EARLY MEDIEVAL KINGDOMS AND TERRITORIES: NEGOTIATING SOVEREIGNTY IN THE IRISH SEA REGION

Patrick Gleeson (Queens University Belfast)

INTRODUCTION

One of the defining characteristics of the early medieval period across much Europe is the emergence of kingdoms. Alongside this change in conceptions of civil community and collective identity, the crystallisation of governmental apparatus capable of sustaining and administering those kingdoms, and the development of Latin Christian culture, religious and ethnic identities, were equally formative and inter-linked in shaping the notional nationalities that remain the building blocks of modern European society and politics. The basis of many of these major social changes is the nature, shape and stability of local territories, through which identities were negotiated, kingdoms were built, regimes articulated, and even ecclesiastical hierarchies administered. Yet, how and when these local territories came into existence, and indeed, how they changed through the medieval period, has not often enough been considered or holistically understood. These issues are as true of the Irish Sea region as they are of the rest of medieval Europe.

TERRITORIES IN THE IRISH SEA REGION

The nature of evidence for the localities in early medieval Ireland, Scotland and Wales differs fundamentally from the Anglo-Saxon, Carolingian or Iberian worlds, mainly due to the absence of a key feature like charters, at least before the 11th century. Some may survive, as in the case of the Llandaff charters from Wales, or the Kells charters and perhaps some material preserved in the Patrician dossier for Ireland[1]. Yet, by and large any pre- 12th century charter material is uncertain, controversial and exceptional. This is not to say that charters were not an important element of social discourse and the development of land-holdings earlier, however. On the contrary, Wendy Davies long ago established that there existed a charter tradition in these regions that was distinctly "Celtic" in nature[2]. The peculiarities of this charter tradition mean that this evidence has not come down to us today, and as a result, getting at the fine-grained nature of territoriality in early medieval Ireland, Scotland or Wales has long proved a tall order outside of a few small pockets where material amenable to territorial reconstruction survives. The absence of just such charter material is one principal reason why so-called "Celtic" kingship is conceived as lacking developed governmental apparatus or real evidence for royal power when compared with Continental or "Germanic" polities elsewhere in Britain and Europe[3]. Particularly, the Anglo-Saxon world is often contrasted, where huge number of charters describe massive royal grants, and the appearance of "bookland" in tandem with the

---

[1] Bieler, Ludwig, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, Dublin, Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979; Davies, Wendy, "Land and power in early medieval Wales", *Past & Present*, 81 (1978), pp.. 3-23; Mac Niocaill, Gearoid, "The Irish "Charters"", in Peter Fox, ed., *The Book of Kells: MS 58 Trinity College Library Dublin*, Lucerne, Faksimile Verlag Luzern, 1990, pp. 153–165; Flanagan, Marie-Therese, *Irish Royal Charters: texts and contexts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

[2] Davies, Wendy, "The Latin charter-tradition in western Britain, Brittany and Ireland in the early medieval period", in Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamund McKitterick and David Dumville, eds., *Ireland in early mediaeval Europe: studies in memory of Kathleen Hughes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp. 258-280; Davies, Wendy, "Charter-writing and its uses in early medieval Celtic societies", *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature*, 33 (1998), pp. 99-112.

[3] Wormald, Patrick, "Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship: some further thoughts", in Paul Szarmach, ed., *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Culture*, Kalamazoo, Michigan University Press, 1986, pp. 151–183; Charles-Edwards, Thomas, "Celtic Kings: "priestly vegetables"?", in Stephen Baxter, Catherine Karkov, Janet Nelson and David Pelteret, eds., *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald* , Surrey, Ashgate, 2009, pp. 65–81

conversion to Christianity and emergence of regional kingdoms[4]. Seemingly confirming this impression is a contrast between the centralised polities of eastern Britain and the Continent, and the diffuse character to kingship and intensely local nature of identity in the Irish Sea region; consider, for example, the famous heptarchy of early medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdoms against the fact that at least two hundred kingdoms existed simultaneously in early medieval Ireland, but perhaps as many as 600. Such an abundance of royal blood inspired F. J. Byrne[5] to remark that "many Irishmen boast decent from kings", a wry lament that should not obscure the fact that even the most low-level of kings were knitted into a complex hierarchy where regional kings comparable to other regions of Europe did exist.

Faced with this bewildering complexity to the nature of royal power, Ireland in particular often seems somewhat anomalous, and for this reason it endures as an outpost of early medieval European society, often excluded or ignored by scholarship. Yet, its ubiquity of kings and intensely local character to identity also means that it is one of the richest regions of early medieval Europe to study. The genealogies of even obscure lineages that ruled kingdoms amounting to no more than ten kilometres in extent are routinely preserved in a corpus that describes some 30000 personal names, while a remarkable corpus of genealogies also survives for Wales[6]. These genealogies are littered with topographical information too, that sometimes details the extent of land-holdings, caputs and significant monuments or places within these same territories[7]. Combined with a corpus of annals that seem to have been recorded contemporaneously from about the mid 6th century, the ebb and flow of power in the localities of the Irish Sea region is uniquely well-documented by European standards. The fortunes of these lineages sometimes recorded by chronicles, is also refracted and mused upon by myth and saga, particularly in Ireland, where an ancient but imagined past is valorised for its timelessness through the image of a turbulent present[8]. This rich documentary evidence of course comes with a host of interpretive difficulties and biases, but its value is clear, and this richness is mirrored in Ireland by the most extensive and monumental field archaeology of early medieval western Europe: some 60000 upstanding settlements exist in the modern landscape from this period, and furthermore, detail a clear settlement hierarchy[9]. Add to this the discoveries of developer-led archaeology in recent decades that have revolutionised our understanding of the early medieval social and economic landscape, and this unparalleled evidence makes Ireland a rich area of study for examining many pressing issues of pan-European concern. Amongst these, the origins, development and articulation of local territories is perhaps most apposite.

In general terms, the shape and antiquity of early medieval territories is a topic with a long and protracted historiography. In Anglophone scholarship, the work of Glanville Jones[10] in particular has engendered debate in Britain about his multiple estate model of land organisation. Jones' willingness to pluck eclectically from a broad suite of evidence to reconstruct territories that could then be projected back into the medieval and even Roman periods seems now less secure, and has been justifiably critiqued by Dawn Hadley and Andy

---

[4] See, for instance, Blair, John, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005

[5] Byrne, Francis, *Irish Kings and High-Kings,* Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1973, p. 1.

[6] O'Brien, Michael, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae,* Dublin, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1962; Bartrum, Paul*, Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1966.

[7] E.g. O'Brien 1962, p. 64.

[8] Ó Corráin, Donnachadh, "Historical need and literary narrative" in D. Ellis Evans, John G. Griffith and Edwar. M. Jope (eds.), *Proceedings of the 7th International Congress of Celtic Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. 141-158.

[9] Cf. O'Sullivan, Aidan *et al.*, *Early Medieval Ireland AD 400–1100: The Evidence from Archaeological Excavations*, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 2013.

[10] Collected now Barnwell, Paul, ed., *Britons, Saxons and Scandinavians: The Historical Geography of Glanville Jones*, Tunrhout, Brepols, 2012.

