* settings too and, like *breac*, can be indicative of mineral and metal occurrences in a locality. Landscapes explored in this paper incorporate townlands that carry the root word *breac* in their place-names. The townlands of Bracklin Little and Bracklin Big, from the Irish *breaclainn*, meaning “speckled place”, lie across the Silver River south of Ráith Áeda, and the townlands of Cloghabrack (*na cloche breaca*, “the speckled stones”) and Brackagh (*an bhreacach*; “speckled place”) are integral to the *óenach* landscape of Colmán Eala.

The modern landscape contexts in which former medieval assembly places are found give the impression that meetings were conducted in open countryside affording unimpeded views, but an appreciation of historical land use suggests that several assembly sites were set close to or in major clearings of woodlands. The 12th-century *dindshenchas* poem on the origins of Taltiu (Teltown, County Meath), the island-wide *óenach* hosted by the Southern Uí Néill kings of Tara, explains that the landscape in which it lay was once “a thicket of trees” and the location of a place called Assuide—“the seat of the hunt, whither

gathered the red-coated deer” (Gwynn 1924:149). The poem explains that the place of the *óenach* was created when Taltiu, the daughter of Magmor, reclaimed meadowland from the wood, which became the great plain of Bregmag in which the assembly place stood. Their sylvan aspect is of course also borne out by the evidence for primordial oak woods in the vicinity of assembly places such as Colmán Eala in Offaly (Magner 2011:375). The idea that the genealogy of medieval Irish kings could be found in woodland, in the place of the hunt, and revealed by felling trees and clearing the overgrowth that had masked and hidden the burial and ritual places of progenitors, may be significant in view of the importance for newly arrived dynasties to demonstrate long lineage that involved a pre-Christian past. Of course, the overlap between assembly places and woodlands would also have had a practical basis—crowds attending assemblies needed to be fed. Pork has been described as “the meat of the feast” in early medieval Ireland (Ní Chatháin 1979:201). Wild swine/boar were hunted in Irish woodlands, and it is possible that they were ritually coursed as one of the sporting contests of an *óenach* with the beneficial outcome of producing food for the assembly (FitzPatrick 2013:112–117).

Funerary Landscapes

The archaeological profile of early medieval tribal assembly places is overwhelmingly funerary and distinguished by a range of sepulchral monuments, generally prehistoric in origin, characterized by megalithic tombs with and without their cairn coverings, as well as later Bronze Age and Iron Age burial and ritual monuments (Breathnach 2014:69–77, FitzPatrick et al. 2011:163–164). However, there is also the expectation of early medieval royal burials in these landscapes between the 5th and 7th centuries and an intimation of such in the literature in relation to the burial places of particular kings. Elizabeth O’Brien (2009:135–154) has shown that both long cists and unprotected burials (often of females) of the 5th and 6th were sometimes placed into prehistoric burial monuments at the boundaries between territories, and that there are a small number of instances of unprotected burials being inserted into prehistoric funerary monuments during the 7th century. The fanciful *Life of St. Cellach of Killala* claims that the early historic king of Connacht, Eogan Bél, was buried at the tribal assembly place of Lough Gill in the county of Sligo in the northwest of Ireland, which is predominantly a prehistoric funerary landscape (FitzPatrick 2013:106–110).

Where dramatic surface expressions of sepulchral monuments are absent, place-names derived from Old Irish *fert*, which translates as a grave, usu-

ally of a person of high status (Swift 1996:14), can reveal the essential if invisible funerary character of an *óenach* landscape. O’Brien (2009:142–143) and O’Brien and Bhreathnach (2011:55) have refined this definition and suggest that a *fert* is an ancestral burial place, regarded by the 7th-century Bishop Tirechán as a pagan grave, usually but not consistently a reused prehistoric sepulchral monument, a natural hillock perceived as an ancient burial place, or an early medieval mound imitating prehistoric prototypes. More specifically, O’Brien and Bhreathnach (2011:55) suggest that a *fert* or *ferta* (a group of graves or more than one burial in a single mound) may occur in the form of a mound, a ring-barrow, or a circular ditched enclosure. Ancestral burial places were important as boundary markers and were especially invoked in disputes over territorial claims (Charles-Edwards 1976:83–87). In order to make a claim to land, approval from the ancestor(s) perceived to be buried in a boundary *fert/ferta* had to be sought, as they were viewed as guardians of the land or territory in dispute. Archaeological investigation of burials identified as boundary *ferta* indicate that in the period A.D. 400–700 new burials were inserted into them. This practice can be interpreted in different ways. O’Brien and Bhreathnach (2011:55) suggest that the insertion of burials into an existing prehistoric burial in a boundary location may have been done by the dynasts of a kingdom in order to reinforce their claim to their territory, or it could have been the case that burials were introduced by an intrusive group in order to associate themselves with prehistoric “ancestors” and thereby legitimize their claim to new territory. The ancestral boundary *fert* assumes particular importance in assembly landscapes of early medieval Ireland. Ó Riain (1972:12–29) observed that assemblies were regularly convened at boundary locations but did not note that place-names derived from old Irish *fert* occur at several known assembly places. To mention some, there is the townland of Fertaun (*an feartán*) in the *óenach* landscape of Colmán Eala in the early medieval kingdom of Cenél Fiachach, and the townland of Fartan northwest of Shantemon hill, which was an assembly place in the south Ulster kingdom of East Bréifne used as late as 1596 for the inauguration of the O’Reilly lord of that territory (FitzPatrick 2004:112–113, MacNeill 1962:174). Funerary monuments, ancestors, gatherings, and territoriality coalesce in the assembly landscapes of early medieval Ireland.

Ráith Áeda and Mythological Identities

The Eiscir Riada, that mythological boundary between the quintessential primordial collective identities of Leth Cuinn and Leth Moga, forms the

southern backdrop to Ráith Áeda as it winds its broken way across the Central Plain of Ireland (Fig. 1). The Irish *eiscir*, anglicized “esker”, translates as a line of low mounds but has a specific geological meaning as a narrow and generally sinuous ridge of sand, lacustrine and sorted silts and clays, gravels, and large boulders formed in an ice-walled channel, left behind by sub-glacial rivers during the Midlandian or final ice age in Ireland (Sheehan 1993:1–2, Tubridy and Meehan 2006b:13). The Eiscir Riada is not a monolithic landform, a single continuous raised ridge. Typical of the eskers in the midlands of Ireland, it is mostly discontinuous and does not run in a straight line, nor is its orientation precisely east-west (Fig. 1). The Eiscir Riada, and the Slighe Mór or “great road” which followed its approximate line between Dublin and the county of Galway, constituted several esker systems along its midland section (Tubridy and Meehan 2006a:20). At Ráith Áeda, the

Eiscir Riada is a high wooded ridge called “Rahugh Ridge” (Fig. 2), which because of its rich ground flora and associated wildlife is listed as a scientific area of international importance. It is described as having the best woodland in the county of Westmeath, particularly distinguished by *Sorbus hibernica* or Irish Whitebeam (Sheehan 1993:23, Tubridy and Meehan 2006a:137). Rahugh Ridge is 2.5 km long, covering 61 ha in south Westmeath and north Offaly, the eastern limit of which is also the point of convergence of 3 distinct esker systems which disappear beneath an extensive bog in this part of Westmeath (Tubridy and Meehan 2006a:13, 137).

