

Megalithic tombs and storied landscapes in Neolithic Ireland

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Summary

This paper is concerned with the storied landscapes underlying the megalithic tradition of the Irish Neolithic. The importance of place is now well established as a significant factor in the distribution of megalithic tombs at a local level as well as the original source of material from which they were built. At one level those places could be seen as a backdrop to the megalithic tomb; at another they could be seen as the reason for its construction or an intrinsic element of the construction ritual. Here we are concerned with the Neolithic mythologies that might have given meaning to ancient landscapes. Although the specific mythical personalities and events through which the meaning of places were reinforced and transmitted from generation to generation in deep prehistory are now lost to us, we can nevertheless hope to identify the landscapes in which such mythical dramas were brought to life in the stories. The paper draws on analogies from Irish mythology and folklore, and examines a small number of Neolithic case studies in some detail.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel beschäftigt sich mit den erzählten Landschaften, die mit den megalithischen Traditionen des irischen Neolithikums verbunden sind. Die Wichtigkeit von Orten auf einer lokalen Maßstabsebene ist seit einiger Zeit als signifikanter Faktor für die Verbreitung von Megalithgräbern erkannt, ebenso wie die Herkunft der Baumaterialien. Wir beschäftigen uns hier mit neolithischen Mythologien, die vorgeschichtlichen Landschaften ihre Bedeutung gegeben haben mögen. Obwohl die konkreten neolithischen mythischen Personen und Ereignisse, durch die die Bedeutung der Orte verstärkt und von Generation zu Generation weitergegeben wurden, uns nicht mehr zugänglich sind, können wir immerhin hoffen, Landschaften zu rekonstruieren, in denen solche mythischen Dramen in den Erzählungen lebendig wurden. Dieser Artikel bedient sich Analogien aus der irischen Mythologie und volkstümlichen Überlieferung und konzentriert sich auf die ausschnittshafte Behandlung einiger neolithische Fallbeispiele.

Introduction

It is in the nature of humanity to mythologize, to devise explanatory narratives addressing the deepest existential questions we face: Who are we? How did our world unfold? Are there other worlds out there? What is our future? A society's response to questions like these tends to promote the cohesion and distinctive identity of the group and re-affirm its status in the world. In this sense, modern scientific myths about origins take their place alongside older traditions such

as the biblical creation story or the Irish invasion narrative recounted in the 12th century manuscript *Lebor Gabhála Éirenn*. In time all myths become dated as the information on which they are founded is superseded by society's expanding knowledge, but they are surprisingly resilient because the underlying mysteries are intractable. Ancient myths still live in the Irish oral tradition, especially in rural and Gaelic-speaking areas, and manuscript accounts allow us to trace the roots of these myths back to early medieval times at least. Beyond the reach of historical records, however, it is difficult to measure the genealogy of myths because chronology is one of the more intractable problems of folklore (Ó hÓgáin 1999, VIII). Accordingly it would be unreasonable to suggest that known myths of the historical era had roots in the fourth millennium BC or even that the survival of specific myths in folk memory over the past thousand years, for example, can be taken as a measure of their survival over the previous thousand years and beyond. There may be some value, however, in projecting the interplay between mythology and landscape over the past 1,000–1,500 years in Ireland as an analogy for mythically enriched Neolithic terrains. This analogy might then inform our efforts to identify sacred locations of the Neolithic world. In the following paragraphs an effort is made to travel such a journey, and the reader is invited along for the experience.

Locating myths

Myths are often located in familiar yet mysterious places at the margins of the everyday world: remote lands, mountain pinnacles, the sources of wells and rivers, forbidding forests and marshes, socially restricted territory, topographical anomalies, the night sky, or deepest space. Myths enrich the cultural landscape and the lives of those living within it by associating dark secrets, epic stories, heroic events and supernatural or larger than life personalities with these places. Who could imagine Mount Sinai without the Ten Commandments or Mount Olympus without the Greek pantheon? Societies frequently explain the origin of distinctive features in the landscape by weaving them into a mythological narrative, as in the case of the geological spectacle known as the Giant's Causeway in county Antrim, Ireland, reputedly constructed by the legendary Irish hero Fionn Mac Cumhaill so that he could pursue an adversary across the sea to Scotland. Some mythic places exist primarily in the imagination. England's *Camelot* and the Irish *Tír na nÓg* are as much utopian states of being as physical locations. Where imaginary worlds feature in the lore of a society, their interface with day-to-day life is often linked with mysterious features in the local countryside. Thus medieval monsters and dragons inhabited caves and the deep. In Ireland strange encounters with fairy folk could be expected in a *lios* (fairy dwelling), usually a local ringfort, in reality a settlement enclosure of the mid-first millennium AD. Likewise the remains of specific megalithic tombs were the impromptu nocturnal beds of the infatuated lovers Diarmaid and Gráinne as they fled through the countryside pursued by Gráinne's enraged husband, the previously mentioned Fionn. Spears thrown by Fionn as he tried to bring down the fleeing couple remain standing in the countryside as *galláin* (standing stones) while a fistful of rock thrown in exasperation became the Rock of Cashel in county Tipperary, the cavity left by its removal remaining visible as the Devil's Bit, a landmark mountain in the same county with a noticeable hollow at the summit.

There is a close relationship between myth and religion. Several revered religious centres of the Christian tradition, for example, originated as pagan shrines or epic events at the edge of known history.

Thus the great pilgrimage centre at Santiago da Compostela derives its status from its association with the apostle James, a rather tenuous link forged by legend as much as history. In medieval Ireland founding saints, preferably the dominant figure of Patrick (5th century AD) provided a Christian context for traditional shrines in the countryside.¹ The number of holy wells bearing the name of Patrick is legion, and inevitably the narrative of his missionary life involves visits to iconic places of the pagan Iron Age, such as Tara and Rathcroghan, while he also spent time on the summit of Croagh Patrick, a pilgrimage mountain to the present day that seems to have played an important symbolic role from the Bronze Age if not earlier. In some cases the link from prehistoric paganism to more recent Christian traditions has multiple strands. An early Irish account has Patrick baptising two princesses at the well of Ogulla at Rathcroghan, who after their deaths were buried in what seems to have been the traditional pagan manner (Herity 1991, 34). The spring well at Ogulla, transformed mysteriously into a voluminous rivulet as it flows away from its source, remains a Christian shrine to the present day. That it was also a pre-Christian shrine is suggested by the combination of

- (I) mysterious natural phenomenon,
- (II) location at the edge of the sacred Rathcroghan landscape and
- (III) linkage with Patrick.

