

EARLY HISTORIC ROUTEWAYS

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EARLY HISTORIC ROUTEWAYS

In this contribution to the Know Your Monuments series, Muiris O'Sullivan and Liam Downey outline the different perspectives pertaining to Ireland's early road system.

Right: Fig. 1—Representation of the routeways of the five major *slighe* identified by Ó Lochlainn (1940), including some prominent current centres (courtesy of M. Corcoran).

Building on the pioneering study of roadways in ancient Ireland undertaken some three quarters of a century ago by Colm Ó Lochlainn (1940), further investigations have recently been published on the five major early routeways (O'Keeffe 2001; Doran 2004; Geissel 2006).

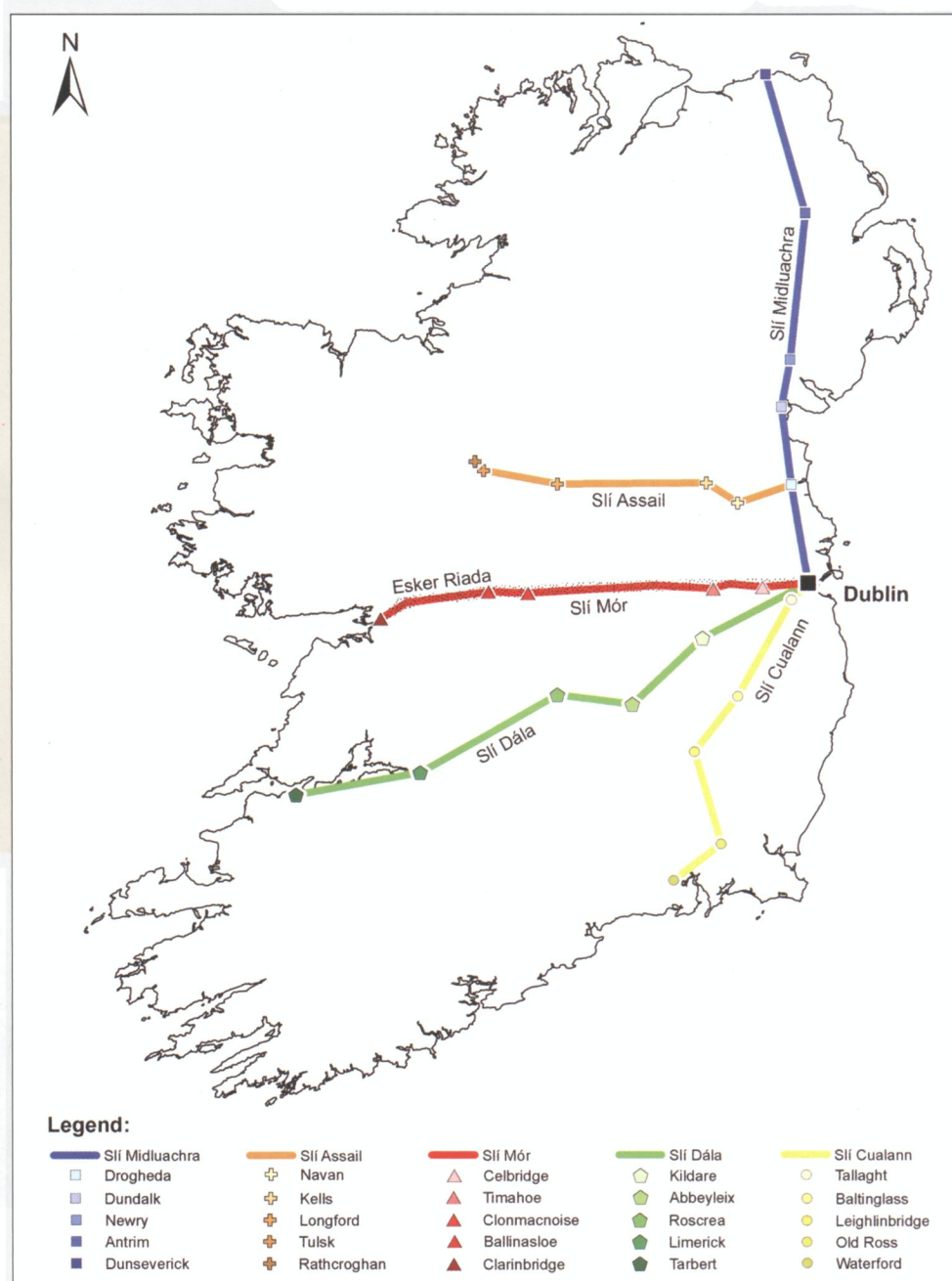
Particular attention is given in this article to two radically different perspectives that have emerged in relation to key features of the routeways, focusing on (i) the hubs from which they are speculated to have radiated and (ii) the association between the *Slí Mór* and the Esker Riada.

