

The Route of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* Revisited

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the topographic and toponymic aspects of Táin Bó Cúailnge, specifically the work of Gene Haley and Thomas Kinsella. Their re-construction of the route of Queen Medb's forces from Crúachain (Co. Roscommon) to Cúailnge (Co. Louth) and back is reviewed. Evaluations of and revisions to same are presented.

Introduction

In September 1969 Dolmen Press published what is widely regarded as the finest English translation of the early medieval epic, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (henceforth TBC). Authored by Thomas Kinsella, it has been celebrated on many levels, not least for the treatment of the text but also for Louis Le Brocqy's bold artwork and Liam Miller's distinctive book design (Ní Bhriain 2001). What is often overlooked is a fourth innovative aspect, the inclusion of maps showing the route followed by the forces of Queen Medb from Connacht to Ulster and back (Fig. 1). These had been prepared with the aid of a Harvard postgraduate student, Gene Haley, and were accompanied by a tabulated list of placenames with identifications. Not since Eleanor Hull's *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (1898) had the topographic aspects of the epic been afforded such primacy of place in a major edition of TBC.

The success of the first limited edition led quickly to a second mass imprint, in hard and paperback formats, published in October 1970 by Oxford University Press (Kinsella 1970). While the first edition featured two maps of the overall route, the second was graced by an additional map focusing on Cooley, Co Louth (Fig. 2). This too was based on Haley's toponymic research; his PhD thesis on the topography of TBC had been completed in May, five months earlier (Haley 1970). Though little noticed then or now, a tantalising statement in the introduction to the first edition was dropped in the second. This read: 'a full analysis of the route ... will be published soon in *The Route of the Táin*, a Dolmen Press book containing further maps and essays' (Kinsella 1969, 272). It was to be penned by Haley and Kinsella but never saw print. Thus, the research on which the maps and toponymic identifications were based remained unpublished. The only crumb was a short article on the placenames in the tourist magazine *Ireland of the Welcomes* (Kinsella 1975). It provided only skeletal details of the placename identifications. However, it was a slickly presented piece that was reprinted and retailed as a stand-alone brochure. In the absence of any publication from Haley, it and the maps in Kinsella's translation formed the basis for many subsequent re-tracings of the route in populist and tourist literature. Recently, Gene Haley has made a welcome return to the field with a published paper (Haley 2005) and a web-based project

'Places in the Tain' (Haley 2012); via the latter, he has, in effect, published his PhD research. In the meantime, new translations of TBC have appeared in which the topographic aspects of the epic are downplayed or ignored (Neeson 2004; Carson 2007). The paragraphs that follow review the route as reconstructed by Haley and Kinsella (Figs. 1 and 2), examine the evidence underpinning their identifications, and offer re-evaluations as appropriate (Figs. 4–6).

Hardly a method statement, more a premise of sorts

It is this writer's view that TBC is a work of heroic literary fiction crafted from various strands of oral and literary tradition at the end of the first millennium AD in order to create a piece of epic literature to rival the stories of classical tradition. Implicit in this is an indebtedness to Hildegard Tristram (1999), Anne Dooley (2006) and Brent Miles (2011) whose researches have brought a range of novel perspectives to bear on TBC. However, in common with many late twentieth century analyses of same, they steer clear of any serious consideration of the topographical aspects. In a series of recent papers (Gosling 2011; 2012a; 2013) I have re-evaluated the placement of a number of toponyms in TBC. From this research it is clear that some of the scribes who had a hand in creating the epic had a keen sense of the landscapes in which they set the story. Moreover, they regularly employed real places not just as textual embellishments but for specific literary and dramatic effect, e.g. Barnavave (Bernas Bó Cúailnge), Ardee (Áth Fhir Diad), Slanemore Hill (Slemain Midi).

In treating of the route of TBC, I take the view that if you want to study the topographical aspects then you have to enter into the spirit of the story. Donning the hat of a participative ethnographer and the coat of a landscape archaeologist, you must suppose that there was a route, that TBC did take place two thousand years ago. You must accept that the route has been lost, that all that survives is a series of half-forgotten placenames. Your goal is to fix these uprooted signposts once again in their proper places. This is the approach that Gene Haley has taken in his research and if it has drawbacks these are more than outweighed by the insights it provides into the role of topography in the plot of TBC.

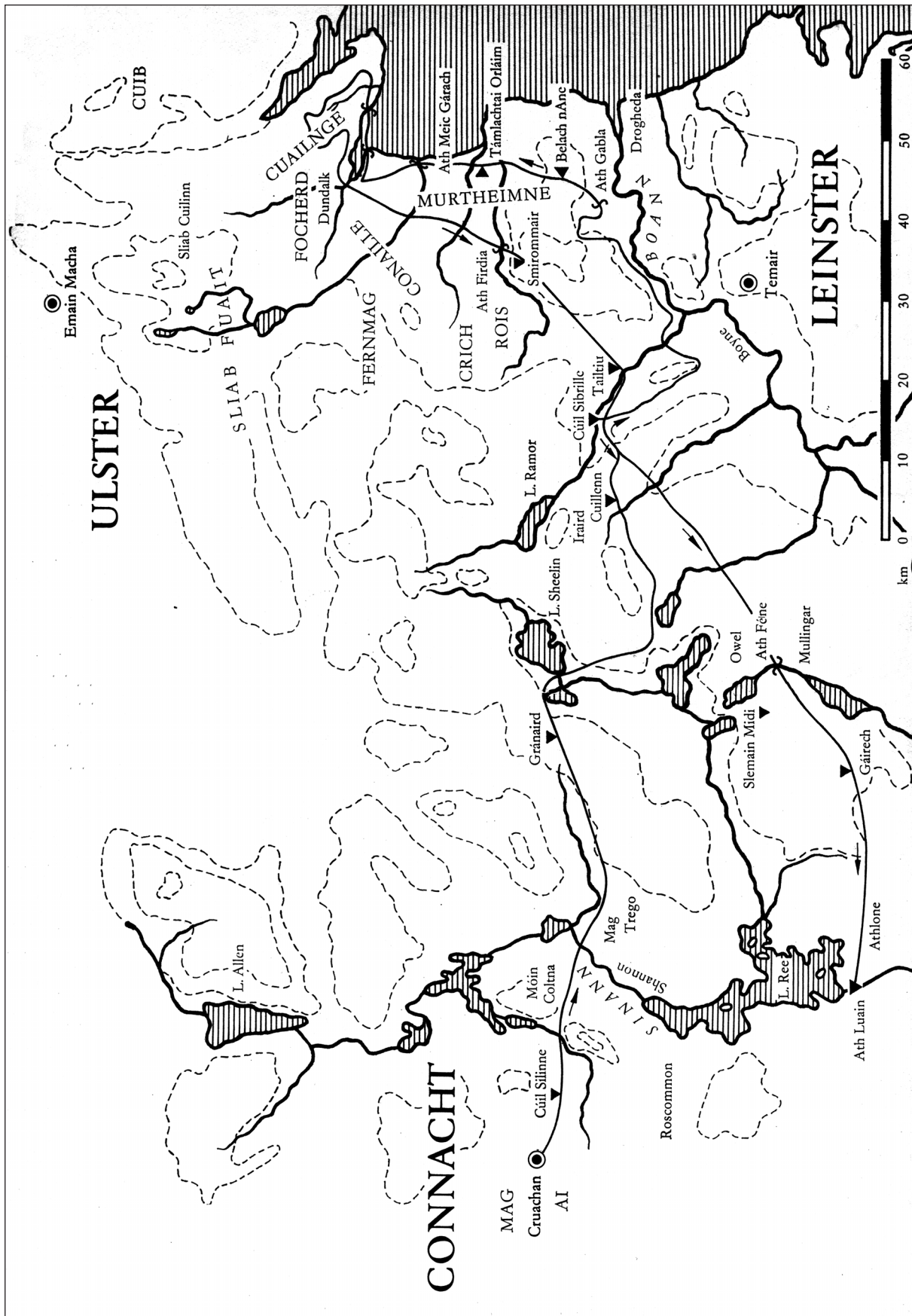


Figure 1 Map entitled the 'Die Route der Tain' from the German edition of Thomas Kinsella's *Tain* (1976, karte ii) showing the route taken by Queen Medb's forces from 'MAG AI, Cruachan' (Tulsk, Co. Roscommon) to 'CUAILNGE' (Cooley, Co. Louth). It is a straight reproduction of the map that appeared in the 1970 edition, but its graphic conventions are crisper and it contains one significant correction, the re-positioning of 'Ath Féné'. Like the 1970 map, it employs a number of symbols - ©, ▼ and j - to indicate provincial royal centres, named locations and fords, respectively. The spellings of some of the placenames differ from the orthography of this paper.

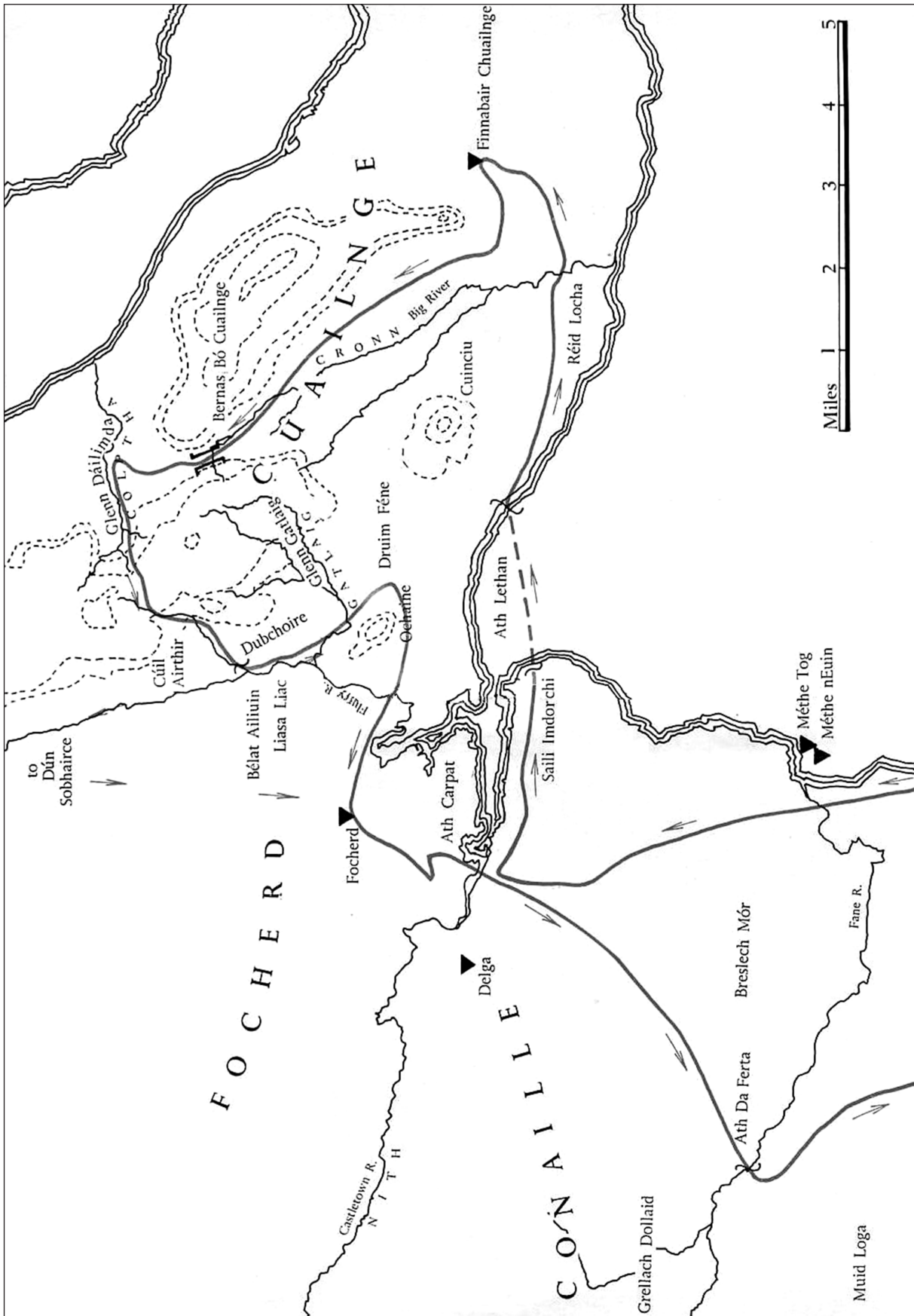


Figure 2 Map entitled 'In Conaille and Cualinge' from the 2nd edition of Thomas Kinsella's *Tain* (1970, map iii). Covering north Louth as well as parts of south Armagh, it is the first published attempt to work out in detail the route of Queen Medb's forces through the Cooley Peninsula (Cúailnge). The symbols ▼ and ↗ are used to indicate named locations and fords, respectively. The spellings of the placenames on the map vary slightly from the orthography of this paper.

