

Landscape and lamentation: constructing commemorated space in three Middle Irish texts

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Abstract

In the Middle Irish texts *Acallam na Senórach*, *Dindshenchas Érenn* and *Triamhuin Ghormlaithe*, moments of death, burial and ritual lamentation create sacred commemorated spaces. Such spaces were considered worthy of preservation in cultural memory via literary compositions, monuments, place-names and lamentation festivals. The present study investigates categories of burial and lamentation space embedded in the medieval Irish landscape and attempts to understand the historical and archaeological context surrounding the textual tradition, with particular emphasis on the re-use and re-interpretation of prehistoric and early medieval burial monuments. Literary texts most often emphasise the creation of sacred space rather than its re-use, and the original burial function of ancient commemorated spaces, highly visible in the historical and archaeological record, is significantly eclipsed. Instead of emphasising the ancestral past, writers of the lamentation texts actively re-interpret ancient burial landscapes in the contexts of ritual kingship and territorial claims of emergent dynasties.

Introduction¹

Medieval Irish texts as varied as *Acallam na Senórach*, *Dindshenchas Érenn* and *Triamhuin Ghormlaithe* reveal a sacred landscape explicitly shaped by death, burial and ritual lamentation. This essay argues that burial and lamentation space is sacred in the sense that it is *commemorated* space: the graves, and the bodies they contain, are considered worthy of preservation in cultural memory via literary compositions, monuments, place-names and lamentation festivals. Cultural memory, according to Cornelius Holtorf, denotes ‘collective understandings of the past which are held by people in a given social and historical context’.² The texts mentioned above record the collective understanding

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² Cornelius J. Holtorf, ‘Towards a chronology of megaliths: understanding monumental time and cultural memory’, *Journal of European Archaeology* 4 (1996), 119–52: 125.

shared by medieval (c. twelfth–fifteenth century) writers, compilers and audiences regarding Ireland’s ancient (often mythical) burial landscape, for medieval perspectives of the landscape were shaped and transmitted by literary culture. The texts can thus be read as reliable guides to the cultural themes that were significant to the medieval Irish. The present study investigates categories of burial and lamentation space embedded in the medieval Irish landscape, attempts to understand the historical context surrounding the textual tradition, and reveals how medieval minds made sense of the sacred burial landscapes of the past. An analysis of these ‘spatial narratives of death’,³ when complemented with historical and archaeological sources, highlights the interrelatedness of mythology, territory and kingship in conceptions of Ireland’s sacred burial landscape. Such spaces need not be explicitly Christian spaces, as the following textual analysis will reveal.

The dichotomy of sacred versus ‘profane’ or ‘secular’ space popularised by Mircea Eliade in the mid-twentieth century does not offer a useful model for this study.⁴ Non-religious ‘secular’ spaces can be used for sacred purposes, as in the case of high-status Christian burials in traditional, pre-Christian burial mounds. Proinsias MacCana offers a more relevant definition of the sacred based on a location’s association with Ireland’s mythic past,⁵ but a place made sacred by death, burial or lamentation ritual is even more specific, and is observable not only in literature but also in the historical and archaeological record. This definition of the sacred implies a state of ‘otherness’ that separates a space from ordinary existence. For example, as discussed by Riitta Latvio, the Old Irish term *neimed* originally described consecrated places, probably sacred groves. The term came to classify the temporary ‘sacred’ social and legal status of a person mourning a death in the family in Old Irish legal texts.⁶ The terminology applied to this state of ‘otherness’ explicitly recognises the sacred status of one who laments the death of kin. The sense of the sacred connected to the moment of death is a liminal state, existing beyond the boundaries of the ordinary. Burial spaces are thus liminal spaces, belonging not to this world but to another.

³ Aubrey Cannon, ‘Spatial narratives of death, memory and transcendence’, in Helaine Silverman and David B. Small (eds), *The space and place of death* (Arlington, VA, 2002), 191–9: 191.

⁴ See Mircea Eliade and Willard R. Trask (trans.), *The sacred and the profane: the nature of religion* (New York and London, 1959). Veikko Anttonen charts a more general movement away from Eliade’s religious conception of the sacred in recent scholarship: Veikko Anttonen, ‘Does the Eliadean notion of the sacred make a difference?’, *CSSR Bulletin* 36 (3) (2007), 66–70.

⁵ Proinsias MacCana, ‘Placenames and mythology in Irish tradition: places, pilgrimages and things’ (paper presented at the First North American Congress of Celtic Studies, Ottawa, 1986), 319–41: 321.

⁶ Riitta Latvio, ‘*Neimed*: exploring social distinctions and sacredness in early Irish legal sources’, in Katja Ritari and Alexandra Bergholm (eds), *Approaches to religion and mythology in Celtic studies* (Newcastle, 2008), 220–42.

This investigation is guided by the rationale that texts specifically emphasising geography and landscape can shed light on Ireland's commemorated spaces. The chosen texts are connected by episodes of lamentation that provide a framework for constructing commemorated space and are collectively referred to as 'lamentation literature'. For instance, lamentation often serves as the occasion for explanations of place-names in the *Dindshenchas Érenn*, Ireland's medieval corpus of place-name lore. The place-name Ochoinn Midi ('Ochoinn of Meath') is traced to 'the great lamentation (*ochán*) of Níall's household' upon the celebrated king's death.⁷ Lamentation serves a similar purpose in the *Acallam na Senórach* in the episode of Fer Óc's death, whose burial place is called the 'Mound of the Youth'. Fer Óc's mother

spent a year in this place after the death of her son, and came, each day, to visit his grave. She grieved all that year and died there herself one day as a result. She was placed in this mound which now bears her name, 'Cuillen'.⁸

In these texts, place-names are frequently traced to the act of lamentation or to the means of death or burial;⁹ the ritual of lamentation thus creates a sacred space that is commemorated in the literature. Most often, though, places are named for the person who is lamented (including lakes and rivers, for drowning deaths are frequent in the *Dindshenchas*). The Gormlaith poems are more conventional lamentation texts that lack specific emphasis on toponymy. Instead, they are considered for their spatial narratives and literary motifs that complement and balance the more directly topographical focus of the *Dindshenchas*. The *Acallam* is an unusual text that blends both textual categories. This analysis represents a straightforward, minimalist reading unburdened by abstract theoretical discussions of space. The focus remains on what the Middle Irish texts alone have to say about conceptions of commemorated space and how this relates to the historical and archaeological record. For theoretical approaches to space and landscape, the works of Henri LeFebvre and Christopher Tilley are recommended.

Analysis of the three texts confirms and further illuminates significant connections between mythology, territory and sacred kingship that have long been recognised in Irish scholarship. Burial mounds hold special significance for territorial inheritance in general, and sacred kingship in particular, in

⁷ Whitley Stokes, 'The prose tales in the Rennes Dindsenchas', *Revue Celtique* 15 (1894), 277–336, 418–84: 296. A similar etymology is given for Cleittech: 'Clet-ach Erenn, that is, the roof (*clethe*) of the groans (*ach*) of Ireland, because of the lamentation which the men of Ireland made there, bewailing Cormac, grandson of Conn, King of Erin'. Whitley Stokes, 'The Bodleian Dinnsenchas', *Folklore* 3 (4) (1892), 467–516: 511.

⁸ Ann Dooley and Harry Roe (eds), *Tales of the elders of Ireland: a new translation of Acallam na Senórach* (New York, 1999), 164.

⁹ The convention of naming a place after the means of death is exemplified by the entry for Nemthenn, named not for the dead victims but for the 'strong (*tenn*) poison (*neim*)' that killed them. Stokes, 'Bodleian Dinnsenchas', 499.

historical and legal sources. Prehistoric and early medieval mounds were actively re-used and re-interpreted in the Middle Ages as spaces appropriate for inaugurations and assemblies,¹⁰ legal disputes over ancestral territory,¹¹ and the exposition of law and dispensation of judgment.¹² Mythology played an important role in the selection of monuments for re-use because they provided dynastic continuity with mythological ancestors. Medieval sources are generally consistent with the appropriation and re-interpretation of sacred burial spaces for new purposes rather than direct continuity with prehistoric or early medieval practices. Although the ancestral dimension of Ireland's burial landscape is only tacitly acknowledged in the lamentation texts, there is abundant evidence for re-interpretation of burial spaces for dynastic purposes. This literature cannot be considered in isolation; historical and archaeological evidence provides a useful guide to the specific cultural context that produced the literary texts. The following analysis, incorporating all three perspectives, is intended to contribute to a more thorough understanding of medieval re-use and re-interpretation of ancient commemorated spaces.

The Irish lamentation texts have much in common with the heroic elegies of the Welsh *Cynfeirdd* ('early poets' of the sixth to eleventh centuries) and the later *Gogynfeirdd* ('rather early poets' of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, roughly contemporary with the Middle Irish texts).¹³ Most often, the moment of death and the subject's passage to an explicitly Christian heaven define sacred space in the Welsh poems. This focus suggests that the place of death was perhaps more significant to Welsh tradition than the place of burial, although the *c.* ninth/tenth century¹⁴ *Englynion y Beddau* ('Stanzas of the Graves'), a catalogue of the graves of Welsh mythical heroes, presents a notable exception. Unlike the Irish texts, however, the Welsh elegiac poems most often

¹⁰ Elizabeth FitzPatrick, *Royal inauguration in Gaelic Ireland c. 1100–1600: a cultural landscape study* (Woodbridge, 2004).

¹¹ T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Boundaries in Irish law', in P.H. Sawyer (ed.), *Medieval settlement: continuity and change* (London, 1976), 83–7; Elizabeth O'Brien and Edel Bhreathnach, 'Irish boundary ferta, their physical manifestation and historical context', in Fiona Edmonds and Paul Russell (eds), *Tome: studies in medieval Celtic history and law in honour of Thomas Charles-Edwards* (Woodbridge, 2011), 53–64.

¹² Cathy Swift, 'Pagan monuments and Christian legal centres in early Meath', *Riocht na Midhe* 9 (2) (1996), 1–21. A possible analogue to this function appears in Anglo-Saxon England, where prehistoric and early medieval burial mounds were re-purposed as sites for the execution and burial of criminals: see Andrew Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon deviant burial customs* (Oxford, 2009).

¹³ Joseph P. Clancy (ed.), *Medieval Welsh poems* (Dublin, 2003), 16. Cf. 'early bards' and 'not so early bards', in Andrew Breeze, *Medieval Welsh literature* (Dublin, 1997), 28.

¹⁴ Thomas Jones, 'The Black Book of Carmarthen "Stanzas of the Graves"', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 53 (1967), 97–137: 100. David Petts, 'De Situ Brecheniauc and Englynion y Beddau: writing about burial in early medieval Wales', in Sarah Semple and Howard Williams (eds), *Early medieval mortuary practices*, Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History (Oxford, 2007), 163–72: 163.

focus on heroic deaths in battle.¹⁵ The Welsh texts are thus not a precise match for the Middle Irish texts, but they are sometimes useful for illuminating shared literary traditions regarding commemorated spaces. Old Norse literature similarly provides a number of analogues in the context of the close relationship between ritual kingship and burial mounds. In terms of archaeological evidence, Welsh and (perhaps to an even greater extent) Anglo-Saxon burial practices offer particularly productive comparative studies for patterns of medieval Irish burial.