Convergence on Dublin

The five major early routeways postulated by Ó Lochlainn (1940) are shown schematically in Fig. 1. The *Slí Mór* ('great road'), according to Ó Lochlainn, followed a route from Dublin across to Galway, passing through Clonmacnoise, and on to Clarinbridge.

The main Dublin to Newry road was reported by Ó Lochlainn as representing the *Slí Midluachra*. This routeway ran through Antrim to Dunseverick, and had a junction with Tara just north of Drogheda.

The *Slí Assail* seems to have been the main road from Meath to Connacht. Leaving the *Slí Midluachra* a little to the north of Drogheda, it ran on the high ground north of the Boyne via



Navan (where there was a junction with Tara) and continued on through Tulsk to Rathcroghan.

A more recent investigation of the ancient routeways in Roscommon and Longford was undertaken by Doran (2004). In accordance with Ó Lochlainn, both the *Slí Mór* and the *Slí Assail* are taken to have commenced from Dublin. The *Slí Assail* is shown to have a clear focus on the early ritual site of Cruachain or Rathcroghan, as it is more often termed. It passed through Edgeworthstown, Termonbarry, Tulsk and on to Cruachain.

Ó Lochlainn reported that the *Slí Dála* was the road from west Munster to Tara. From Dublin, the route passed through Abbeylax and Roscrea, and on to Limerick and Tarbert.

The *Slí Cualann* seems, according to Ó Lochlainn, to have been the great main road to the south-east. From Dublin it passed through Tallaght and Baltinglass and on to Old Ross and Waterford.

A reappraisal of the *Slí Mór* was more recently undertaken by Hermann Geissel (2006), in conjunction with Seamus Cullen. The route reported by Geissel broadly concurs with that of Ó Lochlainn, although some points of difference were discerned, as mentioned below.

Starting from Dublin, Geissel reported the *Slí Mór* as going in a general westerly direction towards Taghadoo, which could be easily recognised from a distance by its round tower. Following the present road west, the route continued towards Timahoe



Left: Fig. 2—Togher/trackway in County Longford dated to 2259±98 BC, made of transverse split timbers and roundwoods, which ran for more than 750m across the bog (photo: Barry Raftery).

again noted on Ó Lochlainn's map. West of Durrow, the route proceeded to Clara and on to Ballycumber. The ancient routeway here known as the Pilgrim's Road approaches Clonmacnoise from the east and is generally accepted as a part of the *Slí Mór*.

Clonmacnoise was founded at the crossroads of the *Slí Mór* and the Shannon, and, as noted by Geissel, several possible routes link the monastic site with the Ballinasloe road at Cloonfad. The modern road to Shannonbridge is the route marked by Ó Lochlainn on his map as the *Slí Mór* between Clonmacnoise and the ford at Shannonbridge.

The Shannon could also once have been crossed from Clonmacnoise by a ninth-century wooden bridge (Fig. 3), which would have provided a continuation of the *Slí Mór* across the river. From Coolumber on the far side, the route headed for Cloonfad and on to Ballinasloe. Part of the main road through Ballinasloe coincides with the *Slí Mór*.

According to Ó Lochlainn, the *Slí Mór* from Ballinasloe to Kilconnel went via Aughrim. Geissel favoured a more direct route, running in a westerly direction towards Kilconnel. He added, however, that the route between Kilconnel and Kiltullagh was most difficult to discern and required a more detailed fieldwork.

Having crossed the Athenry to Clarinbridge road, the *slí* follows a low ridge parallel to the road and on to a full-blown esker near Clarinbridge.

and on to Carbury. By way of coincidence, or maybe partial corroboration, several wooden trackways/toghers have been revealed under the peat in the Timahoe area. A pen picture of toghers is outlined in Box 1, and featured in Fig. 2 is an impressive togher/trackway excavated at Corlea, Co. Longford.

Carbury Hill was a major landmark on the *Slí Mór*. From Carbury the route runs parallel to the modern Edenderry Road, and on via Monasteroris to Rhode, both of which were identified by Ó Lochlainn as being located on the *Slí Mór*. Having crossed the bog on a togher, the route continues west towards Croghan Hill, which is another of Ó Lochlainn's landmarks.

The route went on west to Durrow, which was an important historical centre and was

BOX 1—TOGHERS

These are causeways or trackways in a bog, typically made of wood although some historic examples are made with gravel, cobbles or stone slabs. The earliest Irish examples date from the mid-fourth millennium BC. They were constructed to give access into, within and across bogs. They can vary from small deposits of wood to trackways many hundreds of metres in length, providing a causeway from dryland to dryland. Most sites remained functional for no more than a number of years or decades.

In a small number of historic examples, such as at Lemanaghan and Bloomhill, Co. Offaly, a road was maintained and rebuilt with layers of wood and stone for up to 800 years. Although many roads crossing bogs today were constructed in recent centuries, some of these are likely to have earlier origins, such as the Togher of Croghan near Croghan Hill, Co. Offaly.

Source: Conor McDermott, pers. comm.; McDermott 2007.