Seaman, amongst others[11]. Correspondingly, however, working from a more landscape-orientated perspective, Susan Oosthuizen has presented systematic and compelling evidence in favour of long-term continuities in landscape organisation, albeit for the most part relying on evidence of the later 7th to 12th centuries in Eastern Britain[12]. The latter optimism about long-term territorial contiguity is perhaps mirrored by Scandinavian scholarship, where most notably analysis of assembly places and structures of governance in recent decades have seen the administrative structures of many Scandinavian regions identified as emerging in the mid- to later first millennium AD, if not earlier[13]. An important rejoinder to such scholarship regarding parish territories in the region of Touraine, France, has been presented recently by Elizabeth Zadora-Rio, who argues that parish networks were constantly evolving and reconfigured throughout the early medieval period[14]. Of course, there is no reason why we should expect the antiquity of local territories to be the same in different regions of early medieval Europe, so what holds true for one area may not for another. Yet, this brief historiographic overview highlights a variety of opinions and models, and at least establishes that the antiquity of local territories is a central issue regarding questions of landscape organisation and exploitation, governance and administration, Christianisation and the provision of pastoral care in many areas of north-western Europe.

While Welsh evidence featured prominently in the case studies drawn upon by Glanville Jones to build his multiple estate model, by and large there has been much less focused analysis of territorial organisation in the Irish Sea region: namely Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Andy Seaman's studies of the Llandaff charters and Vale of Glamorgan have highlighted evidence apposite to studying early medieval territoriality[15], and more recently Rhiannon Comeau has demonstrated through painstaking research how a combination of methods allows probable early medieval territories to be re-composed in some areas of Wales too[16]. In Scotland, however, aside from a wealth of scholarship on the antiquity of land-units in Viking-colonised areas of the Western and Northern Isles, there is a comparable dearth of scholarship regarding land organisation in the kingdoms of Pictland and Dál Riata, in large part due to the absence of amenable evidence from either the early or late medieval periods[17]. A

[11] Hadley, Dawn, "Multiple estates and the origins of the manorial structure of the northern Danelaw", *Journal of Historical Geography*, 22:1 (1996), pp. 3-15; Seaman, Andrew, "The Multiple Estates Model re-considered: Power and Territory in Early Medieval Wales", *Welsh History Review*, 26 (2012), pp. 1-23.

[12] Oosthuizen, Susan, *Tradition and Transformation in Anglo-Saxon England: Archaeology, Common Rights and Landscape*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013 and *The Anglo-Saxon Fenland*, Windgather, Oxford, 2017.

[13] Storli, Inger, "Court sites of Arctic Norway: the remains of *Thing* sites and representations of political consolidation processes in the northern Germanic world during the First Millennium AD", *Norwegian archaeological review*, 43:2 (2010), pp. 89-94; Iversen, Frode, "Community and society: the *Thing* at the edge of Europe", in Alexandra Sanmark *et al.*, eds., *Debating the Thing in the North II, Journal of the North Atlantic*, Special Edition Vol. 8 (2015), pp. 1–17; Sanmark, Alexandra and Semple, Sarah, "Assembly in North West Europe: collective concerns for early societies?" *European Journal of Archaeology*, 16:3 (2013), pp. 518-542.

[14] Zadora-Rio, Elizabeth, "Parish boundaries and the illusion of territorial continuity in landscape archaeology: the evidence from Touraine", in Tomás Ó Carragáin and Sam Turner, eds., *Making Christian landscapes in Atlantic Europe: conversion and consolidation in the Early Middle Ages*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2016, pp. 345-366.

[15] Seaman 2012 and "Dinas Powys in Context: Settlement and Society in post-Roman Wales", *Studia Celtica*, 47 (2013), pp. 1-23

[16] Comeau, Rhiannon, "Bayvil in Cemais: An Early Medieval Assembly Site in South-West Wales?" *Medieval Archaeology*, 58:1 (2014), pp. 270-284.

[17] See Bannerman, John, *Studies in the history of Dál Riata*, Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1974; Driscoll, Stephen, "The archaeology of state formation in Scotland", in William S. Hanson and Elizabeth A. Slater ,eds., *Scottish archaeology, new perceptions*, Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1988, pp. 81-111; Driscoll, Stephen, "Formalising the mechanisms of state power: early Scottish lordship 9th–13th century", in Sally M. Foster, Allan I. MacInnes and Ranald MacInnes, eds., *Scottish power centres from the early middle ages to the 20th century*, Glasgow, Cruithne Press, 1998, pp. 32-58.

number of focused studies have highlighted territorial continuity in parts of lowland, eastern Scotland as well as the possibility of identifying discreet land-holdings units like the *dabhoch*[18]. Atlantic Scotland is comparably less well served, but tracts like *Senchus Fern Alban*, which may have a 7th-century core, perhaps hint at a territorial structure based on military muster units defined by "houses" (*tech*); a complex history for this document, and uncertainty over the antiquity of distinct elements, however, have limited its use within more general models. Until very recently, the focused analysis of territoriality in Ireland has been similarly under-developed, with only limited and focused local studies of particular regions like Co. Clare, or general overviews of phenomena like the townland[19].

DEFINING TERRITORIAL STRUCTURES IN IRELAND

This picture began to change drastically through the work of Paul MacCotter in recent years, however. Despite Ireland's lack of charter evidence, MacCotter's[20] ground-breaking research is demonstrating the existence of a hierarchical system of territorial organisation in early medieval Ireland that has much relevance to the broader northwestern European debates. The basic unit of this territorial system is the *túath* (plural *túatha*), a term that literally means "community" (sometimes "kingdom"), referred to by MacCotter as the late-*túath*. These units of land encompassed a number of modern parishes, but were in origin composed of *bailte*, essentially "townlands", many of which are still in-tact units of land division commonly found anglicised in modern toponymy with the prefix "bally". In so far as *túatha* were composed of a number of *bailte*, *túatha* in turn were grouped together into petty kingdom units known as *trícha céts* in the 11th or 12th centuries. This term referred to muster and administrative units, much as described in *Senchus Fer nAlban* for Western Scotland[21], and that in origin appear to have been petty kingdoms of this late period. Yet, despite this MacCotter has shown that some do preserve earlier units.