The selected lamentation texts are primarily concerned with secular subject matter. Religious texts such as Hiberno-Latin *vitae sanctorum* (specifically the patrician text *Vita Tripartita*), the *náemshenchas* ('lore of the saints'), the keening poems of Blathmac, son of Cú Brettan, Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis* and the Old Irish *Amra Choluimb Chille* offer specifically Christian perspectives of commemorated spaces. Analysis of these texts, many pre-dating the secular lamentation literature by centuries, would certainly complement the present study and further illuminate medieval treatment of Ireland's commemorated spaces over time.¹⁶ They have been excluded solely to maintain a reasonable breadth of material.

Pathetic fallacy and Christian burial in *Géisid cúan*

Géisid cúan, more commonly known as 'Créide's Lament for Cael', is a lament poem nestled within the frame-tale of the *Acallam na Senórach* ('Colloquy of the Ancients'). James Carney dates the poem to the second half of the eighth century,¹⁷ although the prose narrative comprising the frame-tale is generally accepted to be a twelfth-century composition, the product of a revived interest in the mythological Finn cycle.¹⁸ Créide is a woman of the *síd* who mourns the drowning death of her mortal husband, Cael. After Cael's body washes ashore it is brought to a place called 'the Shore of Cael and the Grave of Cael to the

¹⁵ See for example Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr's mass eulogy 'The Fall of Powys' (twelfth century), Peryf ap Cedifor's 'Lament for Hywel Ab Owain and his Foster-Brothers' (twelfth century) and Gruffudd ap Gwrgenau's 'Lament for his Comrades' (c. late twelfth/early thirteenth century). Nerys Ann Jones and Ann Parry Owen (eds), *The poets of the princes volume III: gwaith Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr, I* (Cardiff, 1991), 92–104; translated in Clancy (ed.), *Medieval Welsh poems*, 139; 45–7; 55.

¹⁶ See for example Katja Ritari, 'Theology of holiness in early medieval Ireland', in Ritari and Bergholm (eds), *Religion and mythology*, 264–91.

¹⁷ James Carney, 'The so-called "Lament of Creidhe"', *Eigse* 13 (1969–70), 227–42: 36.

¹⁸ Harry Roe dates the earliest version to c. 1200 based on linguistic evidence, though 'there is a reference to an *Acallamh* from around AD 1175'. Harry Roe, 'Acallam na Senórach: the confluence of lay and clerical in oral traditions' (paper presented at the Second North American Congress of Celtic Studies: Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples, Halifax, Nova Scotia, August 16–19, 1989), 331–46: 331. Joseph F. Nagy notes that it would be 'philologically unsafe' to date the language of the text *as we have it* (my italics) 'much earlier than 1200, for what we find in the *Acallam* is very late Middle Irish, indeed the beginning of Early Modern Irish'. Joseph Falaky Nagy, 'Oral tradition in the *Acallam na Senórach*', in W.F.H. Nicolaisen (ed.), *Oral tradition in the Middle Ages* (Binghamton, NY, 1995), 77–95: 78.

present day'.¹⁹ The integration of place-name lore in this lamentation episode, a commonplace found throughout the *Acallam*, commemorates the place and means of the celebrated hero's death. Créide's lament poem, in which the river mourns alongside the grieving widow, follows:

A roar rises from the great flood of Reenverc.
The youth from Two Hound Lake has drowned, the waves along the
shore lament.

... Sad is the cry of the wave, striking against the shore.
I weep that the noble youth ever encountered the sea.

Sad is the sound of the wave against the northern shore,
Encircling the glistening rocks, lamenting the death of Cáel.²⁰

The river's surrounding wildlife laments in tandem with Créide but not necessarily for Cáel, for the crane mourns her young and the stag his doe. The grieving river, however, clearly mourns the fallen hero of the *fiána*. As the sacred site for both death and lamentation, the river's participation in Créide's lament reinforces the connection between Cáel's death and the Irish landscape.

The pathetic fallacy of the grieving landscape that finds its fullest expression in *Géisid cúan* became a commonplace in classical Bardic convention and, as elegiac themes became formalised over time, persisted well into the early modern period.²¹ This motif suggests that lamentation is not contained by a single sacred space (the deceased subject's deathbed or final resting place, for instance). Instead, the entire natural world, connected by the moment of death, participates in the sacred ritual lament. The possible locations for constructing sacred space are thus opened to the entire landscape of Ireland.

The landscape could punish as well as grieve. In a study of the death-tales of four iconic kings of Tara, Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin reveals how the landscape protects Tara's sacred spaces from imperfect kings. The accession of a new, perfectly unblemished king initially appears promising; the landscape rewards and confirms the new king's sacrality with 'rivers full of fish, great crops and good weather'; as death approaches, however, the 'landscape, rivers, fire and weather revolt against the flawed king'.²² Fire demarcates the boundaries of Tara's sacred landscape and physically prevents the disastrous

¹⁹ Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the elders of Ireland*, 27.

²⁰ Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the elders of Ireland*, 28. Cf. Gerard Murphy (ed.), *Early Irish lyrics* (Oxford, 1956; reprinted 1977), 149, 51.

²¹ Padraig A. Breatnach, 'The poet's graveside vigil: a theme of Irish bardic elegy in the fifteenth century', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* (1997), 49–50: 52; James Carney, 'Two poems from *Acallam na Senórach*', in James and David Greene Carney (ed.), *Celtic studies: essays in memory of Angus Matheson 1912–62* (London, 1968), 22–32: 24.

²² Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, 'Death-tales of the early kings of Tara', in Roseanne Schot, Conor Newman and Edel Bhreathnach (eds), *Landscapes of cult and kingship* (Dublin, 2011), 44–65.

king from approaching its environs. He is condemned by the landscape to die elsewhere, banished from Tara's sacred spaces at the moment of death because his misrule threatens the sanctity of kingship. Tara's ceremonial landscape, so intimately bound to medieval conceptions of high-kingship, is compelled to dispense judgment by supernatural means in order to preserve its sacred spaces.

The landscape of *Géisid cúan* is, however, one of lamentation. Upon completing her lament, Créide dies of grief and is buried in the same tomb as her husband. Cailte, the story's narrator, raises the stone above their grave, which is 'still called the Grave of Cáel and Créide'.²³ The deaths of Cáel and Créide are thus permanently imprinted on Ireland's sacred topography. The significance of Créide's lament lies in its literary structure: the moment of death and the act of lamentation create a sacred space. The *Acallam* is liberally sprinkled with episodes of death, burial and lamentation that further reinforce the significance of its commemorated spaces.

In the poem, Cáel is buried with 'a cross above his head',²⁴ signifying an explicitly Christian burial-space, yet in the surrounding prose Cailte raises 'a stone above their grave', which Carney interprets as a specifically pagan burial marker.²⁵ The cross marking the shared grave presumably signifies Cáel's Christian faith and not Créide's for, as a woman of the *síd*, she belongs to the pre-Christian era. Yet they share the same burial space; Christian and pagan commemorated space thus coincides. If *Géisid cúan* is accepted as an authentic eighth-century composition, the text reflects Ireland's historical burial landscape, for at that time Christian graves could still be found embedded in the landscape rather than in consecrated churchyard cemeteries, co-existing with pagan burial sites within ancestral cemeteries.

Archaeological evidence for the appropriation of ancient burial sites for Christian burial suggests significant continuity of pre-Christian commemorated space into the early medieval period. Elizabeth O'Brien acknowledges that 'small numbers of high-ranking, probably Christian, individuals were still being buried in and around prehistoric monuments among their (pagan) ancestors' into the early eighth century.²⁶ The Church was clearly aware of the significance of burial among ancestors and found ways to accommodate pre-existing tradition even as it promoted burial in church cemeteries. O'Brien and Bhreathnach identify canons from the eighth-century *Collectio Canonum Hibernesis*, for instance, that 'make allowance for the upkeep of ancestral burial places'.²⁷ Burial also occurred in secular habitation sites—ring-forts, raths, cashels and other constructed sites not principally ecclesiastical in

²³ Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the elders of Ireland*, 28. Cf. Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics*, 151.

²⁴ Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the elders of Ireland*, 28. Cf. Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics*, 149.

²⁵ Carney, 'Two poems', 24.

²⁶ Elizabeth O'Brien, 'Burial practices in Ireland: first to seventh centuries AD', in J.D. and Anna Ritchie Downes (eds), *Sea change: Orkney and Northern Europe in the late Iron Age, AD 300–800* (Balgavies, Angus, 2003), 62–72: 67.

²⁷ O'Brien and Bhreathnach, 'Irish boundary ferta', 58.

nature—at this time.²⁸ Although lay Christians were expected to be buried in consecrated ecclesiastical cemeteries from the eighth century on,²⁹ Susan Fry presents persuasive evidence for the persistence of private, unconsecrated burial into the fifteenth century, largely in defiance of Church attempts to control burial practices.³⁰ As a result, Christian and non-Christian graves were virtually indistinguishable in the early medieval period; from an archaeological perspective, ‘it is impossible to differentiate between Christian and pagan burials . . . all graves looked alike’.³¹

Archaeological evidence is corroborated by literary evidence, as in *Bethu Phátraic*, compiled before the tenth century, in which bishop Cethiachus is buried in a *fertae* (burial mound) by his church at Oran, Co. Roscommon.³² In two patrician texts by Muirchú and Tírechán the graves of Christian and pagan appear so identical that crosses are placed over the pagans in error, and must be transferred to the graves of baptised men.³³ Muirchú, Tírechán and Adomnán describe burials at the place of death, even for newly baptised Christians;³⁴ such isolated inhumations are not uncommon in the archaeological record. *Géisid cúan* reflects what John Carey identifies as ‘the ease with which pagan and Christian realities could overlap . . . in the world of early Ireland’.³⁵ A Christian grave such as Cael’s may not always be found within consecrated ground, and the place of death would be considered acceptable ‘sacred’ space for burial and lamentation even for an acknowledged Christian.

Constructed space
in *Triamhuin*
Ghormlaithe

Triamhuin Ghormlaithe adds a new dimension to the motif of the grieving landscape of *Géisid cúan*: the desolation and loneliness of both landscape and its *constructed* spaces upon the death of the deceased subject. The poems are

²⁸ Elizabeth O’Brien, ‘Pagan and Christian burial in Ireland during the first millennium AD: continuity and change’, in Nancy Edwards and Alan Lane (eds), *The early church in Wales and the west: recent work in early Christian archaeology, history and place names* (Oxford, 1992), 130–7: 134.

²⁹ By the eighth century burial in ancestral cemeteries had ceased, replaced by ‘burial among the saints’. O’Brien, ‘Burial practices’, 69.

