

ARCHAEOLOGY AND MYTH: a consideration of the ancient royal site of Rathcroghan

Author(s): Gerard Mulligan

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ARCHAEOLOGY AND MYTH:



a consideration of the ancient royal site of Rathcroghan

Gerard Mulligan argues in favour of a
collaboration between archaeology and mythology.

Above: Queen Maeve by J. C. Leyendecker for
The Century Magazine, 1907 (Thanks to John Waddell).

The ancient royal centre of Rathcroghan in County Roscommon, known in early Irish literature as *Cruachain*, represents an important archaeological site and a location endowed with extensive mythological associations. These two fields of research, archaeology and mythology, are frequently seen as representing opposite ends of the spectrum by those studying the past. Is it possible, however, to combine both disciplines to advance our understanding of sites such as Rathcroghan? Can the rich mythological traditions and more recent archaeological investigations of Rathcroghan be considered side by side to provide insights into how such sites developed through time? In examining these notions, it is important to remind ourselves that mythology can be a powerful social force. It can be used by communities as a means of engaging with the divine supernatural forces and, as religious concerns can prompt communities to undertake the construction of great works (one need only think of the medieval cathedrals of Europe), so too can mythological concerns cause societies to create new sites and landscapes. In discussing these notions, and in order to differentiate between the archaeological landscape and the mythological associations, 'Rathcroghan' will be used throughout this article to refer to the archaeological site while '*Cruachain*' will refer to the mythical landscape.

Cruachain was renowned as the royal seat of the mythical Queen Maeve and her consort Ailill, as well as the location for the start of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('Cattle Raid of Cooley'). The mythology also described *Cruachain* as an inauguration site for the Connacht kings, a regional assembly, a royal cemetery and an entrance point to the spiritual world. This mythology was first written down in the early historic period and as such may be a combination of both ancient myths and references to the contemporary society of the time. Today the archaeological site of Rathcroghan contains over 60 monuments, including the linear earthworks known as the Mucklaghs, the large Cashelmanannan enclosure, the Miosgan Meva ('Maeve's heap') stone pillar, the Oweynagat ('cave of the cats'), which was viewed as an entrance to the Otherworld, and, central to all, the sloping, flat-topped Rathcroghan Mound, 85–90m in diameter (Waddell *et al.* 2009).

These monuments are spread over the eastern end of a raised plateau that commands excellent views over the surrounding countryside, including the Mag nAi ('the plain of the sheep'). The early Irish literature chronicles other royal sites that were positioned on comparable elevated settings, including Dún Ailinne (Knockaulin), Co.

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Rathcroghan Mound, Co. Roscommon.

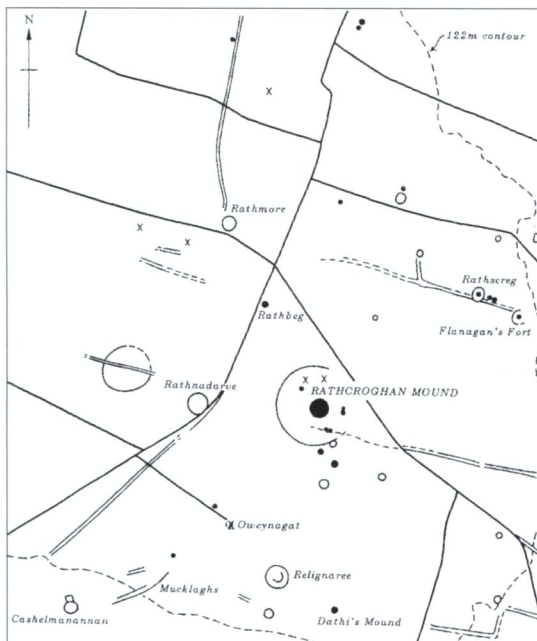
Kildare, Temair (Tara), Co. Meath, and Emain Macha (Navan), Co. Armagh. These elevated locations almost certainly acquired significant cultural and ritual meaning for their regional communities prior to the actual construction of any monuments on the sites. Throughout Irish mythology there are enigmatic references to an early creation myth, common in world mythology, which believed that the earth emerged as a primordial hill from the elemental waters of creation. For instance, the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (Book of Invasions) records

that one of the earliest arrivals in Ireland, Fintain, survived a great flood by transforming into different animals until the waters subsided, revealing the first mountains and plains. The extensive geophysical survey conducted by Fenwick *et al.* (2006) at Rathcroghan revealed that the mound was an artificial construction built on the summit of a prominent and conspicuous glacial ridge. Thus the raised ground of *Cruachain* could have been invoked and used ritually as a representation of this first aboriginal hill.