Likewise, two spring wells rise on the Hill of Tara, one of which is revered locally as St. Patrick's well and linked with Liaig, a spring listed in earlier sources (Newman 1997, 28/89). Both streams find their way eventually into the River Boyne by means of the Gabhra river which flows past the cluster of ritual features at Lismullin in the valley to the east of Tara. The best known of these features is the Iron Age timber circle but other discoveries included a large Neolithic pit, re-dug several times and producing a macehead amongst other artefacts, and a stone decorated with megalithic art and recycled as a roof-stone in the chamber of a souterrain. The occurrence of ritual features from both the Neolithic and Iron Age may be coincidence, but not necessarily so as I suggest below.

The evidence from Rathcroghan and Tara suggests that, while later prehistoric narratives have been mediated through the lens of Christian scribes (Ó hÓgáin 1999, VII), the landscapes inhabited by these myths are open to fresh study based on an analysis of the known shrines absorbed into the Christian tradition and those deliberately avoided. Moreover, building on an awareness of culturally enriched places in historical times, the search for environments touched by Neolithic mythology becomes a more promising line of enquiry. Megalithic tombs are a natural starting point for the endeavour because they are obvious and enduring landmarks. In Ireland, the long-established classification of these monuments identifies four principal groups: court tombs, passage tombs, portal tombs and wedge tombs. The classification and associated terminology are retained here for convenience, although they are challenged by the identification of numerous anomalous structures and practices (Shee Twohig 2004, 9; O'Sullivan 2007). For the purpose of this paper, wedge tombs are left aside because they are dated primarily to the Bronze Age while court tombs are also omitted because their distribution appears to have as much to do with soil types and drainage as topographical considerations.

Portal tombs are intriguing (fig. 1), not least because our knowledge of these sites from recent excavations is limited. As highlighted by ApSimon (1986, 6), even the basic chronology of these monuments is as much a matter of inference as established fact. Of those excavated during the past thirty years, the portal tomb at Melkagh

1 Phallic stones of the pagan Celtic Iron Age, akin to the Lia Fáil at Tara and the decorated stone at Turoe in county Galway, stand near the holy well at two of the shrines associated with St. Ciarán of Saighir, reputedly one of the earliest Christian missionaries in Ireland (O'Sullivan 1997).



Fig. 1. Pounabrone portal tomb, county Clare, Ireland. Note the pronounced entrance and tapering height from front to rear.

Abb. 1. Das Pounabrone Portal Tomb, county Clare, Irland. Besondere Beachtung verdient der markante Eingang und die von vorne nach hinten abnehmende Höhe der Anlage.

in county Longford had been effectively destroyed before the archaeological work began (Cooney 1997) and the tantalising preliminary account of the excavations at Poulabrone in county Clare (Lynch 1988) has served only to whet the archaeological appetite for the awaited comprehensive report. From a landscape perspective, the most complete analysis of portal tombs is to be found in Ó Nualláin (1983). Difficult to pin down in terms of universal patterns, in many cases they seem to occur close to rivers and streams: Haroldstown and Ballynoe in county Carlow, for example, are each located within 100m of the Derreen river, a tributary of the Slaney, while Kilgraney in the same county lies within 10m of a stream that also joins the Slaney. There are only two other portal tombs in the county, both lying within a few kilometres of the river Barrow and one of them less than two kilometres from its tributary the Burren. Portal tombs frequently tend to be impressive structures, at least in their denuded state, but they are seldom located on the tops of ridges or hillocks in the manner of passage tombs, sitting instead in valleys (38%), flat and undulating land (36%) and hillsides (18%), as reported by Ó Nualláin (1983, 86). With their emphasised front end and decreasing height from front to rear, these monuments might be taken to represent entrances to the mysteries of the netherworld. One way or another they undoubtedly encapsulate important mythological ideas of the fourth millennium BC. However, our knowledge of this class of megalith beyond their location and structure is insufficiently developed to facilitate a meaningful examination of Neolithic ideology. Colleagues in Britain are faced with a similar difficulty, although Scarre (2006, 193) has drawn attention to the possibility that the portal tombs at Pentre Ifan and Carreg Samson in Wales may each have been constructed on the site from which the capstone was dug, which, by displaying the stone in an elevated position, makes a statement that seems at once bold and indecipherable to us. Passage tombs represent a more promising line of inquiry because they have been studied from many perspectives and in considerable detail. We have been gifted a treasure house of data through the endeavours of many 20th century researchers and are on firmer ground in stating that these structures appear to represent intricate cosmological ideas and principles. Rather than attempt a comprehensive statement on the issue, this paper dwells on a few iconic landscapes in the hope of prompting a debate that might extend to other contexts.

Passage tomb sites: synchronic or diachronic?

Megalithic structures have often been treated as integral architectural units, planned once-off achievements in which *pre-tomb* and *post-tomb* activity played a subsidiary or marginal role. Pre-cairn traces, for example, were often explained as habitation layers from earlier settlement or preparatory activities associated with the construction of the megalithic tomb (e.g. Herity 1974, 164–8). By contrast, developments in data and inference allow contemporary sequential narratives for individual sites to be more complex. The surviving traces at Fourknocks II, for example, are best explained as the product of a chain of ceremonial events during the Neolithic rather than a once-off construction project (Cooney 2000, 106–8). A similar argument can be made in the case of Carrowmore 4 where, in addition to the cruciform tomb, two separate stone cists containing classic passage tomb funerary remains were located within the area enclosed by the cairn (Burenhult 1980, 70–7 and fig. 27). Based on emergent ideas elsewhere, the cists might be interpreted as pre-cairn phenomena arising from self-contained ceremonial exercises, subsequently incorporated within the cairn associated with the tomb. At Townley-hall, the passage tomb was constructed over a horizon that was rich in stake holes and Neolithic artefacts, including a variety of pottery vessels, but the stake holes were only 4–5 cm in diameter and did not form a pattern that would conform to any obvious domestic structure. Moreover the overlying layer of Neolithic material formed a clear intermediate horizon between the stake holes and the overlying passage tomb (Eogan 1963). It is also significant that the remains of nine intense fires were encountered amongst the stake holes, a remarkable concentration of burning in one location and presumably an indication of successive events. Such indicators of diachronic activity on the one location, often underscored by an emphasis on enclosing the chosen space (O'Sullivan 2009, 20–1), have in the past prompted archaeological interpretations relying primarily on deconstructing a building project (Childe 1940, 65; Piggott 1954, 198–9; Herity 1974, 166 and 259; O'Kelly, Lynch/O'Kelly 1978, 276). In hind-



Fig. 2. Excavation photograph of the Mound of the Hostages at Tara, a passage tomb excavated during the 1950s and studied in considerable depth during recent years.