The role of the Slighe Mór as an overland artery of communication in early medieval Ireland is confirmed by its proximity to major early medieval midland monasteries, such as Clonmacnoise, Durrow, Lemanaghan, Rahan, and Ráith Áeda. However, the ideological position of pseudo-history,

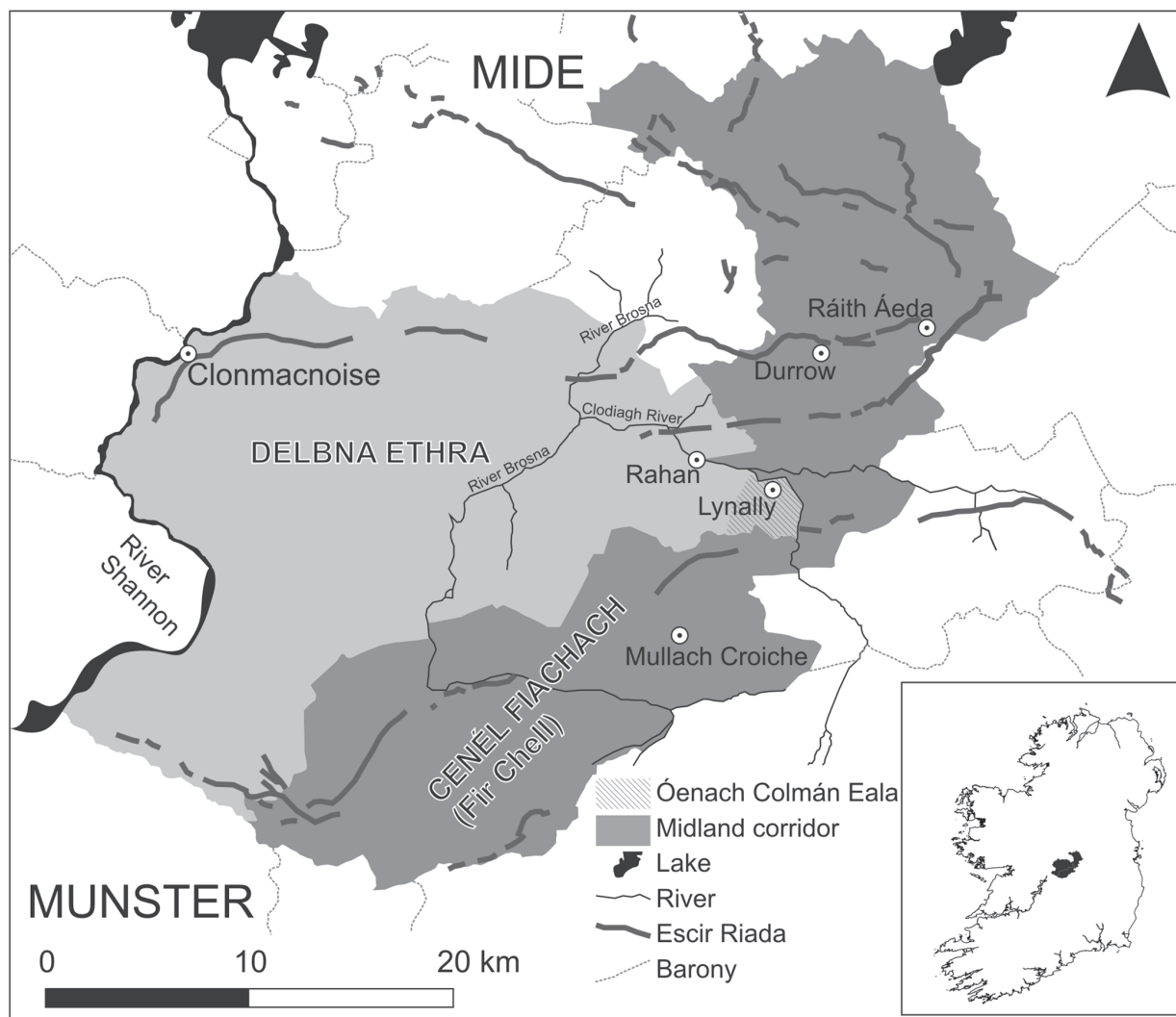


Figure 1. Assembly places and the early medieval kingdoms of Cenél Fiachach and Delbna Ethra, showing the system of eskers and the characterization of Cenél Fiachach as a route or pass, termed the “Midland Corridor”, between the rival provinces of Mide and Munster (map by Richard Clutterbuck).

in which early medieval society viewed the Eiscir Riada as separating 2 distinct primordial lineages, has not yet been attributed any role in place creation. In support of that, the selection of Ráith Áeda as the location for a significant royal colloquy in the 9th century, the continuity of the site as the venue for the inauguration of the Mic Eochagáin lords of Cenél Fiachach in the later medieval period, and the typical topographical and archaeological profile of its greater landscape as a place of assembly suggests that the pseudo-history relating to the Eiscir Riada as a boundary between distinct peoples was a potent instrument of place creation in the midlands of Ireland and especially in the inter-tribal zone called the “Midland Corridor” where the borders of the major provincial over-kingdoms of the island joined.

The term “Midland Corridor” was developed by Alfred Smyth (1982:86–87) for his pioneering historical geography of medieval Leinster. He described it as a tract of open fertile countryside approximately 20 miles long and 2 to 4 miles wide

which extended from what is now the southern area of County Westmeath at Clonfad and Tyrellspass, south past Ráith Áeda and the Eiscir Riada into southern Offaly (Fig. 1). The medieval geography of the corridor incorporated the entire territory of Cenél Fiachach, which was coterminous with the later baronies of Moycashel in Westmeath and Ballycowan, Ballyboy, and Eglisish in Offaly. This corridor territory had the alternative name Fir Chell, which translates as “Men of Churches” and derived from the fact that several important early medieval monasteries, including Durrow, Tihilly, Rahan, Lynally (Colmán Eala), Kinnity, Seirkieran, and Birr were founded along its north–south route from the province of Mide into the province of Munster (Byrne 1973:93, Smyth 1982:86–87). Charles-Edwards (2000:298) has argued that the emergence of Fir Chell as an alternative name for the lands of the Cenél Fiachach south of the River Brosna could have been the result of a policy of the dominant Southern Uí Néill kings of the province of Mide