³⁰ Susan Leigh Fry, *Burial in medieval Ireland, 900–1500* (Dublin, 1999), 43–7.

³¹ Elizabeth O’Brien, ‘Pagan or Christian? burial in Ireland during the fifth to eighth centuries AD’, in Nancy Edwards (ed.), *Proceedings of a conference on the archaeology of the early medieval Celtic churches, September 2004; The Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph 29; The Society for Church Archaeology Monograph 1* (Leeds, 2009), 135–54: 149.

³² Swift, ‘Pagan monuments’, 14. *Ferta* or *fertae* most often refers to prehistoric burial mounds appropriated for later secondary burial (see footnote 116).

³³ Elizabeth O’Brien, ‘Literary insights into the basis of some burial practices in Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England in the seventh and eighth centuries’, in *Aedificia Nova: studies in honor of Rosemary Crmap*, Catherine E. Karkov and Helen Damico (eds), *Publications of the Richard Rawlinson Center* (Kalamazoo, 2008), 283–99: 288.

³⁴ O’Brien, ‘Pagan and Christian burial’, 134.

³⁵ John Carey, ‘Looking for Celtic Christianity’, *Gnosis* 45 (1997), 41–5: 42.

dated fairly late in the chronology of Irish lamentation literature, which testifies to the longevity of the tradition over time. They were recited as early as the fifteenth century but in their original form ‘may go back two or three centuries earlier’.³⁶ Gormlaith (d. 948) was a historical queen, daughter of the Uí Néill king Flann Sinna, and wife to three Irish kings.³⁷ The lamentation poems have been ‘anachronistically ascribed’ to the historical Gormlaith but were most likely composed long after her death.³⁸ Commemorated space is portrayed as distinctly royal space in the Gormlaith poems, a motif that underscores the Uí Néill dynasty’s political and territorial ties to Ireland’s pre-eminent royal sites.

Many of the poems focus on the emptiness and desolation of Ireland’s royal spaces upon the death of Gormlaith’s third husband, King Niall Glúndub. In one version of the text, Niall’s now-empty land of Kells, Co. Meath has ‘shed its beauty since Niall himself lives no more’. Parted from Tara, Gormlaith looks upon Niall’s ‘fair spacious land’ and mourns not only the loss of her husband, but the loss of her connection to his lands and royal residences.³⁹ Here, Gormlaith reverses the traditional pathetic fallacy. Rather than participating in the lament, the landscape is lamented along with the deceased king. In another poem, royal spaces associated with mythological lore grieve for the fallen king:

Wearied I am tonight-dear is Niall beyond all telling-so too it is with Tara
of the drappings, her cloak and her brightness are dimmed.

Eamhain⁴⁰ is without music and feasting, though great its jollity once,
And the Craobhrúadh⁴¹ of Conor of the spoils: in turn their hosts have
gone.

Silent tonight is Oileach where much music would have been heard.
Loch Foyle’s voice is rough. My looks are gone, and I shall not live.⁴²

Elsewhere in the poems attributed to Gormlaith, the landscape and its royal structures have decayed: ‘since he [Niall] is gone every rath is empty . . . from his

³⁶ O.J. Bergin, ‘Poems attributed to Gormlaith’, in Osborn Bergin and Carl Marstrander (eds), *Miscellany presented to Kuno Meyer* (Halle-on-Saale, 1912), 343–69: 344.

³⁷ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Tales of three Gormlaiths in medieval Irish literature’, *Ériu* 52 (2002), 1–24: 1–2. Bergin, ‘Poems attributed to Gormlaith’, 343.

³⁸ Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Three Gormlaiths’, 2; Bergin, ‘Poems attributed to Gormlaith’, 344.

³⁹ Bergin, ‘Poems attributed to Gormlaith’, 351.

⁴⁰ Eamhain Macha is a late Bronze Age hill-fort in Co. Armagh, royal seat of Conchobar mac Nessa in the Ulster cycle, and ‘one of the most often cited place-names in early Irish literature’: James MacKillop, *Oxford dictionary of Celtic mythology* (Oxford, 2004), 180.

⁴¹ ‘One of three royal residences of Conchobar mac Nessa, and the one most often used for large assemblies’: MacKillop, *Celtic mythology*, 108.

⁴² Anne O’Sullivan, ‘Triamhuin Ghormlaithe’, *Ériu* 16 (1952), 189–99: 194.

going until Judgement Day Tara will be in ruins as is fitting'.⁴³ Poems mourning the now lonely 'Fort of the Kings' and the empty raths of Tuathal and Tara are found in O.J. Bergin's compilation.⁴⁴ Following Niall's death, Ireland is 'an empty fold',⁴⁵ a landscape devoid of meaning. In these poems, constructed spaces complement the natural landscape, adding a new dimension to the traditional pathetic fallacy exemplified by Créide's lament. The emptiness of constructed spaces also appears in several *Acallam* poems recited by Cailte:

Áine's Fort is empty where warriors once laughed,
And hosts and horses strayed over its flawless slope
... All those have since died, the fort is now laid to waste.

And in a later episode:

Forad na Féinne empty, where Finn once walked,
Noble *Almu* is empty, after the good man's death.

The noble household gone and the true lord Finn,
The host without deception and their chieftains all.⁴⁶

The raths and forts of the Gormlaith poems and the *Acallam* are portrayed as formerly festive royal spaces significant for their role in lamenting the dead. Ritual lamentation, rather than burial, thus defines commemorated space in *Triamhuin Ghormlaithe*. Although the grieving palaces associated with Niall no longer remain, the poems perpetuate cultural memory of these commemorated spaces for later generations.

Although they were likely composed earlier than the Middle Irish texts (c. ninth century), the poems of the Welsh Heledd Saga similarly reflect the desolation of constructed spaces upon the death of Cynddylan, a seventh-century prince of Powys who died in battle against the English.⁴⁷ *Stafell Gynddylan* ('The Hall of Cynddylan') is a lamentation poem in which the hero's sister, Heledd, keens the hero's death and the sudden emptiness of his hall. She describes the darkness ('without a fire, without a light') and stillness that has descended: Cynddylan's royal space is 'desolate', 'without comfort', and 'bereft

⁴³ O'Sullivan, 'Triamhuin Ghormlaithe', 196.

⁴⁴ Bergin, 'Poems attributed to Gormlaith', 347, 51.

⁴⁵ Bergin, 'Poems attributed to Gormlaith', 355.

⁴⁶ Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the elders of Ireland*, 94, 102. Cf. Murphy, 'Desolate tonight is Forad na Fíán (the Fíans' Look-out Place), to which Finn of the unsheathed weapons used to come. By reason of the death of that griefless lord, noble mighty Allen is desolate. / The good household lives no more. Finn the true lord lives not. No longer does the manifest host surround the Fíán king, nor is any captain with him': Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics*, 153.

⁴⁷ Breeze, *Medieval Welsh literature*, 23.

of form' upon the death of its lord and the retreat of his household.⁴⁸ Another Heledd poem, *Eglwysau Basa*, describes Cynddylan's final resting place (presumably at or near the place of death) in the town of Baschurch, Shropshire. The town lies in ruins; nothing remains but 'glowing embers' and clover bloodied from battle. Following the brutal slaying by the English, the entire town is nothing more than 'the land of Cynddylan's grave'.⁴⁹ The Heledd poem *Y Drefwen* describes in very similar terms a town thoroughly bloodied by battle and subsequently abandoned.⁵⁰ Constructed spaces are correspondingly joyless, colorless and cold in the later poetry of the *Gogynfeirdd*. The poet Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr (twelfth century) describes his longing for

the court beside the Dyfrdwy,
And the fair place like a beach . . .

. . . And the homes and the famous borders,
And the place where no lord is spurned,
And the church above Madawg's court.⁵¹

The expansiveness of lamentation spaces in the Welsh poems heightens the significance of the deaths that have occurred in battle and provides a suitable setting for the narrators' dramatic keening. They point to a shared tradition with Ireland's medieval lamentation literature as well as the persistence of the topos of the grieving landscape over time. The *Gogynfeirdd* poems provide a close parallel to the roughly contemporary *Acallam* and a foreshadowing of motifs in the later Gormlaith poems.

Christian burial and secular kingship coincide in *Triamhuin Ghormlathie*. Two of the poems place Niall's burial space in an explicitly Christian setting. In one poem he lies 'under a cross'; in another he lies in the churchyard of Kells 'at the high cross'.⁵² Royal and Christian burial space is thus blended in the grave of Niall, a secular king given a Christian burial. There is nothing unusual about a tenth-century king buried in a churchyard, for church burial became common practice from the eighth and ninth centuries and the 'cemetery of the kings' at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly testifies to the burial of medieval

⁴⁸ Jenny Rowland, *Early Welsh saga poetry: a study and edition of the Englynion* (Cambridge, 1990), 432, 85. Cf. Clancy, *Medieval Welsh poems*, 92–3. See also A.O.H. Jarman, 'Saga poetry: the cycle of Llywarch Hen', in A.O.H. Jarman and Gwilym Rees Hughes (eds), *A guide to Welsh literature, Volume I* (Swansea, 1976), 81–97: 93–4; Breeze, *Medieval Welsh literature*, 23–4.

⁴⁹ Rowland, *Early Welsh saga poetry*, 435–6; 87. See also Clancy, *Medieval Welsh poems*, 91–2.

⁵⁰ Rowland, *Early Welsh saga poetry*, 436, 87. See also Clancy, *Medieval Welsh poems*, 95–6.

⁵¹ Jones and Owen, *Poets of the princes, Volume III: Gwaith Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr*, 92–104; Clancy, *Medieval Welsh poems*, 147.

⁵² Bergin, 'Poems attributed to Gormlaith', 357, 63. The lines referring to Niall's Christian grave echo those describing Cáel's grave in Créide's lament.

royalty within ecclesiastical enclosed spaces.⁵³ Across the Irish Sea, the burial of Anglo-Saxon kings reveals similar patterns from roughly the same period. Each of the nineteen kings from Egbert (ninth century) to Edward the Confessor (eleventh century) were buried in or around eleven different churches, most of them favoring Winchester. Few kings were actually buried in the places where they died.⁵⁴

The problem lies in the identification of sacred commemorated space as exclusively, or even *consistently*, Christian, for spatial categories break down when Christian and royal spaces coincide. Tara's multi-layered history offers one example of the co-mingling of conceptions of commemorated space. A Middle Irish text claims Ráith na Senad ('Rath of the Synods'), an authentic pre-Christian barrow cemetery on the Hill of Tara,⁵⁵ as the site of significant ecclesiastical synods attended by Patrick and Adomnán (see Fig. 1).⁵⁶ Cathy Swift examines the appropriation of Fertae fer Féic, a pre-Christian ceremonial site in Slane, Co. Meath, for ecclesiastical functions in seventh-century patrician texts. Muirchú and Tírechán claimed this particular mound as the site of Ireland's first Easter celebrations which, in Tírechán's text, also involved the consecration of a bishop.⁵⁷ The literary appropriation of Ráith na Senad and Fertae fer Féic clearly mirrors royal inauguration and assembly on prehistoric burial mounds, a subject that is discussed in greater detail below.⁵⁸ Pre-Christian

⁵³ Fry, *Burial in medieval Ireland*, 42, 152. Clonmacnoise was documented as a place of interment since the death of Ciarán; the earliest graves date from the seventh to the tenth centuries. Abbots, pilgrims, scribes and High Kings were buried there in the early medieval period. Heather King, 'Burials and high crosses at Clonmacnoise' (paper presented at the 'Death and burial in medieval Europe' conference, Zellik, 1997), 127–31.