Although correspondingly late in date, one of the few sources to detail this hierarchical structure of territorial organisation is *Críchad an Caoille*, detailing the politico-spatial extent of *bailte* and *túath* in Fir Maige Féne ("the men of the plain of Féne")[22]. This was a kingdom in the north of Co. Cork centred on Fermoy and ruled by Síl Cathail. Although the tract itself is late in date, archaeological analysis of this structure supports the existence of that territorial framework by the 6th to 7th century AD. There are, for instance, two estates within this *túath*-structure, that appear to be royal demesne, known as *mruig ríg* in early Irish law: one surrounding Glanworth and associated with the overlords Síl Cathail, and the other focused on a ridge crowned at the western end by Carn Tigernaig, a Bronze Age hillfort containing a cairn,

[18] Barrow, Geoffrey W. S., *The Kingdom of the Scots: Government, Church and Society from the Eleventh to the Fourteenth Century*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2003²; Rogers, N. S. H., "The foundation of parishes in twelfth century Perthshire", *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, 27 (1997), pp. 68-97; Ross, Alaister, "The Dabhach in Moray: a new look at an old tub", in Alex Woolf, ed., *Landscape and Environment in Dark Age Scotland*, St. Andrews, Committee for Dark Age Studies, 2006, pp. 57-74; RCAHMS, *In the Shadow of Bennachie: a field archaeology of Donside, Aberdeenshire*, Edinburgh, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2007

[19] Ní Ghabhláin, Sinead, "The origin of medieval parishes in Gaelic Ireland: the evidence from Kilfenora", *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 126 (1996), pp. 37-61; McEerlean, Tom, "The Irish townland system of landscape organisation", in Terrence Reeves-Smyth and F. Hammond ,eds., *Landscape archaeology in Ireland*, Oxford, Archaeopress, 1983, pp. 315-340.

[20] MacCotter, Paul. *Medieval Ireland: territorial, political and economic divisions*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2008; MacCotter, Paul, "Túath, manor and parish: kingdom of Fír Maige, cantred of Fermoy", *Peritia*, 22 (2012), pp. 224-274.

[21] See Bannerman 1974, pp. 27-67.

[22] Power, Rev. P, *Críchad an Chaoille: being the topography of ancient Fermoy*, Cork, Cork University Press, 1932.

and associated with the ruling line of Fir Maige[23]. The antiquity of these estates as royal demesne is testified by Tomás Ó Carragáin's analysis of settlement archaeology within the wider kingdom[24]. This shows that 86% of multivallate ringforts (high status early medieval settlements) occur on royal land, demonstrating the concentration of elite settlements within elite spaces. Although multivallate ringforts tend to be slightly earlier than univallate ringforts, the vast majority seem to have been constructed in the period AD 600 to AD 850[25]. This suggests that the settlement hierarchy of Fir Maige is at least as old as the 7th or 8th century, and so too may the land-holding structure that it supports be correspondingly ancient.

Furthermore, adding to the impression of a very ancient territorial organisation in the kingdom of Fir Maige Féne, is the evidence of assembly structures. We know that each kingdom also required their own place of assembly, which was the responsibility of the king to convene on royal land. The only historical, toponymic or archaeological evidence for assembly in this wider kingdom is also concentrated on royal estates: (i) Caherdrinny, a hillfort overlooking Glanworth on the Síl Cathail estate, and containing the element *drung*, the same root as the modern English "throng", and attested as a signifier of assembly places since the 7th century; and (ii) Knockanannig, probably preserving *Cnoc an Óenach*, "the hill of the assembly", on the Fir Maige royal estate. At the very least this evidence suggests that the royal demesne within this kingdom was a part of an ancient administrative structure, and it seems likely that this can also be identified with the *túath* structure later detailed by *Críchad na Caoille*.

Fir Maige is not the only kingdom where there is a correlation between a *túath* structure and administrative structure that must indicate early origins. We see a similar phenomenon, albeit while detailing a different structure of assembly and administration, in the case of Inishowen, Co. Donegal. This was the local kingdom of Cenél nÉogain, and was sub-divided into three *túatha*: (i) around Aileach, and royal demsne of Cenél nÉogain; (ii) Crích Muiredaig in the northeast of the peninsula ruled by Cenél Fergusa seated at Carraic Brachaide; and (iii) Bredach, named for the River Bredagh adjacent to Moville and Cooly[26]. While we do not know the exact extent of these *túath*, it is significant that each contain a placename with the element *drung* that indicates a structure of assembly mirroring that of the *túath* divisions. This includes two townlands of Drung in Bredagh and Crích Muiredaig, as well as Dundrean, from *Dun Druing*, "the fort of the assembly", located adjacent to Elaghmore/Aileach, the Cenél nÉogain caput, and the southern borders of the kingdom. That this is an ancient supra-local administrative structure is hinted by a variety of evidence: a record of one of these *túath* in an annal for 764 (*Annals of Ulster*); the association of Dundrean with a 9th-century dynast of Cenél nÉogain by the genealogists; the location of Dundrean next to Elaghmore, from whence Aileach was moved to Greenan mountain in the 9th century; and the presence of ecclesiastical establishments containing the early toponymic element *domnach*, which went out of use in the 6th century, in each of the three *túath* of Cenél nÉogain. This latter point in itself suggests the existence of the *túath* structure hereabouts in the conversion period (5th to 6th century)[27].

While the evidence provided by *Crichad na Caoille* is thus far exceptional for the detail it provides on *baile*, *túath* and *trícha cét*, it is not unique. MacCotter has argued, for instance, that the manorial framework and administrative structure of Anglo-Norman Ireland largely

---

[23] See MacCotter 2012, pp. 242-249.

[24] Ó Carragáin, Tomás, "Local Churches and Social Power in Early Medieval Ireland: A Case Study of the Kingdom of Fir Maige", in Michael Shapland and Jose Sanchez Pardo, eds., *Churches and Social Power in Early Medieval Europe*, Tunrhout, Brepols, 2015, pp. 266-312.

[25] O'Sullivan *et al.* 2013, p. 65.

[26] Lacey, Brian, *Cenél Conaill and the Donegal Kingdoms AD 500-800*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006, pp. 114-115

[27] Gleeson, Patrick, 'Landscapes of kingship in early medieval Ireland, AD 400-1150', Unpublished PhD thesis, University College Cork, 2014.

adopted an existing native system of territorial organisation that was based on the *túath* and *trícha cét*, and as such, late medieval manorial extents and charters embody the essential territorial framework that existed in early medieval Ireland at the end of the period, while some documents may also detail the *túath* structure of other Gaelic kingdoms, like Corcu Loígde in southwest Co. Cork[28]. MacCotter's argument, although contentious because it appears to back project 12th to 14th century evidence in the manner that Zadora-Rio has recently cautioned against[29], is nonetheless hugely significant and as we will see, backed up by a variety of evidence. That being said, not all cantreds can have been *trícha céts* and early medieval petty kingdoms, with some evidence that some of these units of landholding are actually quite recent in origin. MacCotter is himself careful to stress this point, that many *trícha céts* were likely 11th and 12th centuries territories, but that some, as in Meath, may have been carved *de novo* by the Anglo-Normans[30]. Nonetheless, MacCotter's researches have provided a template for examining territorial organisation and indeed, how local territories originated and articulated in early medieval Ireland that is uniquely suited to archaeological exploration.

While these analyses provide large-scale models for thinking through territorial arrangements, early Irish law, myth and hagiography correspondingly provides a reasonable idea of what natural and anthropogenic features could mark territories or landholdings at a localised scale: cairns, mounds, stones, trees, rivers, streams, natural features, ditches and fences could all be used, with the use of burial monuments in particular a well-established phenomenon[31]. In particular, Edel Bhreathnach and Elizabeth O'Brien have explored the role of *ferta* in demarcating territories[32]. These are burials positioned near the boundaries of territories in order for the ancestors to guard and protect kin-land. These were active elements of land-holding, in that they could also be implicated in contested claims to land through rituals like *tellach*, a legal compact through which the claimant of a territory or estate claimed that land by incrementally leading horses over a boundary *ferta*[33]. The ancestors interred in the *ferta* would be expected to bar an unrighteous claimant from entering and performing the ritual if they were not kin, and thus not entitled to any share of kin land.

