

Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon: Where the "Táin Bó Cúailnge" Began

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the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*
began

Archaeology
IRELAND
Heritage Guide No. 44



Queen Maeve by J. C. Leyendecker, 1907.

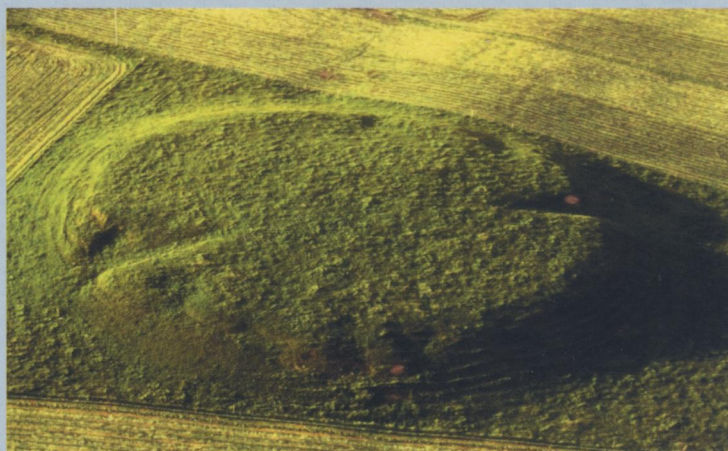
Rathcroghan is one of four major royal sites in ancient Ireland frequently mentioned in medieval Irish literature, the others being Tara, Co. Meath, Navan Fort, Co. Armagh, and Knockaulin, Co. Kildare. Rathcroghan was described as a place of assembly or *óenach* and as an important burial-ground where many kings are said to have been buried. The ancient name *Crúachain* may mean 'place of burial mounds'. In several tales it is also depicted as a kingly settlement. The royal residence of Queen Maeve (Medb) and her husband Ailill figures in the celebrated *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley'), that epic tale of bulls and battles between Connacht and Ulster that is at least as old as the eighth century. In the *Táin Bó Fraích* there is a long and fanciful description of their palatial house in *Ráth Crúachain*, the rath or fort of *Crúachain*, which begins: 'This was the arrangement of the house: seven partitions in it, seven beds from the fire to the wall in the house all around. There was a fronting of bronze on each bed, carved red yew all covered with fair varied ornament . . .'. Unfortunately, like a similar description of the royal house at Navan Fort, this is a literary fiction that provides no information on settlement in the Rathcroghan of old.

Archaeological evidence confirms that prehistoric Rathcroghan was an important burial-ground and cult centre. The great mound there was