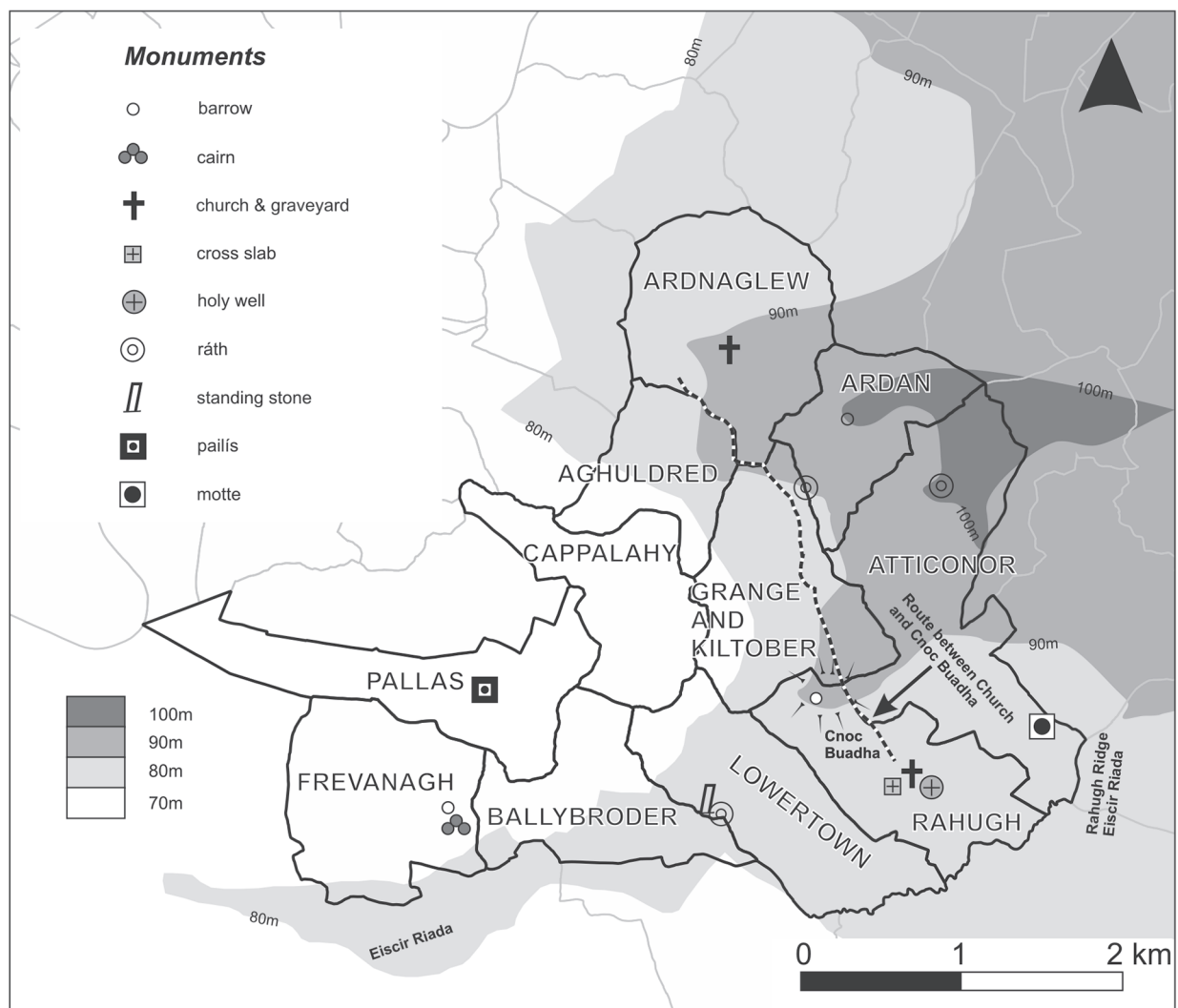


Figure 2. Prehistoric and medieval landscape of Ráith Áeda and its hinterland (map by Richard Clutterbuck).

to reduce the resources of the Cenél Fiachach “by granting away lands to churches in its territory”. The strategic importance of Cenél Fiachach as a corridor into Munster was understood by the Southern Uí Néill kings of Mide when they annexed that territory, allegedly sometime in the 5th century (O’Donovan 1841:51–52, n. 173). Certainly, from the 8th century the power of the petty kings of Cenél Fiachach and their neighbors, the Delbna Ethra, was eroded, with a corresponding increase in the dominance of the Southern Uí Néill kings of the province of Mide in this region. This development towards Continental-style powerful over-kings, traceable from as early as the 8th century in Ireland, is also witnessed in the form of address towards petty kings under the control of dominant over-kings. The king of Cenél Fiachach is referred to as *tigerna* (lord) in A.D. 740, and the king of his vassal kingdom of Delbna Ethra is called *dux* (Ó Corráin 1972:29–30, Simms 1987:10–11).

In A.D. 859, a *rigdál* took place on the northern side of the Rahugh Ridge that constituted part of the Eiscir Riada on the lands of the monastery of Ráith Áeda (Fig. 2). The *rigdál* was convened by Máel Sechnaill (846–862), the Southern Uí Néill overking of Tara, in the synthetic division of Leth Cuinn. The purported intention of the *rigdál* was “to make peace and amity between the men of Ireland” (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983:317), but its real purpose was a display of power by the Southern Uí Néill in the midland boundary zone between their lands and those of the rival king of Munster, Máel Gúala of Leth Moga, the fabled southern half of the island. At Ráith Áeda, the recalcitrant Munster kingdom of Osraige that had been acting independently of the king of Munster, was drawn into the jurisdiction of the Southern Uí Néill (Charles-Edwards 2000:476, FitzPatrick 2005: 268–269, Ó Corráin 1972:99–100). This served to consolidate Máel Sechnaill’s dominance over Munster, a goal which he had already advanced through his less-cordial military campaign in Munster in A.D. 858 (Ó Corráin 1972:99). The assembly of A.D. 859 was a singular assembly event at Ráith Áeda during this time, of national rather than local importance, and presided over by an aspirant high-king of all Ireland. The fact that this dramatic event unfolded in the landscape of the Eiscir Riada at Ráith Áeda rather than further south on the boundary between the kingdoms of Cenél Fiachach and Éile, which constituted the actual border between the provinces of Mide and Munster, confirms the role of the esker system as the physical manifestation of the ideological binary division of the island and the importance attached to it by an aspirant high-king of the island as a place to dominate those opposites.