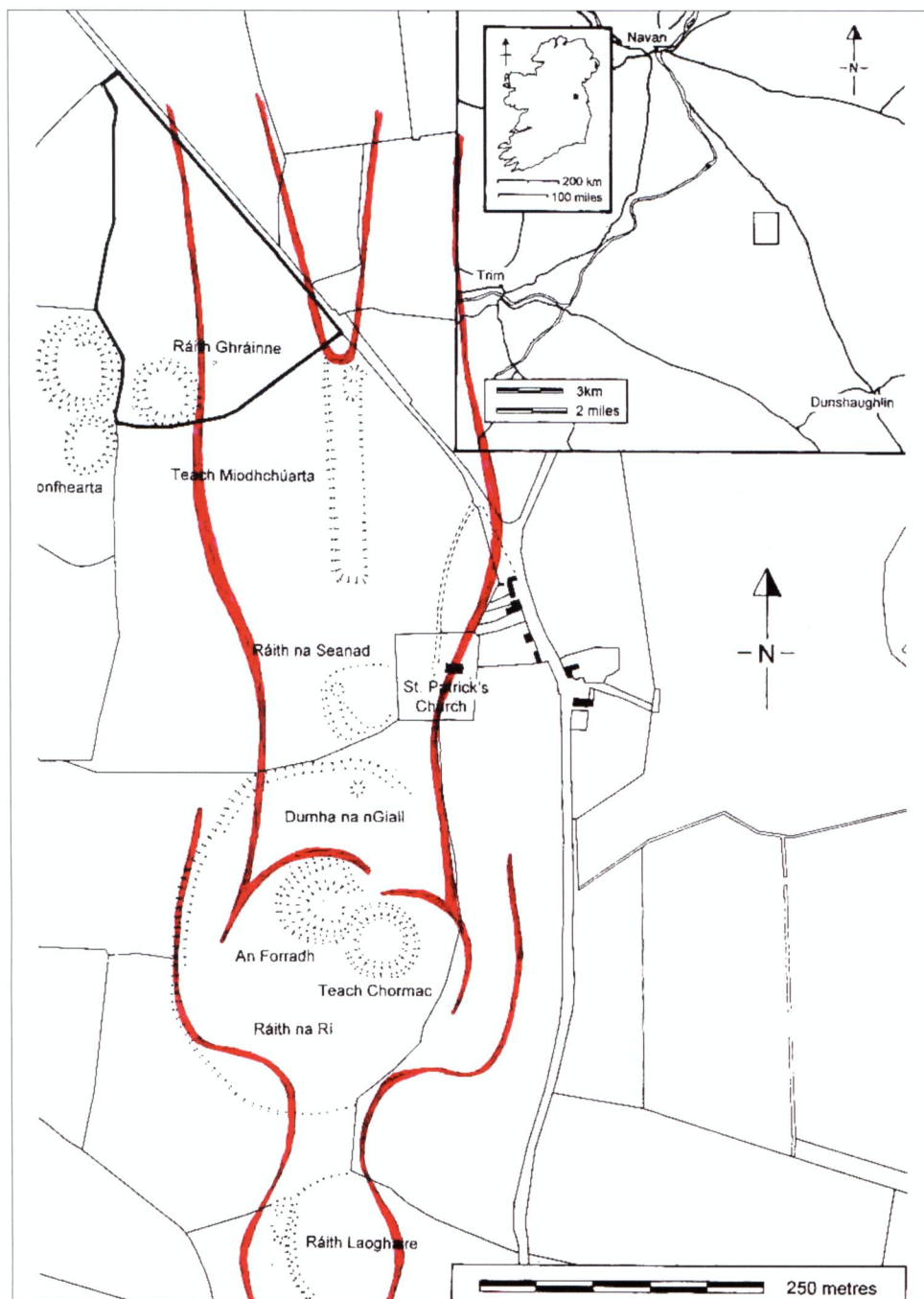
The emergence of these myths may correspond to an increasing need from the Iron Age onwards to establish communal ownership of lands, firstly by 'anchoring' the landscape to a prominent regional focal point and secondly through the formation of myths that depicted the landscape as a divine creation which was bestowed on mythical ancestors. These ancestors were subsequently assigned mounting accolades until they eventually emerged as creation deities who both formed and then cultivated the early landscape. The *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, for instance, relates that the mythical Nemed arrived from the ocean to clear twelve large fertile plains throughout Ireland (Koch 2003, 241). This mythical emphasis on the divine origin of agriculture may also represent an allegorical narrative to explain how mankind came to seem to command nature through the production of crops and the control of domesticated beasts.