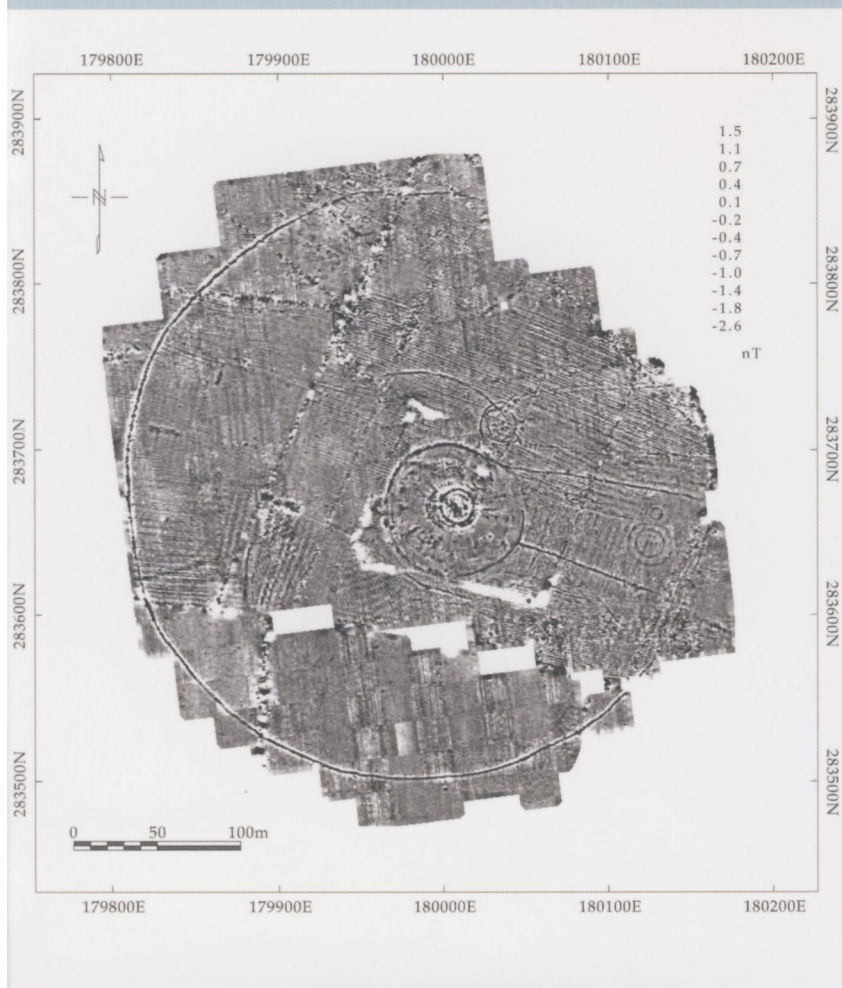
a ceremonial monument with a protracted and complex history that may have included royal inauguration rituals. The kings of *Crúachain* were sacred individuals. Ailill became king of Connacht because of his marriage to Medb, who had previously been the wife of Conchobar, king of Ulster, and two other Connacht kings. In this early manifestation, Medb was not a historical person but a goddess whose name is related to words in Irish and other languages signifying drunkenness (like the English word 'mead'); her name means 'she who intoxicates'. While the character of Medb in the *Táin* is a complex and mainly medieval creation, the earlier Medb was a goddess of sovereignty. The reign of the kings of Connacht was inaugurated in a mystic marriage with her that may have taken the form of a ceremony inducing a 'divine' intoxication of the new king. To gain possession of Medb of *Crúachain* was to gain possession of the kingship, a fact that explains the unusual number of her husbands.

Rathcroghan today is an archaeological complex of over 60 monuments just north-west of the village of Tulsk in County Roscommon. These monuments are scattered over some four square miles of elevated ground and include some nineteen enclosures, 27 burial mounds, pillar stones and other earthworks clustered towards the eastern end of a broad limestone plateau that slopes gently away to the east and south. Rathcroghan Mound, the great monument that is the focal point of the complex, is a broad, flat-topped circular mound with an average basal diameter of 89m and a height of some 5.5m; sloping ramps on the east and west give access to the summit, on which there are traces of a small mound. A small burial mound lies 60m to the north-west, with a squat natural limestone boulder called Milleen Meva nearby. There is a fallen pillar stone named Miosgan Meva about 100m to the north-north-east. A number of other burial mounds, greatly reduced in height by centuries of agriculture, are barely visible to the east and south.

Geophysical survey using magnetic gradiometry around Rathcroghan Mound has revealed a very large circular enclosure, 360m in diameter, formed by a substantial ditch. Given that the limestone bedrock lies close to the surface in many areas, this ditch is likely to be rock-cut and appears to be about 5m wide. Though only visible on the ground as a curving depression to the south, the size of this enclosure recalls the huge circular earthworks at the other major royal sites. Monuments within this great enclosure visible in the geophysical imagery include a pair of ring-barrows to the east, a northern enclosure with an eastern avenue, and another avenue forming a formal eastern approach to the great mound. These linear features probably contained timber palisades and are similar to the smaller avenues that lead to



Rathcroghan Mound.



Geophysical survey: Rathcroghan Mound and the 360m enclosure.

circular enclosures at Navan and Knockaulin and which have been dated to the later centuries BC.