The prevailing presence in the glacial landscape

setting of the *rigdál* is the Eiscir Riada defined by Rahugh Ridge (Figs. 1, 2), combined with topography of multiple small ridges, hillocks, and deep cup-shaped hollows (Sheehan 1993:14). The Silver River flows due southwest of Rahugh Ridge forming the southern boundary of the parish of Ráith Áeda in this area. The archaeology associated with the *rigdál* is focused within the townland of Ráith Áeda where the early medieval church of St. Áed mac Bricc is situated (Fig. 2). The church was founded in the 6th century by Áed, who is portrayed by the 8th-century author of his Life (biography) as a saint of the border between the Southern Uí Néill kings of Mide and the kings of Munster (Charles-Edwards 2000:445–446). The saint’s genealogy placed him in the house of Uí Néill as a direct descendant of Fiacha, whom the Cenél Fiachach also claimed as their progenitor.

The foundation attributed to Áed was once surrounded by an earthen *vallum*, a portion of which survives on the northeastern side of the graveyard and which may be the *ráth* or earthen enclosure indicated in the place-name Ráith Áeda. The holy well of St. Áed lies south of the church, and an early medieval grave-slab, decorated with an equal-armed wheeled cross, is recorded from the site (Stokes 1896:331–332). However, as a place of early medieval assembly, this ostensibly ecclesiastical archaeology is lightly drawn over a deeper palimpsest of prehistory (Fig. 2). A bowl-barrow—a dome-shaped sepulchral mound—enclosed by a fosse of perhaps Bronze Age or Iron Age period is situated northwest of the church on the summit of a low drift ridge locally known as Knockbo or Cnoc Buadha, translated as the “Hill of Triumph”, and which is part of the esker system in this landscape (Fig. 3). Cnoc Buadha is a highly visible landmark which can be picked out on the skyline from the church and from other locations in the hinterland. It may have been connected to the church by a routeway preserved in the line of a narrow roadway that runs northwest for ~600 m from the church towards the barrow and northwards to Bonfire Hill in the townland of Aghuldred (Fig. 2). I have argued elsewhere (FitzPatrick 2005:273–275) that the barrow may have been re-used as a throne-mound, the focus-point in the landscape from which Máel Sechnaill presided over the *rigdál* of A.D. 859. Apart from the barrow, a Bronze Age burial consisting of a short, rectangular cist that contained some cremated bone and “two pots” was found in 1903 in “a gravel ridge” at Ráith Áeda (Waddell 1985:151). During the second half of the 19th century, the remains of what was described as a stone circle “from which all the stones [had] been removed except seven, and of these only one [remained] perpendicular”,

were also recorded in Ráith Áeda (Anon 1870–1871:27–28). No trace of this monument survives in the intensively farmed townland. Stone circles are attributed to the period 1700–800 B.C. in Ireland (Waddell 2010:178). In the townland of Lowertown, which adjoins Ráith Áeda on its west side, there is an upright stone standing almost 1 m high in open grassland (Fig. 4). It is situated a short distance northeast of an impressive bivalent *ráth*, an enclosed settlement of early medieval origin which sits on the summit of a drift ridge. Further west in the townland of Frevanagh, 2 monuments—a cairn and a possible barrow—were recorded on the current-edition Ordnance Survey six-inch map and cleared during more-recent land improvement in the area. The cairn carried the name “Slaghta” from the Irish *sleachta*, which means grave, grave-mound, or monument. The cumulative evidence of prehistoric monuments in the townland of Ráith Áeda and in the townlands immediately to the west of it suggests an intensity of pre-Christian funerary and ritual practices in this landscape (Fig. 2).

Although the archaeological profile of the Ráith Áeda landscape is appropriate to an early medieval assembly place, it is unknown whether the early medieval Cenél Fiachach habitually used this site as their place of assembly before and after the *rig-dál*. As discussed below, it can be argued that the tribal assembly place of Cenél Fiachach was Colmán Eala, situated further south in their territory in the boundary zone with Delbna Ethra and the Leinster

kingdom of Uí Failge (Figs. 1, 5). However, the later medieval descendants of the kings of Cenél Fiachach, the Mic Eochagáin lords, who ruled the diminutive lordship of Cenél Fiachach (coterminous with the modern barony of Moycashel in County Westmeath), frequented Cnoc Buadha at Ráith Áeda for their inauguration ceremonies (Fig. 3). The Mic Eochagáin lords of Cenél Fiachach claimed their descent from Fiacha mac Néill, the progenitor of the Cenél Fiachach, thereby displaying a northern or Leth Cuinn affiliation (Byrne 1969:12, Charles-Edwards 2000:446). The use of Ráith Áeda as their place of inauguration may not so much represent continuity of use from the early medieval period as a concern to connect themselves with the location of the once victorious *rigdál* of A.D. 859 and their tribal roots in Leth Cuinn.

Cenél Fiachach came under the control of the Anglo-Norman knight Hugh de Lacy in the late 12th century when he was granted the province of Mide. A series of earthen and timber motte castles, strung out across the Eiscir Riada system in the townland of Atticonor at Ráith Áeda (Fig. 2), at Colmán Eala, Durrow, Horseleap, Moate, Mount Temple, and Athone, are attributed to the process of subinfeudation that followed in central Ireland (O’Brien 1998:169–171, Sheehan 1993:34). The petty kings of Cenél Fiachach became tenants of their Anglo-Norman overlords. From the 13th century and throughout the 14th century, the centralizing administration of Edward I (1272–1307) in Ireland determined to



Figure 3. Bowl-barrow on Cnoc Buadha at Ráith Áeda (photo © E. FitzPatrick).

disable the authority of all local Gaelic kings. This gradual process is reflected in Crown documentation that, soon after 1300, addresses Irish leaders as *duces* rather than *reges* and sometimes just by their names with the distinguishing qualification *hibernicus* (Simms 1987:36–37). In these new political circumstances, Cnoc Buadha, the “Hill of Triumph” at Ráith Áeda (Fig. 3), had an after-life as the inauguration site of the Mic Eochagáin lords of Cenél Fiachach down to the end of the 16th century

(Cox 1976:86–87; National Library of Ireland, MS G 192, 306). Alongside that development, the presence of a large moated site in the townland of Pallas, northwest of the townland of Rahugh, suggests that the Mic Eochagáin lords may have had a *pailís*, an elaborate timber hall, built for themselves in the 14th century near to their place of assembly (Fig. 2). The Irish *pailís* (anglicized pallas) is variously translated as a palisade or stockade, a palisaded enclosure or fortress, a castle, and a palace (Quin 1983:494).



Figure 4. A standing stone and *ráth* at Lowertown in the assembly landscape of Ráith Áeda (photo © E. FitzPatrick).

However, *pailís* as used in a 14th-century context in Gaelic Ireland implies an elaborate timber hall befitting a king but used by Gaelic elites who were reduced to the status of lords by the centralizing power of the English Crown (FitzPatrick, in press). In the creation of a *pailís* and the re-use of the *rigdál* site as a place of inauguration, the Mic Eochagáin lords may have been consciously reviving their collective identity as Cenél Fiachach linked to the memory of the powerful Southern Uí Néill kings and the dominance of the primordial tribe of Leth Cuinn on the north side of the Eiscir Riada.

