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Myth and the creation of landscape in early medieval Ireland

Gregory Toner

Medieval Ireland is replete with stories set in, and attached to, the landscape. The land has even inspired a genre of tales, known as the *Dindshenchas*, 'history of famous places', relating specifically to the naming of places. The importance of place-myth in establishing and defining the Irish landscape can hardly be underestimated, therefore, but it is not my intention here to examine the naming of places as an activity in and of itself. Rather, I wish to focus on those elements of the wider literature that recount and explain the physical creation and formation of the land and its associated features.

The medieval Irish corpus, vast though it is, contains no native creation myth. The origins of the cosmos and of the island of Ireland are based on the biblical account of Creation as related in Genesis. The key text here is *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* ('The Book of the Taking of Ireland').¹ Compiled from earlier sources in the eleventh century, it tells of six successive invasions of Ireland, culminating in the arrival of the sons of Míl of Spain, the pseudo-historical ancestors of the dominant dynasties of medieval Ireland. The first settlers to arrive in Ireland, led by a daughter of Noah called Cessair, find a pristine island. Their occupation is ill-fated, however, and apart from a solitary witness who survives to recount the story through many generations, they all perish in the Great Flood. Nevertheless, while the native tradition is silent about the origins of the world, the land that the first settlers find is uninhabitable and has to be made fit for human occupation. Therefore, *Lebor Gabála* is concerned not with a great act of cosmic creation *ex nihilo* but rather with local acts of the re-formation of the landscape – the creation of lakes and rivers, the clearing of plains and the flattening of mountains, the appearance of great boulders and rocks as well as the construction of massive earthworks and habitation sites.

I use the term 'myth' in this paper in the broader sense of stories about the origins of things rather than merely to refer to narratives concerning the gods. In the medieval Irish corpus, the ancient gods frequently appear in euhemerized form and thus are often indistinguishable from other pseudo-historical personages. Therefore, I will examine a wide range of stories in which the formation of the topography is attributed to gods, ancestors, imagined precursors, animals or undefined cosmic forces in order to assess the medieval Irish view of mythical origins of the landscape. I shall argue that the creation of physical features is viewed in terms of the civilisation of the wilderness and the creation of domestic space, but also as tangible evidence for the presence and actions of former inhabitants of the land that links medieval writers and audiences to both historical and mythical time and space. The stories, and their associated marking of the land, imbues the landscape with a meaning far beyond the surface geography.

Plains and woods

One of the remarkable features of *Lebor Gabála* is the formation of lakes, rivers and plains during the second and third invasions led by Partholón and Nemed respectively. It was largely during this period that the land as it was known to the inhabitants of the historical period was formed. Four

¹ *Lebor Gabála*, ed. by Macalister.

plains were cleared by Partholón's people: Mag nÍtha in Leinster, Mag Tuired in Connacht and Mag Lí and Mag Láthránn in Ulster. During the next invasion, twelve plains were cleared: Mag Cera, Mag nÉba, Mag Cúile Tolad and Mag Luirg in Connacht; Mag Sered in Tethba; Mag Tóchair, Mag Seimne, Mag Macha, and Mag Muirthemne in Ulster, Mag mBernsa in Leinster; and Lecmag and Mag Moda in Munster.² We are told that there was only one plain in the whole of Ireland before the invasions of Partholón and Nemed, namely, Senmag nÉtair, 'the old plain of Étar', which was probably located at Benn Étair (Howth, Co. Dublin) for 'never did branch or twig of a wood grow through it'.³ With this single exception, therefore, plains were not regarded as naturally occurring as we might assume but as manmade. One accompanying poem tells us that the plains of Ireland were cut from the great forest,⁴ all except for Senmag nÉtair which was created by God himself.⁵ Irish *mag* does not primarily indicate a level area as suggested by English 'plain' but rather an area of land cleared of trees and rocks to produce agricultural plots.⁶ Thus, the formation of plains is a cultural action performed for the benefit of its inhabitants – the taming of the wild forest and the bringing of land under cultivation. Scowcroft has observed a cyclical pattern in *Lebor Gabála* with successive invaders acting out 'a single drama of colonization and conquest'.⁷ According to Scowcroft, each invader, apart from the last two, encounters an uninhabited island and so they 'colonize rather than conquer' the land.⁸ The purpose of the repeated emphasis on the clearing of plains within this scheme is clear. Ireland before the first invasion was a wilderness, covered in trees and unsuited for human habitation, and each new wave of invaders cultivates and domesticates the land, bringing more and more of it into agricultural use.⁹

However, agriculture is not the only purpose of the clearing of plains. In *Tochmarc Étaíne* ('The Wooing of Étaín'), Óengus journeys on behalf of Midir of Brí Léith to Ailill, king of north-east Ulster, to seek the hand of his daughter, Étaín Echraide. Ailill agrees to the marriage on condition that Oengus clear his lands for grazing, games and assemblies. The Dagdae duly clears twelve plains for him in a single night including Mag Macha, Mag Lemna, Mag nÍtha, Mag Tóchair, Mag nDula, Mag Techt, Mag Lí, Mag Line, and Mag Muirtheimne.¹⁰ Another episode in the same tale indicates that plains had to be cleared of stones as well, a practice that has necessarily persisted down to modern times resulting in characteristic stone walls that still dominate parts of the Irish landscape. In this episode, the king of Tara imposes on Midir 'famous great tasks' (*mórchesta urdharca*) including clearing Mide of stones.¹¹

One further clearing is described in *Lebor Gabála* and has clear significance for agriculture too. The invasion of the Fir Bolg is characterised by dissent and the struggle for kingship until the good king,

² *Lebor Gabála*, ed. by Macalister, iii, p. 122 §240.

