

Archaeology
IRELAND

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**The route of
Táin Bó Cúailnge
in County Louth**

Retracing the route of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in Louth

Much of the core action of the *Táin* takes place in Louth (Map 1). This is reflected in the route, which traverses the county from north to south. Entering via the Boyne Valley, Medb's forces approached Cooley (Cúailnge) along the coast. This was the homeland of Donn Cúailnge (the Brown Bull of Cooley), whom they eventually capture. Harried by the Ulster warrior Cúchulainn, they retreat through mid-Louth and exit the county via Ardee. Given that they had set out from Roscommon, one might have expected a more northerly approach to Cooley, not to mention a more direct return route. Some historians have posited that the cattle-raiders were skirting the boundaries of Ulster, which at the time may have extended to the River Boyne. Others have argued that it reflects the development of the *Táin* as a literary epic. In the earliest outlines of the story, Medb appears as queen of Tara and the cattle-raiders originate from Meath rather than Roscommon.

River Mattock: Medb's forces entered the modern county of Louth via the Boyne Valley, fording the River Mattock at its junction with the Devlin. The winding course of the Mattock forms a historic boundary, dividing Meath from Louth. In the *Táin*, this crossing-point is named *Áth nGabla*—Fork Ford—after Cúchulainn fixed a forked branch on which human heads were impaled in the middle of the stream.

Barmeath: The texts are vague as to the path taken by Medb through south and mid-Louth to Cooley. What can be argued is that once you cross the Mattock you are unlikely to recross it if heading north. Medb's forces probably tracked north-eastwards to Annagassan along an old routeway which is still traceable from Mellifont across the hills around Monasterboice and Fieldstown to Drumshallon and Rokeby. Very little lore survives about this part of the route but one place-name that provides a clue is Barmeath, 3.5km east of Dunleer. Though it does not feature in the text versions of the *Táin*, the OS Letters of 1836 record a local tradition that the name Barmeath is derived from 'beairne Méadhbha, i.e. Meva's Gap'.



Above: **Map 1—The route of Queen Medb's forces in Louth was first worked out in detail by the American scholar Gene Haley and the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella and published in 1970. A number of refinements to it are presented here, principally in south Louth (Mattock to Barmeath) and Cooley (see Map 2) (basemap: NASA 2000).**

Annagassan: *Áth na gCasán* lies at the confluence of the rivers Glyde and Dee at the point where they enter the Irish Sea (Pl. 1). Known in medieval times as *Linn Duachaill*, it was the site of an early monastery and its strategic location made it attractive to the Vikings in the ninth century. *Linn Duachaill* is not mentioned in the *Táin* but Queen Medb's forces are likely to have crossed here and tracked northwards along the coast. The Down Survey barony map (c. 1657) marks this old routeway as 'strand and highway'. It was conceivably part of the *Slige Midlúachra*, 'the northern road' from Tara, which passed through Louth to Emain Macha in County Armagh.

Lurgangreen: Much of the coastal plain east of the M1 motorway was once an extensive salt-marsh stretching from Castle Bellingham to Blackrock, so the shore would have provided a straight and firm strip of land (*lurga*) the whole way to the River Fane at Lurgangreen, just south of Blackrock. The Fane does not appear to be named in the *Táin* but Haley equates the ford at its mouth with *Áth Srethe*.



Left: **Pl. 1**—Annagassan (Áth na gCasán) was the site of an early medieval monastery and later a Viking settlement. Medb's forces are likely to have crossed here and followed the coast northwards to Cooley.

Below: **Pl. 2**—Castletown Mount or Cúchulainn's Castle is an Anglo-Norman motte-castle on the western outskirts of Dundalk. In the *Táin* it features as Delga, from where Cúchulainn monitors the movements of Medb's forces. It is a multi-period site, with a prehistoric standing stone in an adjacent field and an early medieval souterrain beneath the motte.

Bothar Maol (Map 2) is a partially abandoned byroad connecting the Dublin road out of Dundalk with the coast road to Blackrock village. From its east-west trajectory and situation overlooking the former coastal marshlands (the Loakers), it appears to have been a medieval routeway. The residents of Bothar Maol nurture a vivid tradition that Medb followed this route to the coast on her way to Cooley.

Dundalk Bay: It was Haley and Kinsella who first identified Áth Lethan as being located at the mouth of the Castletown River. The tidal sand-flats of Dundalk Bay are, in effect, the Broad Ford, which allowed Medb to bypass the inland route via Toberona. The texts of the *Táin* do not mention the crossing but it is clearly inferred by local lore and has been fleshed out by antiquarian imagination: 'Meave and her host passed over the head of the tideway by the light of torches'.

The Plain of Cooley is designated as Réid Lócha in the *Táin*, literally the 'plain of the lakes'. The appropriateness of this label becomes apparent when one considers that there are more than twenty small lakes on the gently undulating coastal plain between Rockmarshall and Carlingford.