Colmán Eala, Mullach Croiche, and Shifting Collective Identities

It can be argued that the *óenach* of Colmán Eala, mentioned as one of “the three *óenaig* of Ireland [*tri háenaig hÉirenn*]” in the 9th-century Triads of Ireland (Meyer 1906:x-xi, 4–5), was the habitual venue for seasonal tribal assembly presided over

by the dynasts of Cenél Fiachach, before Anglo-Norman colonization in the Irish midlands (Figs. 1, 5). It has already been shown that the kingdom of Cenél Fiachach constituted a pass or route described as the “Midland Corridor” (Smyth 1982:86–87). The kingdom straddled the mythological binary division of the island (Fig. 1) but lay firmly in the province of Mide because it had been annexed by the Southern Uí Néill, allegedly as early as the 5th century (O’Donovan 1841:51–52, n. 173), and was certainly dominated by that powerful dynasty by the 8th century (Ó Corráin 1972:29–30).

Colmán Eala was situated in the kingdom of Cenél Fiachach ~10 km southwest of Ráith Áeda, on the south side of the Clodiagh River which flows into the River Brosna. Colmán, who lived during the 6th century and died in A.D. 611, perhaps at 55 years of age, is recognized as the founder saint of the monastery of Lann Eala, anglicized Lynally (Ó Riain 2011:203). The Irish *lann* is a cognate of the Welsh *llan* and English *land*. It is often followed by a saint’s

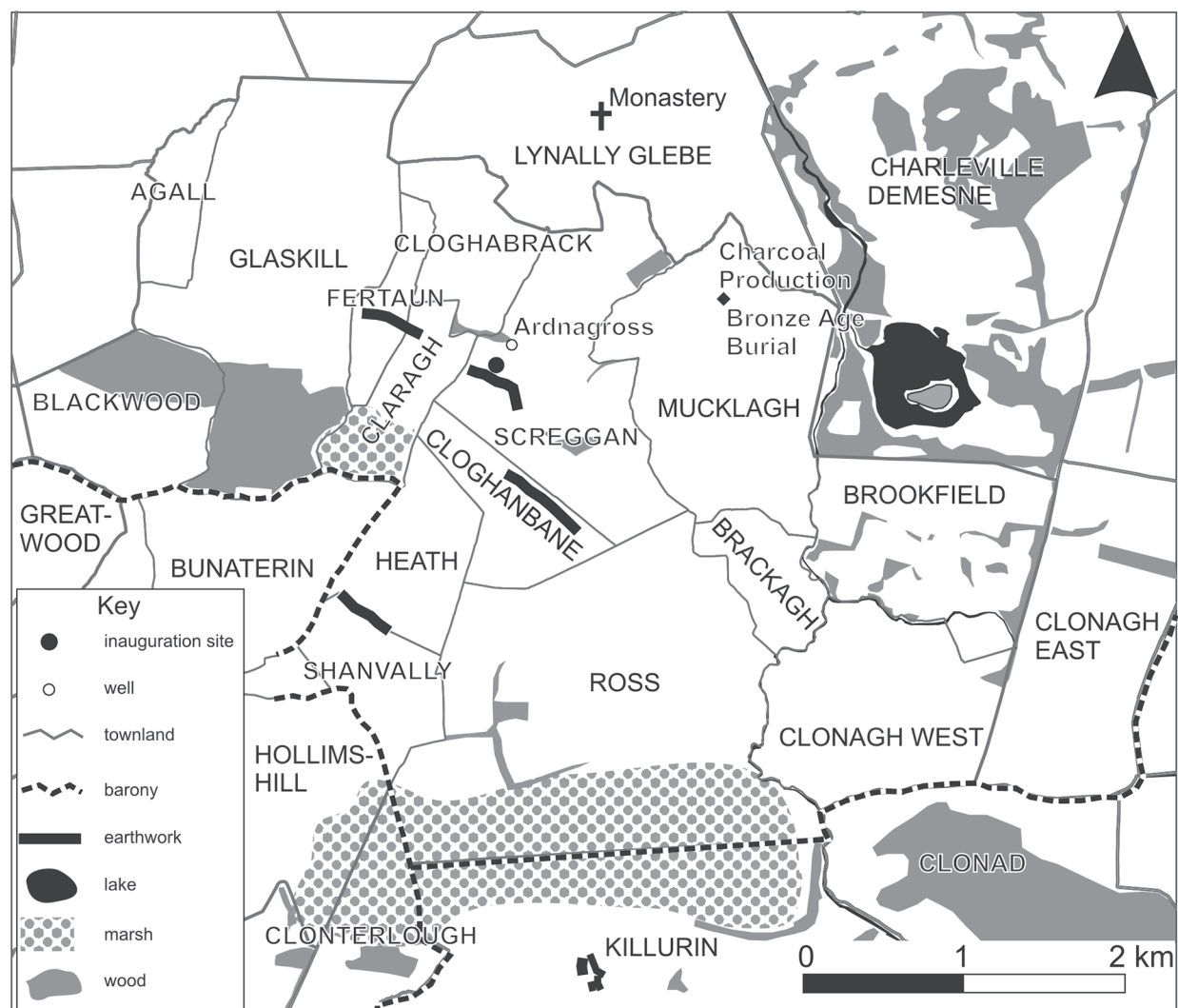


Figure 5. The archaeology and landscape of the *Óenach* of Colmán Eala (map by Richard Clutterbuck).

personal name in Welsh usage and indicates the presence of an enclosed church and cemetery and the land served by a parish (Roberts 1992:43–44). No Welsh connection has been established for Colmán's church, but the neighboring monasteries of Gallen and Lemanaghan are accorded Welsh associations in the Annals of Clonmacnoise (Murphy 1896:107, 131). The remains of St. Colmán's early medieval church, which was modified in the 15th century, and a graveyard are encompassed by a large earthen enclosure detectable as a crop mark. A fanciful foundation tale is connected with the creation of the enclosure around the monastery in Colmán's Latin Life. Having demonstrated his higher powers to the Cenél Fiachach by banishing the pestilent monster of Loch Eala, the saint set about constructing an enclosure for his monastery with the assistance of the sons of the local king, Duinecha and Cuineda (Plummer 1910:162, 166). The enclosure is possibly the *lann* referred to in the place-name (FitzPatrick 1998:105).

