

10. Early medieval historical research on the M3 in County Meath: sources, contexts and analyses

Anne Connors



Illus. 1—Location of the early medieval sites on the M3 Clonsilla–North of Kells motorway scheme discussed in this paper (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map).

When trying to understand the historical context of early medieval sites such as those newly discovered along the route of the M3 Clonsilla–North of Kells motorway scheme, probably the best point of departure is to try to determine the site's original name. Since all place-names would have been in Irish before the coming of the Anglo-Normans in the late 12th century, this task is made much simpler when the modern name of the site represents a straightforward Anglicisation of a Gaelic original. In these cases the early place-name can often be easily reconstructed, thereby facilitating an attempt to trace the site in the early medieval historical sources.

One good example of a place-name that enables us to easily trace the original Irish name of the site is 'Ardraccan'. This is the name of both a townland and a parish in north central County Meath. The townland contains a possible late Iron Age or early medieval settlement site (Ardraccan 2), discovered in the course of excavations carried out as part of the M3 project (Illus. 1).¹ Here, 'Ardraccan' is clearly derived from the Irish *Árd Breccáin*, 'the heights of Breccáin', an important monastic centre during the early medieval period.



Illus. 2—Post-excavation elevated view of Collierstown 1 cemetery, looking west (Hawkeye).

Other Irish-based place-names may not be quite so obvious in their derivation but are still possible to reconstruct. For example, ‘Collierstown’, the name of a townland near Tara containing a newly discovered burial site (Collierstown 1; Illus. 2), is a corruption of ‘Calliaghstown’, itself an Anglicisation of *Baile na Caillige*, ‘the farmstead or residence of the nuns’.² During the later medieval period, and possibly in pre-Norman Ireland as well, Collierstown was part of the landholdings of St Brigid’s nunnery of Odder, near Tara (Cogan 1874, 256).

The fact that both Collierstown and Ardbraccan have strong ecclesiastical links may have contributed to the continuity between the earlier and later incarnations of their names (Duffy 2000, 204). The proliferation of places containing the element ‘Kil(l)’—from *cell*, the Irish word for church—emphasises the enduring power of ecclesiastical names in the Irish landscape. This is not to say, though, that only ecclesiastical place-names have survived through the ages. Lismullin is the site of a recently discovered Iron Age post enclosure (O’Connell 2007a; 2007b; Deevy, this volume; O’Connor, this volume), which also contains some early and later medieval features (Illus. 3).³ The name derives from *Les Muilinn*, ‘the ringfort of the mill’. Although *Les Muilinn* does not appear as a place-name *per se* in the early medieval sources, its location implies that it may have been the place celebrated in early Irish lore as the home of the first watermill in Ireland. According to the *Dindshenchas* (‘lore of prominent places’, a body of pre-Norman poetry celebrating famous sites in Ireland) of Tara, the legendary king of Tara Cormac mac Airt impregnated Ciarnat, an English slavewoman whose task it was to grind 10 measures of corn a day by hand. Taking pity upon his heavily pregnant lover, Cormac sent across the Irish Sea for a wright to build a watermill on a stream near Tara in the hope that the new technology would considerably lessen her workload (Gwynn 1903, 22–3; Meyer 1900–1).



*Illus. 3—
Elevated view of
an early
medieval
souterrain at
Lismullin 1
(John
Sunderland).*

While the original names of the places discussed above were relatively simple to trace, unfortunately the same cannot be said of all of the early medieval sites excavated as part of the M3 project. Instead, the majority of place-names associated with these sites derive from the period of Anglo-Norman settlement in County Meath, frequently taking the form of the personal name of a Norman family compounded with the suffix 'town' (Murphy 2006, 13; Herity 2001, 73). Sites excavated in the townlands of Boyerstown, Dowdstown, Baronstown and Roestown are all cases in point. Such a naming pattern is extremely useful to historians of the later medieval period as it can signal the identity of the site's occupants at this time. With regard to the early medieval period, however, it frequently obscures, and in many instances has obliterated altogether, the site's original Irish name. In these situations, in order to try to gain some understanding of the early medieval phase of the site, the historian must rely on general context rather than specific references.