Slievenagloagh: Cúchulainn killed Medb's handmaid with a slingshot from Cuinciu as she fetched water. Cuinciu is labelled 'sliab' (a mountain) and could be an old name for Slievenagloagh (310m) or the unnamed summit above (north of) Bush on the opposite side of Glenmore, both of which command the coastal plain.

Cooley Point: Queen Medb made her encampment or 'dúnud' at Finnabair Chúailnge, using it as a base from which to ravage the peninsula in search of the bull. Kinsella equated the camp with a fine ringfort at Rath, north-east of Bush. Haley interprets the name as 'the Fair Brow of Cooley' but there is an alternative reading of *findubair* as 'a place by white water'. This is particularly apposite, for it suggests a coastal location. Cooley Point seems to provide the best fit on the basis of its name, its location and the white water that breaks on the headland.

Big River: The most significant topographical feature encountered by Medb's forces on the plain of Cooley was undoubtedly the Big River, known in the *Táin* as the Cronn. The raiders appear to have forded this river without incident on their way into Cooley, but when they tried to recross it 'rose up against them as high as the tops of the trees' and drowned the warrior called Úalu. The fording-point (Áth Cruinn) was probably close to the river mouth, south of Riverstown.

Barnavave: Having failed to recross the Cronn, Medb's forces tracked up Glenmore to the river source. The story relates that 'they would have gone between its source and the mountain only that Medb would not allow it [preferring] that they should go across the mountain so that the track they made might remain there for ever as an insult to the men of Ulster. So they ... dug up the earth in front of them (to make a pass through the mountain) which was called Bernas Bó Cúailnge.' The gap is still there, right on the summit of Barnavave Mountain (Pl. 3).

Ryland River: Having come through the newly cut gap, the army must have descended to the shores of Carlingford Lough on or about the site of the present town of Carlingford. From here they evidently negotiated the narrow coastal strip between Slieve Foye and the lough towards Omeath. When next we hear of them they have reached the Colptha, now the Ryland or Essmore River. Here 'they heedlessly tried to cross ... but it rose in flood against them and carried off to sea a hundred of their chariot-warriors'. Like the Big River, the Ryland is prone to spates—in the 1920s it badly damaged a railway bridge at its mouth.

Black Mountain (Clermont Cairn): Medb's forces worked their way upriver to Clermont Pass. From there they 'went round the river ... to its source at Bélat Alióin and spent the night at Liasa Liac ... between Cúailnge and Conaille'. The name *bélat* means a 'crossway, pass, frontier' and suggests that they crossed Black Mountain via the Cadger's Pad, an upland track once used by fishmongers to transport produce from Omeath to Dundalk. Thus they would have descended the flank of Annaverna along the small stream that flows via Ravensdale Bridge.





Castletown Mount: From Faughart, Medb's forces followed the Slige Midlúachra southwards and crossed the Castletown River (Níth) via Áth Carpat at Toberona (Map 2). This ford is overlooked by Castletown Mount *alias* Dún Dealgan *alias* Delga (Pl. 2), held in local tradition to be Cúchulainn's foster-home. Continuing southwards, the cattle-raiders likely followed what is now the Greyacre Road, part of an old routeway skirting Dundalk on the west.

Knockbridge: Medb pitches camp at Breslach Mór in Mag Muirthemne, where many of her warriors are slaughtered by Cúchulainn. Haley and Kinsella place this battle site east of Knockbridge. Crossing the River Fane, they are confronted by the Ulster hero Óengus Mac Óenlaimhe Gaibe at Louth village (Lugmod). Single-handedly, he drives them back north to Áth da Fherta. This ford is generally placed on the Fane at Knock Bridge (Map 2) but could also have been upstream at Castlerring or downstream at Sorrel Ford in Stephenstown.

Tallanstown: Proceeding towards Ardee, Medb's forces must have crossed the River Glyde at some point. The most likely fords are those at Tallanstown and Mapastown (Map 1). Both locations are graced with Anglo-Norman motte-castles, indicating that they were of strategic value in the late 1100s, and probably long before.

Ardee *alias* Áth Fhir Diad is the scene of the great single-combat and literary set piece of the *Táin*, the four-day fight between Cúchulainn and his childhood friend Ferdia. Once again the location is not arbitrary, for Áth Fhir Diad features in the Irish annals as a place of combat where dynastic families and armies recurrently fought and died.

Hurlstone: Medb's forces retreat south-westwards from Ardee and camp at Smarmore (Imorach Smirorach). Close by, in the townland of Hurlstone, the Ulster warrior Cethern 'rushed at the pillar stone [bearing Ailill's crown] and drove his sword through it and his fist after the sword. Hence the place-name Lia Toll in Crích Rois.' The holed stone survives to this day (Pl. 4).

White Mountain: The last act of the *Táin* in Louth occurs at White Mountain, near Smarmore. Here Finnabair, the daughter of Queen Medb, dies after the battle of Glen Domain. Her name is preserved in the upland stream known as White Mountain Water (Finnabair Sléibe). Crossing into Meath, Medb's forces track south-west to the great sacred site of Tailtiu (Teltown) on the Blackwater.