³ '*nīr ās frem nā fleisc feda trīt rīam*', *Lebor Gabála*, ed. by Macalister, ii, p. 270 §204.

⁴ '*Ro slechta maige a mōr-chaill* (Plains were cleared of their great wood)', *Lebor Gabála*, ed. by Macalister, iii p. 48 §11.

⁵ '*Is aire is sen-mag son – is Dīa delbach foterā*' (This is why it is the fortunate Old Plain | it is God the Fashioner who caused it), *Lebor Gabála*, ed. by Macalister, iii, p. 50 §19.

⁶ Ó Maolfabhail, *Ó Lyon*, pp. 78–9.

⁷ Scowcroft, '*Leabhar Gabhála*', p. 32.

⁸ Scowcroft, '*Leabhar Gabhála*', pp. 32–33.

⁹ Toner, 'Landscape and cosmology', p. 274.

¹⁰ '*Tochmarc Étaíne*', ed. by Bergin and Best, p.150 §13. Although it is stated that twelve plains were cleared, only nine are named. Note that the land in question had previously been wasteland and woodland: '*fo dithraib 7 fedaib*' (under waste and wood), *ibid.* p.150 §12.

¹¹ '*Tochmarc Étaíne*', ed. by Bergin and Best, p.176 §5.

Eochu son of Erc, becomes king. He is a just and righteous king and peace prevails throughout his reign. He takes Tailtiu, the daughter of the king of Spain, as his bride. He was eventually killed by the Tuatha Dé Danann and when he died Tailtiu, tormented by grief, went to Caill Cuan and she felled the trees of the wood so that by the end of the year 'it was a plain under clover-flower' (*magh fo scoth-semair*).¹² The flowering of clover indicates that the land became rich, luscious farmland capable of supporting the best cattle.¹³ Elsewhere, we are told that games, presided over by the king of Tara, were held at Tailtiu at the feast of Lughnasad (the harvest festival), and so the resonances between fertility and this site are particularly strong. Indeed, Tailtiu is depicted as the fostermother of Lug who, of course, gives name to the festival of Lughnasad and who is said to have instituted the games of Tailtiu in her honour.¹⁴

The predominant theme in the felling of trees, therefore, is that of the domestication of wild space. However, in some texts, deforestation is linked to acts of anger or vengeance. According to the D version of *Aided Conchobair* ('The Death of Conchobar'), when Conchobar, king of Ulster, heard of Christ's crucifixion, he became so agitated that he cut down the trees of Mag Lamraige and died there.¹⁵ In the Dindshenchas of Fornocht, Uinche went to Finn's fort at Dún Droma Dean where a wood stood at that time. He divided his retinue of twenty one into three bands: a third to fell the trees, a third to slaughter the people, and a third to burn the fort, so that it was left naked (*fornocht*).¹⁶ In *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, the men of Ireland cut down the woods of Slechta ('that which is hewn down') to make a path for Medb's chariot during her invasion of Ulster.¹⁷ This too, may be seen as a violent act as the felling of the woods is a corollary to her penetration of Ulster and the theft of the Brown Bull of Cooley. In this case, however, the result is not a plain (*mag*) but rather a scar through a hill which remained as a physical reminder of the destruction of the raid.

This perhaps reflects another view of woods as economically productive land that supplied building materials, firewood and, of course, nuts that were a mainstay of human and animal diets over the winter.¹⁸ Thus, while the clearing of land to create plains or farmland is invariably seen as a good thing, the destruction of woods may not always have produced farmland but merely destroyed another important resource. The positive economic aspect of woods is seen very occasionally in some stories. In *Tochmarc Étaíne*, one of the 'great tasks' imposed on Midir, as well as the clearing of plains, is the planting of a wood over Bréifne.¹⁹ According to the Dindshenchas of Fid nGaible, Gaible mac Ethedeóin, son of Nuadu Argatlám, stole a bundle of twigs which the Dagda's daughter had gathered to make a tub because the tub which the Dagda had made dripped while the sea was in flood. He threw away the bundle of sticks and where it landed a wood grew, which was then

¹² *Lebor Gabála*, ed. by Macalister, iv, p. 114 §311. In an alternative version in the Dindshenchas of Nás, Tailtiu's husband, Eochaid, summoned the men of Ireland to cut down Caill Cuan in her honour ('Rennes Dindsenchas', ed. by Stokes, §20).

¹³ See Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp. 44-45 on the value of clover.

¹⁴ MacNeill, *Festival of Lughnasa*, p. 320.