Likewise, ogham stones are declared to be boundary markers by early Irish law, although they held many other social and symbolic functions[34]. There is uncertainty over the exact origins of ogham and date of particular inscriptions, but the cipher is a form of the Irish language generally agreed to have developed under the influence of Latin in Roman Britain, and that from the 4th to 7th century was applied to stone monuments in Western Britain (mainly southwest) and Ireland[35]. In the latter region ogham is found in small clusters throughout the island, but is generally far more common in the southern counties of Cork, Waterford and Kerry, as well as to a lesser degree Kilkenny. In general, inscriptions take two forms: (i) X son of Y; or (ii) X of the *gens* of Y; thus both types of inscription are commemorative in nature. In spite of the functions ascribed to ogham stones in early Irish laws and saga, a cursory look at a distribution of ogham stones suggests that not all can be marking territories: some may define local territories, but others cluster together in groups. There is a reasonable number of ogham stones positioned in proximity to *trícha cét* boundaries, as, for instance, in the case of Sylmolron, a territory that in the early medieval period probably comprised two distinct *túath*,

---

[28] MacCotter 2008 and 2012.

[29] Zadora Rio 2016.

[30] MacCotter 2008, pp. 196-206

[31] Kelly, Fergus, *Early Irish Farming*, Dublin, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997, p. 409.

[32] Bhreathnach, Edel and O'Brien, Elizabeth, "Irish boundary *ferta*: their physical manifestation and historical context", in Fiona Edmonds and Paul Russell, eds., *Tome: Studies in Medieval Celtic History and Law*, Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2011, pp. 53-64.

[33] See Charles-Edwards, Thomas, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993.

[34] Kelly 1997, p. 409.

[35] Swift, Catherine, *Ogham Stones and the earliest Irish Christians*, Maynooth, St Patrick"s College, 1997.

the Ciarraige Maige nAí and Síl Máelruanaid, supposedly an offshoot of the Uí Briúin[36]. However, as the territories of Ciarraige and Uí Briúin lay to the west and east respectively, this *trícha cét* may be a good example of a territory formed late in the early medieval period, but utilising *túath* that had been long established territorial units.

With regard to the more general distribution of ogham stones, suggestive correlations between *trícha cét* boundaries and ogham stones can be identified in: central Leinster in Ofelmeth and Omurthi; Co. Waterford in Slefko and Ohenwys; in Co. Cork between Muscrimittyn, Ocurblethan and Olethan, as well as between Iflanlo and Glinshalewy; and in the densest concentration of ogham in Ireland in Co. Kerry between Mayconcken, Offarbe and Ossuris (Figure 1). As the distribution of ogham shows in Co. Kerry, however, not all ogham stones can be marking kingdom boundaries or even local landholdings. Undoubtedly, a tendency to recognise these monuments from the 18th century onwards and remove them to specific locations, often churchyards, may be partly obscuring a more general phenomenon, but it nevertheless remains the case that not all ogham stones served to demarcate land units. A variety, for instance, although within churchyards may be within their original contexts and perhaps to be associated with ecclesiastical cemeteries. Clearly nonetheless an important point remains that a large number of ogham stones did mark territories and local landholdings, and while not all of these *trícha céts* need preserve early petty kingdom boundaries, there is suggestive evidence that as preserved in the 12th century, these territories recomposed a very ancient structure of *túath* and local territorial organisation.

Insertar Figure 1: Map showing the relationship between ogham stones (4th to 7th century) and *trícha céts* (following MacCotter 2008). (copyright: author)

Amongst examples of local, sub-*túath* land units is local estates structures, and in particular royal estates. An interesting example is an ogham stone from Tory Hill, Co. Limerick. This sits very precisely on a parish boundary that was likely also the boundary of an estate and assembly landscape of the Uí Fhidgente associated with Óenach Cairpre. Whereas this is an estate boundary, and possibly a kingdom one, an example of a regional kingdom boundary may be marked by the ogham stones forming the boundary of modern day Cos. Tipperary and Waterford, as by the 8th century this was the southernmost extent of Mag Femen, the plain that stretched southwards from Cashel, Co. Tipperary to the river Suir. Ogham is virtually absent from southern Tipperary, and this boundary was already recognised as such by at least by the 7th to 8th centuries in propaganda tracts like *Conall Corc and the Corcu Loígde*[37].

A peculiarity of ogham, however, is that despite the evidently commemorative nature of these stones, none have clearly been shown to be associated with burials. There are examples of standing stones or cairns marking burial places, as at Kiltullagh, Co. Roscommon, and some burials may have been marked in cemeteries with cross-slabs or upright posts, but these are comparatively rare[38]. This may simply be because the commemorative nature of ogham stones is rather to be read in their social function as monuments proclaiming the identity of landowners and kin groups who controlled territories. In this, they would appear to have functioned similarly, indeed, sometimes in tandem with, *ferta*, cemeteries and other monuments and natural features in demarcating territories. Thus, a distinction between an ogham stone as a commemorative inscription, boundary marker and burial monument may be moot.

---

[36] MacCotter 2008, p. 148.

[37] Hull, Vernam, 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde', *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 62 (1947), pp. 887-909.

[38] O'Brien 2009; McCormick, Finbar *et al.*, "A Pagan-Christian transitional burial at Kiltullagh", *Emania*, 13 (1995), pp. 89-98; O'Brien, Elizabeth, "Pagan or Christian? Burial in Ireland during the 5th to 8th centuries AD", in Nancy Edwards, ed., *The archaeology of early medieval Celtic churches*, Leeds, Maney Publishing, 2009, pp. 134-154.