⁵⁴ Barbara Yorke, 'Anglo-Saxon royal burial: the documentary evidence' (paper presented at the Conference on Medieval Archaeology in Europe, University of York, 1992), 41–6: 41.

⁵⁵ Edel Bhreathnach and Conor Newman, 'Tara, Co. Meath: a guide to the ceremonial complex', *Archaeology Ireland*, Heritage Guide no. 41 (2008): 4; Conor Newman, *Tara: an archaeological survey*, Discovery Programme Monograph 2 (Dublin, 1997), 92.

⁵⁶ The place-name is apparently significant only for symbolic or literary reasons, since there is no evidence that ecclesiastical assemblies were actually held at Tara. See Edel Bhreathnach, 'Transforming kingship and cult: the provincial ceremonial capitals in early medieval Ireland', in Schot, Newman, and Bhreathnach, *Cult and kingship*, 126–48.

⁵⁷ Swift, 'Pagan monuments', 14.

⁵⁸ The ease with which secular patterns of ritual were historically adopted by Church authority is particularly visible in Irish penitentials regarding the practice of excessive lamentation, or keening. These texts prescribe relatively lighter penances for the keening of bishops, anchorites and high-ranking clergy in comparison to lay commoners. Lighter penances also apply to royalty, considered the secular equivalent to Church authority. Ludwig Bieler (ed.), *The Irish penitentials*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1975). The hierarchy of penances suggests that lamentation rituals were considered acceptable by Church authority when they took place within appropriate Christian contexts. The collected literary evidence suggests pre-Christian rituals and spaces directly connected to death and burial appear to have been particularly fruitful areas for ecclesiastical appropriation and adaptation.

commemorated spaces, particularly those associated with secular kingship, are equally 'sacred', and thus appropriate sites for ecclesiastical ceremony; to describe any of these commemorated spaces as exclusively Christian is to ignore the remarkable confluence of ecclesiastical and secular tradition in medieval Ireland.

Royal ceremonial complexes such as the Hill of Tara and Emhain Macha (present-day Navan Fort) were considered sacred for the burial spaces they contained long before they were symbolic of sacred kingship. More than 25 barrows and ring-ditches (the ploughed-out remains of barrows)⁵⁹ occur on the Hill of Tara, dating mostly from the Bronze Age. Barrow construction continued into the Iron Age, often incorporating older barrows into newer enclosures. In this sense, Tara was the focus of ritual burial activity for more than 4,000 years as secondary burials were placed in or around older burial spaces.⁶⁰ The megalithic passage tombs of the Boyne Valley (Knowth, Dowth and Newgrange, the traditional burial ground of the pagan kings of Tara)⁶¹ exhibit similar patterns of re-use.⁶² Richard Bradley argues that the 'juxtaposition of prehistoric and early medieval monuments . . . [are] attempts by a social elite to legitimise their position through reference to the past' rather than evidence for cultural continuity.⁶³ The same legitimising process is discernible in medieval literature, as 'history was rewritten to legitimise the Uí Néill claim to Knowth'.⁶⁴ The practice of monument re-use, common across Continental Europe and Britain into the Middle Ages,⁶⁵ represents a 're-interpretation' of sacred commemorated spaces. However, the archaeological reality of royal ceremonial sites as prehistoric burial spaces is largely absent from the selected lamentation texts.

It was only in the early medieval period that writers re-interpreted ceremonial burial complexes as places symbolic of sacral

⁵⁹ Heather James, 'Early medieval cemeteries in Wales', in Edwards and Lane, *The early church in Wales and the west*, 90–103: 90.

⁶⁰ Newman, *Tara: an archaeological survey*, 146.

⁶¹ Conor Newman, 'Reflections on the making of a "royal site" in early Ireland', *World Archaeology* 30 (1), 'The past in the past: the reuse of ancient monuments (1998)', 127–41: 135.

⁶² Richard Bradley, 'Time regained: the creation of continuity', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 140 (1987): 10–3; Gabriel Cooney, 'The passage tomb phenomenon in Ireland', *Archaeology Ireland* 11 (3), Supplement: Brú na Bóinne (1997).

⁶³ Bradley, 'Creation of continuity', 1.

⁶⁴ Bradley, 'Creation of continuity', 14.

⁶⁵ For the practice of monument re-use in early medieval Wales, see James, 'Early medieval cemeteries'. Anglo-Saxon monument re-use has been widely documented and offers perhaps the most productive avenue for comparative study. See for example Howard Williams, *Death and memory in early medieval Britain*, Cambridge Studies in Archaeology (Cambridge, 2006; reprint, 2010), 181–5. Sutton Hoo in Suffolk represents the most dramatic re-interpretation of an ancient monument. After high status burials ceased in 625 CE, Sutton Hoo's burial mounds became sites for executions and criminal burials. M. Carver, 'Why that? why there? why then? The politics of early medieval monumentality', in Helena Hamerow and Arthur MacGregor (eds), *Image and power in the archaeology of early medieval Britain: essays in honour of Rosemary Cramp* (Oxford, 2001), 1–22.

kingship.⁶⁶ The Gormlaith poems, reflecting on an earlier (tenth-century) landscape, sustain this interpretation. The original ritual significance of these royal spaces was either simply lost to medieval audiences accustomed to the more immediate kingship interpretation, or it was implicitly recognised by them and writers saw no need to make this connection explicit. The twelfth-century *Dindshenchas* clearly identify many of Tara's monuments as pre-Christian burial spaces, suggesting that the second explanation is more plausible. The Middle Irish lamentation texts demonstrate the co-existence and co-mingling of two distinct conceptions of Ireland's sacred ritual landscape: one grounded in burial space, the other in ritual kingship. Ritual burial was perhaps less important to writers of texts, like the Gormlaith poems, meant to perpetuate the Uí Néill dynasty's claims to territories symbolic of Ireland's high-kingship, but it does not mean that medieval audiences were unaware of the rich ancestral significance of these sites.⁶⁷

Commemorated
space and time in
the *Dindshenchas*
Érenn

Episodes of death and lamentation frequently provide etymologies for place-names in the c. twelfth century⁶⁸ *Dindshenchas Érenn*, because 'the name of every place was assumed to be an expression of its history'.⁶⁹ The texts are, in essence, medieval interpretations of Ireland's visually prominent and politically significant landscape features, both natural and man-made.⁷⁰ The *Dindshenchas* reveal a tendency to misinterpret place-names in order to establish mythological origins

⁶⁶ See for example Newman, 'Making of a "royal site"'. Roseanne Schot presents a persuasive analysis of how the past was 'accommodated, drawn upon and in some cases wholly re-composed' to facilitate the transition of the Hill of Uisneach from cult centre to royal centre: Roseanne Schot, 'From cult centre to royal centre: monuments, myths and other revelations at Uisneach', in Schot, Newman and Bhreathnach (eds), *Cult and kingship*, 87–113.

⁶⁷ Michael Herity, for instance, cites 'poetry celebrating royal sites as cemeteries' in his discussion of mounds located in royal complexes: Michael Herity, 'Motes and mounds at royal sites in Ireland', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 123 (1993), 127–51: 137.

⁶⁸ Charles Bowen, 'A historical inventory of the Dindshenchas', *Studia Celtica* 10–11 (1975–6), 113–37: 116. Tina Hellmuth, 'The *Dindshenchas* and Irish literary tradition', in John Carey, Máire Herbert and Kevin Murray (eds), *Cín Chille Cúile: texts, saints and places: essays in honour of Pádraig Ó Riain* (Aberystwyth, 2004), 113–37: 116. Máirín O Daly, 'The metrical Dindshenchas', in James Carney (ed.), *Early Irish Poetry* (Cork, 1965; reprint, 1969), 59–72: 61; Stokes, 'Bodleian Dinshenchas', 468.

⁶⁹ Bowen, 'Historical inventory', 115. Proinsias MacCana describes toponymy as 'in fact, sacred history' for its associations with mythology rather than burial or lamentation. MacCana, 'Placenames and mythology', 338.

⁷⁰ The etymology for *Dindshenchas*, according to Charles Bowen, is *dind*, which literally means 'hillock, raised ground' and, by extension, 'landmark, eminent or notable place', and *senchas*, 'ancient or traditional lore'. Bowen, 'Historical inventory', 115. The texts are commonly known as 'the traditional lore of eminent places'. Hellmuth, '*Dindshenchas* and Irish literary tradition', 116. Cf. MacCana: 'The word *dindshenchas* is of course a compound of *senchas*, 'knowledge of all that pertains to earlier times'... and *dind* meaning 'height, hill', then 'fortified hill, stronghold' and 'famous or important place'. MacCana, 'Placenames and mythology', 333.

for local settings and to emphasise the political significance of a place.⁷¹ Conor Newman characterises the texts as deliberate attempts to ‘re-establish the importance of Tara and, *ipso facto*, its Uí Néill kings’ in the Middle Ages.⁷² Place-names and narratives specifically connected to death and lamentation preserve cultural memory of the deceased over time and heighten the text’s emphasis on mythological origins. This situates the *Dindshenchas* among the most valuable texts for investigating how death alters the medieval landscape, for ‘the meanings of places unfold in stories, myths, rituals and in naming’.⁷³ In these texts, commemorated space is grounded in both sacred burial space and ritual kingship. The two conceptions of sacred space coincide most prominently in the narratives for Temair, or the Hill of Tara, in which burial mounds and monuments are interspersed within and among royal sites. Men, women, heroes, prisoners and criminals are among the deceased commemorated with place-names in the *Dindshenchas*, a motif that suggests the dying wishes of the deceased are more significant to the medieval conception of commemorated space than preserving cultural memory of the elite classes alone. Deaths are often commemorated with seasonal lamentation festivals, which present an alternative temporal conception to commemoration bound solely by the body’s placement in space.

One of the origins given for Temair comes from the burial space of Téa, Queen to the mythological Milesian King Eremon.⁷⁴ Téa designs a rampart (*múr*) on the Hill of Tara for her own burial space before her death, a copy of a Spanish queen’s burial rampart, ‘and therein she was buried. Hence it is called Temair’.⁷⁵ The rampart built for Téa incorporates sacred burial space within the pre-eminent royal space of Tara, seat of the high kingship and symbol of Irish sovereignty. The site of Téa’s burial is no less sacred for being pre-Christian. The origin story for Temair immediately preceding this⁷⁶ describes a rampart ‘more venerable than every rampart’,⁷⁷ which underscores the sacred nature of

⁷¹ See John B. Arthurs, ‘The legends of place-names’, *Ulster Folklife* 1 (1955), 37–42.