¹⁵ *Death-tales*, ed. by Meyer, p. 18.

¹⁶ 'Rennes Dindsenchas', ed. by Stokes, §27.

¹⁷ *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, ed. by O'Rahilly, p. 133 with variant that it was cut down to allow Fedelm, the prophetess, to see more clearly.

¹⁸ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp. 381-4.

¹⁹ 'Tochmarc Étaíne', ed. by Bergin and Best, p.176 §5. In addition to clearing plains and planting woods, Midir is forced to build a causeway over the bog of Móin Lámaige and lay rushes over Tethba. The laying of rushes might be seen as the antithesis of agriculture but see Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp. 384-5 for the economic uses of rushes.

called *Fid nGaible* 'Gaible's wood'.²⁰ Although the wood is the result of an act of theft, the stealing of twigs from the Dagda's daughter, it is noteworthy that the resulting wood is described as a 'fair wood' in the prose version. The metrical version further underlines its economic value. We are told that the site of the wood lay within the 'confines of Fland' (*ic finib Flaind*) who is therefore entitled to its trees (*a doss a derb-chail*).²¹ The extraordinary nature of this wood is intimated in the second verse where we are told that 'every kind of tree without exception is to be sought | in the soft fresh-leaved faggot (*cach crand cen timme ria thúr | isin grinne buc barr-úr*).²² Thus, the place-myth attempts to explain not just the simple fact of its existence but the unusual variety of trees to be found in it.

Therefore, we see that the clearing of forest is about the taming of the wild and bringing it within the human sphere, whether for agricultural purposes or for social purposes such as the holding of assemblies. Woodland was also regarded as valuable land and some stories are interested in its origins. In all of this, there must be a balance between what is deemed to be the most necessary and productive type of land. The original wood-covered island found by Cessair and Partholón was of little use, but neither was a treeless island.

Lakes and Rivers

The formation of lakes and rivers commences in the time of Partholón, the leader of the second invasion. Until then, there had only been three lakes and nine rivers in the country including the major rivers of the Liffey, Lee, Moy, Sligo, Erne, Finn, Mourne, Bush and Bann. During Partholón's life, seven lakes burst forth: Loch Láiglinne, Loch Cuan, Loch Rudraige, Loch Teichet, Loch Mesc, Loch Con and Loch nEchtra.²³ During the subsequent invasion, led by Nemed, four lakes erupted: Loch Cál, Loch Munremair, Loch nDairbrech, and Loch nAinnind.²⁴

I have argued elsewhere that the digging of a grave or any act of penetrating the ground is often related to the bursting forth of lakes.²⁵ We find this phenomenon, for example, in the story of Loch Rudraige as recounted in *Lebor Gabála* (see above), and elsewhere it is said that Loch Garman (Wexford Harbour) erupted when the grave of Garman Glas was dug.²⁶

The *Dindshenchas* of Belach Gabráin relates that a pig called Lurgan was hunted as far as the Bog of Allen where it fled underground in an effort to escape. While no explicit correlation between the rooting of the pig and the inundation is made in the text, it is clear that the lake was thought to have formed from the action of this supernatural pig. Like the inundation of Loch Rudraige in *Lebor*

²⁰ 'Rennes Dindshenchas', ed. by Stokes, §11.

²¹ *Metrical Dindshenchas*, ed. by Gwynn, ii, p. 58.

²² *Metrical Dindshenchas*, ed. by Gwynn, ii, p. 58.

²³ *Lebor Gabála*, ed. by Macalister, ii, 270 §203; iii, pp. 14-16 §219.

²⁴ *Lebor Gabála*, ed. by Macalister, iii, 120 §238. It was the burial of Ainnind son of Nemed that caused Loch nAinnind to burst forth according to this account. According to the *Dindshenchas*, however, Ainnind was of the Fir Bolg and settled at the lake after fleeing oppression in Greece. There is no inundation there ('Rennes Dindshenchas', ed. by Stokes, §128).

²⁵ Toner, 'Landscape and cosmology', p. 276.

²⁶ 'Rennes Dindshenchas', ed. by Stokes, §40.

Gabála, the eruption of Loch nOirbsen is related to a interment, in this case of the god Manannán mac Lir who was buried upright there after he was slain in battle.²⁷

One of the newly formed lakes mentioned in *Lebor Gabála* is Loch Laíglinne. The text merely tells us that it burst forth during the time of Partholón and that it was named after Laíglinne, one of Partholón's sons and one of the leaders of the expedition. A more complete version is presented in the Dindshenchas of Loch Laíglinne, according to which Laíglinne went with fifty men to the well of Dera mac Scera. A wave erupted from the well forming the lake and drowning Laíglinne and his companions.²⁸ The metrical version supplies important details, including that the well wreaked dire vengeance (*trom-dígail*) on Laíglinne.²⁹ Unfortunately, we are told nothing more about why the well should seek to punish Laíglinne, but his arrival with fifty men in the *Lebor Gabála* version suggests that he was mounting an attack on the land and perhaps directly on the well. It might be read as an attempt by Ireland, or by its nefarious waters, to repel the invading force and it is interesting in this regard that it is the first lake to be mentioned in this section. It may, therefore, mark an attempted expansion into new territory and it may be linked rather to the battle with the Fomoiri three years later at Slemna Maige Ítha.³⁰ If so, the drowning of Laíglinne marks a further escalation in the Partholonians' battle with the land in their attempt to subdue it.