As might be expected of a monastic foundation in the province of Mide, Colmán is attributed an Uí Néill genealogy by the author of his Latin Life, and a tract on the Cenél Fiachach claims Colmán as their pre-eminent saint (Ó Riain 2011:203, 205). The deliberate attachment of the saint to the collective tribal identity of Cenél Fiachach is significant in respect of the *óenach* named after him. The *Óenach* of Colmán Eala, like other *óenaig* associated with saints, has been generally viewed as monastic and largely commercial, without the political and ceremonial aspects associated with secular *óenaig* such as the island-wide *Óenach* Tailten and the provincial *Óenach* Cruachna, but Etchingham (2011:41–42) has pointed out that since the *Óenach* of Colmán Eala is listed as one of the three *óenaig* of Ireland along with *Óenach* Tailten and *Óenach* Cruachna, there is no reason not to believe that it was a political assembly and that it included funerary games such as racing. The archaeology and topography of the site and the connection of at least one aspect of the saintly cult of Colmán with horses suggests that the *Óenach* of Colmán Eala was a seasonal tribal gathering with all of the ritual expectations of such an assembly. Colmán's cross was invoked as a protection against being thrown from a horse (Ó Riain 2011:205), a talisman that may have been especially called upon by those about to race horses or partake in any other sporting contests involving horses at an *óenach*. The fact too that a select point, Ardnagross hill (Fig. 5) in the landscape of the *Óenach* of Colmán Eala, was adopted by the later Mic Chochláin lords of Delbna Ethra as the venue for their inaugurations and parliaments suggests that, despite the association of the *óenach* with a Christian saint and his monastery of Lann Eala, this event and its setting

retained a strong secular personality rooted in its origins as a ritualized political assembly of the Cenél Fiachach tribe rather than a monastic market.

Determining the extent of the *óenach* landscape is problematic because important matters, such as the use to which funerary monuments in *óenaig* landscapes were put and how people moved through these places, are as yet under-investigated aspects of assembly culture. The challenge is compounded by modern, callous attrition of the cultural landscape of Colmán Eala due to extensive quarrying, intensive farming, and more-recent motorway development, which have completely altered the historical geography and removed most of the archaeology and topographical landmarks related to the *óenach*. However, using topographical, place-name, and archaeological indicators of assembly places, as outlined earlier in this paper, a block of townlands south of St. Colmán's monastery of Lann Eala can be identified with some confidence as components of the *óenach* landscape (Fig. 5). These townlands include Screggan, Mucklagh, Cloghabrack, Brackagh and Cloghanbane, Fertaun, Claragh, Heath and Shanvally, Ross, and Killurin—an area of approximately 15 km² flanked on its east and west sides by woodland and to the south by a marsh between Ross and Kilurin. The most significant natural attribute of this region was woodland. The earlier historical names “Fid Elo” and “Silva Elo”, which translate as “the wood of Lann Eala”, may indicate significant oak woodland here (Hogan 1910:417). The so-called “King Oak” of Charleville Demesne, east of Lann Eala (Fig. 5), with a girth of ~8 m and an estimated age of at least 400 years is regarded as a descendant of the great woods of common oak (*Quercus robur*) that once covered the Central Plain of Ireland (Magner 2011:73–375, Nicholls 2001:181, Pakenham 1997:27).

The topography of this landscape is glacial, related to the esker system further north and distinguished by a glaciofluvial fan—deposits of outwash that form a fan shape as they spread out over the land surface (Tubridy and Meehan 2006b:15). In keeping with most assembly places, the core of the *óenach* landscape is rocky pasture with shallow soils characterized by Rendzinas and Lithosols. The highest-point of the *óenach* landscape is Ardnagross hill at 80 m above sea level, situated in the townland of Screggan immediately south of St. Colmán's monastery of Lann Eala (Fig. 5). Ardnagross was a glacial ridge, the center of which was entirely quarried out for gravel and sand during the 20th century. Notwithstanding the fact that this was a well-wooded region during the medieval period, from the summit of Ardnagross distant views could be had west into the adjoining kingdom of Delbna Ethra and south

towards the Slieve Bloom Mountains into the province of Munster. A spring well was situated on the northeast side of the ridge, and to the south a linear earthwork, ~350 m long, was cleared during decades of “improvement” in this landscape.

The Screggan earthwork was one of a series of 5 discontinuous linear earthworks, some accompanied by ditches and the others occurring in the townlands of Cloghbane, Fertaun, and Killurin and between Heath and Shanvally (Fig. 5). These were each recorded on the 19th-century first-edition Ordnance Survey six-inch maps for this area, and all have since been cleared from the landscape. The role of linear earthworks in Ireland remains unresolved. They can be described as discontinuous single or parallel lines of bank and deep ditch, usually beginning or ending at a lake, a bog, or lower slopes of hilly or mountainous terrain. They vary greatly in form and length and clearly cannot all be assigned the same role (Ó Drisceoil 2015, Waddell 2010:379–382). The theory that they were all used to control movement of people and cattle is challenged by their discontinuous form and by the fact that they can be as short as 100 m. Some linear earthworks in Ireland, such as the Black Pig’s Dyke in Ulster, have wild-pig folk tales attached to them and are also associated with the wild-pig place-name *muclach*, anglicized mucklagh and translated as “piggery” (Quin 1983:469). The most renowned *muclach* association occurs at Cruachain, the pseudo-historical capital and *óenach* site of Connacht. Two parallel curving banks of earth called the “Mucklaghs”, each ~12 m wide, 3 m high, and ~100 m long with a narrow defile of no more than 1.5 m between them, are attributed in folklore to the rootings of a magical boar (Waddell et al. 2009:89–103).

Parallel linear earthworks were also a feature of the *óenach* landscape of Taltiu in the county of Meath. Excavation of the surviving portion of the southern earthwork indicated that while the lowest levels of the embankment could be attributed to late prehistory, it was modified about the 8th century and again in the 9th or 10th A.D., suggesting that this was “deliberate reuse of a prehistoric monument or possibly the deliberate construction of a prehistoric form, though to what purpose is impossible to say” (Waddell 2011:196–198). In view of the appetite for games at an *óenach* and the need to feed people, it could be tentatively proposed that the deep ditches of these earthworks were used for ceremonial coursing of wild pig as a sporting contest of the *óenach*. It is notable that a townland called Mucklagh also occurs in the area proposed as the location of the *óenach* of Colmán Eala, east of Screggan, in a landscape that once contained several linear earthworks (Fig. 5).

If the archaeological profile of *óenach* venues is

quintessentially funerary, the place where the *óenach* of Colmán Eala was held should be no exception to that rule. There are no surface expressions of prehistoric sepulchral monuments, but the townland of Fertaun south of Lann Eala and west of Screggan, preserves in its Irish-language place-name, *an Fear-tán*, medieval knowledge of a grave of high status (Fig. 5) and an indicator of an ancestral boundary *fert*. The reality of prehistoric burial in the greater landscape of the *óenach* is also confirmed by the results of excavations at Mucklagh during 2006–2007, which revealed a cremation burial in a pit (Fig. 5) containing the partial remains of two individuals, an adult female and a child, dated to the Early to Middle Bronze Age transition (BP 1776 cal. B.C.–1601 cal. B.C. 2 sigma; Lalonde 2008:47, Moloney 2011:1). The cremated burials of the woman and child were accompanied by an antler awl, fragments of copper, and what has been interpreted as a Wessex-type button or bead cover of sheet gold (91%), which is an unusual find in the context of Bronze-Age cremation burials in Ireland (Lalonde 2008:46–48, Moloney 2011:1–2). While the place-name reference to a high-status grave in *an Feartán* cannot be directly linked with the prehistoric cremation burial at Mucklagh, the combined evidence points to a funerary aspect to this landscape, which is an imperative of *óenach* locations. The presence of a *fert* is a strong indicator of a boundary, with the implication that this *óenach* location was once a significant focal point on the territorial boundary between Cenél Fiachach and the kingdom of Delbna Ethra (Fig. 1). This interpretation would explain why, as late as 1591, the lordly descendants of the kings of Delbna Ethra had themselves inaugurated on Ardnagross Hill in the former *óenach* landscape of Colmán Eala (Fig. 6).