Maeve may have originated as a companion to the principal creation deity associated with *Cruachain*. The *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* records that the first mythical ship to Ireland carried 50 women who became the consorts of the newly arrived creation deities (Koch 2003, 237). The continuing intensification of a farming culture could, however, have resulted in the female goddess surpassing the male deity. An agricultural lifestyle required a divine patron associated with recurring fertility, such as a goddess, rather than the male deity who initiated a unique act of creation. This position of Maeve as a fertility goddess is alluded to throughout the mythology; for example, in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* Maeve leads her army from *Cruachain* to capture the Brown Bull of Cuailnge, which symbolised the fertility of Ulster.

The increasing correlation between Maeve and *Cruachain* resulted in her ensuing emergence as a goddess of sovereignty over the lands around Rathcroghan. This is reflected in the *Táin* by Ailill's statement that 'I have never heard in all Ireland of a province run by a woman except this one'. Thereafter the king gradually began to replace the male deity as Maeve's consort in order to gain ownership of the kingdom. The substitution of the king for the male deity indicated an intensifying socio-political influence on the creation of *Cruachain's* mythical landscape. The king was inaugurated through a celestial marriage to Maeve, perhaps embodied by a royal female, in a re-enactment of a divine fertility ritual.



Above: The archaeological landscape of Rathcroghan.



Left: It is possible to envisage a stylised female form in the layout of the monuments at Tara.

association is revealed in *Echtra Chorbmaic Uí Chuinn* ('The Adventures of Cormac, Grandson of Conn') when he supplants Cormac as head of the royal family (Koch 2003, 184). These monuments could have formed a focus for ritual activity involved in the inauguration and subsequent displays of political control by the king. This ritual importance of water sites can be seen at other royal complexes; for example, Emain Macha (Navan) is associated with the deposition of high-status artefacts at Loughnashade.

The growing relevance of the sacred marriage to justify the king's position reflects a transition towards a social hierarchy based around a single individual, the king, who came to dominate the political control of the region. As the position of the king became further removed from the general community, it increasingly became viewed as nearer to the divine realm. Thereafter, through the sacred marriage with Maeve, the king ascended to the position of a semi-deity. In doing so, he emerged as the sole representative of the entire kingdom in all interactions with the spiritual realm. Maeve states in the *Táin* that a king must be 'without meanness, jealousy or fear', as the welfare of the entire kingdom was now innately linked to the king's mental, social and physical condition. Furthermore, the fertility of the king, and therefore the royal seat, represented the fertility of the kingdom. In *Mesca Ulad* ('The Intoxication of the Ulstermen') Furbairde rebukes the hero Cú Chulainn for fighting in the king's hall at Emain Macha, stating that 'while the province is a gushing spring you are harming and destroying it' (Koch 2003, 106–27).

This position of the king as a semi-deity who represented the community in their interactions with the spiritual realm may have been reflected in the construction of the royal landscape. At the royal site of Navan, Lynn (1997, 228–9) suggested that the design and the components of timber, earth and stone used in the construction of the large Site B mound represented the embodiment of the king as the three main social classes: the *bríugaid* (landowners), *fēindidi* (warrior youths) and *áes dáno* (professional class). The geophysical survey of Rathcroghan Mound indicated that there

Maeve is thus known to have married a series of royal spouses at *Cruachain*. The actual inauguration marriage/rite was known as a *feis*, which translates as 'a feast' and 'to sleep with'. The *feis* involved an intoxication that conveyed the king to the spiritual realm. Thus Maeve, or Medb, means 'the drunken one' or 'she who makes drunk' (like the English word 'mead'). The bestowal of the kingship through a sovereignty drink occurs throughout Irish mythology and was also symbolised by water locations. In *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin* ('The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón'), the prince Niall sleeps with an old woman guarding a water well, whereby she is revealed as the

goddess of sovereignty. Throughout the *Cruachain* mythology there is a distinctive relationship between water locations and accessing kingly power. In the narrative 'The Death of Fergus Mac Róich', Ailill has the nobleman Fergus killed after he is observed bathing with Maeve in a nearby royal lake, thus becoming a threat to Ailill's own kingship.

The ceremonial significance of water locations at Rathcroghan can be seen today by the association of the ritually important Mucklaghs linear earthworks with a nearby water pool and the Cashelmanannan enclosure. This site takes its name from the water god Manannán, whose royal

were some comparisons in their construction. For example, the survey revealed that the mound was built over two concentric stone walls, which Waddell (2009) suggested was similar to the entombment of the 'Forty Metre Structure' at Navan. The construction of Rathcroghan Mound could have been intended, then, to represent analogous notions in terms of displaying the king as embracing all classes of the society under his control.