Abb. 2. Ausgrabungsfoto des Mound of the Hostages in Tara, ein Ganggrab, ausgegraben in den 1950ern und seither, besonders in den letzten Jahren ausgiebig untersucht.

sight these explanations may have missed the point that each site was fashioned unsystematically over time by the distinctive ceremonial needs and interventions of successive generations rather than flowing from a preconceived blueprint. The following case study may help to clarify the point (fig. 2–4).

A reasonably clear succession of phases has been identified at the Mound of the Hostages, Tara in county Meath (O'Sullivan 2005),

supported by a detailed sequence of radiocarbon dates and a thorough Bayesian analysis of the chronology (Bayliss/O'Sullivan i. pr.). The phase on which I wish to focus specifically here is the pre-cairn stage, the lowest of the six in figure 3. The evidence from these levels does not amount to a coherent package, except in the scarcity of artefacts. An arc of ditch running beneath the cairn is possibly the remains of an enclosure focused to the west of the megalithic tomb. Unconnected areas of pre-cairn burning were recorded to the east of the ditch, as well as some pits, a deposit of unburnt human bone and a mass of unexplained organic material. This miscellany of pre-cairn events includes at least some ritual elements but does not amount to an overtly orchestrated set of actions. It would seem, for example, that some of the earliest activity was sealed beneath an intervening layer of soil before later pre-cairn events occurred. Following the convention of the time (1950s) the extent of the excavations focused quite tightly around the mound itself, leaving uncertainty today about the original scope or even focus of pre-cairn activity on the Hill of Tara. The theme of variety, established in the pre-cairn phase, was continued through the subsequent development of the complex. Associated in radiocarbon time with the construction of the passage tomb, a loose arc of individual cremation deposits (Burials 1–17) was laid down to enclose the focal area, especially around its southern perimeter (See fig. 3, phase 2). While the series of radiocarbon dates from the cremation deposits is remarkably consistent and most were associated with distinctive mini-settings of stones, the evidence suggests that even these do not represent an entirely homogenous group: The most idiosyncratic and elaborate of the stone settings, Burial 1 near the tomb entrance, sat directly on the fill of a pit containing some exceptional earlier Neolithic pottery (O'Sullivan 2005, 42), the only non-passage tomb Neolithic pottery recovered from the site. This vignette of consecutive activity has been linked with the deliberate infilling of pits elsewhere, with inclusions of carefully arranged artefacts and successive episodes of re-digging, and taken as evidence that pits were dug, ceremonially re-filled, marked in some way and remembered as locations for subsequent ritual activity (Cooney 2009, 73). Whether the stone setting at the Mound of the Hostages could be construed as a herald of the ensuing megalithic structure, a consciously or unconsciously stage in an evolutionary social trajectory, we have no prima facie evidence that the megalithic tomb was anything other than a single-phase construction, although the cists built against the orthostats from the outside might well have been an addition, especially if the cairn was not laid down immediately (See Scarre forthcoming). Human bone deposition occurred within the tomb from shortly before 3,000 BC, again in the later Neolithic a few hundred years later, and afterwards in the Early Bronze Age from the 21st century BC. Just after 2,000 BC the practice changed from deposition within the tomb to insertion from the surface of the mound, and a succession of burials occurred in the mound until the final interment took place in the 17th century BC. This long, occasionally interrupted sequence of activity from pre-construction to cessation is reflected and complemented by residues around the perimeter of the mound and beyond, such as the palisades constructed beside the mound c. 2500 cal BC and a mysterious set of intense fires burned at the perimeter shortly after 2000 cal BC. From the Late Bronze Age, human activity of a ceremonial nature continued to leave a trace on the Hill of Tara, represented by a ring-barrow with cremated human bone immediately beside the Mound of the Hostages, for example, and a sequence of Iron Age phases at the nearby Rath of the Synods (Grogan 2008). By the middle of the first millennium AD, the enormous political and cultural status of Tara