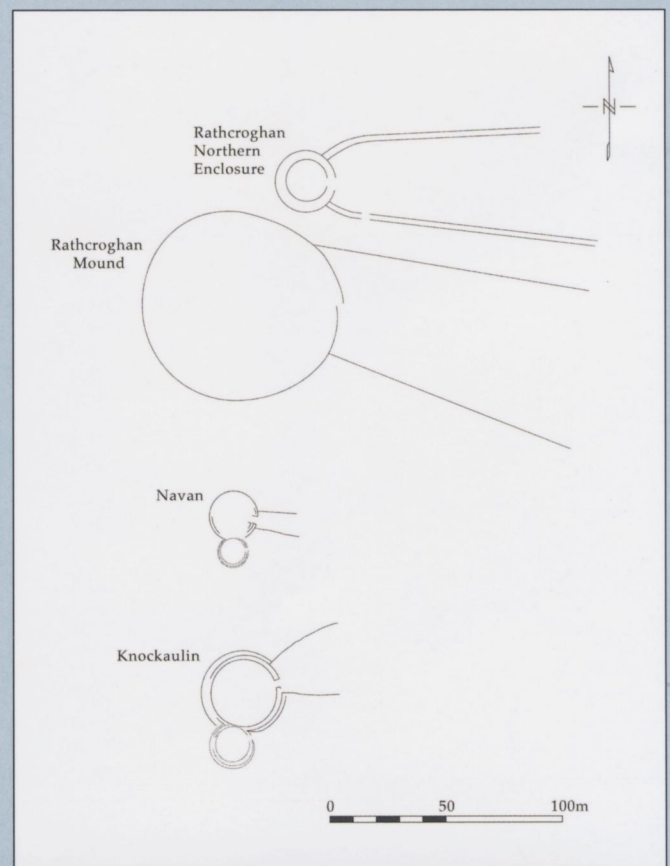
Despite Rathcroghan Mound's deceptively plain external appearance, geophysical survey has revealed a wealth of previously unknown and unexpectedly large and complex archaeological features on its summit and deep within its core. It is a product of an elaborate and calculated series of constructional phases over time. Buried deep within it are the remains of two substantial concentric stone walls. One is 35m in diameter and the other—very visible as a penannular feature in the magnetic gradiometry—is about 22m in diameter; they both lie 1–2m below its summit. This sort of entombment recalls the burial of the 40m structure beneath the cairn of the great mound at Navan around 95 BC. The Rathcroghan Mound perimeter was apparently retained by a timber palisade.

A double circle of pits with a diameter of about 32m partly visible in the gradiometry may represent the remains of a substantial timber-built structure erected on top of the mound, where it must have been an imposing monument, elevated as it was above the surrounding landscape. There is evidence that other timber structures may also have been built and replaced over time on the mound's summit. The very last monument to be built there appears to have been a small earthen mound, traces of which are just visible today.

Rathbeg is one of the more prominent burial mounds in the complex because it is conspicuously placed on one of the low north–south glacial hillocks that are a quite visible part of the Rathcroghan landscape. With two encircling banks, each with internal ditch, and a low central mound,

this is an elaborate Iron Age ring-barrow. A monument called Dath-í's Mound (named after the supposed last pagan king of Ireland) is another ring-barrow with typical enclosing bank and internal ditch, and with a tall pillar stone at its centre. These and the other simpler burial mounds are testimony to the funerary importance and sanctity of the place as a whole in prehistoric times. Their construction over time re-ordered the landscape, producing a sacred geography, a sort of genealogical map when viewed from the summit of the great mound. They presumably reflected the enduring power of the ancestral dead, proclaiming the relationship of the community to land and ancestors, and probably serving as mnemonic devices for remembering the past and for structuring oral history. They would have been points of reference in a ritual landscape in which lineage and territorial rights were proclaimed in both monument and myth well into the medieval period.

The continued importance of Rathcroghan into historic times is attested by a significant number of monuments. Caran Fort is a D-shaped enclosure defined by an earthen bank with a shallow external ditch. A prominent circular mound lies just north of the enclosure; a very shallow penannular depression delimited by a number of stones on its summit may be a diminutive version of the embanked penannular eastern-facing features on the summit of other enclosed mounds, such as Rathbrennan near Roscommon. The latter is the mound referred to in the early thirteenth-century *Acallam na Senórach* on which St Patrick and Caílte were said to have sat, and this may be an allusion to the ceremonial use of such mounds—perhaps as places where



Circles and avenues: asymmetrical approaches to circular features at Rathcroghan, Navan and Knockaulin (the latter after Lynn 1991).