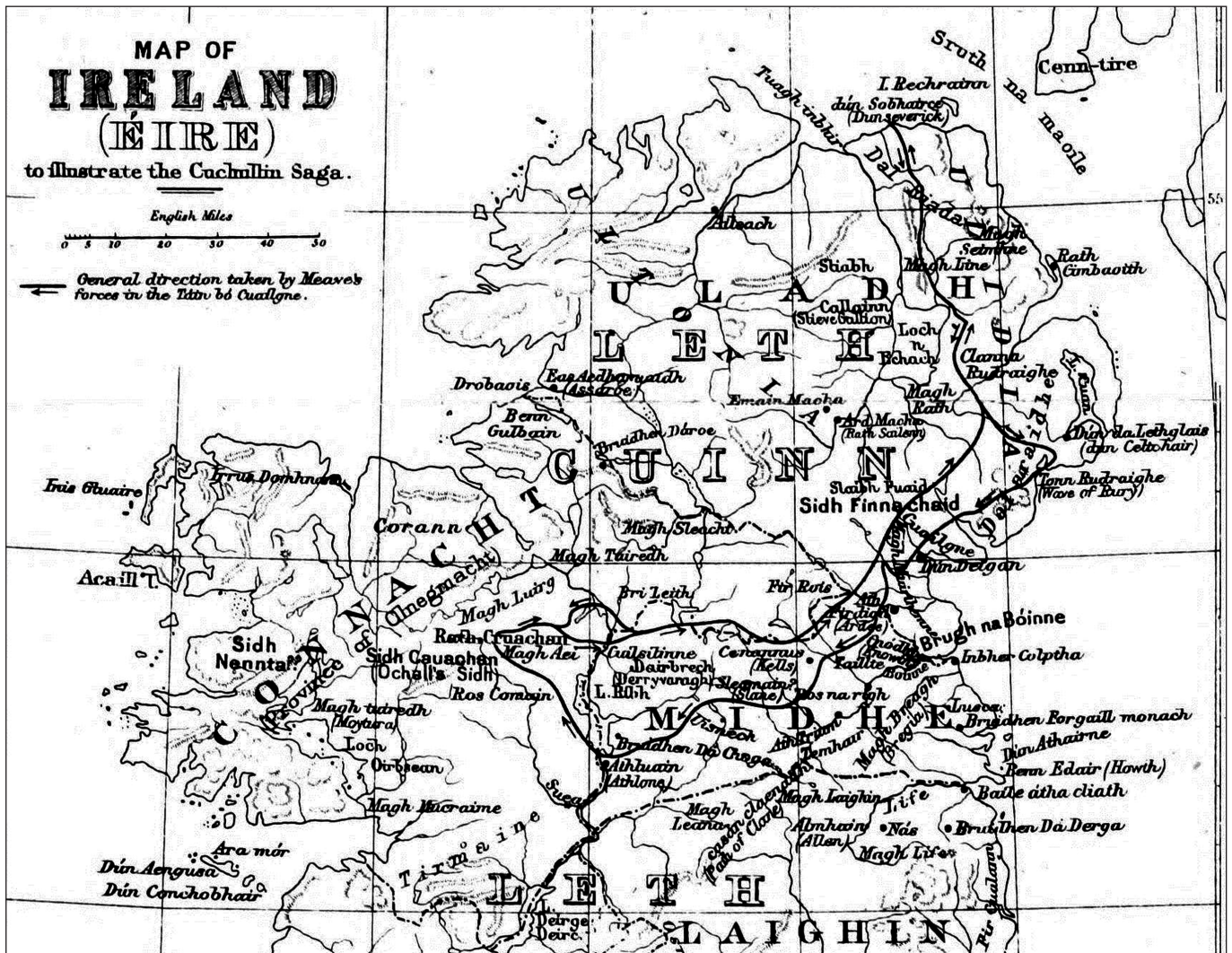


Figure 3 Map showing the 'General direction taken by Meave's forces in the Táin bó Cuailgne' from Eleanor Hull's *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (1898, frontispiece). The map was 'drawn up' by Standish Hayes O'Grady (*ibid.*, lxxix) and is the earliest published cartographic depiction of the route. While it shows little appreciation of the complexities of the journey through Cooley, Co. Louth, it does include specific detail of the raid on Dunseverick on the north Antrim coast. It also depicts a looped section in the Strokestown/Longford area on the outward journey and a striking zig-zag diversion in mid-Louth on the homeward route.

Editorial Conventions

In terms of ground rules, the following apply unless otherwise stated:

- line references to TBC are generally to Cecile O'Rahilly's edition of Recension I (1976) henceforth TBC I, and occasionally to her edition of Recension II (1967), henceforth TBC II;
- the spellings of all place and personal names follow O'Rahilly's edition of Recension I (1976), in particular the orthographies provided in the 'Index of Places, Peoples, Rivers' (pp. 307–312);
- all archaeological monuments are referenced via their ID numbers in the Record of Monuments & Places (henceforth RMP) which is available on the Archaeological Survey of Ireland monuments database (www.archaeology.ie);
- all distances were calculated using the measuring tools on the same website;
- the locations of selected fords, hills and other minor topographical features are provided via their Irish Transverse Mercator (henceforth ITM) co-ordinates calculated from the Ordnance Survey of Ireland (henceforth OSI) website (www.osi.ie);
- the collective terms 'army' and 'forces' are used to describe the military groupings which feature in TBC. In conjunction with the identifiers, Queen Medb / Connachta and King Conchobar / Ulaid, they are employed interchangeably in order to avoid repetitive phrasing;
- all citations to route maps are to the 1970 edition of Kinsella's translation of TBC, e.g. maps i, ii and iii (see Figs. 1 and 2). None of Haley's works contain route maps.¹

¹ His 'Places in the Tain' website (Haley 2012) uses Google Maps to pinpoint placenames but does not physically plot a route between them. At the time of writing (13.ii.2014), details of the homeward route from Tailtiu (Teltown), Co. Meath, to Rathcroghan (Crúachain), Co. Roscommon, have not yet been posted on the project website.

Given Kinsella's acknowledged indebtedness to Haley regarding the preparation of the maps for his translation of TBC (1970, xiv; 1975, 20), it seems appropriate to treat them as a joint effort – hence the repeated use of the phrase 'Haley and Kinsella'.

'Sligi na Tána in so ...'

'This is the route of the Táin' (TBC II, line 279 and p.145). Thus begins the *Book of Leinster* version of the so-called 'itinerary' or list of places that Queen Medb's forces passed through on their way from Crúachain (Co. Roscommon) to Cúailnge (Co. Louth). In both of the major recensions of TBC this passage features at the beginning of the narrative and is an obvious starting point for anyone interested in the topography of the epic. In Recension II, the list runs to 69 placenames representing 65 places (TBC II, lines 281–296).² The corresponding list in Recension I also contains 69 placenames in this case representing 66 places (TBC I, lines 115–130). There are also some differences in the name order and approximately 14% of the names in each version do not occur in the other. So between the two a total of 79 placenames, equalling 75 places, are mentioned.

For such an impressive list of toponyms, it is notable that Gene Haley (1970) does not employ it as a template for his postgraduate study of the topography of TBC. Neither does it feature in the earliest analysis of the whole route, presented as Appendix II in Eleanor's Hull's *Cuchullin Saga* (1898, 301–305). Entitled the 'Track of Meave's Forces ...' it was compiled by Standish Hayes O'Grady who also drew the fine foldout map (Fig. 3) that fronts the volume (*ibid.*, lxxix and 110). This was the first map of the route to be published and was not to be superseded until Kinsella's translation of 1969.

From a topographical viewpoint, the major problem with the itinerary is that so few of the names mentioned in it feature in the subsequent story. Haley (1970, 173) calculated that about 20% appear in the narrative while Anne Dooley (2006, 45) states that 'there are only ten places with which an incident is later implicated'. She does, however, acknowledge that the places themselves may be real and Haley (1970, Ch. 10) devotes a whole section to their identification. Both authors agree that the itinerary is not a summary of the story, rather it is a literary pre-figuration of it. As such, it illustrates one of the problems facing the topographer of TBC. While core elements of the story appear to be rooted in the movements of people and forces through real landscapes, these have been interleaved and overlain with passages in which placenames are employed partially or wholly for literary effect. As Dooley (2006, 46) so eloquently puts it with respect to the itinerary: 'The list becomes mere rhetorical string ... answerable to nothing more than its own alliterative and rhythmic euphony'.

Re-Tracing the Route

So it is from the narrative itself that re-constructions of the route of Queen Medb's forces are best made. While there is much popular interest in the route, academic research on this

aspect of TBC has been a minority sport. Apart from O'Grady's work, already alluded to (Hull 1898), the only other commentaries on the route – by Crowe (1867), Kelly (1879), Shaw (1921), Morris (1926a) and Gosling (2012b) – are partial ones dealing only with particular segments. Haley and Kinsella's research thus represents a major contribution to our understanding of the topic.

This paper reviews Haley and Kinsella's re-construction of the route in a series of headed sections. These reflect not only the stages of the journey but also the differing levels of topographic detail in the narrative. The review concentrates on Recension I of TBC because Haley and Kinsella did, perceiving it to be the richest version toponymically. The 'Index of Places, Peoples, Rivers' which bookends Cecile O'Rahilly's edition of Recension I (1976, 307–312) has 376 entries in contrast to 326 in the corresponding section of her edition of Recension II (1967, 351–356). However, only about 50 placenames feature on the route maps published in Kinsella's translation (1969 and 1970). Because they are crucial for pinpointing the route, it is they that form the focus of this paper. For readers who seek a fuller treatment of the toponyms, Haley's web-based project (2012) is heartily recommended.

Crúachain to Áth nGabra : The opening passages of TBC I narrate that Queen Medb and her forces departed from Crúachain, the royal capital of Connacht 'on the Monday after the autumn festival of Samain' (line 114, and p.128). The first part of the journey saw them marching eastwards across the Irish midlands to the Boyne Valley, a distance of at least 135km. Haley and Kinsella plot eight placenames along this part of the route: Crúachain, Cúil Silinne, Móin Choltna, Mag Trega, Gránard, Iraird Cuillenn, Cúil Sibrinne and Áth nGabra (Fig. 1).

Crúachain is known today as Rathcroghan and is situated just north-west of Tulsk, Co. Roscommon (Fig. 4). Though the name Rathcroghan refers specifically to a large circular earthwork (RMP RO022–057010), Crúachain is best understood as a royal and funerary landscape rather than a single site. As such it is comparable with other early regional centres at Navan Fort and Tara (see Waddell *et al* 2009). At the end of the first day's march the army makes camp at Cúil Silinne which Haley (2012, Stage 1, B) equates with Kilcooley Parish midway between Tulsk and Strokestown. However, in one of a series of marginal notes in the *Lebor na hUidre* version of TBC, Cúil Silinne is glossed as 'the site of Loch Cairrcín today' (TBC I, line 137, footnote b and p.128). Hogan (1910) identifies this as Ardakillin Lough (ITM 587981,778371) 9.5km south-east of Rathcroghan (Fig. 4), a lake with a rich archaeology (crannogs) and history (see Doran 2004, 62 and 73). Moving eastwards from here, Medb's forces must have forded the Scramoge River at some point. From a topographical perspective, the most likely location is Cloonycarran 3.5km south-west of Scramoge village (ITM 594237,777271: see Fig. 4). The clearest indication of the route between Strokestown and the River Shannon is preserved in local lore. Between 'Scramoge Gap and the Shannon' Henry Morris (1938, 120) recorded a tradition of flagstones being dug up on 'the old road ... over which Meave marched her army'.

The next two placenames – Móin Choltna and Mag Trega – are placed by Haley and Kinsella to the north-west and south of Lough Forbes, respectively (Figs 1 and 4). However, in his

² *i.e.* 'for Crond hi Cualngi' is one place but contains two placenames.

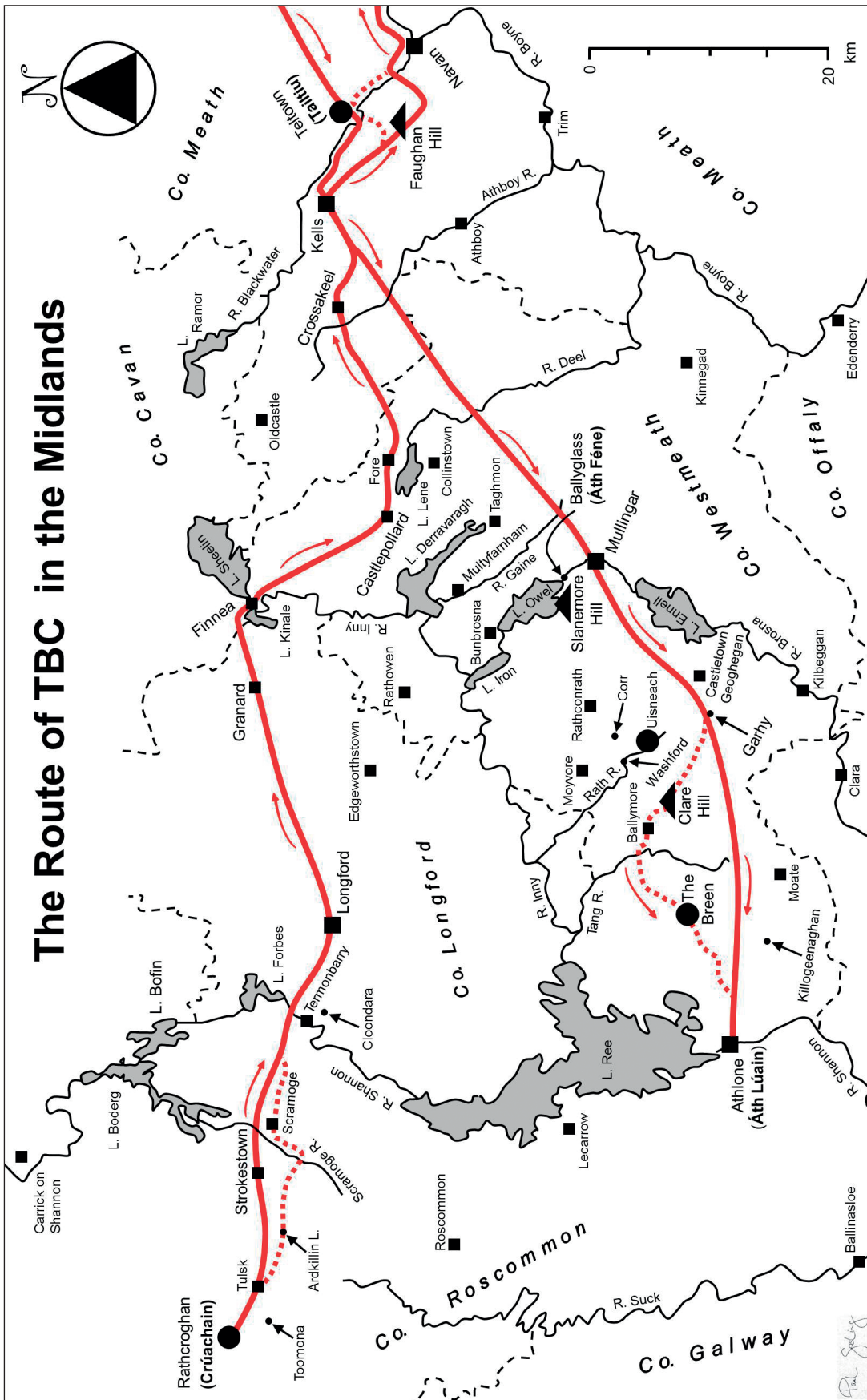


Figure 4 Reconstruction of the route of TBC through the Irish midlands showing the main rivers and lakes, modern county boundaries and almost all of the modern placenames mentioned in the text. The solid line represents Haley and Kinsella's published reconstruction of the route (see Fig. 1), the dotted lines, the revisions to it suggested in this paper (Source of base map Ordnance Survey of Ireland). Modern towns are indicated by black squares, archaeological monuments by black dots and significant hills by black triangles. The locations of other significant places are indicated with an arrow (Drawing P. Gosling, March, 2014).