⁷² Conor Newman, ‘Composing Tara, the grand opera of Irish pre-history’, *Eolas: The Journal of the American Society of Irish Medieval Studies* 3 (2009), 6–18: 13.

⁷³ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the sacred: place, memory, and identity* (Baltimore, 2001), 6.

⁷⁴ Stokes, ‘Rennes Dindsenchas I’, 279; MacKillop, *Celtic mythology*, 403.

⁷⁵ Stokes, ‘Rennes Dindsenchas I’, 279.

⁷⁶ Multiple etymologies are often given for locations in the *Dindshenchas*, as in the case of Temair, for ‘the generation of variants and multiforms is after all a characteristic feature of myth, where truth—whether religious, historical or ideological—may reveal itself under different aspects and the several variant accounts of a given datum are seen to confirm and to complement, rather than to contradict, one another’. MacCana, ‘Placenames and mythology’, 335.

⁷⁷ Stokes, ‘Rennes Dindsenchas I’, 279. Nearly identical language appears in the entry for Temair in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 506. Of the Spanish Téa, the Bodleian poet recites: ‘The first woman that went into a cold grave / Of the band from the Tower of white Breogan / Was Tea [*sic*] of Bregia, the wife of the King / From whom is the name ‘true Temuir of Fil’. Stokes, ‘Bodleian Dinnshenchas’, 470.

this constructed space. The etymologies given in the *Dindshenchas* are chiefly the product of medieval imaginations, but narratives such as this also reflect traces of Tara's sacred qualities that predate the written texts. Edel Bhreathnach argues that the genuine etymology of Temair derives from the Indo-European root *tem-*, 'to cut', a term cognate with Greek *temenos* (sanctuary) and Latin *templum* (temple). *Temair* is thus a general term denoting a place 'cut off or demarcated for sacred purposes'.⁷⁸ From as early as the Neolithic era, the Hill of Tara effectively functioned as a cemetery and its original 'sacred purposes' were rooted in ritual burial practices.⁷⁹ The *Dindshenchas* texts both preserve this original sense of sacred burial space and reinforce Tara's connections to ritual kingship. Whether adapted from mythology or wholly invented, Temair's etymologies provide an opportunity for medieval writers and compilers to make sense of Ireland's ancient burial landscape.

The *Dindshenchas* texts also reveal missed opportunities for exploiting the rich ancestral significance of places. Duma na nGiall ('Mound of the Hostages'), the oldest of Tara's prehistoric burial monuments, effectively illustrates this. The *Dindshenchas* entry for Duma na nGiall describes only the mound's location 'to the north-east of the site of the High-seat'.⁸⁰ The following entry places Fál, 'the stone that used to roar under the feet of every king that would take possession of Ireland', beside Duma na nGiall.⁸¹ The text reinforces the close connection between commemorated space and sacred kingship but it offers no supporting narrative regarding who these hostages were or how they died; the monument is notable only for its proximity to Tara's pre-eminent royal space. The text does reflect archaeological reality to some degree, for Duma na nGiall is situated close to Forrad, the royal seat of Tara (see Fig. 1). The Lia Fáil stone was originally located beside Duma na nGiall until it was moved to the Forrad in 1824.⁸² The lack of narrative detail concerning this particular commemorated space suggests the mound's significance for ritual burial has been eclipsed by the text's emphasis on ritual kingship.

From an archaeological perspective, Duma na nGiall is much more significant as a case study in monument re-use. Mid-twentieth century archaeological excavations revealed a Neolithic passage tomb beneath the mound dating to the third millennium BCE. An enclosure pre-dating construction of the passage tomb marks the 'earliest major structural feature thus far

⁷⁸ 'It is likely, therefore, that Temair . . . referred to hilltop sites on which a sacred space or sanctuary was enclosed' in prehistory. Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The kingship and landscape of Tara* (Dublin, 2005), xiii.

⁷⁹ Nearly all of the thirty surviving monuments on the Hill of Tara are prehistoric. The majority are barrows or ring-ditches, 'thus emphasizing the importance of the funerary aspect of Tara. Collectively they [barrows] construct a cemetery'. Newman, *Tara: an archaeological survey*, 1–2; 153–4. See also Bhreathnach and Newman, 'Guide to the ceremonial complex'.

⁸⁰ Stokes, 'Rennes Dindsenchas I', 281, 5.

⁸¹ Stokes, 'Rennes Dindsenchas I', 281, 5.

⁸² Newman, *Tara: an archaeological survey*, 86.

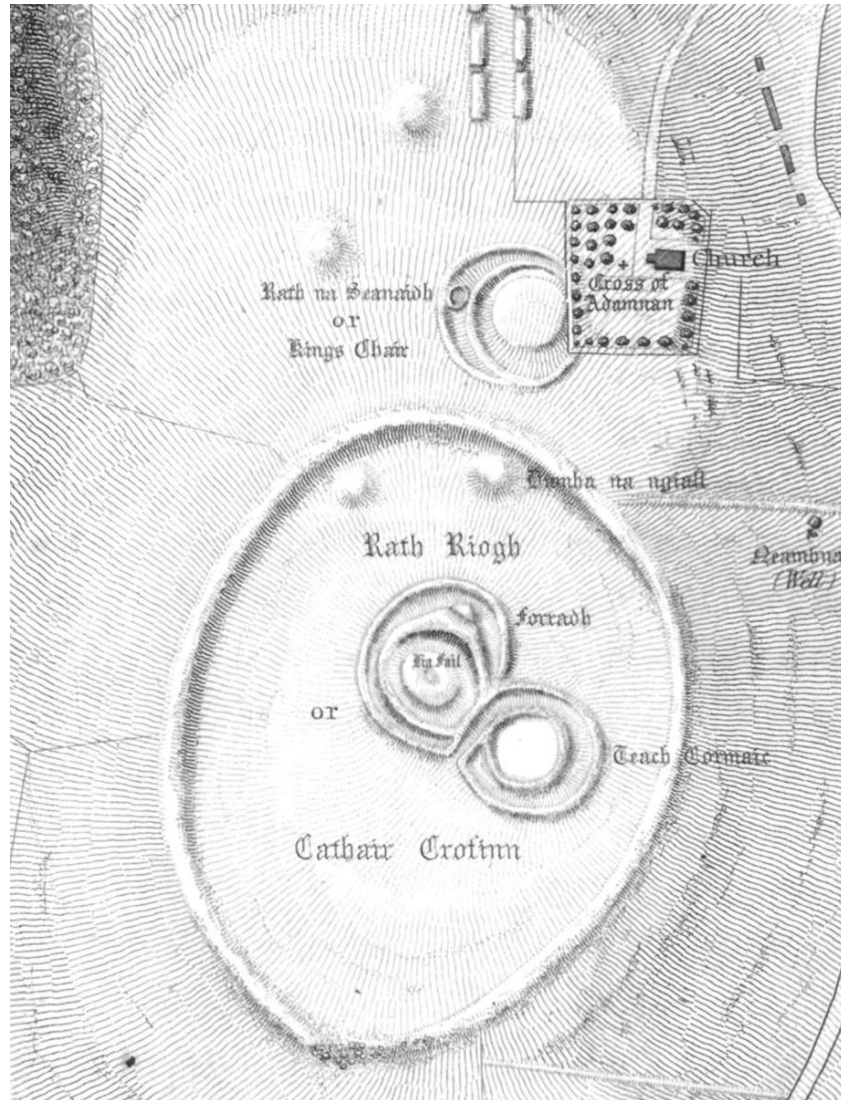


FIGURE 1—Tara's ancient burial landscape. Detail from George Petrie's 1839 reconstruction from ordnance surveys and descriptions in the *Dindshenchas*. Ráith na Senad lies to the north-east of the enclosure known as Ráith na Ríg (labeled 'Rath Riogh' by Petrie), adjacent to the churchyard. Duma na nGiall lies within Ráith na Ríg, to the north-east of the Forrad (Royal Seat). Newman identifies a protrusion in the south-eastern quadrant of the inner bank of the Forrad as Mur Tea, the burial mound that gives the Hill of Tara its name (See Newman, *Tara: an archaeological survey*, 77–8). Only a faint crop circle now remains of the mound to the north-west of the Forrad, identified by Newman as Duma na mBó. The mound situated south-west of the remains of the banqueting hall known as Tech Midchúarta (partially visible as two parallel rows of earthen banks at the top of the figure) is described in the *Dindshenchas* as Dumae na mBanamhus, 'Mound of the Women Soldiers'. Stokes, 'Rennes Dindshenchas I', 283. Source: George Petrie, 'On the history and antiquities of Tara Hill', *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 18 (1839), 129, Plate 6.

recognised at Tara',⁸³ suggesting the delineation of sacred space even before burial took place. The tomb was covered with a cairn and an earthen mound following primary late-Neolithic burial of 'well over two hundred individuals'⁸⁴ with grave goods. Nearly forty secondary burials were placed in and around the mound in the early Bronze Age.⁸⁵ Newman identifies a centuries-long gap between the mound's 'initial use as a passage tomb and its later use as a cemetery mound',⁸⁶ which provides evidence for active re-interpretation of the monument in a later period rather than direct continuity with the ancestral past.

The same process of giving new meaning to Ireland's ancient burial landscape is discernible in the *Dindshenchas* entries for *dindgnai temrach*, 'Tara's remarkable places',⁸⁷ but for dramatically different purposes. Muiris O'Sullivan argues that archaeological evidence from the area surrounding Duma na nGiall

concur with the generally held historical view that Tara's role after the arrival of Christianity narrowed to being a symbol of sectional kingly power and ultimately a focus of myth-laden cultural memory about the prehistoric and proto-historic past.⁸⁸

The ancient ritual origins for Tara's remarkable places were either simply lost or, more likely, intentionally re-imagined by the time the *Dindshenchas* were composed. In the texts, monuments like Duma na nGiall, historically the focus for sacred burial and communion with prehistoric ancestors, are more valuable for their connection to ritual kingship, and by extension the Uí Néill dynasty, than for their commemoration of Ireland's ancestral past.⁸⁹ Once again, the ancestral dimension of commemorated spaces is eclipsed in the textual tradition.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the *Dindshenchas* in the context of death and lamentation is the texts' treatment of social status. Burial space is presented as the great social equaliser; hostages, criminals, soldiers, heroes, royalty, saints, foreigners, women and children are all commemorated with monuments and place-names. As a result, conceptions of commemorated space

⁸³ Newman, *Tara: an archaeological survey*, 146. The discovery of a Mesolithic-type artefact in the vicinity of the mound 'may hint at a deeper antiquity for this sanctuary' and further supports the suggestion that the site of the mound was considered sacred prior to construction of the passage tomb. Muiris O'Sullivan, *Duma na Ngiall: the Mound of the Hostages, Tara* (Wicklow, 2005), 246.