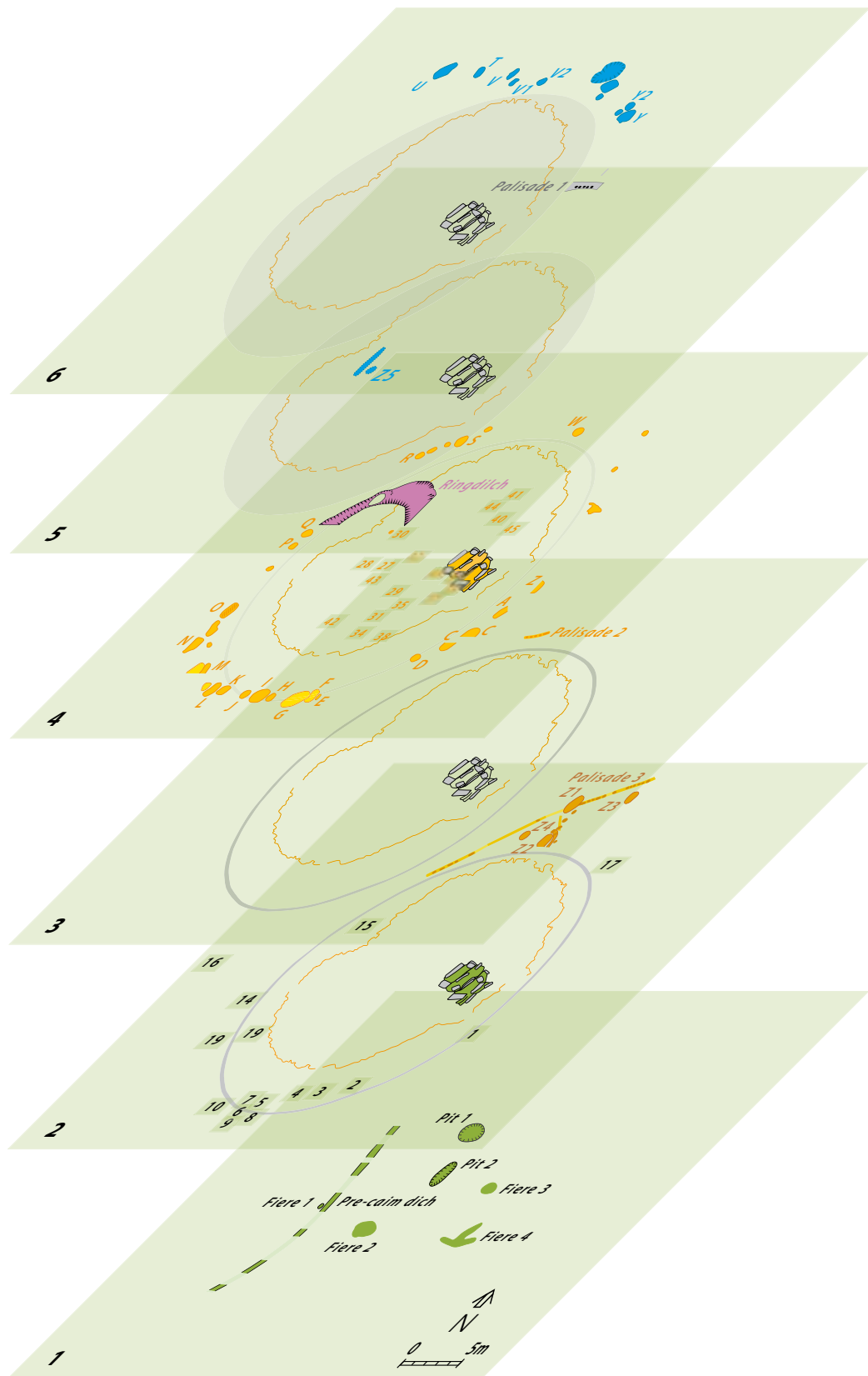


Fig. 3. Principal phases of activity identified at the Mound of the Hostages. Successively from the lowest layer these are (I) the pre-cairn levels, (II) the tomb construction and Neolithic usage, (III) the palisades erected nearby at the Neolithic/Bronze Age interface, (IV) the Early Bronze Age burial phase, (V) later Bronze Age and Iron Age activity, and (VI) post-medieval traces.

Abb. 3. Identifizierte Hauptphasen von Aktivität am Mound of the Hostages. Von der untersten Schicht angefangen finden sich: 1. Die Vorhügelphase; 2. Grabkonstruktion und neolithische Nutzung; 3. Palisaden, errichtet nahebei, während des Übergangs Neolithikum-Bronzezeit; 4. die frühbronzezeitliche Bestattungsphase; 5. spätbronzezeitliche und eisenzeitliche Aktivitäten; 6. nachmittelalterliche Aktivitäten.

was reflected in a palimpsest of prehistoric traces (fig. 4) and a rich mythology that has been captured for us through the lens of medieval literature. In particular, place and myth are fused in the Dinnsenchas, topographical lore of unknown antiquity recorded in the case of Tara by an account in a 10th century manuscript. This provides a guide to the location and medieval names of sacred places on the Hill, allowing specialists to create links with the colourful oral heritage of that era. There is no reason to doubt that the most ancient ritual events at Tara, including the pre-cairn gatherings, might have been informed by similarly powerful mythological ideas.

The long Neolithic sequence at Knowth in the Boyne Valley consisted of house-like structures and palisades shortly after 4,000 BC followed in turn by circular huts and Middle Neolithic pottery horizons, then the great passage tomb complex followed by some interesting later Neolithic activity including a timber circle with associated Grooved Ware, and finally a Beaker horizon at the interface with the Early Bronze Age. At Newgrange, where an equally impressive later Neolithic presence has been documented (O'Kelly 1982; O'Kelly et al 1983; Sweetman 1985; 1987), there was also evidence of pre-cairn activity at Site L (O'Kelly et al. 1978, 263–5). It consisted of elements that are familiar from the sites discussed above: Areas of burning, a number of pits and more than 100 pieces of flint including ten worked artefacts. Sherds from undecorated shouldered bowls were encountered in a hollow beneath the north-east reach of the surviving mound. The excavators noted that the hollow had filled and a thin grassline developed before the mound was built on top of it, indicating a lapse of time rather like that noted at the Mound of the Hostages, Tara. Following the convention of those days, the pre-mound activity at Site L was unhesitatingly interpreted as habitation, as was the pre-cairn activity at Knowth where an explanation referencing settlement and domestic activity seems to be reinforced by the occurrences of 'houses'. However, we have no compelling evidence that these were domestic houses in the conventional sense. When the wall slots and postholes of a sturdy rectangular structure were revealed beneath the megalithic tomb at Ballyglass court tomb in county Mayo (Ó Nualláin 1972) it was immediately heralded as a house. At the time, with the notable exceptions of Lough Gur and Céide, the study of domestic life in the Irish Neolithic was limited by a dearth of evidence beyond chance discoveries in excavations focused on megalithic tombs. In Britain, on the other hand, pre-tomb



Fig. 4. Aerial view of the Hill of Tara, showing the Mound of the Hostages (arrowed) and a variety of earthworks from later prehistoric and early medieval times.

Abb. 4. Luftbild des Hügels von Tara mit dem mound of the hostages (durch Pfeil markiert) und einer Vielzahl von Erdwerken der späteren Urgeschichte und frühmittelalterlicher Zeit.

timber structures are normally interpreted in ceremonial terms even when no burials are associated with them (Lynch 1997, 16), and it is possible that some of the Irish 'houses', especially those located at the sites of subsequent megalithic tombs, might have been ceremonial buildings "(marking) places of special significance and (adding) to the significance of these places by the process of their construction and modification" (Scarre 2006, 205–6). Perhaps it is time to spell out unequivocally that the pre-tomb activity may not have been so much a prelude to the subsequent megalithic structure as an element in its inspiration.

As noted in the case of Tara, the focus of excavations around the megalithic tomb have limited our understanding of the full spatial extent of pre-tomb activity in Ireland, with obvious implications for our interpretations of its nature and focus. However, the occurrence of this phenomenon beneath the cairn on the summit of Baltinglass Hill in county Wicklow does not immediately prompt an explanation based on mundane pre-cairn domestic settlement. The location is an exposed pinnacle c. 400 metres O.D. above the River Slaney and would constitute an inhospitable domestic space. In any case, the pre-tomb horizons consisted of blackened, presumably burned areas with specimens of oak charcoal, hazelnuts, flint scrapers, a polished stone axehead and a javelin head (Walshe 1941). There was no indication of a shelter and no mention of Neolithic pottery. Stone axe-heads were accorded significant status in the Neolithic and were frequently deposited in ceremonial contexts. Accordingly the notion that the axe-head and javelin head were accidentally lost on an exposed mountain top, coincidentally in a burned area on the site of a subsequent passage tomb, is considerably more far-fetched than the suggestion that the burning, deposition and food consumption (or offering) were elements of independent pre-tomb ceremonial events on the pinnacle. Tenuous circumstantial evidence that the investigative focus in Ireland has been excessively narrow, none more so than my own excavations at Knockroe, county Kilkenny, is provided by a single radiocarbon date from charcoal located underneath a burial mound at the Rath of the Synods, Hill of Tara. The bulk of the traces at this site belonged to the Iron Age but the radiocarbon date relates to the primary passage tomb phase at the nearby Mound of the Hostages, perhaps a coincidence or possibly indicating that the Neolithic activity at Tara may have been more extensive than the narrowly confined archaeological excavations have previously led us to believe.