'Places in the Tain', Haley seeks to locate them quite precisely at Cloonshannagh and Fisherstown, two townlands close to Termonbarry village (Haley 2012, Stage 1, C and D). The available evidence does not support such degrees of certainty for these appear to be the names of districts rather than specific places (cf. Dobbs 1938, 244 and map). Here we meet a practice often found in toponymic studies that might be described as the "wish fulfilment" method. Not content to admit defeat, the toponymer (and I include the present writer) clutches at the slenderest of straws, fixing names to places where they think they should be rather than where they are, *i.e.* unlocated.

The Recension I text does not mention the River Shannon at all, and its only mention in Recension II – Sinaind – occurs in the itinerary list (TBC II, line 282). Haley and Kinsella mark it as 'Sinann' on their route map (Fig. 1) and show the army crossing the river at Termonbarry. Haley (2012, Stage 1, D) tentatively suggests that the original ford was at Fisherstown which is *c.* 2km upstream from Termonbarry Bridge. The names that follow – Gránard, Iraird Cuillenn and Cúil Sibrinne – are easier to identify thanks to further marginal glosses. Thus, they can be equated with the vicinities of Granard, Co. Longford, Crossakeel, Co. Westmeath, and Kells, Co. Meath (cf. Figs 1 and 4). Here the army camped for the third night.

Beyond Kells, Haley and Kinsella show the army taking a south-easterly course to Faughan Hill (the 'for Ochuind' of TBC I itinerary list, line 121) before wheeling sharply north-east and crossing the River Blackwater in the vicinity of Liscartan, *c.* 3km north-west of Navan. The existence of a late-medieval Tower House here on the northern bank may indicate the former presence of a ford. However, neither Haley nor Kinsella display any awareness of Henry Morris's research on this part of the route. These include a detailed map re-constructing Queen Medb's progress from Kells to Slane (Morris 1926a, 32). Near Donaghpatrick, he identified a river-crossing on the Blackwater called 'Meave's Ford' in local tradition (ITM 680895,772275; Fig. 5). In a fine piece of topographic research, Morris notes its proximity to the important early medieval óenach site at Teltown (Taitiu of TBC I, p.311) which dates back to the Early Iron Age (Waddell 2010, 379–380). Traces of the approach roads to this ford survive on both banks and Morris provides us with a colourful vignette of 'the local *seanachaidhe* [telling him] that Meave was carried across it on her husband's back' (1926a, 36).

Underpinning Morris's research was a belief that the itinerary list enshrined the most accurate record of the route of TBC. So in tracing the army's path from Donaghpatrick eastwards he focuses on placenames such as 'for Sláini' (TBC I, line 123) which he equates with the Hill of Slane (Morris 1926a, 37). This name does not feature in the narrative of Recension I but Áth nGabla, which follows it, does (Fig. 5). This ford is initially described as Áth nGrencha but the text relates how its name was changed to Áth nGabla – Fork Ford – as a result of Cú Chulainn having fixed a forked branch impaled with human heads 'in the middle of the stream' (TBC I, lines 330–335 and p.134). We know that it was in the Boyne Valley

because of another marginal note in *Lebor na hUidre* which places it 'at the place called Beloch Caille Móire to the north of Cnogba' (TBC I, p.134, fn. 2). This is quite precise as Cnogba is none other than the great multi-period burial and settlement site of Knowth (Fig. 5). Almost exactly 3km due north of Knowth is the confluence, or fork, where the Devlin River flows into the Mattock (ITM 70080,776345). It was Henry Morris (1936, 14) who first identified this spot as Áth nGabla and most authorities, Haley included (2005, 50), have reiterated it. Though the Mattock is a fairly insignificant river, its winding course forms a significant boundary – that dividing the counties of Meath from Louth – and traces of approach roads survive on either side of the crossing point. Haley and Kinsella's map (Fig. 1) shows Queen Medb's forces making a loop to the north of Slane before arriving at Áth nGabla.

The route from Crúachain to Áth nGabla has drawn a range of critical comment over the years. The observations have focused mainly on the easterly trajectory taken by the army. Margaret Dobbs (1912, 340) was quite correct when she pointed out that 'the natural route [to Cooley] would ... be across South Leitrim, Cavan and North Louth', *i.e.* north-eastwards. In one of the earliest topographical analyses of TBC, she argued that the easterly course was deliberately designed to avoid the Black Pig's Dyke. This is a collective name for a series of linear earthworks that can be traced intermittently from Newry in the east to Sligo in the west. Perceiving this as a defensive boundary for Ulster, Dobbs argued that the easterly route was deliberately taken to avoid alerting the Ulstermen of the approaching army. The precise function(s) of these earthworks is still debated, but some sections of it have been confirmed as of Early Iron Age date (Waddell 2010, 381–383). Though there are a couple of oblique references to linear earthworks in TBC I (lines 966 and 4153), there is no specific mention of the Black Pig's Dyke in Recensions I or II. But the narrative does provide a clear explanation for why Queen Medb's forces took the easterly course: 'Then Fergus [Mac Róich] was given the task of leading the army along the path. He went far astray to the south to give the Ulstermen time to complete the mustering of their army' (TBC I, p.131).³

T. F. O'Rahilly (1946, 173–176) also ventured an opinion on this issue when he wrote of 'the narrator [having] first to bring Medb and her forces rapidly from Crúachain to the Tara district before they can march northward against the Ulaid'. In a perceptive evaluation endorsed by more recent scholarship (Carney 1971, 79), he posited that in early versions of TBC the raid on Ulster originated from Tara, in Co. Meath, rather than Cruachain. Focusing on early historical evidence, he argued that the Connachta (descendants of Conn Céadchathach) were originally based at Tara. However, by the ninth century when the epic was 'taking literary shape' Tara was under a new dispensation and the Connachta and their sovereignty goddess Medb were now perceived as being based at Crúachain in the west. So the opening passages of the story were adapted to the contemporary cultural landscape and a route was created from Tulsk to the Boyne Valley to link the Connachta to the pre-existing narrative.

Haley (2005, 49–50) added a toponymic dimension to this when he commented on 'the strangeness of [the] opening march'. He contrasted the core parts of TBC, where toponyms abound, with 'the paucity of placenames [in the opening sec-

³ This episode is depicted on O'Grady map as a looped section (Fig. 3) and glossed as 'Day 2: They make a long detour led by Fergus and find themselves at night again in Cúil Silinne' (Hull 1898, 301): see also Walsh (1912, 605) on this 'detour'.

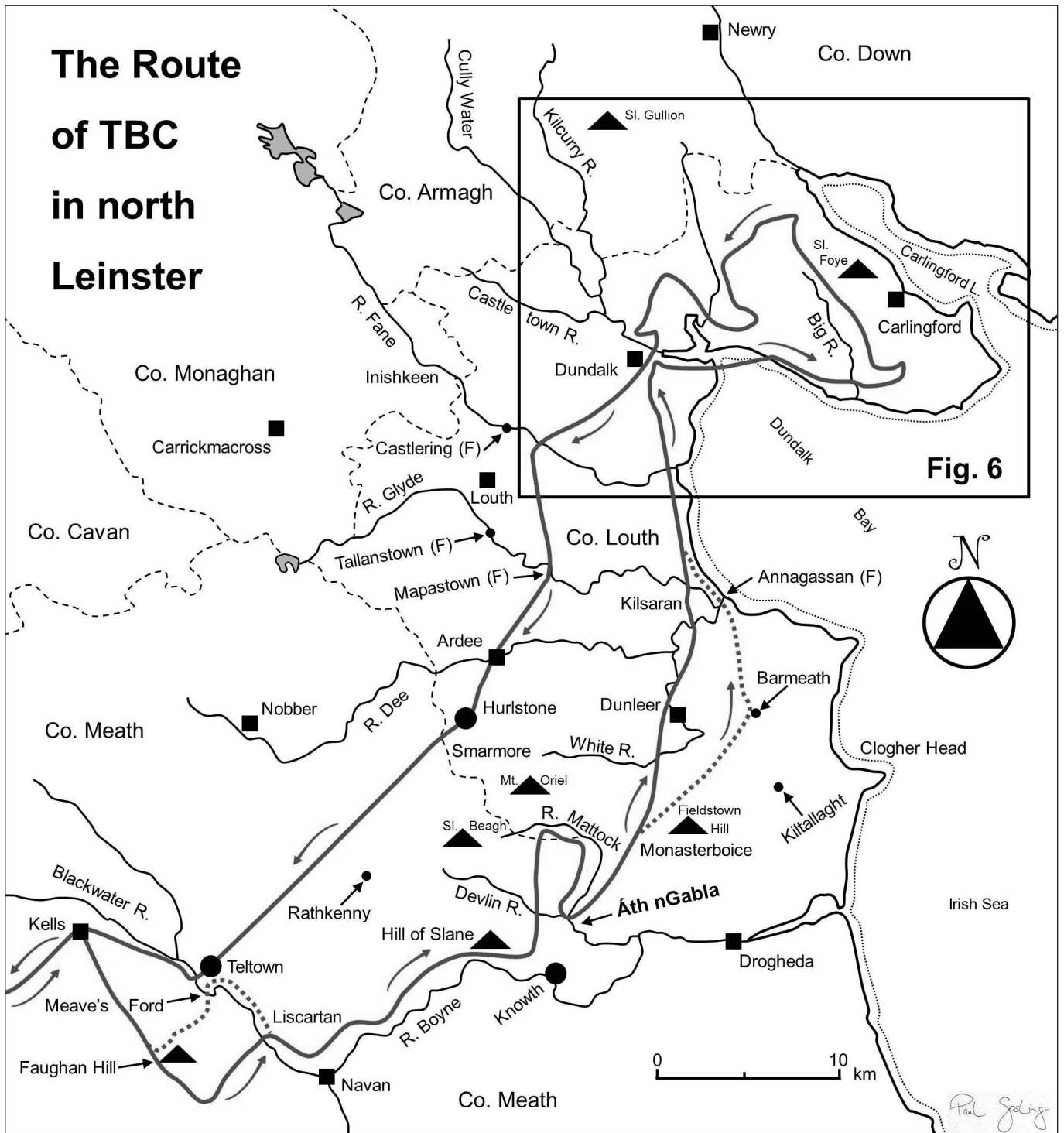


Figure 5 Reconstruction of the route of TBC through north Leinster showing the principal lakes and rivers, modern county boundaries and almost all of the modern placenames mentioned in the text. The solid line represents Haley and Kinsella’s published reconstruction of the route (see Fig. 1), the dotted lines, the revisions to it suggested in this paper (Source of base map Ordnance Survey of Ireland). Modern towns are indicated by black squares, archaeological monuments by black dots and significant hills by black triangles. The locations of other significant places, including fords (= F), are indicated with an arrow (Drawing: P. Gosling, March, 2014).

tion], only eight being given for a march of approximately eighty miles [130km]. He might also have mentioned another toponymic characteristic of this part of the narrative; the general absence of references to rivers or fords, topographical features which occur regularly elsewhere in the story. Haley and Kinsella’s map (Fig. 1) shows the army crossing five major

rivers on the journey from Roscommon to Louth. These include the Scramoge east of Strokestown, the Shannon at Termonbarry, the Inny at Finnea, the Athboy River west of Crossakeel and the Blackwater at Kells (Fig. 4).

In assessing whether this part of the narrative constitutes a viable route, it is worth comparing Haley and Kinsella’s re-

construction with that compiled by Colm Ó Lochlainn (1940, 468). As part of his research on Ireland's early medieval road network Ó Lochlainn provides a summary of the route of TBC from Roscommon to Louth. It runs as follows: 'Rathcroghan by Toomona to Termonbarry, Clondara, Longford, Edgeworthstown, Rathowen, Barratogher, Ballinalack, Bunbrosna, Bóthar na Tána, Multyfarnham, Taghmon, Collinstown, Crossakeel, Teltown, Navan, Slane, Knowth, Mellifont, and joining the Sligh Mhídhluachra north of Drogheda'.⁴ While at first sight this itinerary looks different, large stretches of it are identical to the course plotted by Haley and Kinsella (cf. Figs. 1 and 4). The one major difference is the section between Longford and Crossakeel where Ó Lochlainn plots a more southerly course. What is striking about both reconstructions is the close correlation between them and the line of Slige Assail – 'the main road from Midhe to Connacht' (Ó Lochlainn 1940, 472). What differences there are concern the same stretch between Longford and Crossakeel; the Slige Assail being routed via Castlepollard while TBC runs via Granard or Multyfarnham depending on whether one follows Haley or Ó Lochlainn. So the compilers of TBC appear to have been quite astute, basing their route on a pre-existing highway.

Áth nGabra to Annagassan: Having forded the River Mattock at Áth nGabra, Haley and Kinsella project Medb's forces in a north-easterly direction. This brings them across the low hills around Monasterboice and on to the coast at Annagassan, a distance of approximately 22km. Their map shows them crossing the rivers Dee and Glyde just above their confluence (Fig. 1) which is unlikely given the presence of the historic ford at Annagassan itself (Fig. 5). This is nonetheless a bold and novel take on the route, contrasting dramatically with the inland course charted by Standish Hayes O'Grady seventy years previously (Fig. 3). In truth, all the recensions of TBC are vague as to the path followed by Queen Medb's forces through south and mid Louth on the outward journey. What can be argued is that once you cross the Mattock from west to east, you are unlikely to re-cross it if heading north. This and the absence of any mention of Áth Fhir Diad (Ardee) suggest that the Queen Medb's forces took an easterly course. This would also obviate the necessity of crossing the White River – possibly the Finnglas of TBC I (line 3147) – that flows by Dunleer to join the River Dee near Drumcar (Fig. 5).