It is also possible to identify a number of potential associations between the apparently randomly placed monuments at Rathcroghan which could have served as lines of ritual activity or routeways by which the king could display his power. One such routeway can be seen in the consistent location of monuments and earthworks along an arcuate axis veering from north-north-west to south-south-west, which corresponds to the landscape contours. Another such routeway can be identified, through the curvature and direction of the Mucklaghs, as proceeding from Rathcroghan Mound, past the Oweynagat and through the Mucklaghs to end at the Cashelmanannan enclosure. A procession along this routeway could draw on the mythical associations of these sites to guide the participants to a heightened awareness of the spiritual world, allowing the participants to progress from the physical world to the supernatural realm. This type of procession is reflected in *Echtra Chorbmaic Uí Chuinn*, when Cormac journeyed from the real world through a mist to the fort of Manannán (Koch 2003, 184–7). In particular, entering the Oweynagat allowed individuals to pass directly to the spiritual world. The location of this cave in the royal complex further emphasised the king's position as a spiritual intermediary and counterbalance to the chaos of the Otherworld, which held the people of the Sid and a host of terrible creatures, including the triple-headed monster Ellén Trechend, ferocious cats and werewolves.

The extent of these processional routeways through Rathcroghan implies that the entire complex could have been perceived as a transitional location where the physical and spiritual worlds converged. This mystic landscape was revealed through significant occasions when royal personages passed from the actual to the spiritual world and an unseen ethereal landscape was

superimposed over the real landscape. For example, *Cruachain* was identified as a meeting place for great assemblies and high-status feasting. In *Fled Bricrenn* ('Bricriu's Feast') Maeve and Ailill host a feast for the Ulstermen in a house so large that it 'had room for . . . the valiant heroes of the whole province' (Koch 2003, 92). There is little evidence, however, for this substantial structure at Rathcroghan. Therefore the ritual feasting may have occurred in the sacred space where the real and spiritual worlds coalesced. The great feasting halls were spiritual entities whose essence was represented in the physical world by temporary structures, such as Bricriu's hall, or ritualised features in the landscape, for instance the great encircling enclosure, some 360m in diameter, around Rathcroghan Mound, which was formed by a substantial ditch (Fenwick *et al.* 2006).

Considering the close association between Maeve—in all three of her identities as a fertility goddess, a goddess of sovereignty and a queen in her own right—and *Cruachain*, and its perception as a place where the real and spiritual worlds coalesced, it is further possible that the landscape was itself also physically identified with her form. This can be seen in the association of Maeve with monuments such as Miosgan Meva ('Maeve's heap'). In addition, given the need for the king to marry and thus lie with Maeve in order to claim the kingdom, certain monuments at the site may have been constructed to represent her corporeal body, allowing the king to be 'physically' close to the goddess by interacting with these monuments. For example, Rathcroghan Mound can be viewed as symbolising the swollen pregnant stomach of the fertility goddess, which encompassed the king and the three main social classes. The great earthen channels formed by Maeve's menstrual blood in the *Táin* may be mirrored by the extensive linear earthworks at Rathcroghan such as the Mucklaghs. This physical depiction of a female form may occur at other significant sites. At Tara, for instance, it is possible to identify a stylised female in the layout of the different monuments on the site. Commencing at the south end, it is possible to envisage Ráith Laoghaire as forming the head, Ráith na Rí as the upper torso, An Forradh and Teach Chormac as the breasts, Ráith na Seanad and the outer circular feature as depicting the womb, and Teach

Miodhchúarta as representing the female genitalia. A fertility procession could enter through Teach Miodhchúarta and proceed along the body. This identification between female fertility figures and monuments can be seen at sites other than the royal locations. For example, the outline of the ritually significant Knocknarea Mountain in County Sligo bears a strong resemblance to the silhouette of a pregnant female when seen from below, complete with the protruding navel formed by the prominent cairn, also called Miosgan Meva, located atop the mountain.

Therefore an examination of the archaeological landscape of Rathcroghan alongside the mythology surrounding *Cruachain* can potentially yield a greater understanding of the site than if both strands of inquiry are considered in isolation. It has been suggested that the elevated location of Rathcroghan resulted in its initial association with a creation mythology, which in time led to the emergence of a pre-eminent fertility goddess. The growing association of this goddess with the landscape resulted in her incarnation as Maeve, who bestowed the kingship in a ritual marriage. The king traversed the real world to enter a spiritual realm that overlay the royal landscape to marry Maeve, and in doing so claimed the kingdom. Thus the mythological *Cruachain* and the archaeological Rathcroghan can be seen to have merged into one landscape. ■

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