Fabled vistas

Some of the more impressively sited passage tombs in Ireland are associated with landscapes that feature prominently in later myth and folklore. *Miosgán Meadhbha*, the Gaelic name for the large flat-topped cairn on the summit of Knocknarea mountain overlooking the Carrowmore passage tomb group in county Sligo, claims it as the funerary memorial of the legendary Maeve, proto-historic Queen of Connaught and scourge of Ulster. Likewise, writing about Loughcrew in 1836, the antiquarian John O'Donovan recorded the legend of the so-called *Hag* for the Ordnance Survey of Ireland. This legendary hag, shimmering between the human and supernatural worlds, is associated with sowing and harvesting in the north-midlands of Ireland (1990, 68) and is reputed to have dropped the stones of the cairns out of her apron (Herity 1974, 233). She is also associated in legend with the cairn on the summit of Slieve Gullion, a prominent mountain in South Armagh.



Fig. 5. Cairn overlying a natural rock formation on the summit of Slievenamon mountain in country Tipperary, resembling a blocked entrance to the underground.

Abb. 5. Ein Hügel, der eine natürliche Felsformation am Gipfel des Berges Slievenamon (Country Tipperary) überdeckt und so den Eindruck eines versperrten Zugangs in den Untergrund erweckt.

The legendary figure of Fionn Mac Cumhaill inhabits many of the colourful medieval myths about the Irish countryside. He was at once a singularly gifted poet, warrior, hunter and above all a seer who could gain access to superhuman knowledge by sucking his thumb. Various stories emerged to rationalise this gift. One such account ends with Fionn inserting his thumb in his mouth after it had been crushed between the door and jamb of the cairn on the summit of Slievenamon (Ó hÓgáin 1990, 214). This cairn (fig. 5) was the dwelling of an otherworldly figure named *Cúldubh*, whom Fionn had just slain at the entrance, and the thumb derived its special knowledge from its brief contact with the otherworld. Slievenamon is a prominent mountain overlooking the Golden Vale in south county Tipperary, and the summit cairn is the focal monument of two passage tomb clusters associated with tributaries of the Suir river. Two of the sites, Baunfree in the Lingaun group and Shrough in the Aherlow group, are aligned directly on the summit of Slievenamon while the most famous monument in the group, the decorated passage tomb at Knockroe, is also an excellent vantage point from which to view the summit (fig. 6). Slievenamon will be discussed further below but it is relevant to note here that no passage tomb can be seen within or under the summit cairn. Instead there is a natural rock formation resembling a doorway (fig. 5). No doubt this phenomenon would have stoked the imagination of Neolithic people no less than those of the medieval period. The irony of Fionn's thumb of knowledge is that a better known account locates its origins on the banks of the Boyne, the river with which Ireland's most famous passage tombs are associated. Here, we learn, he inadvertently upstaged his teacher by instinctively sucking his thumb after it was burned when he touched the salmon they were cooking. Unknown to the boy, the teacher had spent his life stalking the *bradáin feasa* (salmon of knowledge) which would bestow supernatural wisdom on the first person to taste it.

There is no need to continue recounting such stories beyond noting that the countryside is invariably the stage on which they are played out. Prominent features in the landscape, both natural and built, were layered with mythological significance through their association with these accounts of a magical world from the past. In that sense, the entire landscape was a cultural phenomenon and it is sometimes possible to identify compelling similarities between particular narratives and the territories of various groups. Thus the most famous (and possibly oldest) saga of all, the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* is at once a story about a mythic past of heroism, barbarism and otherworldliness, and a metaphor for real tensions between the king-

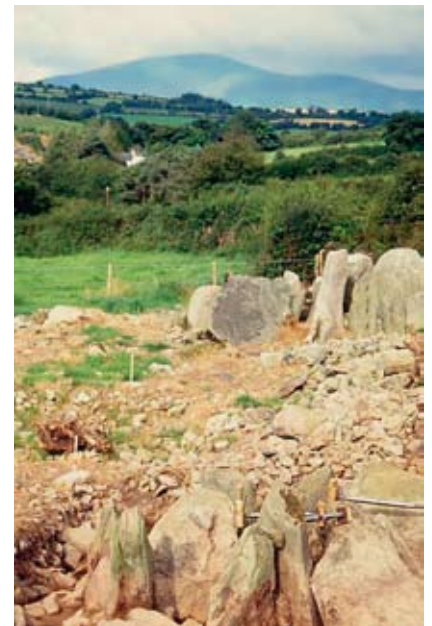


Fig. 6. Slievenamon mountain dominates the distant horizon to the west of the passage tomb complex at Knockroe, county Kilkenny. In clear conditions the cairn stands out on the summit, although it is about ten kilometres away.

Abb. 6. Der Berg Slievenamon dominiert den fernen Horizont westlich des Ganggrabkomplexes von Knockroe, im Conty Kilkenny. Bei klarer Sicht tritt der Hügel auf dem Gipfel klar hervor, obwohl er etwa 10 km entfernt ist.

doms of Connaught and Ulster, the west and the north. Although set in the late prehistoric or proto-historic period and preserved in medieval manuscripts, this saga lives in the landscape to the present day. The location of various scenes are well known, from the opening dialogue at Rathcroghan west of the River Shannon, to the various episodes around the Cooley Peninsula in county Louth, the homeland of Cúchulainn, the terrifying but doomed hero of the saga. To this day, known features in the landscape are linked with the Táin: a particular standing stone to which Cúchulainn reputedly bound himself in order to remain standing and defiant as he died; an enclosure at Rathcroghan in which the heroic expedition culminated in a battle to the death between two greatly prized bulls; the town of Ardee named after Ferdia, the champion of the Connaught army and respected opponent of Cúchulainn who eventually killed him after a prolonged bout of single combat. In addition the underlying rivalry between Connaught and Ulster, Rathcroghan and Emain Macha, is reflected in the construction of dykes across the countryside from south Armagh to Fermanagh in the first century BC, separating the territories of Ulster from those further south.

Mythological narratives preserved in medieval manuscripts are transepts in time and the overlay of myths and legends may have been even more pronounced in prehistoric societies: "People who are without writing have a fantastically precise knowledge of their environment and all their resources" (Lévi-Strauss 1978, 19).