On their published map (Fig. 1), Haley and Kinsella plot three placenames along this part of the route: Belach nÁne in the vicinity of Monasterboice, Tamlachta Orláim at Kilsaran and 'Ath Meic Gárach' at the mouth of the River Fane. All of these placements are speculative to varying degrees. At best, they are topographically logical but some are simply wishful thinking. This is particularly so in the case of Tamlachta Orláim which is described in Recension I as being 'a little to the north of Dísert Lochait' (TBC I, line 871, p.149). Haley (2005, 52) has recently re-located Tamlachta Orláim from Kilsaran to the townland of Kiltallaght, east of Clogher Head (Fig. 5). In truth, neither it or Dísert Lochait has been satisfactorily located in Louth and Haley himself (ibid.) has admitted that they may relate to places further south.

Haley has also re-assessed the location of 'Ath Meic Gárach'. As he acknowledged in his PhD thesis (1970, 52), this placename does not actually occur in the texts of TBC, though it can be inferred from them (see TBC I, line 908). In Recension II it is described as being 'at Ard Ciannacht' (TBC II, line 247, p.172), a territory commemorated in the barony name, Ferrard (Fir Ard Ciannachta). As Haley says (2005, 51), this puts the ford 'comfortably ... in southern Louth' and undoubtedly influenced his decision to re-locate it from the River Fane to the White River, specifically to Ballymageragh, 1km north of Dunleer (ITM 705390,789131). This townland fringes the west bank of the White River at one point, but there is very little topographical or cartographic evidence for a fording point here. Even the toponymic evidence is weak (see Logaimn 2013). If one is seeking a significant and historic ford on the White River then Athclare, 2km south of Dunleer (ITM 705292, 786228), surely has to be considered.

One placename that might have provided a degree of confidence about the route is Barmeath, yet it is not mentioned by either Haley or Kinsella. Situated 3.5km east of Dunleer, this townland is close to the path projected from Monasterboice to Annagassan. Though the name does not feature in the texts of TBC, it can be linked to the story. Francis Stubbs (1908, 36) has briefly outlined the connection which is based on evidence collected by the OSI in the 1830s. The OS Letters for Co. Louth articulate it as follows: 'some say there was formerly a gap in the T.L. [townland] called 'bearne Méadhbha, i.e. Meva's Gap' (Garstin 1921, 31). This is but one of a number of interpretations presented by the OS compilers, but it does provide a toponymic straw that is comforting when one is clutching at wisps.

Annagassan to Áth Lethan: From Annagassan, Haley and Kinsella project a course running due north, parallel to the coastline, to the mouth of the River Fane at Blackrock. At this point, their map has the army cutting inland to Dundalk town centre (Fig. 2). However, just before they reach the Big Bridge on the Castletown River, they wheel sharply to the east and proceed to the river-mouth at Soldiers Point. The distance involved is approximately 20km. Haley and Kinsella's map (Fig. 2), has four placenames along this segment: Méithe Tog[maill] and Méithe nEóin at the mouth of the River Fane, Áth Carpat at the Big Bridge in Dundalk, and na Saili Imdorthi in the area south of Soldiers Point.

In assessing this part of the route, we are on more solid ground, topographically and toponymically. Though Haley and Kinsella do not mention it, their coastal route closely matches that of the Slige Midlúachra as plotted by Colm Ó Lochlainn in his 'Roadways in Ancient Ireland' (1940, map). This Slige was 'the northern road' from Tara and is supposed to have traversed Louth to Emain Macha in Co. Armagh and possibly also to Dunseverick in Co. Antrim (Hamilton 1913; Muhr 2002, 31–32). Its course from Dundalk to Newry via the Moyry Pass has been pinpointed (see Gosling 2011) but south of Dundalk it is unclear. In the 1840s, John O'Donovan commented that 'nothing has been yet discovered to prove its exact position' (1847, lix) and this remains true regarding its course through south Louth. Some writers, including the present one, have courted the idea of a westerly course for the Slige via Ardee and Knockbridge (see Gosling 2013). However,

⁴ 'Bóthar na Tána' is the local name for a linear earthwork near Multyfarnham, Co. Westmeath (RMP WM011-034; see Kane 1917, 554–555).

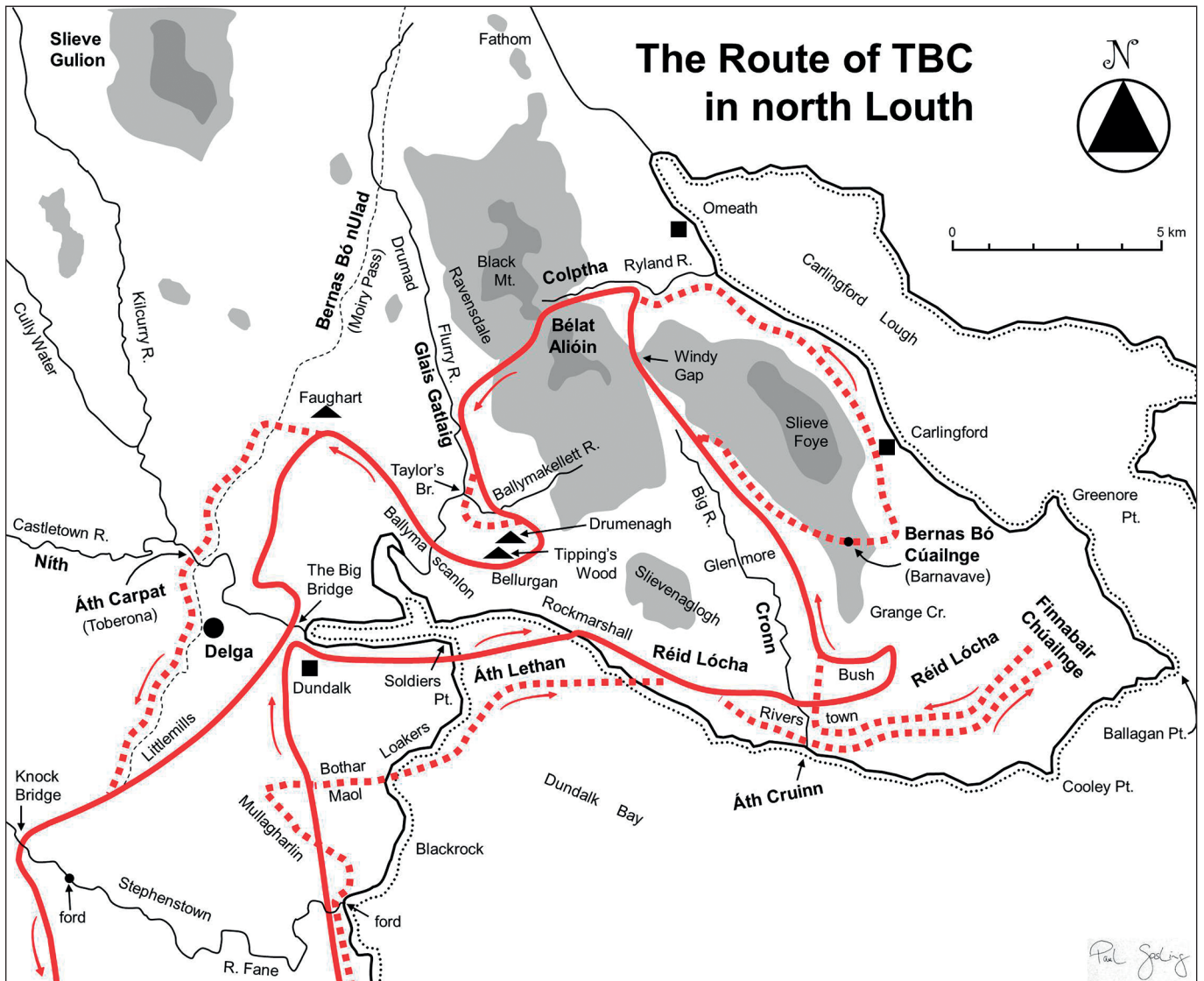


Figure 6 Reconstruction of the route of TBC through north Louth (Conaille Muirthemne) and the Cooley Peninsula (Cúailnge) showing the principal rivers, contours at 200m and 400m, and almost all of the modern placenames mentioned in the text (Source of base map: Ordnance Survey of Ireland). The solid line represents Haley and Kinsella’s published reconstruction of the route (see Fig. 2), the dotted lines, the revisions to it suggested in this paper. (Source of base map Ordnance Survey of Ireland). Modern towns are indicated by black squares, archaeological monuments by black dots and significant hills by black triangles. The locations of other significant places, such as fords, are arrowed. The probable line of the Slige Midlúachra is shown as a thin dashed line (Drawing: P. Gosling, March, 2014).

Ó Lochlainn plots it as running via Drogheda, Dunleer and Annagassan as do some other authorities (Hogan 1910; Morris 1936, 13–15). Whether or not this is the case, there is cartographic evidence to support the existence of an historic routeway along the coast. On the mid-seventeenth century barony map for Louth (Down Survey 1656–1658), the words ‘strand and highway’ appear along the shoreline between the rivers Fane and Glyde, a distance of 7km. The existence of such a route is confirmed on the ground by the old coastal trackway. Moreover, its existence makes topographical sense given that the whole coastal plain east of the present M1 motorway was once part of an extensive salt-marsh stretching from Blackrock to Annagassan.

This brings us to the mouth of the River Fane and another fording point (ITM 706414,801760; Fig. 6). Here Haley (1970, 55–57) places Méithe Tog[maill] and Méithe nEóin on the

basis that *méthe* may be a play on the word *méide*, denoting the lower part of the anatomical neck (eDIL 2013); the necks in this context being the spits of land on either side of the river mouth. The ford where these events took place is not named in Recension I of TBC but it is in Recension II: Áth Srethe (TBC II, line 1278). Haley (1970, 56) interprets this name as ‘the Spreading Ford’. While it would be nice if Áth Srethe were at the mouth of the Fane (and it may be), we are once again faced with the dilemma of balancing need fulfilment with solid toponymic and/or folkloric evidence, and the latter is sadly lacking.

Whatever its name, the ford at the mouth of the Fane was undoubtedly on an important routeway, and the old approach roads to and from it are still traceable. That to the north is particularly interesting as it tracks inland on a north-west trajectory mirroring Haley and Kinsella’s map. Its line can be

traced for some 3.5km through the townlands of Haggardstown and Mullagharlin via by-roads and strong boundary lines (Fig. 6). Beyond that its continuation is less certain but it may have been part of a direct route from the mouth of the Fane to Castletown Mount (alias Dún Dealgan). This fine Anglo-Norman motte (RMP LH007–118007) is universally accepted as being the site of Delga from where Cú Chulainn recurrently harassed Queen Medb's forces (TBC I, lines 1247–1248, 1299–1300, 2036).

From its situation on a prominent ridge, Castletown Mount dominates a strategic ford at Toberona on the Castletown River (Fig. 6). This is the river Níth (TBC I, lines 947 and 950) and not the River Dee as has been widely reported in the literature (see Gosling 2011 and 2013). While a number of local historians articulated this view over the years, they were studiously ignored by the leading *Táin* scholars, e.g. Dunn (1914, 380), O'Rahilly (1976, 311). It was Haley, via the maps published in Kinsella's translation (1970, map iii), who gave the Níth / Castletown equation the prominence it deserved. And as we shall see below, it was he who worked out the topographic and toponymic implications that issue from it.

In relation to Áth Carpat (TBC I, lines 951–952), Haley followed the accepted local wisdom and placed this ford at the Big Bridge (Fig. 6), the road bridge that spans the Castletown River at the north end of Dundalk town centre (Haley 2012, Stage 2, M; Kinsella 1975, 23). However, as the present writer has demonstrated elsewhere (Gosling 2011), Áth Carpat is in fact at Toberona, some 3.5km upstream (ITM 703042,809590). In depicting a dramatic 'about turn' on their map, Haley and Kinsella's were presumably working on the idea that Medb's forces changed course because of Cú Chulainn's presence at Delga. Thus there is logic behind it, albeit the course change should be plotted further south than indicated by them (Fig. 6).

Haley and Kinsella depict the army as proceeding eastwards from Dundalk town centre to Soldiers Point from where they cross Áth Lethan. Here they place the name na Saili Imdorthi or Imdoirchi (TBC I, line 967; Strachan and O'Keefe 1912, line 858). They interpret it variously as 'the Great Spreading Seawater' (Haley 2012, Stage 4, B) or 'the Dark Seas' (Kinsella 1975, 23). Kinsella (*ibid.*) places it at 'the marshes east of Dundalk south of the rivermouth' but Haley (2012, Stage 4, B) suggests that it could be 'the north-probing tidal arm of Dundalk Harbor'. Though the placement appears to be based solely on geographical grounds, it is an apt one as the mouth of the Castletown River was undoubtedly fringed by extensive salt marshes in medieval times (see Gosling 1991, fig. 3).

This brings us to Áth Lethan (TBC I, line 950) which is depicted on Haley and Kinsella's map (Fig. 2) as running across Dundalk Bay from just south of Soldiers Point to Rockmarshall, a linear distance of almost 3km. Setting aside the fanciful etymology provided for it in the narrative, the literal meaning of this placename is the Broad Ford. It is to Haley's and Kinsella's credit that they placed it here at all as numerous writers (Hutton 1907, 461; Mac Iomhair 1962, 146; O'Rahilly 1967, 355; Otway-Ruthven 1968, 405) had located it variously on the River Fane or more often on the River Dee. With the aid of local lore and topographic information, it is possible to refine the location of the ford (Gosling 2014). Its starting point can be gauged from a local tradition that links Queen Medb to an

old by-road just north of Blackrock (see Gribben 1990). Called 'Bothar Maol', its line runs east – west from the southern end of the Dundalk IT campus on the Dublin Road, to the Blackrock Road (ITM 705520,804582 to 706936,804594). This brought Queen Medb's army to the coast at the south end of the Loakers, near Blackrock. From here they boldly crossed the bay at low tide (Fig. 6). Henry Morris (1906, 89) envisioned this crossing in epic terms: 'Meave and her host passed over the head of the tideway by the light of torches into Cooley'. They made landfall at Rampark (ITM 713500,806400) near Rockmarshall where the local memory of 'Medb's Stepping Stones' preserves her passing (Gosling 2014).