Working from context

In the case of a high-status early medieval site (Illus. 4) discovered at Roestown 2 (O’Hara 2007), for example, the townland’s location suggests that it may have been occupied by a branch of the dynasty known as *Síl nÁedo Sláine*, ‘the seed of Áed of Slane’.⁴ *Síl nÁedo Sláine* were one of four chief divisions of the *Uí Néill*—‘the descendants of Niall [of the Nine Hostages]’—the dynasty that claimed a virtual monopoly on the kingship of Tara from roughly the late fifth century to the early 11th century (Byrne 1973, 85–6). *Síl nÁedo Sláine*’s own hold on the Tara kingship was limited to the sixth and seventh centuries, and to a last blaze of glory in the mid-10th century. When not kings of Tara, *Síl nÁedo Sláine*’s claim to fame was as rulers of Brega, the early medieval kingdom that was home to all of the sites excavated as part of the M3 motorway scheme. Encompassing almost all of modern-day County Meath, Brega also took in parts of south County Louth and north County Dublin (Ó Riain et al. 2005, 174–5)

Síl nÁedo Sláine was a dynasty intensely fractured by infighting, and by at least the mid-eighth century had split into a number of distinct sub-kingdoms (Byrne 1967–8, 396–7). Roestown lay within the *Síl nÁedo Sláine* sub-kingdom of *Deiscert Breg*, ‘South Brega’, an area controlled by the *Uí Chernaig* branch of *Síl nÁedo Sláine*. One of the capitals of South Brega inhabited by the *Uí Chernaig* kings was the crannog, or artificial island, of Lagore, just a few kilometres to the south-east of Roestown (Price 1950, 26; Byrne 1967–8, 383). The *Uí Chernaig* also had strong links to the ecclesiastical sites of Dunshaughlin (*Domnach Sechnaill*, ‘the church of Sechnaill or Secundinus’) and Trevet (*Treóit*) to the immediate south and north, respectively, of Roestown (Charles-Edwards 2000, 273; Bhreathnach 1999, 4, 18). Given its proximity to these three places, it is quite likely that the high-status site of Roestown was itself inhabited at one time by the *Uí Chernaig*.



Illus. 4—Elevated view of Roestown 2, Area A, after excavation, looking south-east in the direction of Lagore (Hawkeye).

Identifying secular power centres

Even if Roestown's original Irish name had been known, this is no guarantee that there would have been a record of it in the early medieval sources. The truth is that we know surprisingly little about the location of centres of even major pre-Norman Irish kingships, let alone the holdings of lesser mortals. When trying to ascertain where people lived, historians of the later medieval period rely on sources like rentals that detail the income owed to a landlord from his tenants, inquisitions that detail the holdings of an individual at the time of his death, and charters that formally granted land to an individual or church. For the early medieval period, however, these types of administrative documents are almost entirely lacking.

One way to partly compensate for this absence is to examine the titles accorded to important secular leaders. The main evidence leading historians to identify the crannog of Lagore as one of the chief royal centres of South Brega, for example, is the fact that some of the Uí Chernaig rulers of that kingdom are called 'king of Lagore' by the annals (Price 1950, 26; Byrne 1967–8, 390). (Price felt that 'king of South Brega' was the equivalent of 'king of Lagore'; on closer examination, however, it would seem that 'king of Lagore' was the title claimed by only two of the branches of Uí Chernaig. Rulers who hailed from the two other chief branches never used the 'Lagore' title, only that of 'king of South Brega', and were probably based elsewhere.) Using titles to identify royal centres is not, however, always reliable. The head of the Uí Néill dynasty, as we have seen, was usually called 'king of Tara', despite the fact that, depending on which branch of the Uí Néill was in power, the king of 'Tara' could be based as far away as Donegal, Tyrone or Westmeath (Byrne 1973, 57).

The annals also very occasionally make direct reference to the homes of kings. Although such mentions mainly occur in the post-Conquest period, the death notice in 1022 for Máel Sechnaill son of Domnall—a king of Tara who belonged to the Clann Cholmáin branch of the Southern Uí Néill—names his home as Doon (*Dún na Scíath*) on the shores of Loch Ennell, Co. Westmeath (*A. Clon.*, 171). Doon is once again associated with Máel Sechnaill in a poem on the Battle of Clontarf (O'Lochlainn 1941–2, 209). This example illustrates the way in which poetry, particularly praise poetry celebrating specific kings, can help to link individuals to particular royal residences. One needs to be careful, however, since a poet's linking of his royal patron with a certain place-name may sometimes owe more to his attempt to invoke the prestige associated with a celebrated ritual centre in the king's territory than to the historical reality of the patron's actual dwelling-place. The same caution should be noted with regard to the use of saga literature as a source for the location of royal centres. Somewhat more reliable are references found in hagiography (saints' Lives). As the main focus of these works is generally to promote holy men or women rather than secular leaders, their incidental mentions of royal sites are less likely to be included purely for propaganda value.