What is *Táin Bó Cúailnge*?

Táin Bó Cúailnge is the story of a cattle-raid reputed to have taken place during winter sometime around the time of Christ. Set in a rural, tribal and pagan Ireland, it is peopled with fearless warriors, haughty queens and kings and prize bulls (cover photo). It is often ranked alongside Ireland's greatest literary classics and frequently described as 'epic literature'. This sobriquet arises from its comparison to the heroic tales of Greece, and recent scholarship suggests that the stimulus for its composition was the translation of *Togail Troí* (Destruction of Troy) into Irish in the tenth century. The more traditional 'nativist' view sees the *Táin* as originating, fully formed, from oral tradition to be set down on vellum in the seventh century. What is clear is that *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is not unique but forms part of a small group of *tána bó* (cattle-raiding stories), themselves part of the Ulster Cycle, one of four great categories of medieval Irish literature. This cycle comprises c. 50 stories, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* being acknowledged as the central tale.

Táin Bó Cúailnge is preserved in a number of medieval manuscripts, of which the Book of the Dun Cow (*Lebor na hUidre*, c. 1100) and the Book of Leinster (c. 1200) are the best known. A number of versions or 'recensions' of the story exist, that known as Recension I being the richest from a topographical viewpoint. By the early 1800s *Táin Bó Cúailnge* had fallen out of popular memory but was revived at the turn of the twentieth century through a series of classic translations and retellings, of which Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902) is perhaps the most memorable.

Tracing the route

The route of the *Táin* is often spoken about as if it was a specific path or track across Ireland. The various cycling and walking routes developed by the tourism agencies—the *Táin* Trail, the *Táin* Way—add to this impression of certainty. In reality, retracing the route of Queen Medb's forces is a somewhat illogical undertaking. For the *Táin* is a story about a cattle-raid that never took place 2,000 years ago! The medieval texts provide no map—only sequential lists of c. 70 obscure place-names, supposedly extending from Roscommon to Louth. Moreover, these lists are at variance with the main text of the story and do not cover the homeward journey, which saw Medb's forces returning to the west via Kells, Mullingar and Athlone.





But retracing the steps of a fictional army led by a mythical queen is an engrossing exercise which has stirred the minds of scholars and poets from Standish Hayes O'Grady to Thomas Kinsella (Map 3). In pursuing it, the researcher must embrace many areas of scholarship, particularly the long-neglected study of Ireland's medieval routeways. The texts of the *Táin* are key, for those who composed the story deliberately rooted it in place-lore and plotted it through specific landscapes. Many of the set pieces were clearly inspired by particular place-names, land forms and individual monuments. By rereading the texts, examining old road networks, identifying river fords, climbing hills and taking note of community lore, it is possible to imagine in detail the footfalls of Queen Medb on her bull-quest.

Above: **Map 3—The route of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.** Standish Hayes O'Grady drew the first detailed reconstruction of the route in 1898 and it was not surpassed until 1970, when Thomas Kinsella and Gene Haley published their maps. Analysis suggests that the composers of the *Táin* plotted Queen Medb's forces along existing road networks and across real river fords (basemap: NASA 2000).

Opposite page, top left: **Pl. 4—This standing stone in Hurlstone, 3.5km south-west of Ardee, features in the *Táin* as Lia Toll.** It measures 1.7m in height, and the centrally placed hole is c. 25cm in diameter.

Bottom right: **Pl. 5—'Cloghafamore' is an impressive prehistoric standing stone at Rathiddy, near Knockbridge (Map 2).** Tradition holds that Cúchulainn died here shortly after the end of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

Cover: '*An Tarbh*', by Michael McKeown, looks east towards Cooley from the M1 motorway at Dundalk.

Reading and walking

Táin Bó Cúailnge is available in various on-line and print formats. Cecile O'Rahilly's editions of the story as it is preserved in the Book of the Dun Cow (1976) and the Book of Leinster (1967) are regarded as the most authoritative (Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies). The translations by Thomas Kinsella (Oxford University Press, 1970) and Ciaran Carson (Penguin, 2007) are more lyrical. Gene Haley has a website—'Places in the Táin'—devoted to the place-names (<http://genehaleybc.wordpress.com>). A series of research papers on the topography of the *Táin* by Paul Gosling are being published in the *County Louth Archaeological and Historical Journal*. This guide is based on a detailed assessment of the whole route in the journal *Emania*, Vol. 22 (2015).

The *Táin* can be enjoyed on foot or by bike or car via the Táin Trail, the Táin Way and the Táin March walking festival (www.tainmarch.net). The interpretative centres at Rathcroghan, Tulsk, Co. Roscommon, and Navan, Co. Armagh, provide in-depth information on two of the major sites. In Louth, *Táin*-related displays and events are hosted by the County Museum in Dundalk and by An tIonad Táin Bó Cúailnge at Stephenstown Pond, Knockbridge.

Credits and acknowledgements

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