The earthwork at Rathmore surrounded by a substantial rock-cut ditch and with a raised area enclosed by a stone-built bank.



Left:
Rathnadarve.

Above:
Relignaree and
smaller ringfort.

Below:
Oweynagat
ogam stone.

passage at right angles, which in turn joins a narrow, featureless natural cave that terminates about 50m from the present entrance. Legendary associations include the Morrígan, an ancient goddess of battle, malevolent birds and pigs, a monstrous triple-headed creature, and female werewolves or dogs. Three warriors, including the famous Cú Chulainn, are tested in this cave by terrifying cats in the tenth-century tale *Fled Bricrenn* or 'Bricriu's Feast', and if stories of combat with a triple-headed monster represent a transformation into myth of an ancient warrior initiation rite (perhaps involving a mock combat with a wooden image), then the tale of the triple-headed monster might imply that this cave was once the location of warrior rites of passage that may have included other forms of testing, such as isolation. Assuming that the ogam stone is a memorial to Fraoch, a legendary Connacht warrior, then it and the tale of the confrontation of Cú Chulainn with the fearsome cats add to this warrior connection.

The puzzling earthen embankments called the Mucklaghs lie to the south-west of Rathcroghan Mound. Named because they were once believed to be the result of the rootings of a magical boar, they are two very large linear earthworks, each formed by a curving set of parallel banks running downslope from north-east to south-west into the broad valley that forms the southern limit of the Rathcroghan complex. Best viewed from a distant point (near a prehistoric burial mound) beside the small road that runs along the higher ground to the south in Carnakit townland (eastwards from the Castlerea road), they are



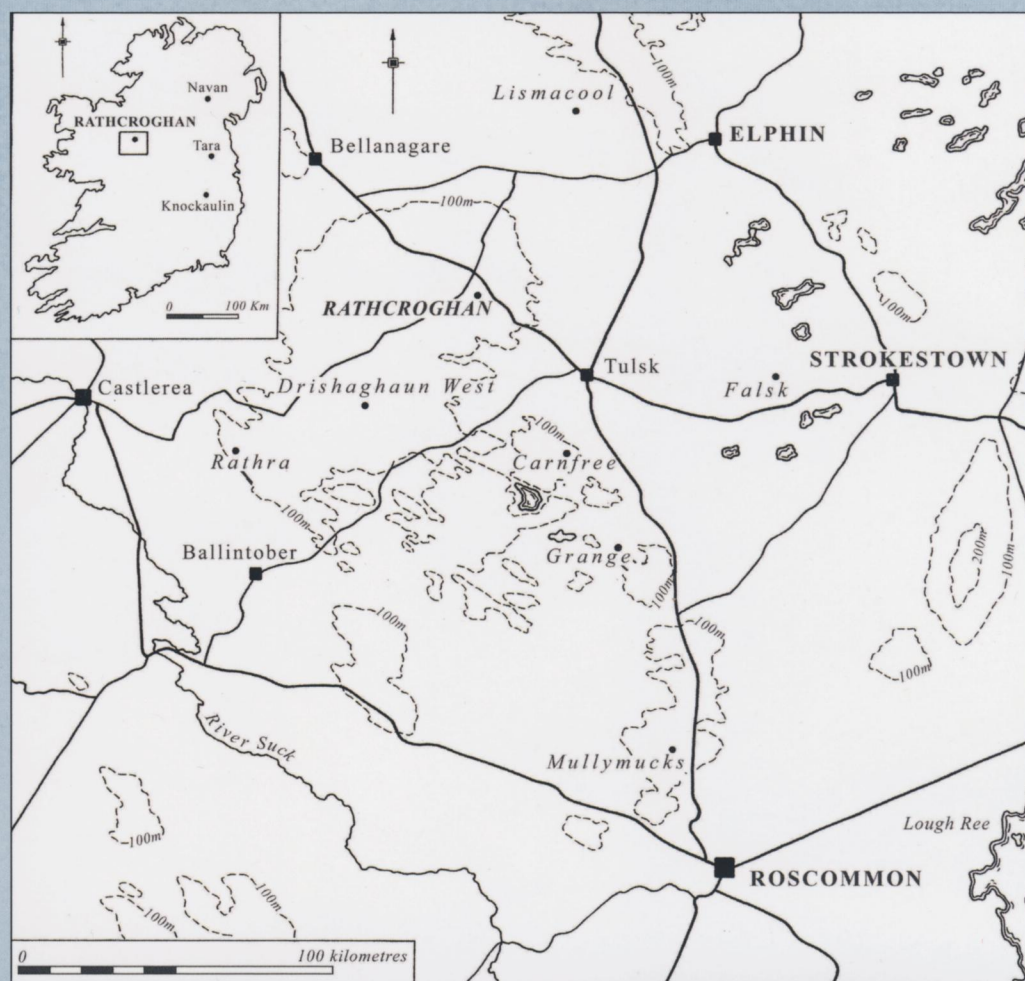
too large to be just driveways for cattle like other parallel bank systems in the area, and they must have had some ceremonial function. The northern earthwork is an enormous, closely set pair of earthen banks about 100m in length, while its southern counterpart comprises three banks with a maximum length of about 285m.