Statements of significance

Material taken from one place and inserted elsewhere can be infused with symbolism that is at once powerful and subtle (O'Sullivan 2009, 10). This theme was relatively common in Neolithic Europe and is expressed for example in the widespread distribution of axes fashioned from Alpine jadeite (Bailloud et al. 1995, 115), the re-cycling of standing stones in funerary monuments (L'Helgouac'h 1983; Bueno Ramirez et al. 1999; Jones 2009, 167) and the recurring instances of pendants fashioned from exotic raw materials (O'Sullivan 2007, 171; Barrowclough 2007, 49). In the historical period, we know that interesting stories and meanings tend to accompany material transferred in this manner. Since the mid-19th century, wooden spikes have been recovered in considerable numbers from the eroding peat of the mountain pass at Coumanare between the summits of Slievanea and Croaghskearda on the Dingle Peninsula in south-west Ireland (Cuppage et al. 1986, 437–8). The spikes are popularly interpreted as arrows from a bloody battle in ancient times, at once vividly remembered and yet existing only in myth, but consistent with the Gaelic version of the place-name, *Com an Áir* (the hollow of the slaughter). The spikes, treasured as souvenirs in many households, are probably deer traps, but acceptance of this view would spoil a colourful and socially important myth in which the spikes have become indispensable props.

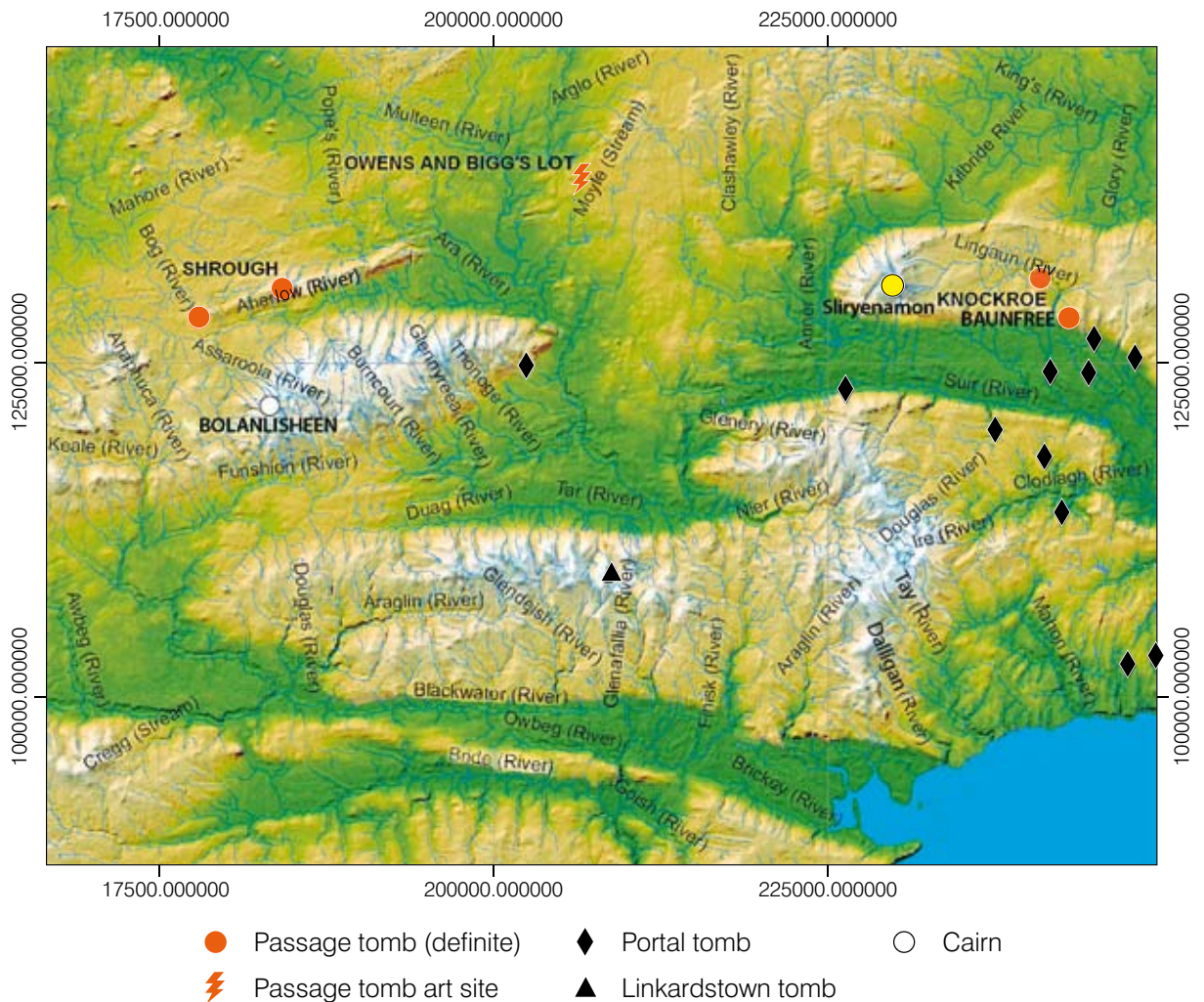
Equivalent narratives may have accompanied the material used in the construction of megalithic tombs, referencing a variety of locations in the neighbourhood and broader region (Cooney 2000, 136–7; O'Sullivan 2007) and binding local people to places of personal or group significance (Brück 2004, 321). The stories that gave meaning to these links are now lost to us, but we can be sure that they bore no resemblance to the geological and archaeological explanations we construct today. In the case of Slievenamon, for example, there is a local tradition that those who climb the mountain place a stone on the summit cairn in memory of the achievement. Although nothing

more than a myth in its right, this tradition could just as easily have existed in the Neolithic. The natural rock formation underneath the cairn features a 'blocked doorway' effect to the interior of the cairn or mountain. This doorway looks out over the lower ground to the east in which Knockroe and the other megalithic structures are lost amongst the hedgerows and other visible components of the landscape far below and some 10 kilometres away. In a remarkable piece of opportunism, its easterly aspect reflects the direction of the focal tombs at Loughcrew (Cairns L and T) as well as Newgrange in the Boyne Valley. The focal role of this natural rock formation in the dispersed passage tomb cluster of the Suir catchment suggests that it was also the subject of beliefs and stories around 3,000 BC and earlier.

The Slievenamon cairn is clearly designed to be seen to best effect from the countryside to the east where a sprinkling of passage tombs cluster near the River Lingaun. One of these, Baunfree, is aligned to the summit of Slievenamon, and the source of the river itself occurs on the eastern flank of the mountain. The Lingaun is a tributary of the River Suir which, in Irish terms, is a major waterway that rises in the midlands of north county Tipperary and loops gently through a wide swathe of countryside in which Slievenamon acts as an off-centre focus (fig. 7). Another tributary, the Aherlow river is the artery around which a second group of passage tombs is sprinkled, of which Shrough is also aligned to the distant summit of Slievenamon as if to maintain and highlight the integrated nature of a storied landscape. From this we might infer an underlying Ne-

Fig. 7. Passage tombs (red), portal tombs (rhombs) and the summit cairn on Slievenamon (yellow) in the Suir catchment area (Image: Frank Prendergast).