Áth Lethan to Finnabair Chúainnge: As the story reaches north Louth one senses that the narrator / writer of TBC is in a familiar landscape. Aodh de Blácam put this most eloquently in a letter to Henry Morris in July 1932: 'The feeling I get in Cooley is that the *Tain* must have happened, everything is so clearly circumstantial' (Morris Collection, UCD: notebook no. 28, 213). De Blácam lived in Ravensdale at the time and took a keen interest in the *Táin* though he does not appear to have published anything on it other than the brief summation in his *Gaelic Literature Surveyed* (1929, 31–32). The topographical clarity is particularly apparent when Medb's forces reach the shores of Cooley. Here Haley and Kinsella astutely place Réid Lócha on the coastal plain to the west of the Big River (Fig. 2). Though Kinsella (1975, 23) later parsed it as 'the low-lying land between Slievenaglogh and the Bay [*i.e.* Dundalk Bay]', it probably designated the whole coastal plain (Figs 6 and 7). Like many placenames, Réid Lócha is provided with a fanciful etymology in the narrative (TBC I, lines 974–977) but its literal meaning is the 'plain of the lakes' or as Thurneysen (1921, 145) phrased it as 'Ebene des Sees' = The Lough Plain. Its appropriateness becomes apparent when one studies the contemporary 1:50,000 scale OS Discovery maps for the area. This reveals no less than 20 small lakelets on the gently undulating coastal plain between Rockmarshall and Carlingford. Generally less than ¼ hectare in extent, these are probably melt-water lakes resulting from depositional activity during the last glaciation.

In the narrative Réid Lócha is linked to a second name, Cuinciu (TBC I, lines 967–976) that the Interpolator H informs us is a mountain (*sliab*). From this vantage point Cú Chulainn killed Medb's handmaid with a slingshot as she was fetching water. Haley and Kinsella equate Cuinciu with Slievenaglogh (OD 310m) which is quite possible though there is no toponymic evidence to confirm this. From what we have clarified regarding Réid Lócha above, Cuinciu could equally have been the unnamed summit above (north of) Bush on the opposite side of Glenmore (ITM 717654,808690) for it too commands the coastal plain (Fig. 6).

The most significant topographical feature encountered by Medb's forces on the plain of Cooley must have been the Big River. The authorities are near universal in their agreement that this is the Cronn. Such confidence is surprising when one considers that there is no toponymic evidence to link the two. The equation is based solely on geography but it does appear to be sound (Gosling 2012a, 559–560). Though only 11km in total length, the lower 3km of this river is known by the aliases Castletown River and Piedmont River. On the outward journey, Kinsella and Haley indicate that the army

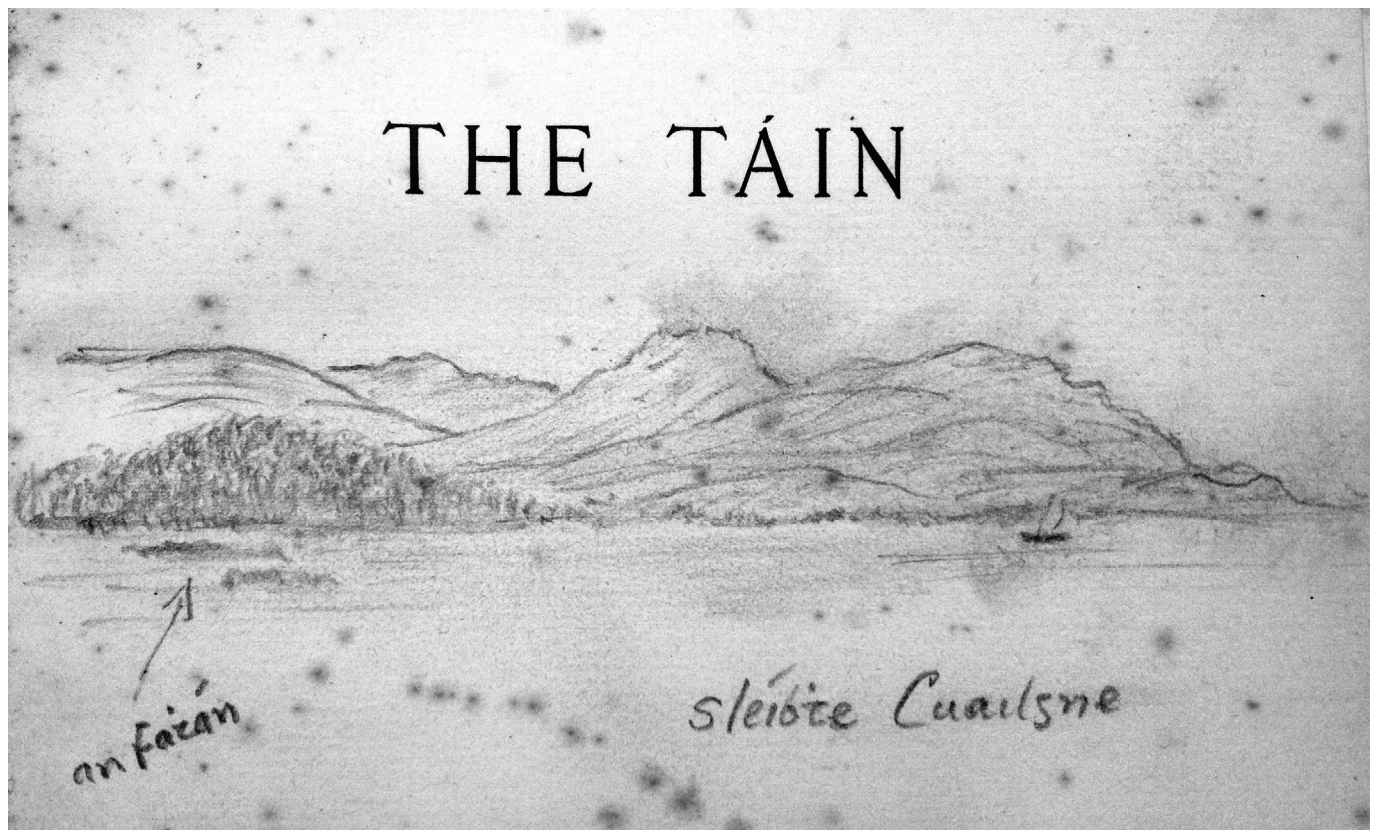


Figure 7 This pencil sketch of Cooley, Co. Louth, views the peninsula from the south-west, looking across Dundalk Bay. The profile of Slieve Foye (OD 588m), the highest peak on the peninsula, is visible at background centre below the first T. The drawing shows the locations of a number of places mentioned in TBC I. That labelled 'an Fathán' (Tipping's Wood) is Ochainé. Áth Lethan crossed the inner part of the bay at foreground left making landfall in Cooley just to the right of Ochainé. Réid Lócha would be the coastal plain extending eastwards from it to the tip of the peninsula. Slievenaglogh (OD 310m), which looms large above the sailing boat, is possibly the mountain called Cuinche.

The drawing, by Peadar Ó Dubhda, is executed on the title page of a copy of Mary Hutton's translation of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (1907). Ó Dubhda (1881-1971) was an Irish language scholar from Dundalk, who had been presented with this particular copy of the book by 'Múinteoiribh Scoile Raing Gaedhilge' (the Teachers of the School of Irish Classes) in August 1908 (Photo: P. Gosling, December 2013, from copy of Hutton's *Táin* in Louth County Library, Reference Section).

crossed the Big River at Riverstown at the old road bridge (Fig. 2). The former presence of two motte-castles in its vicinity (RMP: LH008-072 and LH008-079) suggest that this crossing point may date back to the late twelfth century. However, the configuration of the river channel here suggests that the bridging point may have been developed from scratch by the Anglo-Normans. The early medieval ford was probably 1km to the south, close to the river mouth (Fig. 6). Its site was in the vicinity of the 'Foot Bridge' marked on the OS 1:2500 series map (ITM 716604,805779). The former presence of a promontory fort here on the west bank (RMP: LH008-085) adds circumstantial weight to this proposition as does the relict approach road from the east which is evident on the 1st edition of the OS six-inch maps. This is most likely to be the location of Áth Cruinn where Cú Chulainn later invokes the river to come to his assistance (see below).

That event is a feature of the homeward journey but it informs us that Medb's forces did cross the Cronn before they made their encampment (dúnud) at Finnabair Chúailnge. This is most likely to have been situated on the plain of Cooley but its precise location is unknown. The location offered by Haley and Kinsella is uncharacteristically weak (Kinsella 1975, 23;

Fig 2). Without a shred of toponymic or other evidence, they boldly equate it with 'a big overgrown rath' in the townland of Rath, 0.75km north-east of Bush (RMP: LH008-065). Writing as they were in the late 1960s, the archaeological literature would have allowed them to date ringforts back to the supposed time-frame of TBC. However, contemporary research has firmly placed the ringfort phenomenon in the period AD 500-900. So while the *Táin* may have been recited in the timber hall of this fine bivallate ringfort, the idea that it might mark the site of 'Finnabair Chúailnge' is mere wish fulfilment.

The reality is that Finnabair Chúailnge remains unlocated. Haley (2012, Stage 4, F) interprets the name as 'The Fair Brow of Cooley'. However, an obscure note by T. F. O'Rahilly offers an alternative reading; he interprets *findubair* as 'a place by white water' (1933, 211). This is particularly apposite for present purposes for it suggests that we should be seeking a coastal location in Cooley. The speculation by John O'Beirne Crowe (1867, 7) that Finnabair Chúailnge could be Greenore is thus tantalising. This striking name, which can be traced back at least to the mid-seventeenth century (Down Survey 1656-1658), denotes a headland jutting out into Carlingford Lough (ITM 722359,811140). All this is just topographical



Figure 8 View of Barnavave from Petestown on the plain of Cooley. The view is from the south-east, the only point on the lowlands from which the gap is visible. Barnavave is the Bernas Bó Cúailnge of TBC. (Photo: Eve Campbel).

speculation, however, and the sister headlands at Ballagan Point (ITM 724324,807312) and Cooley Point (ITM 722002, 804977) to the south of Greenore, could equally lay claim on the same basis: geography and white water (see Fig. 6). This makes it difficult to calculate the total length of this segment but if we include the crossing of Dundalk Bay via Áth Lethan and the journey from Rockmarshall to the Big River, the distance is at least 12km.

Finnabair Chúailnge to Bernas Bó Cúailnge: Having set up their encampment, the narrative continues: ‘from Finnabair Cúailnge the army scattered and set the country on fire. They gathered together all the women, boys, girls and cows that were in Cúailnge and brought them all to Findabair’ (TBC I, lines 978–980, p.152). Though the bull was not among them he was subsequently caught and brought to the camp. However, he killed Medb’s cowherd, Lóthar, and escaped again. The army pursued him eastwards to the Big River (Cronn) but it ‘rose up against them as high as the tops of the trees’ (lines 1000–1001, p.153). They spent a night on the river bank and the following morning the warrior, Úalu attempted a crossing but was drowned. The text informs us that ‘His grave and his headstone are on the road beside the stream’ (lines 1005–1006, p.153) which would suggest a spot close to Áth Cruinn (see above) but the site has not been located. Next follows the passage re Medb and her forces working their way up-river:

‘Afterwards they went round the river Cronn as far as its source, and they would have gone between its source and the mountain only that Medb would not allow it. She preferred 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 remained there three days and three nights until they had dug up the earth in front of them (to make a pass through the mountain) which was called Bernas Bó Cúailnge’. (TBC I, lines 1007–1010, p.153)

The by now ‘traditional’ reading of this passage is that the army worked its way up Glenmore on the east bank of the Big River, harassed all the way by Cú Chulainn. Having reached the river source at the head of the valley, they were about to round it when Medb halted them. She instructed them to cut a pass through the mountainside thus creating the Windy Gap (ITM 712944 813835; Fig. 6). While Haley and Kinsella were not the first to pinpoint this gap as Bernas Bó Cúailnge, they certainly helped popularise this version of the route (Fig. 2; Kinsella 1975, 24). However, as the hill-farmers and walkers of Cooley know, the real *bearna* is at Barnavave Mountain, 6km to the south-east, back down the valley (see Gosling 2012a; Fig. 8). Despite being clearly named on countless OSI maps, the spectacular cleft on the hill summit (ITM 717674 810123) has been missed by generations of scholars, emphasising that you cannot conduct effective fieldwork without getting your boots dirty.

Though this is one of the shortest segments of the route, calculating its length is problematic. Apart from identifying the start point, there is also an issue concerning the location of Bernas Bó Cúailnge. If we follow Haley and Kinsella's map (Fig. 2) then it may have been c. 11km in length but the revisions outlined above suggest that it is more likely to have been in the region of 20km (Fig. 6).

Bernas Bó Cúailnge to the River Colptha: The gap at Barnavave is aligned NNW–SSE. Given that Medb's forces approached it from Glenmore, the army must have cut the gap from north to south. So, when they went through Bernas Bó Cúailnge they would have emerged on to the slopes above (north-west of) Grange Cross (Fig. 6). As O'Rahilly's translation has it:

'they came through the pass Bernas Bó Cúailnge with the stock and cattle of Cúailnge, and they spent the night in Glenn Dáil Imda in Cúailnge. Botha is the name of that place because they made huts (*botha*) to shelter them there. On the morrow they went on to the river Colptha' (TBC I, lines 1015–1018, p.153).

If we accept, as most authorities do, that the Colptha is the Ryland River at Omeath (see below), then the total length of this segment is only 9.5km.