Rathmore, adjacent to the main road and north-west of Rathcroghan crossroads, is a prominent earthwork surrounded by a substantial rock-cut ditch and with a raised area enclosed by a stone-built bank. It is a good example of a raised ringfort and is probably a high-status settlement of medieval times. Magnetic gradiometry survey has demonstrated that a large circular timber structure occupied the centre of the summit and, if roofed, would have been an impressively large building. It may have been a timber hall, even a place of royal feasting and hospitality, perhaps a deliberate re-creation of the great circular house of the epic times of Medb and Ailill where, as bardic poetry declares, some descendants of the 'ale-sweet warriors of Crúachain' were royally entertained within sight of Rathcroghan Mound.

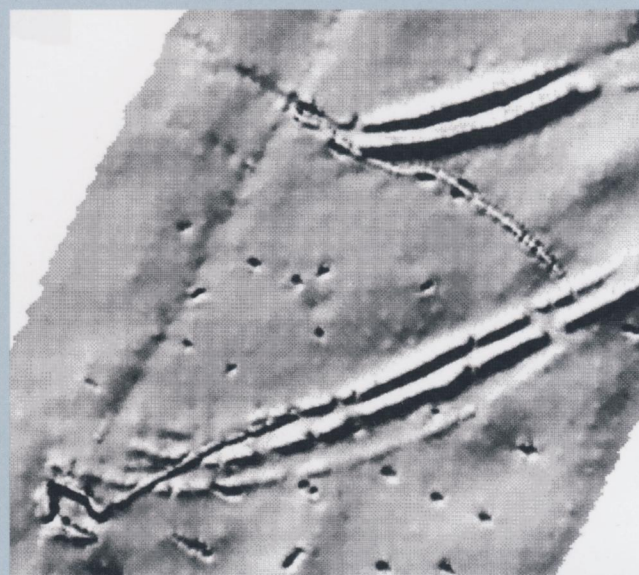
Visiting Rathcroghan: Major monuments such as Rathcroghan Mound and Rathmore (both adjacent to the N5 with car-parking) and Rathbeg and Rathnadarve (adjacent to the Rathcroghan to Castlerea road) are in State care and are readily accessible. Others are on private land and the landowner's permission should be sought. Information about Rathcroghan is available in the Cruachan Aí Heritage Centre in Tusk (071-9639268; <http://www.cruachanai.com>).

Further reading:

- T. Kinsella, *The Tain*. Translated from the Irish epic *Tain Bo Cuailnge* (Oxford, 1969).
- J. Waddell, J. Fenwick and K. Barton, *Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon: archaeological and geophysical survey in a ritual landscape* (Dublin, 2009).



Above: General location map of Machaire Connacht ('the plain of Connacht'), which lies between the towns of Roscommon, Elphin, Strokestown and Castlerea, extending, according to local tradition, northwards as far as Lismacool, eastwards to Falsk near Cloonfree and Strokestown, westwards as far as the bridge of Castlerea, and southwards to a hill two and a half miles north of Roscommon.



The Mucklachs: geophysical image showing linear earthworks.

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