Fig. 7. Ganggräber (rot), Portal tombs (Rhomben) und der der Hügel auf dem Gipfel des Berges Slievenamon (gelb) im Suir Einzugsgebiet.

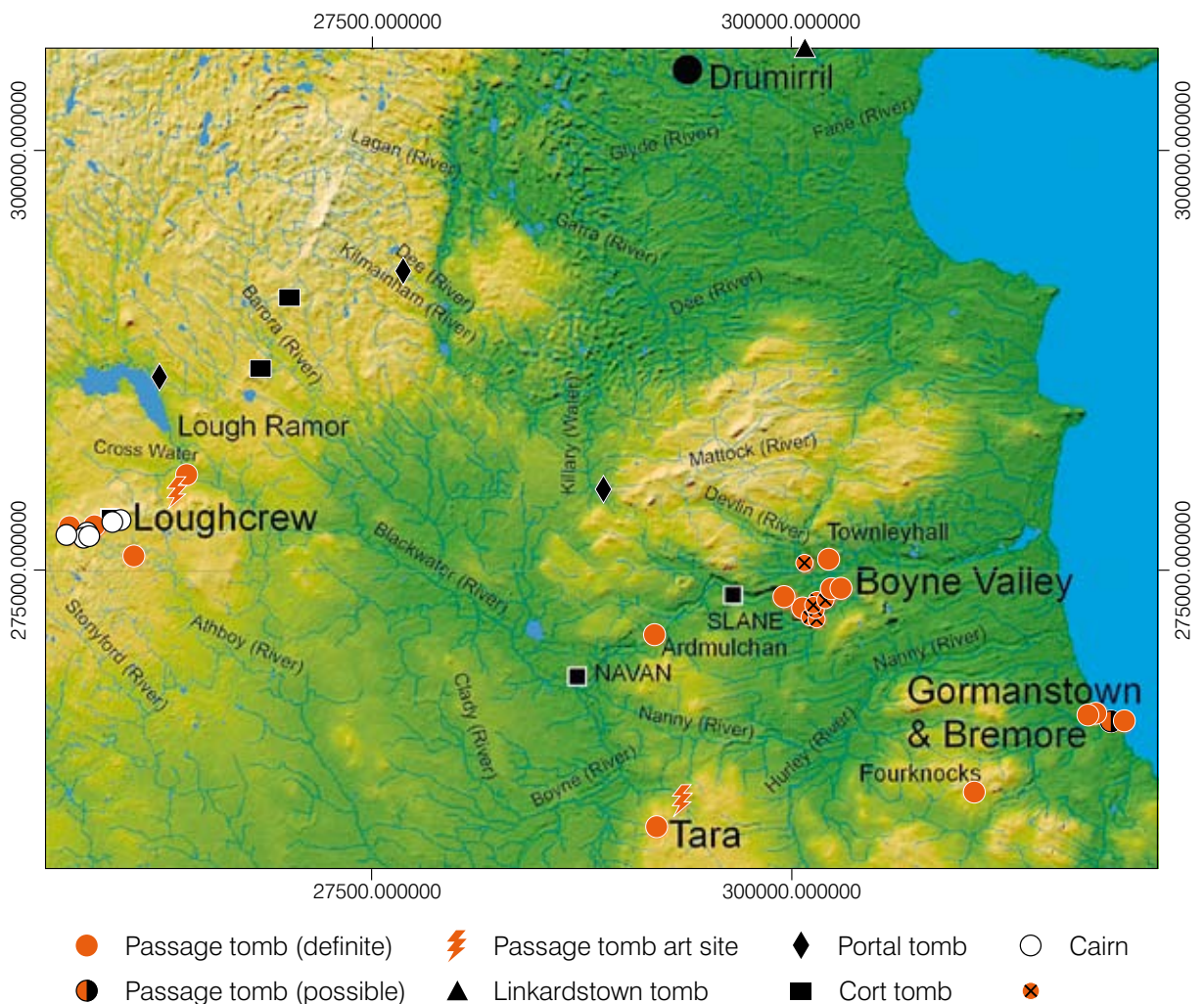


olithic mythology located in this broad territory, with the river system and the focal mountain of Slievenamon as key agents. The alignment of the eastern tomb at Knockroe to the mid-winter rising sun and that of the western tomb to the mid-winter setting sun provided a wider cosmological context by linking the complex with significant solar events. It is likely that important places in the long forgotten Stone Age narrative may be reflected in the location of the passage tombs and the stories associated with the source of the raw materials from which they were constructed. The beliefs around these places were presumably reinforced by the rituals and incantations associated with the sites.

The Boyne Valley is a more complex application of the same set of inferences (fig. 8). The Boyne has many resonances in Ireland down to the present. It was the scene of a decisive skirmish in 1690 and has since become an icon for the divisions in Northern Ireland. Nowadays, as the peace process evolves, the entire island is gradually taking ownership of the shared past and the scene of the battle has become an important visitor attraction, helped by the fact that the locations of historically established events and colourful legends alike can be tied to specific places in the landscape. Answering to a different tune, the source of the Boyne near Carbury in county Kildare is a traditional holy well which, although expressed in Christian terms, is probably inherited from the pre-Christian era as evidenced by a nearby group of excavated Iron Age burial monuments (Willmot 1938). Beyond that the river itself features prominently in ancient Irish mythology. The god Aengus, for example, was the son

Fig. 8. Passage tombs (red) in the Boyne/Blackwater catchment area and, in the lower right, the River Devlin and its associated tombs (Image: Frank Prendergast).

Abb. 8. Ganggräber (rot) im Einzugsgebiet Boyne/Blackwater sowie, unten rechts, der Fluss Devlin und dessen assoziierte Gräber (Bild: Frank Prendergast).



of Bóinn, the personification of the river, and her consort the great god Daghdha. The stronghold of Aengus was at Brú na Bóinne, the original Gaelic name for Newgrange, it is not surprising therefore to learn that votive offerings were left near the entrance to Newgrange during the fourth century AD, the exotic value of the offerings enhanced by their origin in Roman Britain. The presence of the passage tombs near the river indicates a similarly rich overlay of Boyne mythology during the Neolithic. What is clear is that the river, like the Suir in Munster, was an important artery binding several clusters of tombs together. Knowth, Newgrange and Dowth famously occur at the highest points of a ridge around which the river bends while, far upriver, streams running from the Hill of Tara find their way by various means into the Boyne; at Navan the Boyne is joined by the Blackwater, a river that skirts the Loughcrew group of passage tombs as it flows from its origins in Lough Ramor, county Cavan; and, below Navan, the destroyed site at Ardmulchan was located almost on the banks of the Boyne, while some unclassified mounds located near the river at Slane may also be passage tombs. Other places in the region and beyond are referenced through, for example, the quartz and water-rolled stones located around the perimeter at Newgrange and Knowth, the alignment of distinctive nodules in front of the western tomb at Knowth, the objects that have been compared to Iberian artefacts, the linear artword in the east and west tomb at Knowth, seemingly inspired from Brittany, and the decorated mace-head which almost certainly came from Britain.