It is generally accepted that the *óenach* as an institution of kingship ceased after the 12th century. However, prominent *loci* such as large sepulchral mounds and natural hillocks in some *óenach* landscapes had after-lives as assembly places of newly formed Gaelic lordships. The geography of the “Midland Corridor” altered again between the 12th and 14th centuries with the emergence of the lordships of Cenél Fiachach, Fir Chell, and Delbna Ethra (Fig. 6). Cenél Fiachach, as explained above, became a small lordship approximately a third of the size of the original early medieval kingdom of that name, ruled by the Mic Eochagáin lords, while the rest of that once expansive kingdom became the lordship of Fir Chell controlled by the Uí Mhaolmhaidh lords. The neighboring kingdom of Delbna Ethra, bordering the River Shannon, emerged as the powerful and acquisitive lordship of the Mic Chochláin (Fig. 6). In this new geography, Ráith

Áeda became the permanent assembly place of the Mic Eochagáin lords, and Ardnagross hill, which had been central to the *óenach* landscape of Colmán Eala, became the inauguration site of Mic Chochláin lords, while the Uí Mhaolmhuidh lords of Fir Chell used the hill of Mullach Croiche (Fig. 6) ~5 km southwest of Colmán Eala as their assembly place (FitzPatrick 2004:218–219; National Library of Ireland, MS G 192, folio 306). Mullach Croiche, a round hill situated in rich farming land, has no recorded archaeology but affords commanding views from its summit. The period during which the hill was first adopted by the Uí Mhaolmhuidh as their place of inauguration is not known, but it may have occurred sometime during the 14th century when they appear to have had a *pailis* constructed for themselves in nearby Pallaspark townland (O’Brien and Sweetman 1997:152). In effect, they created a new lordly center for themselves at this time.

The use of Ardnagross hill, at the old *óenach* site

of Colmán Eala, by the Mic Chochláin lords for their inaugurations and parliaments as late as the end of the 16th century, raises an important point about assembly places, collective identities, and territorial boundaries. There is a description of the inauguration of John Mac Coghlan on the hill of Ardnagross in A.D. 1590. In that year he assembled “the inhabitants of the said countrie, so many as he could, upon the hill of Ard na Grossa ... and there after other ceremonies and rites used in the creation of a Mac Coghlan did ... receive a scepter or white wand into his hands ... Whereat the people gave a shute as if they said vive le roy” (Mac Cuarta 1987:116). During the early medieval period, Delbna Ethra had been a sub-state of Cenél Fiachach (Fig. 1), which was controlled by the Southern Uí Néill kings of Mide (Byrne 1973:169). This historical association with Cenél Fiachach may partly explain why the later Mic Chochláin lords chose Ardnagross for their inaugurations, but there is a more convincing reason why they used this venue. There is evidence to

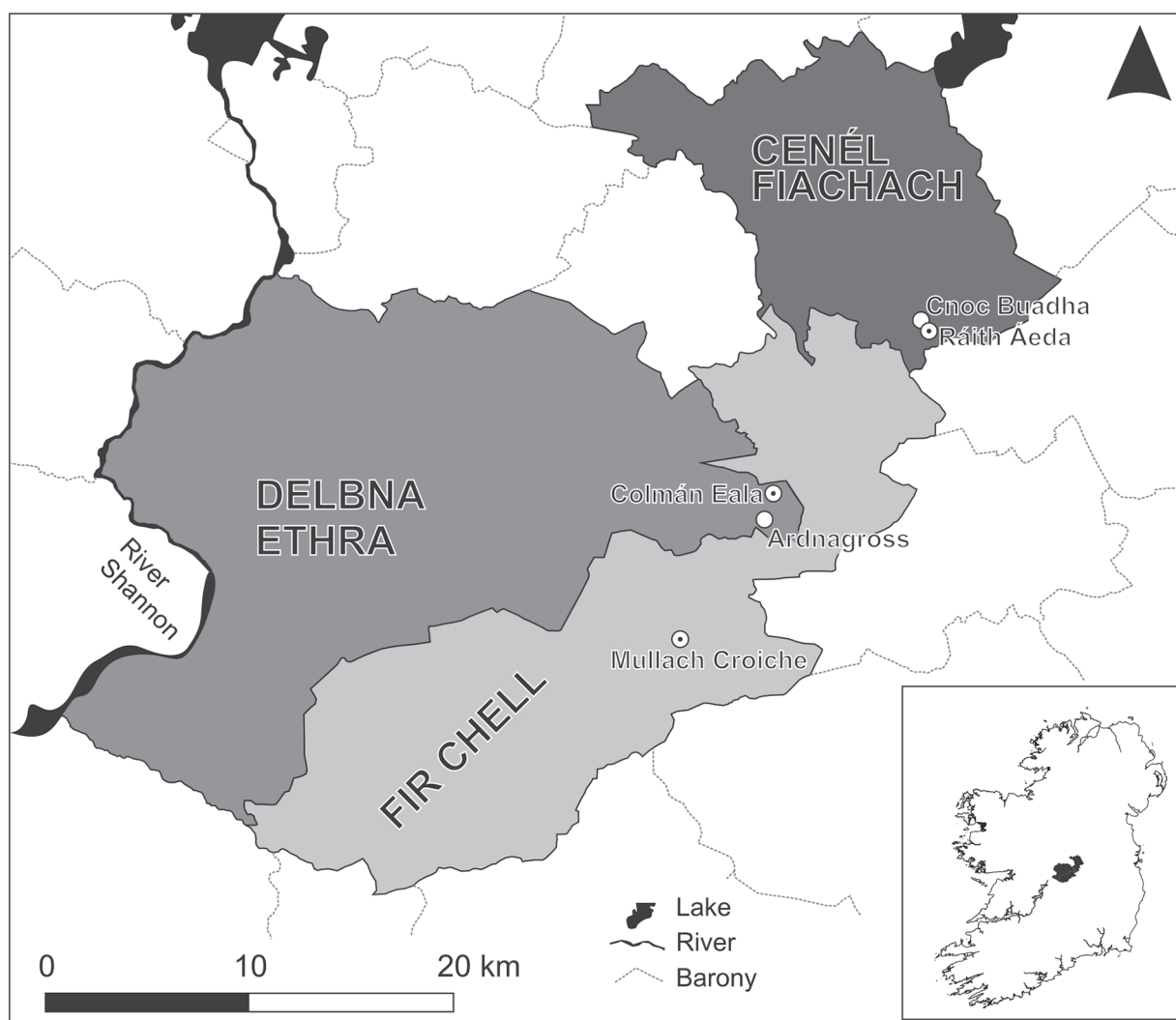


Figure 6. The later medieval lordships of Cenél Fiachach, Fir Chell, and Delbna Ethra, showing the early medieval assembly sites re-used for lordly inaugurations and parliaments (map by Richard Clutterbuck).