A fascinating case study of how these forms of monumentality were linked can be found in the landscape around Carn Amolgnid[39]. Carn Amolgnid was a mound near Kilalla, Co. Mayo, which formed the heart of a major assembly landscape named Forrach Ua Amolngnid or Óenach Amolgnid, named for the sons of Amolgnid, an important ancestor of the lineage of Uí Amolgnid within Uí Fhiacrach Muiresc, the group that controlled much of modern day Co. Mayo. In AD 1198 we know that this landscape including Carn Amolgnid, the central assembly mound, constituted part of the *comharba* lands of Killala, while the Patrician narrative for this area names at least two other ecclesiastical sites in association with this assembly[40]. This landscape also contains Domnach Mór Mag Fochaille, a place identified in Patrician tradition as the location of St Patrick's servitude in the 5th century (*Silva Vocluth*). Being Foghill near the parish boundary of Kilcummin, north of Kilalla[41], this church is also notable for its supraregional significance within the Patrician *paruchia*[42]. Just east of Foghill, also forming the parish boundary is Castlegeeha, where two undated burials overlooking Kilalla bay[43], while an ogham stone in Breastagh provides further evidence for the early demarcation of a parish structure as a land unit hereabouts. This latter ogham reads MAQ CORRBRI MAQ AMMLLONGITT[44], intimating the eponym of Uí Amolgnid (<Carn Amalgnid), and like the burials, probably showing the demarcation of this landscape in the 5th to 7th centuries AD. Despite the tendency to equate *ferta*, or ancestral burial monuments with pagan religious affiliations, there can be no doubt that this landscape was unimpeachably Christianised from an early date. Alongside a concentration of several early conversion-period churches, there is the prominence of sites like Foghill and Kilalla in early Patrician literature. More particularly, the Patrician dossier shows a further example of demarcating this landscape through burials in the 5th to 7th centuries in a series of passages redacted and embellished in 7th to 9th century literature. In the *Vita Tripartita* Patrick travels south of Killala to the *fert* of a woman who had died with child, and miraculously resuscitates her and the child before baptising them in an adjacent well[45]. The site in question must be Crosspatrick, on Kilalla's parish boundary[46], where the well named *Óendarcae* is said to derive from the hill beside the *ferta*. That the same episode is found in Tírechán's 7th-century *Collectanea*[47] also demonstrates that a *ferta* marked a later boundary that was simultaneously a royal estate and assembly landscape. Thus, between the *ferta* near Crosspatrick, Foghill, the ogham stone from Breastagh and early medieval burials Castlenageeha, we see the nexus of ogham stones, inhumation burials, *ferta* and ecclesiastical establishments working together to demarcate royal land and an estate structure through the 5th to 7th centuries.

ASSEMBLING TERRITORIES

The topic of assembly landscapes, moreover, is a remarkably rich area for further exploring the degree to which territories were demarcated and constructed at a local level in early medieval Ireland. Here, an immense body of research on assembly places in recent decades has opened up many avenues for exploring governance, civil society, collective

---

[39] On which, see FitzPatrick, Elizabeth, "The Gathering Place of Tír Fhiachrach: Archaeological and Folkloric investigations of Aughris Head, Co. Sligo", *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 101 (2001), pp. 67-105.

[40] FitzPatrick, Elizabeth, *Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland, c. 1100–1600: a cultural landscape study*, Woodbridge, Boydell, 2004, p. 71.

[41] Bieler 1964, pp. 73 and 135.

[42] Swift, Catherine, "Tirechán"s motives in compiling the Collectanea", *Ériu*, 45 (1994), pp. 53-82.

[43] Mapping Death database; Cahill, Mary and Sikora, Maeve, *Breaking Ground, Finding Graves,* Bray, Wordwell, 2012, pp. 375-377.

[44] Macalister, Robert A. S.*, Corpus inscriptionum insularum Celticarum,* Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1946, p. 15.

[45] Mulchrone, Kathleen, *Bethu Phátraic: The Tripartite Life of Patrick,* London, Hodges and Figgis, 1939, p. 134.

[46] FitzPatrick 2004, p. 73.

[47] Bieler 1979, pp. 158-159.

identity and how the agency of groups at a local level interacts with regimes of rulership and administration[48]. Although Ireland has not seen the same level of detailed research ~~that~~ as Anglo-Saxon England or Scandinavia, there is nonetheless an emerging archaeology of assembly that allows us to explore not only the nature of governance in localities, but how communities chose to define and articulate community relationships in the landscape through territorial organisation and land-holding[49].

Recent research has shown that there is a strong correlation between assembly places and spaces of burial in early medieval Ireland (Figure 2)[50]. This can include isolated inhumations, burials inserted into ancient monuments, open and unenclosed field cemeteries, cemeteries enclosed by penannular enclosures, and a type of site known as cemetery settlements. These latter sites, cemetery settlements, form a class of monument that has only been recognised in recent decades through developer-led archaeology as a part of large scale infrastructural projects[51]. Generally, these sites describe a defined cemetery area that is normally enclosed, though additional enclosures can be present and may be added as the cemetery expands. Although there is significant evidence for occupation activity at these sites in the form of food waste, remains of metal-working, crop-processing and other production activities, these sites commonly lack structures and hearths that would allow them to be identified as settlements and habitations proper. I have argued elsewhere that these complexes can be understood as local assembly places, namely as the spaces where local kin groups gathered together on a regular basis to resolve disputes, process crops, redistribute resources and proffer render and due to an overlord or higher order king[52]. For these reasons, these complexes appear to cluster in assembly landscapes, with the existence of multiple sites manifesting the collective nature of assembly landscapes, as places where many lineages and kin groups would gather together to construct and articulate a multiplicity of identities relative to one another. While the archaeology of assembly is similarly underdeveloped for the early medieval period in Wales and Scotland, it is intriguing to note that Maldonado has identified a number of sites in Scotland that appear strikingly similar to cemetery settlements, and the only certain early medieval evidence to be recognised in one of the few landscapes identified as an assembly place in Wales, is a cemetery at Caer[53]. Thus, while an archaeology of assembly practices has yet to be systematically defined in other parts of the Irish Sea region, there is scope for regional comparisons to facilitate more nuanced assessments of locality and territoriality in Western and Northern Britain in future research.

==Insertar Figure 2: Map showing the distribution of known burial places from the early medieval period, as well as places of assembly (following Gleeson 2014). (copyright: author)==

In an Irish context, a uniquely rich landscape where the relationship of various types of burial complex and assembly foci can be analysed in relation to territorial structures is that of Óenach Carmain. This was the major assembly of the province of Leinster. By at least the 9th

---

[48] Brookes, Stuart and Reynolds, Andrew, "The Origins of Political Order and the Anglo-Saxon State", *Archaeology International*, 13/14 (2011), pp. 84-93; Barnwell, Paul and Mostert, Michael, eds., *Political Assemblies in the Earlier Middle Ages*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2003; Pantos, Aliki and Semple, Sarah, eds., *Assembly Places and Practices in Medieval Europe*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2004; Sanmark, Alexandra *et al.*, *Debating the Thing in the North: selected papers from workshops organised by The Assembly Project I. Journal of the North Atlantic*, Special Edition 5 (2013); Sanmark *et al* 2015; Sanmark and Semple 2013.

[49] See FitzPatrick 2001 and 2004; Gleeson 2014 and Gleeson, Patrick, "Kingdoms, communities and óenaig: Irish assembly practices in their Northwest European context", en Alexandra Sanmark *et al.* 2015 pp. 33-51.

[50] Gleeson 2015.

[51] See O'Sullivan et *al.* 2013.

[52] Gleeson 2014 and 2015.