Having descended from Bernas Bó Cúailnge the army must have swung northwards and proceeded along the narrowing coastal strip. This would have brought them right past the site of the present town of Carlingford (Fig. 6). The location of Glenn Dáil Imda, where they spent the night, is unclear as there are no obvious valleys in this area. The sheltered concave hill terraces near Slate Rock, immediately above (east of) the town, might just fit topographically but we are back in the realm of speculation. Beyond Carlingford, the Connachta army must have worked their way northwards along the lower flanks of Slieve Foye to Omeath via the old road that runs parallel but above the present R173. While this route is a narrow one, history and tradition testify that it was used by Lord Mountjoy's forces in AD 1600 during his campaigns against Hugh O'Neill (Gosling 2012a, 563).

Haley and Kinsella broke new ground when they equated the Ryland River at Omeath with the Colptha of TBC. Almost a century before, John O'Beirne Crowe (1867, 5) had linked the Colptha with the River Flurry which skirts the western fringes of Cooley. However, the Ryland is the more likely candidate as, apart from the Big River, it is the only other watercourse of any significance in the heart of the peninsula. Even so, its main channel is only 5km in length from its source just below the summit of Black Mountain (508m OD) to the sea just south of Omeath (Fig. 6). Its equation with the Colptha is based purely on geography for even though it has an alternative name – the Essmore River, from the waterfalls on its lower reaches – there is no specific toponymic evidence or oral traditions to link it to TBC. The name Colptha has in the past been confused and conflated with references to 'Inber Colpa', a medieval name for the River Boyne (see Dunn 1914, 374; also Hogan 1910, under *colbhta*). Having reached the Colptha, Medb's forces were once again confronted by nature in flux:

'They heedlessly tried to cross it [the Colptha] but it rose in flood against them and carried off to sea a hundred of their chariot-warriors. Clúain Carpat is the name of the district where they were drowned' (TBC I, lines 1018–1020, p.153–154).

As I have recently pointed out (Gosling 2012a, 559–560), both the Big River and the Ryland are prone to spates in certain conditions which adds some circumstantial weight to the Ryland/Colptha equation. Clúain Carpat might then be positioned towards the mouth of the river where piles of debris tend to accumulate after such floods.

At this point one might also note the reference to the sea – *dochom maro* – in the above passage (eDIL 2013, from *muir* = sea). With the possible inclusion of Findabair Chúailnge, already mentioned, this is one of only three allusions in Recension I of TBC to the maritime location of Cúailnge, a peninsula defined on the south, east and north by the tidal waters of the Irish Sea. The third occurs with respect to Ochainne (Tipping's Wood: see TBC I, line 1438). What is particularly striking is the absence of any reference to Cuan Snámha hAighne alias Cuan Snáma Ech, both attested medieval names for Carlingford Lough (Hogan 1910). However, TBC is not a geographic treatise but an epic tale where scene and setting are employed solely to serve the narrative flow, so we should not expect geographic completeness.

River Colptha to Druim Féne: The Connachta army responded to the rising waters of the Colptha (Ryland) in the same fashion as they had to those of the Cronn (Big River), they worked their way upstream. Haley and Kinsella (Fig. 2) show them crossing the mountain from Omeath to Ravensdale before progressing on to Bellurgan, a distance of approximately 15km. In attempting to verify this part of the route, the following six lines of Recension I are vital as they provide us with no less than six more local placenames (underlined for emphasis):

'They went round the river Colptha then to its source at Bélat Alióin and spent the night at Liasa Liac. It is so called because they made sheds (*liasa*) for their calves there between Cúailnge and Conaille. They came through Glenn Gatlaig and the river Glais Gatlaig rose in flood against them. Before that its name was Sechaire, but from that time it was called Glais Gatlaig because they had taken their calves across bound together with withes. They spent the night in Druim Féne in Conaille'. (TBC I, lines 1021–1026 and p.154)

Only one of these placenames – Druim Féne – had been previously provenanced with any satisfaction (see below). Unperturbed by this, Haley and Kinsella astutely route the army over the mountain via the Cadger's Pad, the well-known upland trackway from Omeath to Ravensdale. This was once an accepted 'shortcut', held in local lore to have been used by the fishmongers of Omeath and district to transport produce to the market at Dundalk (Tempest 1983, 92). Kinsella makes a fairly unequivocal reference to this trackway in his poem, 'The Route of the Táin': '*then to Bélat Ailiúin / by that pathway / climbing back and forth out of the valley / over to Ravensdale*' (Kinsella 1973, 57). Having crested the ridge line, the

Cadger's Pad skirts the summits of Black Mountain (508m OD) and The Ben Rock (410m OD) before descending down the flank of Annaverna along the east side of the small stream which flows via Ravensdale Bridge. Here at the western foot of the mountain, Haley and Kinsella chose to locate Liasa Liac and Bélat Alióin, specifically equating the latter with the bridging point (Fig. 2). Interpreting Bélat Alióin as 'The Pass of the Islands', Kinsella (1975, 24) justified this reading with the comment that 'the Flurry River and its tributaries form a series of small islands' at Ravensdale. This seems to be stretching the interpretation of 'Alióin' a tad too far, not to mention its Recension II equivalent, 'Bélat Aileáin [alias] Glenn Táil' (TBC II, line 1373 and p.176). What it also ignores is the statement in TBC I that Bélat Alióin is at the source of the Colptha and thus, close to the mountain summit. In this location, the name not only matches the local topography but also the definition of *bélat* given in eDIL (2013): a 'place where several roads meet, crossway; pass, frontier; way' (cf. Evans 1941, 77).

Before considering the next two names – Glais Gatlaig and Glenn Gatlaig – it is important to locate the afore-mentioned Druim Féne. Just over a century ago, Mary Hutton (1907, 465) identified this as Drumenagh Hill (108m OD), a small but steep-sided knob of rock to the south of Ravensdale (ITM 710054,810297), and all subsequent authorities have affirmed this (Dunn 1914, 376; Haley 2012, Stage 4, S). It lies just south of the famous Lumpers public house from whence it is best viewed. However, from most points of the compass it is obscured by the adjacent and slightly higher hill called Tipping's Wood (142m OD) whose wooded profile is a more widely recognised feature on the landscape (Figs 6 and 7).

In placing Glais Gatlaig, Haley and Kinsella were clearly cognisant that the TBC texts have Medb's forces crossing this river before proceeding to Druim Féne. Their solution was to equate it with the Ballymakellett River, thus making Glenn Gatlaig the steep-sided ravine that it has cut in the mountain slope (Fig. 2). These placements are eminently logical, but the Ballymakellett River is a very minor watercourse only 4.5km in total length from its source to its confluence with the Flurry River at Taylor's Bridge. An alternative view would propose the Flurry River itself as a more likely candidate for Glais Gatlaig. It is a significant river, c. 22km in length, which rises near Camlough in south Armagh and debouches into Dundalk Harbour at Ballymascanlan. Between Flurry Bridge and Ravensdale it traverses a significant u-shaped valley that would make an excellent Glen Gatlaig. Its candidature is supported by toponymic evidence, for the 'validated' Irish name of the Flurry is Glais Ghallaigh (see Logainm 2013). In this scenario, the crossing point used by Medb's forces might be tentatively positioned at the confluence of the Ballymakellett and the Flurry, i.e. at Taylor's Bridge (ITM 708916,811494; Fig. 6).

Finally, there is Dubchaire Glinne Gaitt which Haley (2012, Stage 4, E) and Kinsella (1975, 24) read as 'The Black Cauldron' and mark on their map as 'Dubchoire' (Fig. 2). They equate it with the small secluded valley at Doolargy known as 'Gleandurrougha' (Davies 1939, 209) which occupies a fold in the mountain-side just north of Ballymakellett (Fig. 2). Though it is a minor placename, it has a certain status in that the text informs us at one point that 'the bull ... with sixty heifers ... is now in Dubchaire' (TBC I, lines 985–987 and p.152). Haley and Kinsella's placement is an attractive one topographically

but if, as posited above, Glen Gatlaig is the valley of the Flurry River, then Dubchaire is more logically placed c. 4.5km north-west in the vicinity of Drumad (ITM 707800,816200) where the river valley is at its deepest (Fig. 6).

Druim Féne to Delga: It is perhaps opportune to remind ourselves that in reaching Druim Féne, Medb's forces have now exited Cúailnge and are commencing the homeward leg of their journey. The Donn Cúailnge is captive and the goal is to negotiate a passage westward to Crúachain. Between Druim Féne (Drumenagh) and Delga (Castletown Mount, Dundalk), Haley and Kinsella plot three names along a 13.5km route, as follows: Ochaíne, Focherd and Áth Carpat (Fig. 2).

One of the most vivid single combats in TBC – the encounter between Cú Chulainn and Nad Crantail – takes place at Ochaíne (TBC I, lines 1388–1486). Haley and Kinsella equate this with Tipping's Wood, the previously mentioned tree-covered eminence immediately west of Druim Féne (Fig. 6). Though it is also known locally as Trumpet Hill, it is via a third and older alias – 'Feochan Hill' – that it has been identified as Ochaíne (Morris 1926a, 38–39, 41; see Fig. 7). The texts of TBC are quite clear that Druim Féne and by inference Ochaíne, are located in the territory of Conaille Muirthemne as opposed to Cúailnge from whence Queen Medb's forces have come (TBC II, lines 1384 and 1465; TBC I, lines 1026 and 1233). While the border between these territories clearly ran along the western limits of the uplands of Cooley, it is difficult to pinpoint a more precise boundary. What is clear from the foregoing is that the boundary did not coincide with the Flurry River as recently suggested (see Gosling 2012b, 1).

Shortly after leaving Ochaíne, Haley and Kinsella depict the army re-crossing the Flurry River at Ballymascanlan (Fig. 6). This is an astute piece of topographical routing as there is a historically attested fording place here that still functions as a bridging point on the modern road from Dundalk to Carlingford. The original ford is likely to have been upstream from the modern crossing probably just north of the old bridge (ITM 708044,810138). A number of townland and parish boundaries converge here and the foundations of Ballymascanlan Castle – probably a later medieval Tower House (RMP LH007–115) – are still visible on the west bank of the river. Haley (2012, Stage 4, U) and Kinsella (1975, 26) both identify this ford as Áth mBuide (TBC I, line 1506) on the basis that part of Ballymascanlan Parish was formerly known as Ballyboys (see Stubbs 1908, 34). However, in the narrative this ford features in the passage dealing with Medb's side-foray to Dún Sobairche on the north Antrim coast (TBC I, lines 1487–1526; Fig. 2). From this, it is clear that Áth mBuide lay much further north in the vicinity of Newry (cf. Hogan 1910). Like many other fording spots which Queen Medb's forces crossed, that at Ballymascanlan does not feature in the text because no action occurred there.

From Ballymascanlan, the army proceeded north-west to Faughart Hill (OD 113m), a low but topographically significant feature in the local landscape (Fig. 6). It is crowned by an Anglo-Norman motte castle (RMP LH004–023) and an early medieval ecclesiastical site dedicated to St. Brigid (RMP LH004–097). Under the name Focherd, it features at four points in the narrative, on each occasion as the scene of combats fought by Cú Chulainn (TBC I, lines 1537, 1784–1797,

1939–1965 and 2035). The Slige Midlúachra, the old historic route from north Leinster to south Ulster, skirts the western foot of this hill (Fig. 6) so it is reasonable to suggest that the army joined that routeway here as Medb had earlier directed (line 1034). This would have brought them southwards to the Castletown River (Níth) at Toberona. As already indicated, Áth Carpat was situated here, not at the Big Bridge where Haley and Kinsella depict the army re-crossing the Castletown River (cf. Figs 2 and 6). Once south of the latter, it is probable that the army kept west of Delga (Castletown Mount) on the homeward journey for it is repeatedly cited as a place from which Cú Chulainn observes and harasses the army. If this is the case, they are likely to have tracked south-west along what is now called the Grey Acre road. This is part of an old but still functioning routeway that skirts Dundalk on the west, winding its way southwards through the townlands of Donaghmore and Littlemills (Fig. 6).

The landscape through which they passed on this leg of the route – from Druim Féne past Foherd and Delga – is repeatedly labelled in the narrative as Conaille Muirthemne, Mag Muirthemne or Machaire (TBC I, Index of Places). Haley and Kinsella show Mag Muirthemne as extending as far south as the Boyne but restrict Conaille to the northern part of lowland Louth excluding Cooley (Fig. 1). In the literature, these names are often treated as interchangeable and the information provided regarding their limits is confusing (cf. O’Rahilly 1967, 352, 354 and O’Donovan 1856, Vol.1, 10, fn. u). In the medieval sources the term Muirthemne seems to be referring to a geographic region while Conaille Muirthemne is a specific geo-political unit. This territory occupied north Louth (Thornton 1997) but also extended into south Armagh (Muhr 2002, 32) and east Monaghan (Mac Iomhair 1962, 157). It was bounded on the east by Cúailnge, while to the north lay Cuib (TBC I, lines 1488–1490). On the south it was adjoined by Crích Rois, territory in mid-Louth which included Áth Fhir Diad. Diarmuid Mac Iomhair’s research on Crích Rois (1962, 1964) identified the River Glyde as the probable boundary between the two territories (Fig. 5). He also provided valuable insights into the placenames mentioned in TBC and Haley and Kinsella draw heavily from his research.

Delga to Tailtiu: On this leg, the Connachta traversed southwards from Dundalk (Delga) through mid-Louth to Teltown (Tailtiu) in Co. Meath, a distance of c. 50km. Haley and Kinsella plot six names between these places, as follows: Grellach Dolluid, Breslech Mór, Áth Da Fherta, Moda Loga, Áth Fir Diad and Smiommair (Figs 1 and 2).