suggest that the *óenach* of Colmán Eala was situated on the early medieval territorial boundary between Delbna Ethra and Cenél Fiachach. The presence of a *fert*, an ancestral burial place, remembered in the townland place-name Fertaun, signifies that this was formerly a boundary zone and therefore a contested place where ancestral burials were invoked to legitimize claims to territory by both tribal groups. Other sources, such as the 9th-century Martyrology of Oengus, indicate that before the formation of the Uí Mhaoilmuidh lordship of Fir Chell, which had been carved out of the early medieval kingdom of Cenél Fiachach in the 13th/14th century, the eastern extent of the kingdom of Delbna Ethra had included monasteries such as Rahan founded by St. Mochuda just 2 miles northwest of the *óenach* of Colmán Eala (Stokes 1905:93). The footprint of the Mic Chochláin lords in the landscape of the former *óenach* of Colmán Eala was pronounced and long-lived. The attendance of the Mic Chochláin lords at Ardnagross hill, which had been central to the cultural landscape of the *óenach*, was as much an affirmation of their territorial claims, as a demonstration of their desire for overlordship of their neighbors, the Uí Mhaoilmuidh lords of Fir Chell, during the late medieval period.

Conclusion

Open-air assembly in medieval and early modern Ireland to ca. 1600 exercised elite collective identity more than any other institution of Gaelic society. It was at the assembly site, often situated in a territorial boundary zone and distinguished by an ancestral burial, real or imagined, that the concept of people and place as indivisible found its greatest expression. Landscapes selected for elite assembly in medieval Ireland and the continuity and sometimes discontinuity observed in their use by particular dynasties through time, reflects a complex set of expressions of collective identity. Assembly traditions of dynastic rulers of tribal groups, and the locations where those cultural practices were enacted, were not immutable. As suggested by the case studies explored in this paper, the circumstances in which assembly places were used were influenced by the territorial strategies of dominant over-kings and aspirant over-lords and by the involvement of the early medieval Church in assembly practices.

A hierarchy of elite collective identities was played out in the choice of Ráith Áeda, situated on a mythological boundary, and Colmán Eala, located on a territorial boundary, as the sites for particular forms of assembly between the 9th century and the 16th century. The most primordial and enduring collective identity, based on a mythological north-south division of the island into

two halves—Leth Cuinn and Leth Moga—and the designation of the Eiscir Riada as the boundary between those halves, appears to have been one of the significant factors in the choice of Ráith Áeda, as the venue for the *rigdál* convened in A.D. 859 by the Southern Uí Néill over-king of Mide. Against the dramatic backdrop of the glacial moraine that demarcated the binary cosmography of the island, the occasion of Máel Sechnaill's assembly displayed his growing power to the rival king of Munster. The glacial landscape of drift ridges in which the *rigdál* was held had a rich inheritance of prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments into which the 6th-century saint Áed mac Bricc had inserted his Christian church, drawn there by its proximity to the Eiscir Riada and the attendant major east-west route, the Slighe Mór. Áed's allegiance to Leth Cuinn is conveyed by the 8th-century author of his Life who portrayed him as a saint of the border between the Southern Uí Néill kings of Mide and the kings of Munster. His genealogy incorporates him into the house of Uí Néill, as a direct descendant of Fiacha. The Cenél Fiachach or "race of Fiacha" also claimed Fiacha as their progenitor, and their territory carried his name. However, it seems that the place where the early medieval dynasts of Cenél Fiachach expressed their collective identity as descendants of their eponymous ancestor Fiacha was not at Ráith Áeda where the *rigdál* had been convened but at the *óenach* of Colmán Eala, in the borderlands between Cenél Fiachach and Delbna Ethra, renowned in the 9th century as one of the principal *óenaig* of Ireland. Colmán and not Áed was claimed as the pre-eminent saint of the Cenél Fiachach, and Colmán himself was attributed an Uí Néill genealogy by the author of his Latin Life. Collective identity at this more local tribal level depended on genealogical construction of relationships with eponymous ancestors and striking ancestral associations with prehistoric funerary monuments in landscapes used for assembly practices.

The *rigdál* and the *óenach* both disappeared as institutions of kingship after the 10th and 12th centuries, and inauguration ceremonies made lords and not kings at assembly places in Ireland following the Anglo-Norman colonization of the late 12th and 13th centuries. There were extraordinary shifts of power in the later medieval period and in some instances corresponding changes in the collectives using assembly places. Only the most powerful dynasties retained the core of their lands and, consequently, access to their traditional assembly places. The need to demonstrably reconnect with alleged ancestors became greater as new lordships were created. The Mic Eochagáin lordly descendants of the kings of

Cenél Fiachach assembled around Cnoc Buadha at Ráith Áeda to inaugurate their rulers in the late medieval period, in circumstances where their territory had shrunk to a relatively small lordship. Ráith Áeda was then not only on the fabled boundary between the mythical halves of the island but a very real territorial border between the lordships of Cenél Fiachach and Fir Chell. In the circumstances of the drastic reduction of their ancestral territory, the reuse of the *rigdál* site by the Mic Eochagáin lords of Cenél Fiachach was perhaps an attempt by them to elevate themselves through place-association with the historic southern Uí Néill kings and their victorious *rigdál*. As Cenél Fiachach contracted, the new lordship of Fir Chell, ruled by the Uí Mhaoil-muaidh lords, emerged, but by the 16th century, and probably much earlier, they were overshadowed by the Mic Chochláin lords of Delbna Ethra. The Mic Chochláin were descendants of the early medieval kings of Delbna Ethra who had acquired ancestors in the *óenach* landscape of Colmán Eala and thereby increased their land claim in the easternmost extent of their kingdom. As a contested boundary zone between the early medieval territories of Delbna Ethra and Cenél Fiachach, the *óenach* of Colmán Eala and the focal point of Ardnagross hill in that landscape were the strongest and most enduring expressions of the collective identities of the elites that dominated the territories on either side of the broad interactive zone afforded by the assembly landscape.

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