[53] Maldonado, Adrian, *Christianity and burial in Late Iron Age Scotland, AD 400-650*, Glasgow, University of Glasgow, 2011 [Unpublished PhD Thesis], pp. 144-146; Comeua 2014.

century this was centred on a ring-barrow crowning Silliothill to the northeast of Knockaulin, the Iron Age ceremonial complex identified as Dun Ailinne and the capital of Leinster in early myth and saga. Although the barrow atop Silliothill provided a monumental focus for this assembly place, the landscape of assembly encompassed a far larger area (Figure 3)[54]. Research by Paul MacCotter as a part of the *Making Christian Landscapes Project* has reconstructed the *túath* structure of the surrounding petty kingdom of Uí Fáeláin. Alongside Uí Muiredaig and Uí Dunchadha, Uí Fáeláin were one of the three principal lineages of the dynasty who ruled northern Leinster from the mid 7th century, named Uí Dúnlainge. Óenach Carmain and Silliothill were located within Uí Fáeláin's local kingdom, but specifically within the *túath* of Uí Athechda, a sub-lineage who appear to have taken over control of this territory in the 7th century[55]. MacCotter has shown, however, that a royal estate associated with the assembly landscape of Óenach Carmain encompassed the parishes of Coughlanstown and Carnalway, while it is not improbable that this estate also included the parish of Kilcullen, containing Knockaulin (see Figure 3). Silliothill itself sits at the western extremity of that land unit, overlooking both the Liffey Valley to the west and north, and the majority of the estate to the east. More broadly, the boundaries of that estate are defined by a number of burial foci and cemetery complexes, and these show a large and poly-focal funerary landscape of assembly: Coughlanstown, Mullaboden, Mullacash, Greenhills and Corbally. Greenhills describes a linear inhumation cemetery located to the east of a ring-ditch containing a founder grave, but associated with a large linear ditch, numerous pits, postholes and a hearth (Figure 4)[56]. Corbally is much more extensive, and encompasses a number of discreet funerary foci: ring-ditches containing multiple burials, but with a larger enclosed cemetery describing the principle element. This larger cemetery developed around a primary 5th-century grave, before being enlarged twice during the 6th and 7th centuries to accommodate the growing cemetery (Figure 5)[57]. Outside of this enclosure, and encompassing the other funerary foci was an extensive system of inter-cutting ditches and annexed enclosures likely to have contained animals or specialised activities (Figure 5). Adult burial seems to have ceased in the later 7th century[58], though juvenile burial continued, and the complex as a whole remained in use down to at least the 9th century. The only structure excavated was a small sunken building perhaps used for textile-working, while the assemblage from the site shows craft- and iron-working, as well as feasting through a large collection of animal remains and food waste[59]. Most significantly the broader complex included at least thirty grain-drying kilns showing large scale crop-processing[60].

==Insertar Figure 3: Map showing the assembly landscape and royal estate of Óenach Carmain (following MacCotter 2016), as well as the location of burial places and major churches. (copyright: author)==

---

[54] Gleeson, Patrick and Ó Carragáin, Tomás, "Conversion and consolidation in Leinster's royal heartland", in Tomás Ó Carragáin and Sam Turner, eds., *Making Christian landscapes in Atlantic Europe: conversion and consolidation in the Early Middle Ages*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2016, pp. 75–108.

[55] MacCotter, Paul, "Reconstructing the territorial framework for ecclesiastical and secular power structures: a case study of the kingdom of Uí Fáeláin", in Ó Carragáin and Turner 2016, p. 67.

[56] Keeley, Valerie J., 'Archaeological excavation of a burial ground, Greenhills townland', *Journal of the Kildare Archaeological Society*, 17 (1991), pp. 180-201.

[57] Coyne, Frank, "Corbally, Co. Kildare: The Results of 2003–4 Excavations of a Secular Cemetery", in Christian Corlett and Michael Potterton, eds., *Death and Burial in Early Medieval Ireland*, Bray, Wordwell, 2010, pp. 80-84.

[58] Coyne 2010; Gleeson and Ó Carragáin 2016.

[59] Coyne 2010; Gleeson and Ó Carragáin 2016.

[60] Coyne 2010; Tobin, Red, "Houses, Enclosures and Kilns. Excavations at Corbally, Co. Kildare", *Archaeology Ireland,* 17:3 (2003), pp. 32-37.

While Corbally and Greenhills are relatively well excavated, evidence from Mullaboden, Mullacash and Coughlanstown is more piecemeal, if nonetheless relevant (see Figure 3). Although undated, long cist cemeteries of probable early medieval date have been found at Mullaboden and Coughlasntown East[61], while in Mullacash three adult male extended inhumation burials, and the disarticulated remains of adult females, juveniles and an infant have been excavated. The latter was likely part of a cemetery situated within the eastern precinct of an enclosure surrounding the summit of Mullacash Hill[62]. Like the Mullaboden and Coughlanstown East burials, and indeed the Corbally and Greenhills complexes, these burials are all situated in proximity to the boundaries of the royal estate of Óenach Carmain (Figure 7). Moreover, they can all be associated with discreet lineages thanks to a combination of evidence from the genealogies, toponymy and MacCotter's reconstruction of the *túath* structure of Uí Faeláin[63]. The genealogies, tell us, for instance, that Uí Langéni, a branch of Uí Bairrche, were settled at Caisse, where Mullacash derives from Mullach Caisse, "the hilltop of Caisse"[64]. Similarly, Coughlanstown was known as *Ballicutlane* in late medieval sources, and likely preserves *Baile Uí Chuthlacháin*, where Uí Chuthlacháin are another branch of Uí Bairrche[65]. Both complexes at Corbally and Greenhills are likely on the boundaries of *túath* controlled by the Uí Garrchon segment of Dál Messin Corb[66]. Not only does the arrangement of *túath* within Uí Faeláin ensure that other groups like Dál Cormaic Loisc had access to the estate of Óenach Carmain, the evidence of toponym and the genealogies suggest that each of the constituent groups within that kingdom who assembled at Óenach Carmain had a specific locale connected with them within the boundaries of that estate and landscape. This allows us to see how local kin-group identities could be constructed through the use of ancestral burial places for assembly, but also to appreciate how those local identities could have been articulated relative to more encompassing scales of community, like Laigin, the "Leinsterman", of whom Dál Cormaic Loisc, Dál Messin Corb, Uí Bairrche and Uí Dunláinge were all constituents. Indeed, it is intriguing that adult burial appears to cease in this landscape in the 7th century, precisely contemporary with the advent hereabouts of Uí Dunláinge, the group that thereafter ruled northern Leinster, and alongside Uí Chennselaig in the south, dominated the federation of the Laigin until the 10th century[67].

Insertar Figure 4: Plan of cemetery at Greenhills, showing the primary ring ditch and linear cemetery. (copyright/courtesy of Nick Hogan, UCC).
Insertar Figure 5: Plan of cemetery at Corbally, showing the principal locations of burial within the wider complex. (produced by Nick Hogan and copyright Aegis Archaeology)

While the latter point opens up interesting possibilities regarding the link between autonomy in the localities, burial and conceptions of group identity, more pressing presently is the evidence that Óenach Carmain provides for estates, royal land, and a *túath* structure being actively defined as local territories and land-holdings by the 5th century AD.

Óenach Roigne was the major assembly place of the kingdom of Osraige (modern Co. Kilkenny and southern Co. Laois). was Óenach Roigne was r. Referred to once in chronicles

---

[61] Blackburn, Mark,, *Viking coinage and currency in the British Isles*, London, Spink, 2011, pp. 64-6; Shearman, J. 'Discovery of Carolingian Coins at Mullaboden, Ballymore Eustace', *Journal of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland*, 2 (1872), pp. 13-6.