The key placenames for the reconstruction of this part of the route are the fords Áth Da Fherta and Áth Fhir Diad. The equation of the latter with Ardee is beyond doubt and clearly indicates that Queen Medb’s forces followed an inland route through mid-Louth on the homeward journey. In doing so the army must have crossed the rivers Fane and Glyde. Though Henry Morris (1926b) argued that Áth Da Fherta was situated on a bog on the Louth-Monaghan border, the most logical placement for it would be on one of the latter rivers. Along with the River Dee, these are the main drainage arteries of mid-Louth and all of them traverse the plain from west to east (Fig. 5). As with many of the rivers crossed along the route, it is notable that the various texts of TBC rarely mention river

names even when dealing with specific fords. However, the list of the healing ‘streams of Conaille Muirthemne’ does feature the Delt (TBC I, line 3147 and p.208) that, alias the Doailt, is one of names for the Glyde in medieval documents (Mac Iomhair 1962, 154, 174).

Haley and Kinsella locate Áth Da Fherta on the River Fane at Knock Bridge (ITM 698744,803169) with Grellach Dolluid (TBC I, lines 2514–5) to the north-west of it and Breslech Mór (ibid., lines 2072–2074 and 2328–2329) to the east (Fig. 2). Both of the latter placements are speculative, the latter particularly so given that the only topographical context provided is that it was located in Mag Muirthemne.⁵ In choosing the Fane over the Glyde, they were no doubt influenced by the episode in TBC featuring the Ulster warrior Óengus mac Óenláime Gaibe. Here we read of how this warrior singlehandedly ‘turned back the whole army at Moda Loga (which is the same name as Lugmod) as far as Áth Da Fherta’ (TBC I, lines 2489–2491 and p.193). Moda Loga or Lugmod is generally interpreted as the early medieval name for what is now Louth village (Fig. 5). Given that Queen Medb’s forces were travelling southwards, this indicates that the ford lay to the north of Louth Village thus suggesting a location on the Fane. O’Grady’s map of the route (Fig. 3) references this episode in the form of a striking zig-zag at the River Fane on the homeward journey indicating that he too perceived Áth Da Fherta to be on the latter river.

Knock Bridge lies just south-west of the village of the same name and it is certainly an historic bridging point dating back to medieval times. While the placement makes geographical sense in terms of an army travelling southwards from Dundalk to Ardee, it is just one of a number of historic crossing points on the Fane (see Fig. 5). In choosing Knock Bridge, Haley and Kinsella were following Diarmuid Mac Iomhair (1962, 148) who based his placement on its conjunction with Loughantarve, a townland lying immediately to the east. He equated the latter with ‘Étan Tairb ... the hill at Áth Da Fherta’ where Donn Cuailnge paused on his return journey from Crúachain (TBC I, lines 4150–4152). While this is persuasive, equally coherent cases could be made for placing Áth Da Fherta at Castleryn, 3km upstream from Knockbridge (ITM 696553,803731), or at Sorrel Ford in Stephenstown townland, 2km downstream (ITM 700039,802193). The presence of Anglo-Norman motte-castles at both locations (RMP LH006–076 and LH011–052) indicates that they were important crossing points in the late twelfth century. Furthermore, there is also local lore connecting Cú Chulainn with both places, something that is lacking at Knock Bridge.

Having crossed the River Fane, Haley and Kinsella’s maps depict Queen Medb’s forces following a fairly straight course to Ardee. The trajectory plotted suggests that the army crossed the River Glyde at Mapastown (ITM 698539,795439) another historic crossing point with an Anglo-Norman earthwork (RMP LH014–022). However, in his recent analysis of the route Gene Haley (2012, Stage 5.2, F) has noted Tallanstown as ‘a major crossing point’ on the Glyde (Fig. 5). Here again, the presence of a motte-castle (RMP LH011–085)

⁵ In his ‘Places in the Tain’, Haley (2012, Stage 5.2, E) has revised the placement of Grellach Dolluid, moving it to Inismocht, on the Louth-Meath border to the west of Ardee.



Figure 9 View from the north-east of the Hurl Stone in Hurlstone townland, 3.5km south-west of Ardee, Co. Louth (Photo N. Ross, May 1975). The stone is aligned north-south, stands 1.7m in height and 0.3m in thickness. The centrally placed hole is 20-25cm in diameter (RMP LH017-041). Here 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’ (TBC I, p.213).

suggests a fording point of some antiquity and this would be a logical place to ford the Glyde if one were approaching Ardee via Louth village. Ardee itself is the scene of one of the most iconic episodes in TBC, the single combat between Cúchulainn and his childhood friend Fer Diad mac Damáin. The location is apt, for it features recurrently in the early medieval historical sources as a site of conflict. However, the actual ford of Fer Diad is more likely to have been at Dawson’s Bridge (ITM 696566,790562) rather than the ‘traditional’ site upstream from Ardee Bridge (see Gosling 2013).

South of Áth Fhir Diad, the narrative informs us the army ‘made their encampment at Imorach Smiromrach’ (TBC I, line 3150 and p.208). This toponym is preserved in the local name Smarmore, which now denotes a parish and a townland, the latter centred on a castle 5km south of Ardee town (Fig. 5). The adjoining townland to the north-west is Hurlstone where once again we find quite specific topographic detail in the narrative of TBC. The OS maps label a fine standing stone with a neat circular hole through it as ‘Hurl Stone’ (RMP LH017-041; Buckley 1991; Fig. 9). This closely matches the detail of the episode called ‘The Hard Fight of Cethern’, specifically the passage where this warrior ‘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’ (TBC I, lines 3317-3319, p.213).

Haley and Kinsella’s map depicts the route between Smarmore and Teltown (Tailtiu) as a straight line running from south Louth into Meath (Fig. 1). Though it is c. 19km in length, the narrative of TBC provides little or no detail regarding it. The Hurl Stone itself offers a pointer in this regard as it stands close to a by-road that appears to be part of an old routeway.

Though now a cul-de-sac, it originally crossed the county boundary via a ford on the Corkey River and its winding course can be followed south-westwards from Cusack’s Cross for c. 11km as far as Rathkenny (Fig. 5).

At Teltown the narrative records that the charioteers of the Ulaid attacked the army (TBC I, lines 3387-3390) and when Aimirgin enters the fray they ‘challenged him by turning the left board of their chariots to Tailtiu and Ráith Airthir’ (lines 3406-3407 and p.216). The latter site can be specifically identified (RMP ME017-033) as the multi-vallate enclosure at Gibstown which is one of a number of monuments associated with site of Óenach Tailten (see above, p.4). Its significance for this part of the route is that it is located to the north of the River Blackwater. Haley has admitted (1970, 145) that ‘it is at this point, still located north of the Blackwater at Oristown [read Teltown], that we lose track of the host. When we meet them again they are already in position at Gairech [Slanemore Hill, Co. Westmeath] for the great battle with the Ulaid’.

Tailtiu to Áth Féne: Morris’s comment (1930, 114) that Queen Medb’s homeward journey was ‘a bee-line for the Shannon’ certainly holds true for the segment between Tailtiu (Teltown) and Áth Féne (Mullingar), a distance of c. 50km. Haley and Kinsella’s map plots a straight line running south-westwards from Kells and does not include any placenames along this whole stretch (Fig. 1). Along with the comments cited above, Haley’s statement (1970, 145) that the route ‘may perhaps be inferred from the actions of the Ulstermen who pursue them’ only reinforces the scarcity of route detail. Moreover, it recalls T. F. O’Rahilly’s hypothesis (see above) that the first part of the route from Crúachain to Áth Da Ferta

was an addition to an earlier version of the story which had the TBC setting out from Tara rather than Roscommon. The homeward traverse of the Irish midlands must also be regarded in the same light.

Undeterred by the lack of topographical detail between Tailtiu (Teltown) and Áth Féne (Mullingar), Haley and Kinsella show the army crossing the River Blackwater at Teltown and tracking upstream along its western bank to Kells (Cúil Sibrinne). Though Queen Medb's forces had passed through here on the outward route, Cúil Sibrinne is not mentioned in the narrative of TBC on the home journey. So its inclusion here is speculative as is the depiction of the army wheeling left at Kells to resume their south-westerly path towards Athlone. For the first 4km beyond Kells, Haley and Kinsella depict the outward and homeward routes following the same path (Fig. 1). O'Grady's map in contrast, routes the army south of Kells on the homeward route (Fig. 3) and so avoids such an overlap. Haley and Kinsella essentially follow the present N52 corridor to Mullingar and the map shows them crossing the Athboy River and River Deel (probably 'for Delind' of TBC I itinerary list, line 120) en route (cf. Figs 1 and 4).

Haley and Kinsella's re-construction of this part of the route is worth comparing with the interpretations proposed by Standish Hayes O'Grady (Hull 1898) and Denis Kelly (1879). West of Kells, O'Grady's map (Fig. 3) routes the returning forces southwards towards Athboy before sweeping westwards around the head of Lough Owel via Bunbronsa. It is interesting to note that the *Táin Trail Cycling Ireland* brochure (Moriarty c. 2000) also opts for this course, specifically mentioning 'the ford of Bunbrusna' in passing. Denis Kelly's reconstruction is different. Not only is it one of the earliest attempts at route re-construction of TBC, it also plots the most northerly homeward course through the midlands, as follows:

'any one who will take a glance at the map will see that the natural route of such an army from Cuailgne [sic] ... would be, through Kells, Castle Pollard, skirting the north shore of Loch Derryvarra to Moyvore, and thence, by the pass over the gravel Esker ... to the pass across the Shannon at Athlone' (Kelly 1879, 256).

In choosing to route Queen Medb's forces via Castlepollard, Kelly presumably envisioned them passing through Crossakeel and Fore, thus mirroring in part, the outward leg of TBC as plotted by Haley and Kinsella (cf. Figs 1 and 4).

In assessing which of these route-options is more likely to have been taken by Queen Medb, the placement of Áth Féne is crucial. Though it features only once in TBC this ford is important as the site of the first engagement between Medb's forces and those of the Ulaid. Having fully recovered from their debility, King Conchobar leads his forces southwards from Emain Macha (Navan Fort, Co. Armagh) to Iraid Cuillenn (Crossakeel in Co. Meath: TBC I, line 3504). While the bulk of the army pauses there, Conchobar and Celtchair lead an advance party of Ulster 'chariot fighters' to Áth Féne where they defeat a rear-guard of the Connacht army (TBC I, lines 3512–3513). Though initially named as Áth Airthir Mide (literally, the ford of east Meath) in the narrative, the ford is re-labelled as Áth Féne (ford of the waggons) because of this action.

A variety of locations have been proposed for Áth Féne over the years. Hogan (1910) has five entries under this name from which it is clear that there was more than one Ford of the Waggons in early medieval Ireland. In the *Dictionary of Gaelic Placenames* (Ó Riain *et al* 2003, 131 and 134), there are two entries both of which are suggested as being 'prob[ably]' in south Roscommon. The 'Ath-feine' mentioned in the *Annals of ... the Four Masters* in AD1160 was provenanced by John O'Donovan (1856, Vol. 2, 1138–1141) to 'a stream near Ories or Oris, in the barony of Clonlonan, and county of Westmeath'. Thanks to Cox (1994, 35) we can pinpoint this location with some precision: on an un-named stream at Killogeenaghan almost 9km east south-east of Athlone (ITM 612095,738604; Fig. 4). As with all of O'Donovan's pronouncements on placenames, the identification carried weight and no doubt influenced Kelly's and O'Grady's reconstructions of the route. In this location, close to Áth Lúain (Athlone), it is possible to conceive of a variety of route approaches to Áth Féne through the lakelands of Westmeath. Thus, the routing of Queen Medb's forces north of Lough Owel or even north of Lough Deravarragh is quite credible.

Haley and Kinsella place Áth Féne on the River Brosna at Mullingar (Haley 1970, 159; Kinsella 1975, 28) some 35km to the north-east of O'Donovan's location (Fig. 4). When positioned here, the route options proposed by Kelly and O'Grady become untenable. The Mullingar placement was based on the researches of Paul Walsh and Aubrey Gwynn. As early as 1913, Walsh had speculated that Áth Féne was 'on the Brosna river ... or on the Gaine' (Walsh 1913, 187). In 1924 Gwynn proposed the River Brosna at Mullingar as the location of the ford. His view (1924, 385–386) was that the town itself 'probably stands on the old ford' and that it was a crossing point on the Slige Assail, one of the great roads of early medieval Ireland (cf. Ó Lochlainn 1940, 472). In his *Placenames of Westmeath* Walsh himself was more cautious, suggesting that Áth Féne was 'perhaps at Mullingar or at Ballyglass' (Walsh 1957, 206). The latter is a small townland on the northern outskirts of the town whose north-eastern boundary coincides with the old course of the River Brosna. Due to the construction of a feeder for the Royal Canal in the early years of the nineteenth century, the topography of this area has been much altered. However, there is a striking conjunction of monuments in the adjoining townland of Culleen More. Situated close to the east bank of the river are a castle site, a holy well and graveyard (RMP WM019–009; WM019–035; WM019–036) whose siting may be reflecting the former presence of the ford. This is the location marked on the route map accompanying the 1970 edition of Kinsella's translation (map ii). However, when this map was redrawn for the German edition it is noticeable that Áth Féne is re-located to the centre of Mullingar (Fig. 1).