The story of Loch nEchach tells of a well that was so dangerous that it had to be guarded, and when its cover was removed it flooded the whole plain and formed the huge lake which is now called Lough Neagh.³¹ Strangford Lough is named in *Lebor Gabála* from the inundation of the Brénae (*murthóla Bréna fo thír*).³² In historical times, Brénae was the name of an inlet, and possibly a river, in Strangford Lough. St Patrick enters the Lough at '*fretum quod est Brene*' and elsewhere it is mentioned as an eastern boundary of the Ulaid.³³ It is evidently derived from the adjective *brén* 'stinking, rotten' and may mean something like 'stinking place'. It may well have originally been named from one of the areas of low tide where rotting seaweed would have created a particularly obnoxious smell, but in terms of the narrative it is reminiscent of other inundations caused by repellent acts. In Muirchú's seventh-century Life of St Patrick, a churlish man drove the saint's oxen out of his field where they were resting after hard toil. Patrick cursed him, saying:

'Nusquam proficiat tibi ager hic tuus neque semini tuo in aeternum; iam inutilis erit.' Et factum est sic: inundatio etenim maris tam habunda eodem ueniens die circumluit et operuit totum agrum, et possitus est iuxta profetae uerbum terra fructifera in salsuginem a malitia inhabitantis in ea.

'May this your field here never again yield profit either to you or to your descendants; from now on it will be useless.' And so it happened. On the same day a vast flood of the sea

²⁷ 'Rennes Dindsenchas', ed. by Stokes, §159.

²⁸ 'Rennes Dindsenchas', ed. by Stokes, §151.

²⁹ *Metrical Dindshenchas*, ed. by Gwynn, iv, p. 256.

³⁰ *Lebor Gabála*, ed. by Macalister, ii, p. 270 §202; iii, p. 12 §216.

³¹ *Two texts on Loch nEchach*, ed. by Ranke, pp. 200-202; Mac Néill, 'Mythology of Lough Neagh'.

³² *Lebor Gabála*, ed. by Macalister, iii, p. 16 §219.

³³ 'Patrician texts', ed. by Bieler, p. 78; *Historical dictionary*, ed. by Ó Riain, Ó Murchadha, and Murray, fascicle 2, p.181.

submerged and covered the whole field and, as the prophet says, fertile land was turned into marsh because of the wickedness of those who dwelled there.³⁴

The account continues that the land has ‘remained sandy and barren’ (*arenossa ergo et infructuossa*) from that day to this. This event is located in Mag Inlis which lies west of Downpatrick on the banks of Strangford Lough, close to where Bréna must have lain. Inundations are far from neutral, therefore, and mark the intervention of supernatural forces in peoples’ lives. The seething waters that lie underground threaten this world and will flood if disturbed.

The formation of nine rivers is described as historical fact in *Lebor Gabála* but in a radically different account in *Tochmarc Étaíne*, Ailill, king of Ulster, compelled the young god Óengus to divert twelve great rivers into the sea so that the land would be drained and people would have fish from the sea:

...co ruga da primusce déc asin ferand sa docum mara do neoch fil a tibradaib 7 mointib 7 seiscnib, do thabairt thoraib o muirib do thuathaib 7 cenelaib, do thirmugudh thiri 7 talman.

(...until you draw out of this land to the sea twelve great rivers that are in wells and bogs and moors, so that they may bring produce from the sea to peoples and kindreds, and drain the earth and the land.)³⁵

The Dagdae obliged and so were formed Find, Modornn, Slenae, Nass, Amnas, Oichén, Or, Banda, Samaír, and Lóche.³⁶ The diversion of the rivers has two effects, therefore. Firstly, the land is drained and rendered suitable for agriculture. Secondly, by connecting the rivers to the sea, fish can now swim up them and they provide an important additional food source for people. Plentiness of fish in the rivers is one of the signs of a just king. For example, Conaire Mór’s reign in Tara is characterised by ‘acorns up to the knee every autumn, a surfeit over the Búas and the Bóand each June’ (*mes co glúine cach fhogmair 7 imbas for Búais 7 Boind i medón in mís mithemon cacha bliadna*).³⁷

The eruption of lakes is frequently a violent act, but bursting forth of rivers is much less likely to be destructive. In *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the river Cronn rises up against the men of Ireland and bars them from crossing but this may be seen as the river acting in the defence of the territory to which it belongs rather than being purely destructive.³⁸ The River Boyne is the subject of Dindshenchas accounts according to which the woman Boand (who is in fact the eponymous goddess of the river) dared to look into the well of Nechtain as a result of which it burst forth and drove her to her death in the sea. However, Boand is portrayed here as a provocative and haughty woman, showing a lack of respect for the well and so seems deserving of her fate.³⁹

Habitation sites

³⁴ ‘Patrician texts’, ed. by Bieler, p. 112.