[62] Cahill and Sikora 2011, pp. 55-69.

[63] MacCotter 2016.

[64] Hogan, Edmund, *Onomasticon Goedelicum*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1910, pp. 167-168; O'Brien 1962, p. 54.

[65] MacShamhráin, Ailbhe, *Church and Polity in Pre-Norman Ireland*, Maynooth, An Saggart, 1994, p. 195 and p. 238.

[66] See MacCotter 2016.

[67] Further Gleeson and Ó Carragáin 2016.

under the year 859 *Annals of Ulster* s.a. 859, and is ,Roigne is also mentioned in *Conall Corc and the Corcu Loígde* (*c*. 700), a propaganda tract of the kings of Cashel, as a place of *mórdál* where the king of Munster would expect to levy a cattle tribute[68], a function eminently appropriate to an *óenach*. The location of Óenach Roigne has, however, proved elusive. Its name suggests a location in Mag Roigne, which adjoined Belach Gabráin, the pass of Gowran[69]. The only other piece of information is the existence of the early ecclesiastical establishment of Domnach Mór Maige Roigne, likely Donaghmore in St Patrick's parish, south-west of Kilkenny city. Within that area, the principal candidate for a central royal focus is Dunbell (east of Donaghmore), which derives from Dún Bile, "the fort of the [sacred] tree" (Figure 6).

==Insertar Figure 6: Map showing the probable extent of a royal estate at Dunbell and Óenach Roigne, with major burial foci also indicated. (copyright: author)==

In the case of Óenach Roigne, a royal estate may be argued to span the River Nore, encompassing the parishes of Dunbell, Grangekilree and Kilfreagh. Early high status material culture from Dunbell, including a number of ogham stones, one of which commemorates a member of the Osraige ruling line of Uí Gentig, support a royal attribution for Dunbell, while the church of Kilree, which gives its name to the parish, derives from Cell Ríg, "Church of a King"[70].

Within that putative area there are five excavated early medieval burial foci, all with east-west orientated inhumations (Figure 6). These include: twelve burials in Sheastown, one of which is dated to the fifth/sixth century: five burials at Kilree 3, associated with a complex of enclosures occupied up until the eighth or ninth century; Kilree 4, where three sixth to early seventh-century burials were inserted into an Iron Age ring-ditch; Holdesntown 1, where between the fifth and seventh centuries AD, three earlier Iron Age ring-ditches were enclosed by a penannular enclosure, before east-west extended burials were interred; and Holdesntown 2, where a large open cemetery, contemporary with Holdesntown 1, contained at least 94 individuals organized into seven rows of east-west inhumations[71]. It is pertinent to note the fact that, just as Kilree 3 and 4 were sited within the same townland as Cell Ríg church, Holdenstown 2 was located adjacent to a church of St Colmán, Belach Buadaige[72]. Many if not all of these burial foci may be identified as *ferta* following O'Brien and Bhreathnach[73], but as at Óenach Amolgnid, any idea that these were non-Christian modes of burial would seem to be misplaced.

Again, the commonality between these burial sites and those discussed above at Óenach Carmain is their close spatial relationships and propensity, particularly at Kilree 4, Holdesntown 1 and Sheastown, for locations near to a parish boundary, and by inference, that of a royal estate and early territory (Figure 7). Likewise, evidence for structures and souterrains

---

[68] Hull 1947, p. 894.

[69] Ó Riain, Padráig, Ó Murchadha, Diarmait and Murray, Kevin, *Historical Dictionary of Gaelic Placenames – A,* Dublin, Irish Texts Society, 2003*et al.*, *Historical Dictionary of Gaelic Placenames – A,* Dublin, Irish Texts Society, 2003, p. 66.

[70] Ó Floinn, Raghnall, "Freestone Hill, Co. Kilkenny: a reassessment", in Alfred P. Smyth, ed., *Seanchas: Studies in Early and Medieval Irish Archaeology, History and Literature in Honour of Francis John Byrne*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2000, pp. 28-29; MacCotter 2008, p. 181. See also Bhreathnach and O'Brien 2011, pp. 57-58 and 63. *Logainm* under Kilree www.logainm.ie [last accessed 24th September 2013].

[71] Cahill and Sikora 2012, pp. 73-75; *Mapping Death Database* www.mappingdeathdb.ie [last accessed 23rd September 2013]; Whitty, Yvonne and Tobin, Michael, "Rites in transition: the story told by Holdenstown 1 and 2", *Seanda: NRA Archaeology Magazine*, 4 (2009), pp. 19-21; Whitty, Yvonne, "An Iron Age Ring-Ditch Complex at Holdenstown 1, Co. Kilkenny", in Corlett and Potterton 2012, pp. 313-326; Bhreathnach and O'Brien 2011, pp. 57-58.

[72] Ó Riain, Padraig, *Dictionary of Early Irish Saints*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2011, pp. 189-190.

[73] Bhreathnach and O'Brien 2011.

at Kilree 3, as well as pits, post-holes, and five cereal-drying kilns from Holdenstown 2, facilitates comparisons with Corbally. On more pressing concern presently is the sequence at Holdenstown 1, which saw a series of pre-existing Iron Age ring-ditches cut by a large linear feature, before being enclosed by a penannular enclosure associated with the insertion of the east-west inhumations[74]. Thus, the area being demarcated by the early medieval burials (i.e. a royal estate) may have been a pre-existing land unit, demarcated in turn by the earlier ring-ditches and linear feature.

==Insertar Figure 7: Map showing the probable extent of a royal estate at Óenach Tailten, with principal foci of assembly and burial places indicated. (copyright: author).==

Óenach Tailten, an assembly landscape that spans the River Blackwater (Co. Meath) is perhaps the most famous assembly place from medieval Ireland. This was the principal assembly of the Uí Néill dynasty, and as such, the *óenach* or assembly place of the kingship of Tara. Tailtiu had two principal assembly locations: firstly, Teltown Hill, where the major monuments include Rath Dubh (a large flat-topped mound), an avenue called the "Knockans", another low mound, as well as Teltown church at the hill's southern foot; and secondly, Rath Airthir, a trivallate enclosure which has a large mound in its north eastern corner, and the associated major ecclesiastical site of Donaghpatrick (Domnach Pátraic), both of which are south-east of Teltown Hill on the northern bank of the Blackwater (Figure 7)[75]. Of these two, Rath Airthir may have been the more important: it is likely identifiable with the "triple-rampart of Tailtiu" and the probable location of *forrad Tailten,* almost certainly a temporary structure built for assemblies, and mentioned in the *Dindshenchas* and *Lebor Gabála Érenn*[76].

It seems likely that the *mruig ríg* of Óenach Tailten encompassed the parishes of Teltown, Donaghpatrick, and Martry (Figure 7). This suggestion is supported by evidence from *The Annals of the Four Masters s.a.* 1168, which states that the encampment of Óenach Tailten extended from Mullach Aiti (the Hill of Lloyd, near Kells) to Mullach Tailteann (the Hill of Teltown). Similarly, the place-name Rathaldron, which incorporates the element *urlann*, a synonym of *faitche* (an area of land surrounding a high-status dwelling), may imply that the *faitche* of Óenach Tailten stretched as far as a fort within Rathaldron, on the boundary of Donaghmore and Donaghpatrick parishes[77].