Also helpful on occasion is the previously referred to corpus of poetry dealing with famous places, the *Dindshenchas Érenn*. One of the *Dindshenchas* poems on Tara, for example, provides a list of the strongholds of Ireland that could, potentially, be enormously helpful in identifying royal residences (Gwynn 1903, Vol. I, 38–43). Unfortunately, however, some of the sites on the list are yet to be identified, and since the list tends to group the forts alphabetically rather than by region, their whereabouts, even on a broad scale, remain unknown. That said, certain of the sites appear in another *Dindshenchas* poem that



Illus. 5—Elevated view of the possible late Iron Age or early medieval settlement site at Ardraccan 2, looking east (Hawkeye).

specifically references the strongholds of Brega (Gwynn 1903, Vol. III, 440–1), while a number of others are listed at the end of the saga tale ‘The settling of the manor of Tara’ (Best 1910, 148, 163), in a context that makes it clear that they were located in either Brega or the neighbouring Southern Uí Néill kingdom of Mide (roughly approximating to County Westmeath). It is undeniably tempting to take some of these Brega sites whose name is known but whose location is not, and match them up with some of the high-status sites recently discovered on the M3 whose location is known but whose name is not; without further information to help narrow down the possibilities, however, such an exercise would be rather arbitrary.

The discussion above has aimed to make clear that the attempt to identify early medieval secular archaeological sites can be a difficult task that often relies more on general context than exact pinpointing. Ecclesiastical sites, on the other hand, are frequently easier to trace in the historical record, both because of greater continuity with regard to their names and because they tend to have a higher profile in the written sources, and particularly in saints’ Lives, martyrologies (calendars recording the feast-days of saints) and the annals. That the annals were themselves compiled in an ecclesiastical environment is likely to be one cause of this heightened presence; the fact that churches were often the victims of raids and military attacks noted in the annals is another.

Returning to the example of Ardraccan 2 (Illus. 5), mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the annals relate that the church that lent its name to the townland was a large ecclesiastical centre that could contain at least 400 people (*AU I*, 468–9). The complex, which included a stone church (*AU I*, 468–9, 558–9), a steeple (*A. Clon.*, 214), several temples (*A. Tig.*, 333) and a monastic school (*AFM II*, 868–9), was burnt by the Vikings of

Dublin in 993 (*AFM* II, 730–1) and 1031 (*AU* I, 468–9, 474–5), but, based on later annalistic references to the church, appears to have been rebuilt thereafter. Saints' Lives and genealogies, meanwhile, tell us that the church and its environs—presumably including the settlement site discovered during the M3 excavations—were located in Dál Conchobair (Bieler 1979, 124–5), a territory that lay within the lands of the Déisi (Ó Riain 1985, 169). Despite the problems faced by the historian in trying to identify newly discovered archaeological sites, then, the early medieval ecclesiastical and secular sources can sometimes, as in the case of Ardraccan 2, allow us to construct a reasonable profile of the area in which a site was located.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the excavation directors who shared their thoughts and pre-publication reports with me. I would also like to thank Dr Clodagh Downey, to whom I owe the reference to Doon in the poem on the Battle of Clontarf.

Notes

1. Ardraccan 2; NGR 282811, 267104; height 67 m OD; excavation registration no. E3116; ministerial direction no. A023/024; excavation director Matt Mossop.
2. Collierstown 1; NGR 294743, 258825; height 118 m OD; excavation registration no. E3068; ministerial direction no. A008/015; excavation director Robert O'Hara.
3. Lismullin 1; NGR 293437, 261602; height 77 m OD; excavation registration no. E3074; ministerial direction nos A008/021 & A042; excavation director Aidan O'Connell.
4. Roestown 2; NGR 295793, 253824; height 106 m OD; excavation registration no. E3055; ministerial direction no. A008/002; excavation director Robert O'Hara.