³⁵ ‘*Tochmarc Étaíne*’, ed. by Bergin and Best, p. 150 §13.

³⁶ ‘*Tochmarc Étaíne*’, ed. by Bergin and Best, p. 150 §14.

³⁷ *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. by Knott p. 6 §17; trans. Gantz, *Early Irish myths*, p. 67.

³⁸ ‘*Gaibid Crón cóidech friu | nís léicfe [i] Muirthemniu | | co rroisc monar Féne | isin tSléib túath Ochaíne. La sodain cotnóccaib in t-usci súas co mboí i n-indaib crand.*’ (The plaintive river Cronn offers them resistance and will not let them cross into Muirthemne until the work of warriors is finished in the mountain north of Ochaíne. Thereupon the river rose in flood as high as the tree-tops), *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, ed. by O’Rahilly, p. 36 ll. 1160-64.

³⁹ For further discussion, see Toner, ‘Landscape and cosmology’, pp. 279-82.

Manmade structures form an important element of the historical and mythical landscape. Although not part of the natural topography, many manmade structures are afforded construction myths that explain either their existence or some peculiarity about them, and most often these are related to the deeds of gods and ancients. In *Lebor Gabála*, it is said that two raths were also built during Nemed's reign: Ráith Chimbaíth in Ulster and Ráith Chinn Eich in Leinster.⁴⁰ These are claimed as the first habitation sites to be built in Ireland and so represent a further taming and civilisation of the landscape. Moreover, they also embody the (partial) subjugation of the demonic Fomoiri against whom Nemed won three battles for they are built through the forced labour of the Fomoiri. The second fort, Ráith Chinn Eich, was supposedly built in a single day and, we are told, Nemed slew the builders before dawn so that it was left unfinished. Although the site of Ráith Chinn Eich has not been identified, there is a clear implication that the structure was either incomplete or partially destroyed at the time of writing.

A quite different narrative accounts for an incomplete structure at Tara known as Clóenferta Temrach (the crooked grave-mound of Tara).⁴¹ A woman's sheep grazed on the woad belonging to the queen, the wife of Lugaid mac Con. Lugaid ordered that the sheep be forfeit in recompense but the young boy, Cormac mac Airt, approaching Tara for the first time, declared the judgement to be faulty. Only the wool should be forfeit, he argued, as both wool and woad would grow back. The side of the house in which Lugaid was fell down the cliff, causing the misshapen structure known as Clóenferta Temrach to be formed. Unlike other stories concerning human structures that will be considered below, the collapse of the house here is attributed to supernatural forces. Lugaid has uttered an unjust judgement, as demonstrated by Cormac's correction, and the collapsing of the land under his house, literally its undermining, indicates that his sacred kingship is coming to an end. Indeed, he remained in the kingship another year but, we are told, no grass grew, no leaves appeared on trees and there was no corn. Another unfinished building seems to be suggested in the tale *Aided Con Roí* (The Death of Cú Roí) in which Cú Chulainn conspires with Cú Roí's wife, Bláthnait, to slay her husband. She pours milk into the river Findglais, from which it gets its name, as a sign to Cú Chulainn to commence his attack. Realising what is happening, the men who are building a fort for Cú Roí throw down the stones they are using in the construction and rush to defend him.⁴² We are told nothing more about this fort but the very fact that we are told that they abandoned its construction in haste perhaps points to the existence of a partially incomplete stone circle.

The story of Macha Mongruad tells of the construction of the great fort of Emain Macha, the seat of the king of Ulster in the Ulster Cycle. Macha had seized the kingship of Ulster from her rivals who took to brigandage as a result. She pursued them throughout the country and, when she found them, disguised herself as an old hag. Apparently mistaking her for the goddess of sovereignty, the brothers each went to lie with her but she overpowered and bound them. She then took them back to Ulster and forced them to dig the rampart of Emain Macha which was named after her. The very structure of Emain Macha, therefore, instantiates this remarkable victory of the fiery female over her male rivals. I have argued elsewhere that she should be regarded as the founder of the Ulster capital and that her own ferocity embodies and foreshadows the martial superiority of the warriors

⁴⁰ *Lebor Gabála*, ed. by Macalister, iii, pp. 120-22 §239; p. 132 §251.

⁴¹ *Cath Maige Mucrama*, ed. by O Daly, p. 58 §§63-6.

⁴² 'Tragic Death of Cúroí', ed. by Best, §4.

of the Ulstermen as we find them in the Ulster Cycle.⁴³ As such, the fort of Emain Macha stands in the landscape as a reminder of the extraordinary origins of their martial dominance as displayed in the sagas.