⁸⁴ O'Sullivan, *Mound of the hostages*, 237.

⁸⁵ Newman, *Tara: an archaeological survey*, 71–5; O'Sullivan, *Mound of the hostages*.

⁸⁶ Newman, *Tara: an archaeological survey*, 148. See also O'Sullivan, *Mound of the hostages*, 227.

⁸⁷ Stokes, 'Rennes Dindsenchas I', 280, 4.

⁸⁸ O'Sullivan, *Mound of the hostages*, 233.

⁸⁹ Elizabeth FitzPatrick suggests that Temair may have functioned purely as a symbolic capital as there is no historical evidence for the inauguration of an Uí Néill king on the site. FitzPatrick, *Royal inauguration*, 49.

in the place-name narratives are remarkably fluid. Illustrations of this social levelling in the *Dindshenchas* texts are so voluminous that only a handful of entries must suffice. Women are honoured with place-names for various reasons, and not only those of royal status; the House of the Women, Mound of the Woman-soldiers and the Triple Mound of Ness are but a few.⁹⁰ Among Tara's remarkable places, the graves of women, children and a holy pilgrim share the burial landscape.⁹¹ 'Champions and chiefs' are commemorated in the place-name Cerna, for the etymology of this name is

caer-nia[d] 'abundance of champions', because *there* is the principal burial-place of Bregia and eastern Meath, and, moreover, 'tis there that Cerna Cass son of Cairpre son of Etain, and his father were buried. 'Tis because of the abundance of champions and chiefs there that Caer *niad* is said, *etc.*: *cáer* (means) 'abundance'.⁹²

The origin story for the place-name Fafaind tells of the poet Fafne, who was killed for satirising the king of Tara to avenge his sister's death; 'while they were killing him he entreated that his name might be for ever on that mound'.⁹³ Similarly, one of the explanations for Loch Garman claims that Garman was drowned in the Loch by the king of Ireland for stealing the queen's diadem and killing her household.⁹⁴ If criminals could be honoured with commemorative place-names, so too could prisoners. Carman, a female hostage from Athens, died of grief and asked for a fair (*oenach*) to be held at her burial-place, 'and that the fair and the place should always bear her name. And the Tuatha Dé Danann performed this so long as they were in Erin. Hence *Carman* and *Oenach Carmuin* [*sic*].⁹⁵ These episodes from the *Dindshenchas* reveal how deaths were immortalised in place-name etymologies regardless of the deceased subject's social status. Carman and Fafne were neither heroic nor royal, yet their dying requests were honoured and their burial spaces imprinted on Ireland's mythical landscape despite their status as prisoner and criminal, respectively. These episodes suggest that a culture honouring the wishes of the deceased, rather than commemorating only those

⁹⁰ Stokes, 'Rennes Dindsenchas I', 287.

⁹¹ Stokes, 'Rennes Dindsenchas I', 286–7.

⁹² Whitley Stokes, 'The prose tales in the Rennes Dindsenchas', *Revue Celtique* 16 (1895), 31–83, 135–67: 67.

⁹³ Stokes, 'Rennes Dindsenchas I', 307.

⁹⁴ Stokes, 'Bodleian Dinnsenchas', 474. This entry ends with the quatrain: 'Boimm Lecce's son we announce: / Catháir the king drowned him / Garman was the high man's name / Thro' bardic poems—so that he might not be a king'. Elsewhere in the same MS, the place-name Loch Neill commemorates Niall, a 'leader of the brigands' and a 'prime traitor'. Stokes, 'Bodleian Dinnsenchas', 495.

⁹⁵ Stokes, 'Rennes Dindsenchas I', 313. This passage presents some linguistic confusion, either on the part of the medieval compiler or in Stokes's transcription, for 'Carmuin' is genitive singular masculine, yet the subject is female. My thanks to Dr Paul Russell for pointing out this anomaly.

of elevated status, is significant to medieval conceptions of Ireland's mythologised burial landscape.

One final feature of the *Dindsenchas* is worth mentioning for the temporal dimension it adds to Ireland's commemorated spaces: lamentation festivals that take place at burial sites, most often in honour of the expressed wishes of the deceased. In an alternative place-name narrative for Carman, a grave was dug for Sengarman [*sic*] and 'he begged them to establish there a 'fair of Lamentation', and that the fair and the place should always bear his name. Hence *Carman* and *Sen-charman* are so called'.⁹⁶ The Leinstermen honored his dying wish, and the narrative segues into a historical sketch of this fair. Similarly, *Oenach Macha*, 'Macha's Fair', was established to lament Macha, daughter of Aed the Red.⁹⁷ Elsewhere in the texts, Lugh gathers 'the hosts of the Gaels' to bewail the deaths of his two wives 'on the first day of August in each year: so thence was the *nasad* 'assembly' of Lugh, whence Lugh-nasad 'lammaday', that is Lugh's commemoration, or remembering, or recollection, or deathfeast'.⁹⁸ These lamentation festivals preserve cultural memory of commemorated spaces that *transcend* the moment of death; time and space thus coincide in the burial landscape. Mircea Eliade describes festival cycles as 'sacred time', and the festivals themselves as re-actualisations of a sacred event.⁹⁹ In the case of lamentation festivals, death is the sacred event and 'sacred time' is intimately linked with commemorated burial spaces.¹⁰⁰ Historically, such festivals are also intimately associated with ritual kingship.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Stokes, 'Rennes Dindsenchas I', 314.

⁹⁷ Stokes, 'Rennes Dindsenchas II', 45. Cf. Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 72.1.16: 'Macha, daughter of Aed the Red, son of Badurn: 'tis by her that Emain Macha was marked out, and there she was buried when Rechtaid Red-arm killed her. To lament her *Oenach Macha*, "Macha's Assembly", was held'. Whitley Stokes, 'The Edinburgh Dinnsenchas', *Folklore* 4 (4) (1893), 471–96: 481.

⁹⁸ Stokes, 'Rennes Dindsenchas I', 318. Máire MacNeill's classic study *The festival of Lughnasa* traces the history and survival of the Irish festival of Lughnasad. Máire MacNeill, *The festival of Lughnasa: a study of the survival of the Celtic festival of the beginning of harvest* (London, 1962).

⁹⁹ Eliade, *Sacred and profane*, 69.

¹⁰⁰ See for example D.A. Binchy, 'The fair of Tailtiu and the feast of Tara', *Ériu* 18 (1958), 113–38; Catherine Swift, 'Oenach Tailten, the Blackwater Valley and the Uí Néill kings of Tara', in Alfred P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin, 2000), 109–20. MacCana's analysis of the mythological significance of Lughnasa assemblies taking place on heights, an extension of MacNeill's study of Lughnasa, is particularly relevant as it is grounded in Eliade's conception of the sacred mountain as the Axis Mundi that connects heaven and earth. MacCana, 'Placenames and mythology'.

¹⁰¹ See for example Bhreathnach, 'Transforming kingship and cult', in Schot, Newman, and Bhreathnach (eds), *Cult and kingship*, 126–48.

Otherworld beliefs and the re-interpretation of burial mounds

The geographical convergence of the supernatural otherworld and Ireland's earthly landscape in the textual tradition lends a significant new dimension to the present study: the impact of *síd* beliefs on Ireland's commemorated spaces. The otherworld of the *Acallam na Senórach*, for example, is represented by both the Christian heaven and a pre-Christian otherworld located within earthly *síd*-mounds (fairy mounds) or under mountains. Scholars have long argued over the inconsistencies and paradoxes inherent in localisations of the otherworld in medieval Irish literature;¹⁰² I will not enter the debate here, but will limit discussion to the *síd*-mounds as they appear in the *Acallam* and *Dindshenchas*.

Unlike the abstract Christian heaven, the *síd*-mounds of the *Acallam* are firmly situated within Ireland's earthly landscape, for '*síd* seems almost invariably to refer to a mound or tumulus' when expressing 'a particular localisation of the otherworld'.¹⁰³ This otherworld conception accords closely with Carey's indigenous otherworld tradition, 'confined to the empirical geographical context'.¹⁰⁴ These mounds are simultaneously the dwelling-places of individual immortals and entrances 'to the whole immortal realm, the otherworld in its entirety'.¹⁰⁵ The ease with which the *fiana* pass to and from these mythological otherworld realms reflects the fluidity of the borders separating the two worlds. Créide's dwelling place, for example, is both a royal palace and an otherworld *síd*. Cáel and the *fiana* accompanying him 'went off over hillsides and rocks and heights to the Lake of Hosts in the west of Ireland' until they 'arrived at the door of the *síd* and sang the chant of the *Fian*'.¹⁰⁶ Créide's *síd* is explicitly located in the Irish landscape and entrance is easily gained by mortals. A number of similar episodes in the *Acallam* further emphasises the lack of clearly delineated boundaries separating the world of the *síd* from the earthly landscape.

Unlike the otherworld portals of the *Acallam*, the *síd*-mounds of the *Dindshenchas* are primarily constructed burial spaces, most often the graves of shadowy mythological figures. For instance, one of the place-name narratives offered for Ess Rúaid focuses on Aed Ruad, an Irish king and founder of Emhain Macha, who 'was drowned there while gazing at his image and swimming the rapid. From him *Ess Ruaid* 'Ruad's Rapid' is named. His gravemound, *Síd Aeda*, is on the rapid's brink'.¹⁰⁷ The dual conceptions of the *síd*-mound as otherworld entrance and burial space in the *Acallam* and the *Dindshenchas* may reflect confusion due to a shift in the meaning of *síd* from

¹⁰² See for example John Carey, 'The location of the otherworld in Irish tradition', *Eigse* 19 (1) (1982), 36–43. Contradictions regarding the location or characteristics of the otherworld did not appear to present a problem for the medieval Irish; it is only a problem for modern scholars who study them.

¹⁰³ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'The semantics of "síd"', *Eigse* 17 (1977–8), 137–54: 149.

¹⁰⁴ John Carey, 'Time, space, and the otherworld', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 7 (1987), 1–27. See also Carey, 'Location of the otherworld'.

¹⁰⁵ Carey, 'Time, space, otherworld', 2.

¹⁰⁶ Dooley and Roe (eds), *Tales of the elders of Ireland*, 25.

¹⁰⁷ Stokes, 'Rennes Dindsenchas II', 32.

the general (otherworld) to the particular (hollow hill) . . . On the basis of the etymological evidence, it may be conjectured that the semantic pre-history of *síd* was one of progressive specialization of meaning, narrowing from abode in general to abode of the gods in particular, and then from abode of the gods in general to hollow hill in particular.¹⁰⁸

The integration of otherworldly *síd*-mounds into the topography and place-names of Ireland in the texts, coupled with their frequent connections to burial and lamentation, effectively bestows supernatural meaning upon Ireland's commemorated spaces.