Áth Féne to Crúachain: In the closing sections of TBC, the Connachta army make their way from Mullingar (Áth Féne) to Athlone (Áth Lúain), a distance of at least 43km (Figs 1 and 4). However, their journey was far from straightforward given that it involved a full-scale battle between Queen Medb's forces and those of the Ulaid led by King Conchobair. Haley and Kinsella's map does not mark the site of the battlefield but it does include Slemain Midi and Gáirech, two of the principal placenames mentioned in relation to it. What is often

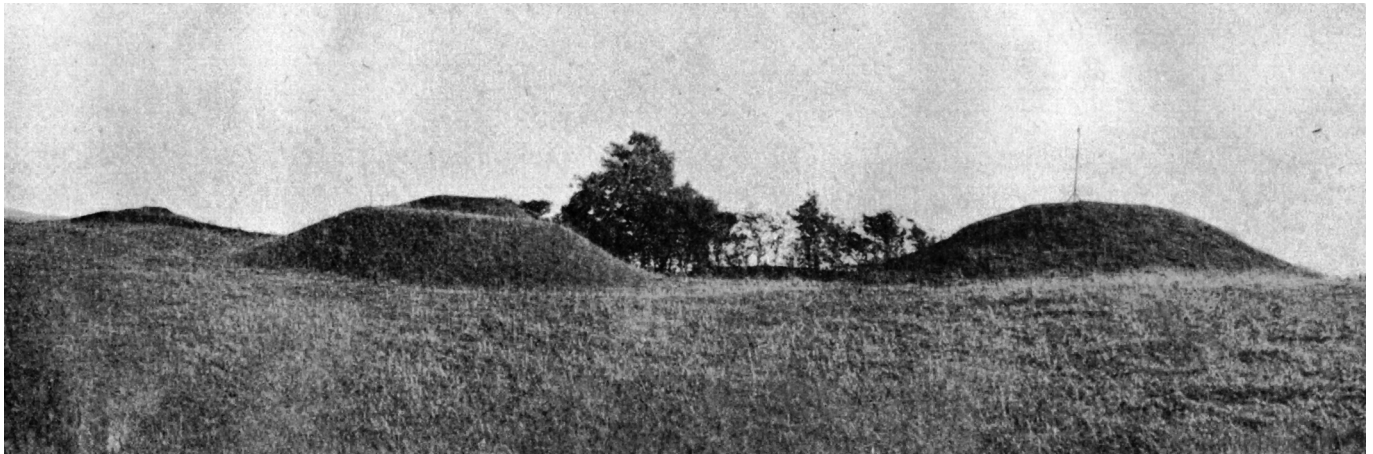


Figure 10 Photograph dated c. 1920 of the barrow group on the summit of Slanemore Hill, Co. Westmeath, 6.5km north-west of Mullingar (Source: Shaw 1921, pl. xxii). The view is from the north and shows three of the five barrows on the hill – from right to left these are RMP WM018-078002, WM018-078001 and WM018-078. In TBC I, Mac Roth, the messenger of Medb and Ailill, describes the arrival of the Ulaid forces here as follows: ‘There came on to the hill at Slemain Mide ... a great company, fierce, powerful, proud. I think that it numbered three thousand. At once they cast off their garments and dug up a turfy mound as a seat for their leader’ (lines 3589-3592 and p. 221).

called ‘the final battle’ of TBC was an episode of epic proportions not only because of the numbers involved but also in terms of landscape, for the fighting appears to have ranged over a large swathe of the countryside between Mullingar and Ballymore.

There is wide agreement that Slemain Midi is Slanemore Hill situated 6.5km north-west of Mullingar (Walsh 1957, 205–207). Eugene O’Curry appears to have been the first to make the connection between this hill and TBC (see Sullivan 1873, vol. 3, 91). From a topographical point of view, it is interesting to note that the by-roads running west from the fording point at Ballyglass (e.g. Áth Féne) lead one straight to Slanemore. Though it peaks at only 149m OD, this and the adjacent Frewin Hill (171m) are prominent features in the local landscape. Recent survey work by David McGuinness (2012, 33–40) indicates that there are barrow groups on both hills including five definite barrows on Slanemore, three of which crown the hill summit (Fig. 10). In the lead up to the final battle, Mac Roth (Medb and Ailill’s messenger) describes the arrival of the first group of the Ulaid forces here:

‘There came on to the hill at Slemain Mide ... a great company, fierce, powerful, proud. I think that it numbered three thousand. At once they cast off their garments and dug up a turfy mound as a seat for their leader’ (TBC I, lines 3589–3592 and p.221).

Here again we have a striking convergence between the text of TBC and physical monuments, in this case circular earthworks with stepped profiles which could be interpreted as ‘seat-like’ (McGuinness 2012, 21–22).

Though they include Slemain Midi on their map (Fig. 1), Haley and Kinsella are quite astute in not routing Queen Medb’s forces via Slanemore as this was the camp of the Ulaid. In the narrative of TBC I, it also appears to be the ‘*dúnad sair*’ = ‘the encampment in the east’ (line 3887 and p.230) described by Cú Chulainn’s charioteer in the lead up to the battle. Haley

and Kinsella depict the Connachta army as making directly for Gáirech which is plotted c. 16km south-west of Mullingar. Once again the location is based on Walsh’s research (1957, 260–262) that pinpointed Garhy, a townland of c. 270ha lying 3km west of Castletown Geoghegan (Fig. 4). Though his case appears to rest solely on toponymy, Walsh was quite emphatic that this is ‘the celebrated Gáirech of Táin Bó Cuailnge’. In the narrative of TBC I, Gáirech is recurrently paired with Irgáirech (eastern Gáirech) and repeatedly named as the site of the last battle (lines 2314, 3522, 3998). Kinsella’s descriptive notes on this location refer to ‘the hill at Garhy, on the south side of the Mullingar/Moate road, and a similar hill on the opposite side of the road’ (1975, 29). These he equates with the two placenames but the so-called ‘hills’ are slight affairs. If this locality is remarkable for anything, it is the gently undulating enclosed farmland that averages 120m above sea level. Rather than being a hilltop location, the narrative of TBC I actually refers at one point to ‘the plain of Gáirech’ (line 3920, p.230).

In TBC I, Gáirech is presented as not only the location of the final battle but also the site of ‘*dúnad anair*’ = ‘the western encampment’ (line 3887 and p.230) and the Connachta army is clearly referred to as being billeted ‘for Gáirich 7 Irgáirich’ the night before the battle (lines 3943 and 4033–4034). However, in TBC II the Connachta camp is in a different location on the battle-eve: ‘the four great provinces of Ireland made their encampment at Clártha that night’ (lines 4228–4229, p.252). The name Clártha does not feature in TBC I, unless it be the Clothra mentioned in the passage entitled the Muster of the Men of Ireland (line 3961). Though Haley and Kinsella do not include Clártha on their map it is a significant topographical location, frequently mentioned in accounts of the last battle. There is wide agreement that this is the Hill of Clare, 3km south-east of the village of Ballymore (Fig. 4). Once again, we are indebted to O’Curry as the first to make this identification (Sullivan 1873, vol. 2, 315). The Hill of Clare is a prominent steep-sided eminence that peaks at 130m OD and

is crowned by a late medieval castle (RMP WM024–078) which features in the medieval sources (Walsh 1957, 22, 350–352).

As to the great battle itself, it clearly fails to live up its billing, being more of a rout than a classic showdown (Dooley 2006, 187). This is particularly so in TBC I where the description of the combat lacks clarity or cohesion when compared to the passages describing the build up to it. However, if the compilers failed to provide a battle narrative of epic proportions, they certainly envisioned the battlefield on a grand scale. If we accept the placename attributions outlined above, the camps of the Ulaid at Slanemore (Slemain Midi) and the Connachta at the Hill of Clare (Cláthra) are just over 16km apart. Moreover, the site of the battle, at Garhy (Gáirech and Irgáirech), is some 13km south-west of Slanemore and 8km south-east of the Hill of Clare. In a paper on ‘the battlefield of Gairech’ published in the early twentieth century, Thomas Shaw (1921, 136) noted ‘the tradition of a great battle which lingers in the district’. However, the only specific location he identifies in relation to it is Washford Bridge (ITM 627125,750555), a crossing point on the Rath River roughly midway between Ballymore and Rathconrath (Fig. 4). Here according to a ‘vivid’ local tradition ‘there was a fierce and mighty battle fought ... and ... the heads of the slain were interred ... in a large and remarkable mound well known locally as *Cruachan na gceann*’ (ibid., 140–141). Shaw equated Washford with *athshlógaíd* – ‘the ford of the hosting’ (line 3997, p.295) – mentioned in TBC I in relation to the entry of the *ferchuitred* into the last battle.

While such details are eye-catching, they are potentially misleading as there is no specific evidence to link Washford with *athshlógaíd*, nor is there anything in Shaw’s summation of the local lore to tie it to TBC. Shaw’s paper is a valuable contribution to the literature on the route of TBC and his toponymic map of the battlefield was most innovative for its time. However, the paper is full of wishful thinking regarding the placement of names. For instance, Shaw (1921, 136) disagreed with Walsh’s placement of Gáirech at Garhy. Firming up a suggestion made by Hogan (1910, 604), he proposed that ‘the scene of the supposed battlefield is to be found in the townlands and districts adjoining and including the townland of Corr’. There are a number of townlands of this name in Westmeath, the one in question being that associated with Corr House, 3km south-west of Rathconrath (Fig. 4). However, there does not appear to be any specific evidence for placing Gáirech here other than the fact that it would situate the battlefield in an almost direct line between the hills at Slanemore and Clare, albeit slightly closer to the latter (7km) than the former (9.5km).

The battle itself resulted in the rout of the Connachta army, the turning point being the entry of Cú Chulainn into the fray and the consequent withdrawal from the field of Ferghus Mac Róich and his forces. As Medb and the remnants of her army retreat westwards, the narrative informs us that Cú Chulainn overtook them. Sparing the Queen’s life, he ‘convoys them west to Áth Lúain and across the ford too’ (TBC I, lines 4117–4118 and p.236). Haley and Kinsella’s map shows a straight line from Gáirech to the Shannon (Fig. 1) but Denis Kelly’s reconstruction of the route of TBC, cited above, provides an interesting alternative. In his view, the natural approach to Athlone from the east would be via ‘Moyvore, and

hence, by the pass over the gravel Esker, commencing at Bruighean da Choga, to the pass across the Shannon at Athlone’ (Kelly 1879, 256). There is general agreement that Bruiden Da Choca can be equated with a prominently positioned earthwork in Bryanmore Upper townland (RMP WM023–070), 12km north-east of Athlone (Cox 1994, 77–78, 82–83; Toner 2007, 28, 150–151). Labelled on the detailed OS maps as ‘The Breen’ it is a circular enclosure of c. 60m overall diameter within the confines of which are the fragmentary remains of a medieval castle (Fig. 4). In the literature, Bruiden Da Choca features as one of six great hostels in Ireland, each of which stood ‘at the junction of several roads’ (Toner 2007, 19, 283–284). Though the story of its destruction post-dates TBC, it is clearly linked to it. Bryanmore lies only 8.5km west of Clare Hill and the most likely route between the two would have been via Ballymore, crossing the Tang/Dungolman River at Crush and continuing along the R390 via Drumraney (see Fig. 4). The ‘pass’ from Bryanmore to Athlone, as envisioned by Kelly, probably followed the winding by-road that runs via Ballybornia, Bealin and Moydrum to Cartonroy. However, there is no continuous ‘gravel esker’ connecting ‘The Breen’ with Athlone (see Sollas 1896).

The ford at Athlone is most widely known as Áth Lúain, exclusively so in TBC I, but it also had an alias, Áth Mór, which features in TBC II (see Index of Places). The town itself is situated on a major esker and continuous ridges can be traced on either side of the Shannon running due east and west for at least 10.5km (Foot and O’Kelly 1865, 22). It is these that dictated the position of the ford. Not only was it a strategic crossing point on Ireland’s largest river, the Shannon, the ford also straddled the provincial boundary between Leinster and Connacht. Thus, it is no surprise to find that it was one of the most famous river-crossings in early medieval Ireland. In the *Annals of ... the Four Masters*, for instance, it is second only to Áth Cliath (Dublin) in terms of frequency of mention before AD 1200 (O’Donovan 1856, Vol. 7, 6–8). Its precise location has been the subject of some debate. Kelly (1879, 254) placed it ‘at the poorhouse of Athlone’ which would be c. 250m upstream from the present road bridge while others have speculated that the medieval bridge of Athlone may have been built on its site (see Murtagh 1994, 13): the latter stood just downstream from the present bridge. The most likely scenario is that the early medieval ford is one and the same as the historic ford. The latter is best known from its role in the assault and capture of the west town of Athlone in 1691. Its position is shown on the map accompanying Story’s *Impartial History* (1693, part 2, 106–107) downstream from the late medieval bridge. Murtagh (1994, 13) estimates that it was c. 100m south of the latter and from this its site can be pinpointed approximately (ITM c. 603950,741390).

Standish Hayes O’Grady’s map (Fig. 3) closes the route-circle of TBC by plotting a course north-westwards from Athlone to Crúachain via Lecarrow and Roscommon town, a distance of c. 50km. In contrast, Haley and Kinsella’s map (Fig. 1) shows the route-end at Athlone itself. This is based on Gene Haley’s contention (1970, 166–167) that ‘the Táin proper is at an end’ once the Connachta army crosses the ford at Athlone. As he points out, the subsequent narrative is devoted entirely to the combat of the bulls – Finnbennach and Donn Cúailnge.

Conclusion

As stated at the outset, this paper is not a comprehensive treatment of the route of TBC. Rather it is a review of Haley and Kinsella's cartographic reconstruction of same. The assessments of the individual placenames and suggested adjustments to the route are most definitely open to further discussion and correction. A key pre-requisite to unravelling the topography of TBC is a knowledge not only of the literature but also of the landscapes in which it is set. Information on the route of TBC is often lodged in obscure places so if some locations and/or references have been missed, it is hoped that those with specific local knowledge will be stimulated to root them out and air them. The eDIL and Logainm websites, along with the Locus Project are providing topographers with increasingly sophisticated sets of data and tools for toponymic research. In particular, the further advancement of the monumental *Dictionary of Gaelic Placenames* (Ó Riain *et al* 2003) is imperative if we are to have a comprehensive treatment of the placenames of TBC, and by implication its route.

Researching the route of TBC is a form of landscape archaeology. As such it involves the topographer in the identification of hills, bogs, rivers, fords, passes and routeways as

well as archaeological and historical sites. The real and mythical landscapes of early medieval Ireland were intertwined. The inclusion of places like Barnavave, Hurlstone and Slanemore Hill sharpen the sense that the compilers of TBC were familiar with landscape features and ancient monuments and wove them into the story. Moreover, at Scramoge, Donaghpatrick, and Bothar Maol one gets the sense of a TBC that is rooted in local memory. The maps produced by Haley and Kinsella are deceptively simple. However, their creation demanded much research to distil a meaningful route from often difficult and divergent texts. Their reconstruction of the route was a considerable achievement and has provided academic scholars, local historians and tourism officers with enough grist to occupy them for many years to come.

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