Various narratives also attempt to account for other monument types. According to *Mesca Ulad* (The Intoxication of the Ulstermen), while the Ulstermen were stranded in Munster, there was a heavy snow fall. They erected stone columns to provide shelter for their horses and, we are told, these survived to the author's day and were called Echlasa Ech nUlad (the horse-shelters of the horses of the Ulstermen).⁴⁴ The assertion that they could still be seen at the time of writing suggests that they actually existed and so the story neatly accounts for the surviving monument. Similar accounts are found elsewhere. In the *Táin*, for example, we are told that Medb's army made huts at Botha ('huts') and sheds at Liasa Liac ('stone enclosures').⁴⁵ However, there is no indication that the author knew of actual manmade structures at these locations and he may just be accounting for the names, although in all likelihood at least the stone enclosures had survived.⁴⁶

Rocks and boulders

At the end of the first Battle of Moytirra, the poets transform themselves into pillar stones to hide from Lug who, however, discovers them and forces them to transform back into poets. Rebecca Blustein astutely observes that both stones and poets are linked functionally through the notion of the preservation of memory: the poets here sit on the stones in order to tally the number of dead and to relate the deeds that they saw and so preserve the events of the battle for future generations.⁴⁷ Similarly, the stones mark the graves of the dead who fell at the start of the tale and so preserve their memory for future generations. What this shows is that the author was keenly aware of the function of grave stones as markers in the landscape indexing the past. Like place-myths, therefore, stones can carry memories of ancient events.

The commemoration of the burial places of warriors, kings and queens is so common in the literature as to hardly require comment. In many cases we are just given the name of the warrior and where he fell, but frequently we are told that a grave was dug or a gravestone (*lia*) raised, and there are numerous references to the construction of cairns, piles of stones commemorating the dead in particular battles. In most cases we may suppose that this is no more than a reference to a common burial practice. Some stories, however, depart from the stock phrasing and suggest something more unusual. According to the *Dindsenchas* of Óe Cualann, a certain Cuala was slain in battle there by the king of Leinster and his head was placed on the mountain on a stone called Óe Cualann which is to be understood in this context as 'Cuala's ear'.⁴⁸ It might be implied, therefore, that his head left the track of his ear on a particular rock here. In *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the warrior Úalu attempts to carry an enormous stone across the river Cronn but is drowned and, we are told, 'his grave and his headstone are on the road beside the stream' (*Atá a lecht 7 a lía forsin tsligi ocon glais*

⁴³ Toner, 'Macha', pp. 98-101.

⁴⁴ Watson, *Mesca Ulad*, p. 14 ll. 306-312; Gantz, *Early Irish myths*, p. 198.

⁴⁵ *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, ed. by O'Rahilly, pp. 153-4.

⁴⁶ Haley, 'Topography', p. 77 suggests that Liasa Liac may be represented by sheepfolds or possibly ringforts but the place is unidentified. Cf. Gosling, 'Route', p. 159.

⁴⁷ Blustein, 'Poets and pillars'.

⁴⁸ 'Rennes Dindsenchas', ed. by Stokes, §29.

.i. *Lía Úaland a ainm*).⁴⁹ Later, at Fuiliarn, Cú Chulainn, with the help of some Ulster exiles, slays Gaile Dáne, his 27 sons and his sister's son. The deed left its mark on the landscape for we read: *Atá isin cloich i medón ind átha láthrach tele a scéth 7 a ndornn 7 a nglúine. Ocus rolatha a naí coirthi fichit and sin.*' (In the stone in the middle of the ford there is still the mark of the boss of their shields and of their fists and knees. Their twenty-nine headstones were erected there).⁵⁰

A curious incident in the Táin may mark a different commemorative or cautionary function of stone pillars. In an attempt to deceive Cú Chulainn who had asked for the hand of Finnabair in marriage, her father, Ailill, sent a jester in his stead to perform the betrothal. Cú Chulainn recognised the deception and thrust a stone through Finnabair and the jester and both stones, according to the story, are still there: *Atát a ndí chorthi and .i. corthi Findabrach 7 corthi in drúith* (Their two pillar-stones are still there, Finnabair's stone and the jester's stone).⁵¹ These are not primarily grave markers, if indeed they are grave markers at all. It has been remarked that Finnabair later appears alive in the Táin and this has been taken as a sign of the redactor's clumsy work of compilation but at the very least we must accept that the scribes, and probably the redactor, did not necessarily assume that Finnabair died at this stage. Given that the deception here lies in the realm of marriage, it seems reasonable to conclude that Cú Chulainn does not slay Finnabair here but rather rapes her with the pillar stone.⁵² This grotesque act, more so perhaps than murder, would have stood as a signal to Ailill that Cú Chulainn would not be deceived so easily.

Natural rocks, crags and boulders are another feature of the landscape that feature prominently in medieval Irish tales.⁵³ According to the Expulsion of the Déssi, Corc used to be washed every morning on the back of the cow belonging to the druid's wife, Boí. Corc's sorcery caused the cow to jump into the sea where it turned into a rock which was called Bó Boí (Boí's cow).⁵⁴ The Táin describes, somewhat anomalously, a battle between Cú Roí of Munster and Munremar of Ulster during which they stood at opposite ends of the encampment of the men of Ireland and cast stones at each other.⁵⁵ The men of Ireland were terrified as the rocks showered down upon them and begged Cú Roí to desist. The plain filled up with stones and was called Mag Clochair ('plain of the stones'). Thus, the story explains not only the placename but, more importantly from our perspective, how the land took on its current form. In *Bruiden Da Choca* (Da Coca's Hostel), a centrepiece of the final battle is the casting of a huge rock in and out of the hostel. Fourteen

⁴⁹ *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, ed. by O'Rahilly, p. 32 ll. 1005-6.