The timeline from the late fourth millennium BC to the early first millennium AD appears to be too long to accommodate a reliable strand of oral tradition. And yet there are enigmatic suggestions of broad continuity, presumably interrupted and transformed along the way but nevertheless sufficiently consistent to be explored. The first and most obvious indicator is the regular occurrence of Iron Age material at passage tomb sites and complexes. Examples include Newgrange, Knowth, Tara, Loughcrew (notably Cairn H), Kiltierney and Carrowmore, the evidence representing various stages of the Irish Iron Age from the later first millennium BC to the mid-first millennium AD. In conjunction with the frequent occurrence of later Neolithic features and earlier Bronze Age burials at passage tombs and the suggestion of continuity through the later Bronze Age at Tara for example, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that oral traditions about these iconic places would have extended through prehistoric times. Inevitably the kernel of significance from earlier times would have become wrapped in successive layers of exaggeration, memory loss, confusion with other myths, seismic local and regional events, displacements of communities, the emergence of new folk heroes, changing belief systems and various other factors.

The second indicator of broad continuity is the occurrence of at least one close analogy in Britain. Around the same time that the classic passage tomb phase was flourishing in the Boyne Valley, the first enduring ritual footprint emerged at Stonehenge in southern England, as outlined elsewhere by Mike Parker Pearson. The complex, although evolving differently, had many of the characteristics of the Irish passage tomb: an emphasis on circular enclosure; a series of in-filled pits near the perimeter (the Aubrey Holes) with cremations inserted into the fill of these pits (c.f. Tara above); a solar alignment and the referencing of places near and distant through the sourcing of the various mega-liths. The Stonehenge Avenue links the complex to the River Avon which loops its way through the countryside about two kilometres to the east. In a fine example of tautology, Avon is almost certainly derived from the Celtic word for *river*. It begs the question: Why did this watercourse become known as *The*

River when it is merely a tributary of the Severn, the longest river in Britain, and a regional neighbour of the Thames, the second longest? Presumably it was clear to everyone in the distant past that the reference was to a special river, an iconic waterway, the Boyne of southern England.

Yet another indicator of continuity is to be found not far from the Boyne Valley itself. Some 30 kilometres north of the passage tombs, open air rock art is to be found on greywacke outcrops overlooking a small marsh at Drumirril, county Monaghan (Clarke 1982). This complex has been analysed in considerable detail by the late Dr. Blaze O'Connor (2003; 2006) who recorded circular enclosures surrounding the decorated outcrops² as well as a network of coaxial fields. The outcrops have the appearance of natural monuments emerging from the surrounding lowlands and seem to have been important features with which various social groups might have interacted in the Neolithic and afterwards just as they or perhaps a more restricted social group interacted with the Boyne cairns (O'Connor 2007, 184–5). Small-scale excavations by O'Connor revealed activity stretching from the early Neolithic through various stages of prehistory to the Iron Age and beyond, showing that the rock art, like the passage tombs elsewhere, represented just one phase in a complex site history. The role of the audience at rock art panels has been highlighted by Bradley (2009), implying continuing activity at these sites, and such panels are sometime located along routes frequented by animals or humans (Bradley 1997, 1845, fig. 12.5), indicating prior usage. O'Connor's work provides direct archaeological evidence to demonstrate the enduring social significance of these outcropping mounds in prehistoric times and, while we may have lost the complementary mythological narrative, it is reasonable to assume that these features were the focus of compelling lore.

Concluding remarks

It was noted earlier that passage tombs have been more extensively examined by archaeologists than any of the other megalithic structures in the Irish countryside. However, even if allowance is made for this bias, the occurrence of passage tombs in richly storied landscapes is strong. On the other hand, it is not surprising. These are the monuments in which alignments to predictable cosmic events and distant mountain summits are common, inter-visibility between tombs is a recurrent theme, and in which a variety of other places are referenced by means of the material used in the structure and associated artefacts. Passage tombs are also the ones that tend to cluster in specific parts of the landscape, often on mountain tops, with presumably the key location marked by the large focal cairn. In many cases the cluster occurs near a river, sometimes overlooking the water, as in the case of the Boyne and Liffey discussed above, as well as the Delvin (Fourknocks), Liffey (Seefin), Slaney (Baltinglass Hill) and Mersey (Calderstones), for example, or the sea as in Barclodiad y Gawres in Wales and Millin Bay in county Down. Indeed the clusters at Bremore and Gormanstown straddling the border between Dublin and Meath occur near the mouth of the Delvin river and beside the sea (fig. 8). The emphasis on location provides an inextricable link between passage tombs and open air rock art, both seeming to indicate regular social interaction with specific places in the landscape. The evidence for recurring activity in both contexts during extended prehistoric times is remarkable, as is the presence of decoration in both. Another overlapping theme is the relationship with water in that rock art sites are also frequently located relatively

- 2 A similar phenomenon occurs at Uisneach, the mythical centre of Ireland, where a circular enclosure surrounds the catstone, an impressive and yet mysterious erratic at the summit of the hill

near to the sea or else beside streams, lakes or marshes. In both cases, there are reasons to suspect that the location was symbolically important long before the appearance of the evidence we can identify today.

Folk memory is both an enduring and complicated process. Ideas can live in the folk consciousness long after they have lost their original meaning and context. Traditional devotional practices in Ireland often focus on stations associated with the titular founding saint of the local early medieval ecclesiastical site. These stations are marked by a variety of natural features such as wells, trees, pitted stones, hills or caves. While Christian prayers are recited, they are associated with less obviously Christian practices such as (I) the occasional preference for a night-time pilgrimage, (II) the absolute imperative to keep the pilgrimage station on one's right while circling it in prayer; and (III) the occasional use of cursing stones which, when turned during a pilgrimage, are reputed to bring bad luck to an enemy. Standard Christian signs such as the cross appear to be optional and the place or natural anomaly seems to be the dominant physical feature around which the traditional narrative is framed. This may be the nearest we can come to explaining the locations of megalithic tombs in the Neolithic landscape. They presumably inform us about the framework within which Stone Age mythology flourished but the stories have grown silent with time.

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