John Carey has discussed a number of medieval Irish texts in which *síd*-mounds and their inhabitants are explicitly connected to both ritual lamentation and supernatural kingship. Women of the *síde* keen the death of Cernach son of Fogartach in an entry from the Annals of Ulster; in *Táin Bó Fraich* 'the cry of lamentation of the women of the *síde*' erupts upon the death of Fráech son of Idath.¹⁰⁹ These texts identify otherworld *síd*-mounds as appropriate places for lamenting the dead—a defining characteristic of Ireland's commemorated spaces. *Síd*-mounds are explicitly associated with otherworldly kingship in the Old Irish texts *Gabáil int Síde* ('The Taking of the Otherworld Mound') and *Tochmarc Étaíne* ('The Wooing of Étaín'), in which the *Tuatha Dé* battle for possession of the tumulus known as Brú na Bóinne, Newgrange, Co. Meath.¹¹⁰ Indeed, Tomás Ó Cathasaigh remarks that 'legitimate kingship has its source in the otherworld' and discusses the historical inauguration of kings on tumuli,¹¹¹ presumably burial mounds identical to the *síd*-mounds of the *Acallam* and *Dindshenchas*. These texts are consistent with conceptions of burial mounds as sacred sites for both lamentation and kingship.

Hilda Ellis has identified a number of significant analogues in Old Norse literature. Kings mourn the death of their queens and preside over assemblies and games while sitting atop their burial mounds in *Gautrek's Saga*, *Hjálmðers Saga ok Ölvérs* and *Göngu-Hrólf's Saga*.¹¹² The mounds of former rulers are portrayed as appropriate places for kings to make official decisions

¹⁰⁸ Ó Cathasaigh, 'Semantics', 149–50.

¹⁰⁹ John Carey, 'The Irish "otherworld": Hiberno-Latin perspectives', *Eigse* 25 (1991), 154–9: 155–6.

¹¹⁰ John Carey, 'Time, memory, and the Boyne necropolis', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium X* (1990), 24–36. The Neolithic passage tomb of Brú na Bóinne in the Boyne Valley acquired a reputation as the 'traditional' burial mound of the pre-Christian kings of Tara. The dubious historicity of this claim did not pose a problem for the emerging dynasties staking a claim to Ireland's high-kingship; it only mattered that literary tradition perpetuated this belief.

¹¹¹ Ó Cathasaigh, 'Semantics', 140, 8.

¹¹² Hilda Roderick Ellis, *The road to Hel: a study of the conception of the dead in old Norse literature* (New York, 1968), 106.

regarding succession and territorial inheritance.¹¹³ In one Old Norse conception of the afterlife, the burial mound serves as the dwelling-place of the dead who continue to live in the grave, jealously guarding their possessions, continuously battling, and maintaining an interest in the affairs of the living.¹¹⁴ T.M. Charles-Edwards argues that the burial mound's dual role as boundary marker and site of passage onto disputed land in *tellach* ('legal entry'), the Irish legal ritual for claiming hereditary rights to the land,¹¹⁵ rests on a similar pre-Christian belief 'that the dead do not merely survive but may take an active part in the affairs of the living'.¹¹⁶ In Norse tradition, when kings became gods, worship of the house-dweller often transitioned to worship of the house, and the burial mound itself became a sacred space requiring votive offerings.¹¹⁷ These analogues remind us that Ireland did not exist in cultural isolation; the close relationship between ritual kingship and burial mounds was a familiar and natural one throughout the medieval world.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 105–8. Ellis links this custom to the record of two Welsh kings who made the decision to grant land to the church while sitting or laying upon the tomb of their father and grandfather in the twelfth-century *Book of Llandaff*.

¹¹⁴ Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 90–6.

¹¹⁵ In *tellach* the mound's inhabitants act as 'guardians of the disputed land or territory. The permission of these guardians was necessary in order to legitimise the claim' and take legal possession of the land. O'Brien and Bhreathnach, 'Irish boundary ferta', 54.

¹¹⁶ Charles-Edwards, 'Boundaries in Irish law', 85. In the late sixth/early seventh century law tract describing this ritual, burial mounds are specifically referred to as *fert* (grave-mound) or *fertae*, a collection of grave-mounds or of multiple burials in a single mound. O'Brien and Bhreathnach further reinforce this connection to monument re-use by specifically defining a *fert* as an 'ancestral burial place which often, but not always, involves the re-use of an already existing prehistoric burial monument'. Although burial in boundary *ferta* ceased in the eighth century, such monuments were remembered as 'essential territorial boundary features' in the legal process of *tellach* and in modern place-names. O'Brien and Bhreathnach, 'Irish boundary ferta', 53–9. The re-use of ordinary burial mounds as boundary markers and legal instruments in landscapes wholly separate from ritual complexes like Tara and the Boyne Valley suggests a more widely diffused practice of monument re-use as a means to legitimise smaller territories.

¹¹⁷ Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 102.

¹¹⁸ FitzPatrick suggests that Viking assembly practices may have directly influenced Irish selection of burial mounds as 'the types of monuments and landscapes by which the dynasts of ruling families chose to legitimise their royal authority' to an even greater extent than the mythological literature concerning prehistoric ritual sites. She cites as a possible influence the Thingmote (from Norse *þing*, 'assembly') in Dublin, which was either a Viking-era mound or a prehistoric mound re-used for Viking burial that served as the site of assembly for the Norse kings of Dublin. FitzPatrick, *Royal inauguration*, 45–7; 51. For a comparative study of Anglo-Saxon assembly on burial sites, see Sarah Semple, 'Locations of assembly in early Anglo-Saxon England', in Aliko Pantos and Sarah Semple (eds), *Assembly places and practices in medieval Europe* (Dublin, 2004), 135–54.

The *sid*-mounds and other constructed burial spaces—raths, cairns, forts—in the *Acallam* and *Dindshenchas* closely conform to the reality of Ireland’s archaeological landscape. Tok Thompson defines Ireland’s *sid*-mounds as megalith structures, usually Neolithic tombs, covered by earthen mounds.¹¹⁹ The deceased continued to be covered by mounds or ring-barrows into the Iron Age,¹²⁰ when inhumation superseded cremation, and burial beneath mounds was commonplace as late as the fourth to sixth centuries CE.¹²¹ Royal complexes such as Tara integrated tumuli, ring-barrows and hilltop forts. Stone cairns were ‘created above the graves of those the local populace wished to commemorate’.¹²² Swift suggests such monuments provided the practical means for orientating oneself within a local landscape.¹²³ As Gabriel Cooney remarks, Neolithic landscapes ‘form the visible foundations of all subsequent cultural landscapes in Ireland’.¹²⁴ The constructed spaces and burial tumuli across Ireland’s landscape, already ancient by the time the lamentation texts were composed, were visible to medieval authors and compilers and provided ample subject matter for mythologising the landscape. In this way, prehistoric monuments form the foundation of the cultural landscapes reflected in the lamentation texts.

Historically, *sid*-mounds enjoyed a close association with sacred kingship, particularly in the context of medieval assemblies and inaugurations. Such practices often lack specific otherworld connotations; instead, they emphasise the ancestral significance of ancient monuments. Royal inaugurations on burial mounds employ the same political motivations as the re-use of monuments for the purpose of burial: the establishment of authority, legitimacy, and ancient roots for relatively new dynasties. The appropriation of the mythologised burial mound of Fráech, legendary hero of the Old Irish *Táin Bó Fraích*, as the inaugural site for the Síil Muiredaig kings of Connacht provides a relevant illustration. Elizabeth FitzPatrick describes the mound known as Carn Fraoich in Co. Roscommon as part of a complex of medieval monuments scattered among prehistoric monuments. Collectively, these monuments ‘may well reflect at least two millennia of burial and other ritual activity on Ard Caoin’, the landscape at the center of the Fráech saga (Pl. I).¹²⁵ Two of the lamentation texts under investigation establish Carn Fraoich as Fráech’s burial site. In the Rennes *Dindshenchas*, the mound is already known as the ‘Hill of Assembly’

¹¹⁹ Tok Thompson, ‘The Irish *sí* tradition: connections between the disciplines, and what’s in a word?’, *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 11 (4) (2004), 335–68: 341.

¹²⁰ Barry Raftery, ‘Iron Age Ireland’, in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (ed.), *A new history of Ireland* (Oxford, 2008), 134–81: 171.

¹²¹ O’Brien, ‘Burial practices’, 65.

¹²² Fry, *Burial in medieval Ireland*, 130.

¹²³ Swift, ‘Pagan monuments’, 7–8.

¹²⁴ Gabriel Cooney, ‘Sacred and secular neolithic landscapes in Ireland’, in Jane Hubert, David L. Carmichael, Brian Reeves and Audhild Schanche (eds), *Sacred sites, sacred places* (London, 1994), 32–43: 33.

¹²⁵ FitzPatrick, *Royal inauguration*, 66.



PL. I—Carn Fraoich (Carns, Co. Roscommon), known as the ‘Hill of Assembly’ prior to the death of the celebrated hero Fráech, viewed from the south. Stokes, ‘Rennes Dindshenchas II’, 136–9. Photograph reproduced with permission of Dr Elizabeth FitzPatrick, Department of Archaeology, National University of Ireland, Galway.

before Fráech’s death; after the hero is buried, it is renamed Carn Fraoich.¹²⁶ The reverse situation accords more accurately with historical reality; mounds were originally significant for ritual burial and later re-adapted for purposes of assembly. If there is any truth to the *Dindshenchas* narrative, the mound was perhaps already significant for assembly in the context of ritual burial or commemorative festivals, rather than for legal or political purposes, before it was re-used for Fráech’s burial. Otherwise, the name ‘Hill of Assembly’ prior to the hero’s burial may well be a projection of the author’s medieval present, which incorporated political and legal assembly on mounds, onto the pre-Christian past. The cairn appears as the site of assembly for St Patrick, Caílte and their company in a fifteenth-century version of the *Acallam*. The earliest evidence for the use of Carn Fraoich as an inauguration site comes from the twelfth century, but FitzPatrick argues that its appropriation could reasonably have happened as early as the eighth century when the Síol Muireadaig sept first emerged as a ‘formidable power’ in Connacht.¹²⁷ The Connacht kings clearly saw strategic value in associating their emerging dynasty with the legendary

¹²⁶ Stokes, ‘Rennes Dindshenchas II’, 136–9. One of the names given to the mound in the metrical *Dindshenchas* is *sith sidamail*, ‘peaceful *sid*-mound’. This variant alludes to the mound’s dual function as an otherworld portal. Edward Gwynn (ed.), *The metrical Dindshenchas*, vol. III (Dublin, 1991; reprint, 1941), 364.

¹²⁷ FitzPatrick, *Royal inauguration*, 66.

hero, and the mythological mound offered the appropriate means to do so. The commemorated space itself, grounded in mythological meaning, became symbolic of the new kings' authority and legitimacy.