⁵⁰ *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, ed. by O'Rahilly, p. 78 ll. 2565-6.

⁵¹ *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, ed. by O'Rahilly, p. 49 ll. 1603-4.

⁵² P. Kelly, *Táin*, 85. *Benaid a dí trilis di \$\$7 sádid liic tríana brat \$\$7 tríana léid, \$\$7 sádid corthe tría medón in drúith* (He cut off her two plaits and thrust a stone through the middle of her mantle and her tunic. Then he thrust a stone through the middle of the jester), TBC-I p. 49 ll. 1602-3. Note the cutting of her tresses – an attempt to rob her of her female beauty – and the fact that the stone penetrates the outer and inner layers of her clothing. By contrast, the pillar-stone is thrust through the 'middle' of the druid (note that 'middle' in the description of the attack on Findabair is an editorial intrusion and is not found in the original text).

⁵³ See, for example, Muhr, 'Queen Medb'.

⁵⁴ 'Expulsion of the Déssi', ed. by Hull, p. 34. We may compare this name to the rocks called Báe Aífi, a trysting site in *Fingal Rónáin* ('The kin-slaying of Rónán'). However, the tale does not offer an origin legend for the rocks but provides a rather clinical account: '*Bae Aífi .i. clocha fileat la tóeb int Sléibe. It cosmaile fri bú finna do chéin. For aife int Sléibe ataat*' (The cows of Aífe i.e. rocks that are on the side of the mountain. They are like white cattle from a distance. They are on the slope of the mountain) (*Fingal Rónáin*, ed. Greene, p. 5). My translation.

⁵⁵ *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, ed. O'Rahilly, p. 170.

warriors were killed as the stone was cast between the two opposing armies until Dubthach Dáel Ulad threw it a great distance away and, we are told, ‘that is the stone which is in the well of Cell Lasra today’ (*conid í an lía fil i topur Cille Lasra indiu*).⁵⁶

Other stones mark the birth place of a great king or warrior. In the story of the birth of Conchobar, king of Ulster, his mother, Ness, wished to delay his birth until a propitious day so she went to the river called Conchobar and sat on a stone to hold back the child. He was born at the appropriate time and, we are told, the stone on which she sat still exists to the west of Airgdech.⁵⁷ The claim that the stone could be seen at the time of writing suggests that it was known to the author and was part of the contemporary landscape. *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic* (The tales of Éogan and Cormac) recounts the story of the birth of Fiachu Muillethan under nearly identical circumstances. A druid announces to his mother, Monchae, that her son would surpass all other princes and that his descendants would be kings until the end of the world if she delayed his birth till the next day.⁵⁸ She then went and ‘sat upon the stone at Raphae in the lower reaches of the Suir’ (*co mbuī inna suidiu forsind licc oc Raphaīnd i n-imīchtur Siúire*),⁵⁹ causing the child’s head to spread out on the rock, from which he was named Muillethan (‘broad crown’). Once again, the stone on which she supposedly sat appears to have been a real stone in the River Suir which is here imbued with added significance as the birthplace of the ancestor king of the Éoganacht dynasty of Munster.

Animals and Landscape

So far we have been concerned largely with the impact of humans or gods on the landscape but animals also play a part in the formation of medieval topography. One of the most memorable stories of the association between an animal and the landscape occurs in the Táin. At the very end of the tale, the two great bulls, the Finnbennach of Connacht and the Brown Bull of Cooley meet and fight. This is often seen as a struggle between cosmic forces, a core episode around which the tale was built.⁶⁰ From our point of view, it results in an altered landscape. This is effected primarily through the renaming of various landscape features but also, importantly, through changes in the geography itself. The Brown Bull knocked the White Bull’s horn from its head, sending the horn into the mountain which was called Slíab nAdarca (‘mountain of the horn’). We are told specifically that the horn was left on the mountainside (*co mbaí asain tsléib*).⁶¹ Whether this represents a natural feature in the shape of a bull’s horn or a real or imagined horn once found there is impossible to determine but in either case it implies a change in the physical form of the mountain, not just a change to the name. A similar story is told of a place called Adarca in the Dindsenchas.⁶² Iuchna Echbél, a royal hospitaller, dwelt at Machad Brigde where he used to rear calves until they were yearlings, and they loved him. When he died, the calves gathered round his body for three days, and they fought each other until they cast their horns which formed mounds, from which it got its name, Adarca (‘horns’).

⁵⁶ *Bruiden Da Choca*, ed. Toner, p. 130 §54. Another stone kills Mog Corb and remains inside the hostel at the time of the writing of the story (p. 134 §58).

⁵⁷ *mairid fos in leacc forsa ro geanair .i. fri hAirgdhigh aniar* (the stone still remains on which he was born, to wit, to the west of Airgdig), ‘Anecdota from the Stowe MS.’, ed. by Meyer, p.177 ll. 106-7.