An extensive area of sanctuary for this assembly, perhaps synonymous with its *faitche*, is also referred to in ninth- or tenth-century hagiography[78]. Martry is associated with the Uí Chais segment of Cenél nArdgail, a branch of Uí Néill, ==and== the placename itself derives from *martartech*, a term used for an ecclesiastical establishment associated specifically with relics. Such a church would be appropriate within an assembly landscape, where relics may have been used during legal proceedings[79]. If then, the landscape of Óenach Tailten did approximate to Teltown, Donaghpatrick, and Martry parishes, it is revealing that the only three

---

[74] Whitty and Tobin 2009; Whitty 2012.

[75] Swift, Catherine, "Óenach Tailten, the Blackwater Valley and the Early Uí Néill Kings of Tara", in Smyth 2000, pp. 109-120; Binchy, Daniel, "The fair of Tailtiu and the feast of Tara", *Ériu*, 18 (1958), pp. 113-138; Gleeson 2017, p. 300

[76] Gwynn, E. (ed.), *The Metrical Dindshenchas vol. 2*, Dublin, School of Celtic Studies, 1913, pp. 156-159; Macalister, R. A. S., *Corpus inscriptionum insularum Celticarum*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1938, pgs. 117, 149 and 179. See also MacNeill, Máire, *The Festival of Lughnasa,* Dublin, Comhairle Bhealoideas Eireann, 1965, p. 311.

[77] See *airlann* and *faitche* in *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language* www.dil.ie [last accessed 23rd September 2013]; Kelly 1997, pp. 369-370.

[78] Mulchrone 1939, pp. 43-48; Swift 2000, pp. 113-116.

[79] E.g. for swearing oaths, see Walsh, Paul, *Irish Leaders and Learning Through the Ages: Essays Collected, Edited and Introduced by Nollaig Ó Muraíle*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2003, p. 75; *martartech* in *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language* www.dil.ie [last accessed 23rd September 2013].

places with evidence for burial within the wider landscapes are situated around the boundaries of that putative spatial unit (Figure 7). Indeed, *Senchus na Relec*, an eleventh-century tract on burial places, even locates the burial place of Níall Noígiallach, ancestor of Uí Néill, at Ocha (Faughan Hill) which traverses the parish boundary of Martry[80]. Excavated burial evidence includes an undated long cist from a ringfort in Oristown, a group of fifth- or sixth-century burials at Grange *c.* 300m beyond the boundary of Martry parish, and two fifth or sixth-century burials at Kilmainham located at the westernmost extent of Teltown parish itself[81]. The Grange burials were associated with a cereal-drying kiln and a bowl furnace indicating metalworking, while those at Kilmainham were associated with a number of kilns, and an enigmatic rectangular enclosure interpreted by the excavator as a shrine. Moreover, an Iron Age linear ditch associated with this latter complex ran parallel to the parish boundary and almost certainly provides evidence for the antiquity of this spatial unit at Óenach Tailten. This very suggestively parallels the sequence at Holdesntown 1 discussed above, where Iron Age burials and another linear ditch hint at ancient land unit being re-inscribed through the act of burial in the 5th and 6th centuries AD. Whether this suggests that these were already an existing land units at Roigne and Tailtiu, in place since the later Iron Age, we should perhaps be wary of pressing the repeated use of boundary locations back through time too far. Notwithstanding such caveats, it is notable that like Óenach Carmain, and regardless of how old any of these units of land may have been, local communities chose to demarcate and sanctify these land units by reinscibing their boundaries through burial and assembly practices at the beginnings of the early medieval period.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering this evidence together, it seems clear that there is strong positive evidence that the 5th to 7th centuries was a formative period in the demarcation of territories in early medieval Ireland. In the case of Óenach Roigne and Óenach Tailten, there is a reasonable possibility that the linear ditch features excavated hint at earlier, more archaic origins for the land units that extended inhumation burials were demarcating in the 5th to 7th centuries. However, we should be wary of pushing evidence back too far in time. While one may feel that the same stricture demands that not too much weight be placed on the evidence that the burials were also demarcating land units either, the evidence of ogham in particular also suggests that the 5th to 7th centuries saw a concerted effort to define territorial structures on a supra-local scale.

The work of Paul MacCotter has allowed a broader analysis of territoriality in early medieval Ireland that has important ramifications. While some of the petty kingdom boundaries preserved in his *trícha céts* may represent archaic kingdoms, it is clear that not all such units are ancient territories. Rather, it seems more likely that the building blocks of these territories, *túatha*, do have early origins, and that correspondingly, these units of land-holding were established at an early date and remained formative in shaping territorial aggregations in various periods, being subject, however, to the machinations of the political landscape. While this allows that the shape of territories can change through time, it also raises an important point that seems also to be borne out by the evidence of cemeteries and burial places demarcating assembly landscapes and royal estates: namely that the 5th to 7th centuries was a particularly formative period in bedding down a territorial structure that defined the political

---

[80] Kilpatrick, Kelly, *The Historical Interpretation of Early Medieval Insular placenames*, Oxford, University of Oxford, 2011 [Unpublished PhD Thesis], p. 303.

[81] Oristown in *National Museum of Ireland* topographical files; for Grange see *Mapping Death Database* www.mappingdeathdb.ie [last accessed 28th September 2014]; Walsh, Fintan, "Seeking Sanctuary at Kilmainham, Co. Meath", *Archaeology Ireland*, 25:2 (2011), pp. 9-12; Walsh, Fintan, "Iron Age Sanctuary Enclosure, Boundary Ditch and Kilns at Kilmainham, Co. Meath", in Corlett and Potterton 2012, pp. 308-309.

landscape of early medieval Ireland for centuries thereafter. There are many possibilities why this may have been the case. The most obvious is the fact that the 5th to 7th centuries is a key period of conversion and Christianisation. In this, it is significant that the method of demarcating these estates, namely east-west extended inhumations, is likely to be a new, Christianising form of monumentality, or at least one emerging within a Christianising context. Similarly, it seems clear that this form of monumentality was being used in tandem with churches in the conversion period to define specific pieces of land as spaces of assembly and royal estates. Secondly, and perhaps intimately related to the process of conversion and Christianisation, we might wonder to what degree the necessity of demarcating territories, whether old or new, in 5th- to 7th-century Ireland, is in part due to new conceptions of personhood and group identity. Ogham, for instance, is a form of monumentality fundamentally concerned with commemoration, and both it, *ferta*, and burial places more generally seem to be linked with building inter-polity relationships; these boundaries are designed to bring communities together and articulate their inter-relationships, rather than segregate, divide and define those communities and their identities in opposition to one another. We see this, for instance, through the process of creating royal estates through repeated acts of burial. As with Carmain, we appear to have evidence for multiple discreet lineages engaged in the same process of demarcating a royal estate. That estate would have been a prerogative of over-kingship, the sovereign who ruled over all of these peoples, and thus in essence, the most tangible expression of their shared community and identity.