FitzPatrick argues against using medieval assembly on mounds as evidence for direct continuity of ritual practice from shadowy prehistory. Instead, the appropriation of prehistoric monuments whose original ritual functions were incompletely understood reflects 'an innovatory interest in "antique" landscape among emerging royal dynasties in early medieval Ireland...The apparent primary motivation behind that interest was the creation of pedigree and territorial history, in order to validate the right to rule'.¹²⁸ More specifically, it is the *ambiguity* surrounding ancient burial sites that provides the opportunity for later medieval appropriation. Swift offers a similar interpretation in the context of medieval exposition and enforcement of law. She argues that literary texts dealing with prehistoric mounds are varying responses to the presence of monuments in the local landscape 'for whose original function there was apparently no single explanation in the early Middle Ages'.¹²⁹ The multiplicity of meanings is reflected in the varied functions these re-interpreted spaces served. Over time, they became appropriate sites for kingship ritual, commemorative festivals, the establishment of territorial claims and boundaries, and legal assemblies. Perhaps this explains why the original burial function of these 'incompletely understood' monuments is not prominent in the lamentation texts. As the original meaning of mounds as sites for ritual burial faded, ancient commemorated spaces such as Carn Fraoich and Duma na nGiall were infused with a new meaning only tangentially connected to burial. The historical evidence for discontinuity with ancient practice created an opportunity for medieval writers to re-imagine and mythologise Ireland's ancient burial landscape.

Conclusions

Thus far it should be evident how commemorated space was constructed in Ireland's medieval lamentation literature: as a grieving landscape; as sites symbolic of sacred kingship; in place-name narratives and constructed burial mounds; in the desolation of constructed spaces, as sites for commemorative festivals; or entrances to a pre-Christian, supernatural otherworld. Clearly, the medieval authors of lamentation texts wrote about commemorated spaces as they viewed or, in the case of sacred festivals, experienced them. In this way,

¹²⁸ FitzPatrick, *Royal inauguration*, 51–2. According to FitzPatrick, the main corpus of evidence for inauguration of medieval Irish royalty on mounds comes from chronicles, prose tracts and bardic poetry from the twelfth century and more extensively from the fourteenth century (FitzPatrick, *Royal inauguration*, 52). The historical period for this ritual practice thus coincides with the composition of the Middle Irish lamentation texts.

¹²⁹ Swift, 'Pagan monuments', 8. It is important to note that assemblies might also take place on natural hills or other mounds such as Iron Age earthworks that have never been explicitly identified as burial mounds. In other words, the medieval appropriation of mounds for legal or political functions might also occur in contexts wholly separate from the re-use of ancient burial monuments.

spatial narratives of death transcend the purely literary landscape to reflect historical and archaeological reality to varying degrees.

Medieval lamentation texts most often reflect burial at the place of death, even in the case of mass graves, but they lack explicit emphasis on the ancestral dimension of burial spaces. This omission is notable in light of the documented reluctance of Irish Christians to abandon ancestral burial grounds that provided significant ‘continuity of place’¹³⁰ even as churchyard burial became more desirable. The archaeological profile of Tara’s monuments, for instance, reflects the re-use of prehistoric burial monuments in the early medieval period, a practice that gave new significance to ancient burial spaces over time. The texts, however, emphasise the *creation* of sacred space rather than its re-use. Yet the burial landscape described in the texts is, implicitly, an ancestral landscape. As entrances to an otherworld populated by Ireland’s mythological ancestors, *síd*-mounds provide a tacit connection to Ireland’s ancestral past. Commemorated spaces in the lamentation texts cannot be divorced from otherworld mythology; royal sites and ancient burial mounds alike were ‘points of access to the otherworld . . . any sacred spot would *ipso facto* have been a supernatural gateway’.¹³¹ Lamentation festivals serve a similar function in the literature. During these sacred times, at assemblies gathered at commemorated spaces, links with the ancestral past were temporarily re-established. The mythologised landscapes in the texts perpetuate this connection with Ireland’s ancient past. In parallel with archaeological evidence for monument re-use, the lamentation literature implicitly recognises the significance of ancestral dimensions of commemorated spaces and their preservation in cultural memory.

Other secular medieval texts that have not been considered in this essay might further illuminate historical and literary constructions of commemorated space. The annals of Ireland focus on the deaths of high-ranking individuals—primarily kings, bishops, abbots and notable scholars—to a remarkable degree.¹³² Obituaries in the annalistic sources most often record the means of death rather than burial places, but they offer a productive avenue for exploring medieval Irish conceptions of ‘honourable’ death and social status¹³³ as well as records of sacred lamentation festivals. The Welsh *Brut y Tywysogyon*

¹³⁰ Fry, *Burial in medieval Ireland*, 153. ‘Archaeological evidence for burial in ancestral cemeteries and monuments of earlier periods is plentiful but literary evidence, unfortunately, is not’. O’Brien, ‘Literary insights’, 289.

¹³¹ Carey, ‘Time, space, otherworld’, 6. Royal sites are often the entrance to supernatural adventures, as in *Tucait Baile Mongáin, Baile in Scáil, Echtrae Cormaic, Tochmarc Étaíne* and the Welsh *Mabinogi*. Carey, ‘Time, space, otherworld’, 4–5.

¹³² Charles-Edwards found that obituaries form more than half of the entries in his statistical analysis of a 20-year period. T.M. Charles-Edwards (ed.), *The chronicle of Ireland*, vol. I, Translated Texts for Historians (Liverpool, 2006), 24.

¹³³ See Fry, *Burial in medieval Ireland*, chapter five. For the early modern period, compare Tait’s study of ‘good’ deaths and ‘bad’ deaths. Clodagh Tait, *Death, burial and commemoration in Ireland, 1550–1650*, Early Modern History: Society and Culture (London, 2002), 8–25.

(Chronicle of the Princes) provides a comparative text for the Irish annals. An entry for the year 1197, for example, contains an obituary for Rhys ap Gruffudd followed by a lengthy elegiac poem in Latin.¹³⁴ The late tenth-century Irish text known as ‘On the Graves of Leinster Men’ offers another source for further study.¹³⁵ This brief text, a catalogue of the graves of Leinster’s kings and heroes, is topographical in nature but lacks the emotional lamentation behind texts like the *Dindshenchas* and the *Acallam*. The ‘Graves’ provides additional evidence for church burial, social levelling, and royal, heroic and noble burial spaces. The Welsh *Englynion y Beddau* is an obvious companion text for the Leinster ‘Graves’. Several of the mythical graves listed are actually prehistoric monuments. Here, as in the Middle Irish texts, we are dealing with a re-imagined, mythologised burial landscape.¹³⁶ These texts have been excluded from the present study because, although they can be considered commemorative sources, they lack the lamentation framework that connects the literary sources under investigation.

Burial spaces are rarely identified as explicitly Christian spaces in the Irish lamentation literature, a natural result of the texts’ more secular and mythological subject matter even when spaces are commemorated with reverence and lamentation in much the same way as burial in consecrated ground. Further investigation of Christian conceptions of ‘sacred’ space is necessary to obtain a more complete understanding of Ireland’s commemorated spaces. The graves of saints, for instance, present parallels and counter-perspectives to the secular spaces explored in this essay, and investigation of religious lamentation texts would illuminate medieval treatment of these venerated burial spaces. The corporeal remains of saints, buried in meaningful places within the natural landscape, create sacred spaces; their graves and the relics they contain directly influenced the development of communal cemeteries and the later siting of churches dedicated to them. In early medieval Wales, saints’ ‘special’ graves were ‘elaborated with cairns, barrows, round or rectilinear enclosures and rectilinear structures’¹³⁷—constructed—spaces remarkably similar to secular graves in the Irish lamentation texts. Inclusion of the *Náemshenchas* texts would similarly complement the *Dindshenchas* and provide a valuable source for better understanding Ireland’s ecclesiastical spaces. The religious landscape can never be fully separated from the secular, and enough parallels clearly exist between the two to warrant further investigation. Each of these parallels has significant implications for medieval conceptions of commemorated spaces.

¹³⁴ Thomas Jones (ed.), *Brut Y Tywysogyon, or the chronicle of the princes: Red Book of Hergest version*, History and Law Series (Cardiff, 1955, 2nd edn).

¹³⁵ M.E. Dobbs, ‘On the graves of Leinster men’, *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 24 (1) (January 1954), 139–53: 139.

¹³⁶ See also the Welsh triad *Tri Eur Geleir Ynys Brydein*, ‘Three Noble (Golden) / Splendid Corpses of the Island of Britain’. Rachel Bromwich (ed.), *Trioedd ynys Prydein: the triads of the island of Britain* (Cardiff, 2006, 3rd edn), 175.

¹³⁷ Nancy Edwards, ‘Celtic saints and early medieval archaeology’, in Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (eds), *Local saints and local churches in the early medieval west* (Oxford, 2002), 225–65: 230.

Veikko Anttonen argues that ‘sacrality is not an inherent property’,¹³⁸ and collected evidence from the medieval lamentation texts supports this argument. Death, burial and ritual lamentation *create* sacred spaces. Lamentation texts both commemorate these sacred spaces and commit them to cultural memory. This sacred burial landscape need not always be Christian, or even religious, for burial spaces may exist in an otherwise ‘profane’ realm and are venerated as sacred simply because they are the locus for commemoration and lamentation. Understanding of these commemorated spaces is, naturally, shaped and conditioned by specific cultural contexts. In this case, medieval authors and audiences were reflecting on an already ancient ancestral landscape and investing it with new meaning; in essence, they were making sense of Ireland’s past in ways that were meaningful to their present. In texts like the *Dindshenchas*, existing burial space is given *new* commemorated meaning. The mythologised landscape of the lamentation texts need not accurately reflect commemorated spaces in the archaeological or historical record, for death, burial and lamentation alter the sacred landscape and perpetuate cultural memory of commemorated spaces even when we are dealing with purely literary landscapes.

Philip Sheldrake defines place as ‘space that has the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious’, and he professes that ‘it is appropriate to think of places as texts, layered with meaning’.¹³⁹ The present interdisciplinary study provides ample evidence for both dimensions existing in medieval Ireland’s commemorated spaces: the capacity to be preserved in cultural memory and the plurality of meanings associated with the conception of ‘sacred’ burial space. Spatial narratives of death in literature, history and archaeology, when considered together, clearly have much to tell us about conceptions of the sacred in medieval Ireland. Much more, of course, remains to be said regarding these and other lamentation texts and their significance for medieval re-interpretation of commemorated spaces. This essay is only an initial contribution to what I hope will become a more fully understood dimension of medieval Irish culture.

¹³⁸ Veikko Anttonen, ‘The notion of “sacred” in language, history, culture and cognition’, in Ritari and Bergholm (eds), *Religion and mythology*, 206–19: 213.

¹³⁹ Sheldrake, *Spaces for the sacred*, 1, 17.