⁵⁸ Ó Cathasaigh, *Heroic Biography*, p. 124.

⁵⁹ Ó Cathasaigh, *Heroic Biography*, p. 119 ll. 10-11.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Ó hUiginn, ‘Background and development’, 61.

⁶¹ *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, ed. by O’Rahilly, p. 124, l. 4139.

⁶² ‘Rennes Dindsenchas’, ed. by Stokes, §16.

The story of the fight between the two bulls in the Táin continues with the slow dismembering of the White Bull on the horns of the Brown Bull. Its shoulder blade was left at Finnleithe ('fair shoulder blade'), its loin at Áth Luain ('ford of the loin'), and its liver at Troma ('liver'). The Brown Bull rested its head at Étan Tairb ('bull's forehead'). When it reached Cuib in present Co. Down it pawed up the ground, after which the place was named Gort mBúraig. Here, we have clear evidence of a belief that the eponymous feature – Búrach – was formed by the action of the mythic bull. *Búrach* means 'rage, fury' but also 'trench, pit, excavation'. The site has been plausibly identified as the Dane's Cast, a vast earthwork, portions of which still survive and that once separated Airgialla in present Co. Armagh from the Ulaid then located in Co. Down.⁶³ Thus, the story envisages the bull creating the Dane's Cast by digging up the ground in its frenzy.⁶⁴

Another rout involving an animal is recorded in *Scéla Mucce Maic Dathó* (Tidings of Mac Dathó's Pig). At the very end of the tale, Mac Dathó released his hound, Ailbe, to see which side it would choose: the Ulstermen or the men of Connacht. The hound sank its teeth into the chariot pole of Ailill and Medb's chariot, king and queen of Connacht. Their charioteer struck it a blow so that its body fell onto the plain which was thereafter called Mag nAilbe ('Ailbe's plain') but its head still clung to the chariot.⁶⁵ They fled throughout Leinster until the charioteer managed to separate the hound's head from the chariot at Áth Cinn Chon ('ford of the hound's head'). It is quite common in the literature for places to be named from where someone died or was buried, but there seems to be added significance to this naming. First of all, we have two separate locations for the resting place of the animal's body and head, and secondly we might suppose that the hound's head at least left some trace on the geography of Áth Cinn Chon other than its name. While 'Ailbe's plain' seems to be little more than a record of the final resting place of Ailbe, the name Áth Cinn Chon supposes some identifiable feature at that location. Indeed, the name is translated word for word as *Vadum Capitis Canis* in Tírechán's Life of St Patrick, suggesting that it remained transparent and retained its literal meaning.⁶⁶ We may reasonably infer that some inanimate object, probably a rock, at that place was thought to be the hound's skull.

Conclusion

It should be clear from the foregoing discussion that the gods and ancestors of the Irish not only acted within the landscape that they found before them but also acted on that landscape to change and shape it. *Lebor Gabála* has a very specific aim of accounting for the domestication of what was supposed to have been an originally wild landscape. Plains are viewed as the product of men's, and sometimes women's, interaction with the land, clearing forest in order to bring the land into productive use for cultural and agricultural purposes. Rivers, too, are seen as essential for the drainage of land and as a source of fish, although water is potentially destructive and lakes are frequently explained as the reaction of the earth to some evil deed or even just the penetration of the land. The presence of large rocks and boulders in the terrain give rise to multiple stories of ancestors, gods and giants casting huge boulders in battle, sometimes littering the battlefield with scattered stones. Animals and ancestors often scattered their own body parts in the landscape and

⁶³ Muhr, 'The early place-names', pp. 33-34.

⁶⁴ It also digs up the ground at Tír Marccéni in a frenzy after killing two thirds of the boytroop, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, ed. by O'Rahilly, p. 30 l. 966.

⁶⁵ *Scéla Mucce*, ed. by Thurneysen, p. 18 §19.

⁶⁶ *Patrician texts*, ed. by Bieler, p. 136.

many of these may have been thought to have remained in the shape of particular stones. The Táin records changes to the very land itself in the episode of the formation of the trench of Búrach and possibly also in the story of the casting of the White Bull's horn onto Slíab nAdarca.

In a number of stories that we have encountered here, the author makes deliberate reference to the continued existence of a particular feature demonstrating that he knew of it personally or by reputation. The geographical features that are the subject of the stories function as links between the medieval audience and the historical and mythical events that are meant to account for them. Where the features are remembered, this link must have been particularly strong and the stories would have transformed the landscape and imbued it with new meaning rooted in the ancient past. By naming Étan Tairb from the resting of the Brown Bull there, the site is altered from a place with no meaning, no history and no cultural significance to one that is replete with meaning. It is no longer a hill with a particular shape but it is now a hill shaped by the cosmic struggle between the two bulls. It would have been impossible, having heard the Táin, to think of the hill and not to remember how it took on its shape and name. Búrach would no longer have been a mere ditch, however impressive, but would have recalled and celebrated the Brown Bull's great size and strength as well as its immortal struggle with the White Bull.

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