Left: Fig. 3—A reconstruction of the ninth-century wooden bridge across the River Shannon at Clonmacnoise, Co.

Offaly/Roscommon (photoshop reconstruction by Conor McDermott, UCD School of Archaeology, from a scale model of the bridge and an aerial photograph by the National Monuments Service, Dept of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht).

and Uisneach, and also that it includes some links in the middle for which there is no evidence of an early road.

Esker Riada and the Slí Mór

O'Keeffe observed that most of the many papers and articles on the *Slí Mór* assume or seek to establish that it followed the Esker Riada. He mapped the lines of both the *Slí Mór* and the Esker Riada (Fig. 4) and showed that, in crossing the country from the east towards Clonmacnoise, they did not always coincide; from Ballinasloe to Clarinbridge, however, they appear to have been congruent.

According to O'Keeffe, the *Slí Mór* probably ran from Tara and passed through Kinnegad, Moate, Athlone, Ballinasloe, Athenry and Clarinbridge. The Esker Riada line comprised many prominent hills in the otherwise flat, boggy landscape on the route from Dublin, including Donadea, Rhode, Durrow and Ballinasloe, and from there the Esker Riada and the *Slí Mór* coincide.

Slí Dála

The terminal for this routeway is generally given as Roscrea (O'Keeffe 2001). The road believed to be the *slí* followed the country road through Ballaghmore from Clondeen, where it crossed the River Nore and went on to Aghaboe (Fig. 4). From there it ran on to Abbeyleix and into the ancient townland of Timahoe. The probable line from Timahoe went to Athy and on to Ballysaz, which is close to Dún Ailline. The road passed through Naas, the seat of the early kings of Leinster, and thence to Clane, an ancient historic crossing place on the Liffey.

Convergence on Tara

Using his wide-ranging expertise in road engineering, O'Keeffe (2001) undertook a systematic investigation of the ancient road system. He mapped the probable lines of the five major routeways as radiating out from Tara (Fig. 4).

Slí Midluachra

According to O'Keeffe, the route of the *Slí Midluachra* ran from Tara Hill down to the Boyne at Dowdstown, and along the pre-1817 Dublin–Navan road. To reach Batterstown, the *slí* had to cross the Blackwater. From Ardee the route passes to the west of Dundalk and on to Navan Fort, which is two miles to the west of Armagh town.

Slí Assail

Starting from Tara Hill, a route due west would, as indicated by O'Keeffe, have encountered the great red bog which stretched from Delvin to Killyan. To skirt this formidable barrier, the route from Tara had to deviate north-west or south-west. Having passed around the bog boundary, the route changed direction to pass through the gap between Lough Ennel and Lough Owel. According to O'Keeffe, the route of the *slí* to the west had to run close to Uisneach and from there towards either

Athlone or Ballyleague to avoid Lough Rea, which is sixteen miles long. From Tara to Rathcroghan, the route shown in Fig. 4 went via Trim, Athboy, Uisneach, Ballyleague and Tulsk. Alternatively, the route from Uisneach could have proceeded via Athlone, Roscommon and Tulsk, and on to Rathcroghan.

O'Keeffe considers it most unlikely that the *Slí Assail* crossed the Shannon at the same location as the *Slí Mór*. Tullamore Ford, located 1.5 miles upstream from Clonmacnoise, was a common crossing place. The crossing at Termonbarry has also often been suggested as an ancient alternative to Ballyleague. O'Keeffe noted that Ó Lochlainn's *Slí Assail* misses both Tara

BOX 2—DIAGNOSTIC FEATURES

- ◆ Place and townland names containing elements (often an Irish root word) relating to a road, routeway, esker, pass, weir, etc.
- ◆ Suitable topography, generally high ground with little soil cover, and avoiding poor drainage.
- ◆ Forging points and bridges.
- ◆ Monastic and ecclesiastical settlements and ancient royal seats.
- ◆ Ancient places of assembly and inauguration.
- ◆ Routes travelled by earlier saints and scholars.
- ◆ Movement of armies and sites of battles.

Right: Fig. 4—Representation of the routeways of the five major *slighe*, showing the Esker Riada, according to O’Keeffe (2001), including some prominent urban centres of today (courtesy of M. Corcoran).

From there, the most likely line for the *Slí Dála* was north-east to Barberstown, and then north through Taghadoe Cross and on to Maynooth and into County Meath. As noted by O’Keeffe, William Larkin’s 1817 map of County Meath shows a road line winding north to Dunshaughlin, with a junction at Ballylough, where it could have joined and followed the *Slí Cualann* to Tara Hill.

Slí Cualann

As stated by O’Keeffe, Pratt and Moll’s maps of 1708 and 1714 show the road from Kileen to Dunshaughlin, Piercetown, Clonee, Castleknock and Áth Cliath (Fig. 4). From the south side of the ford, a road follows the top of an esker leading to Tallaght.

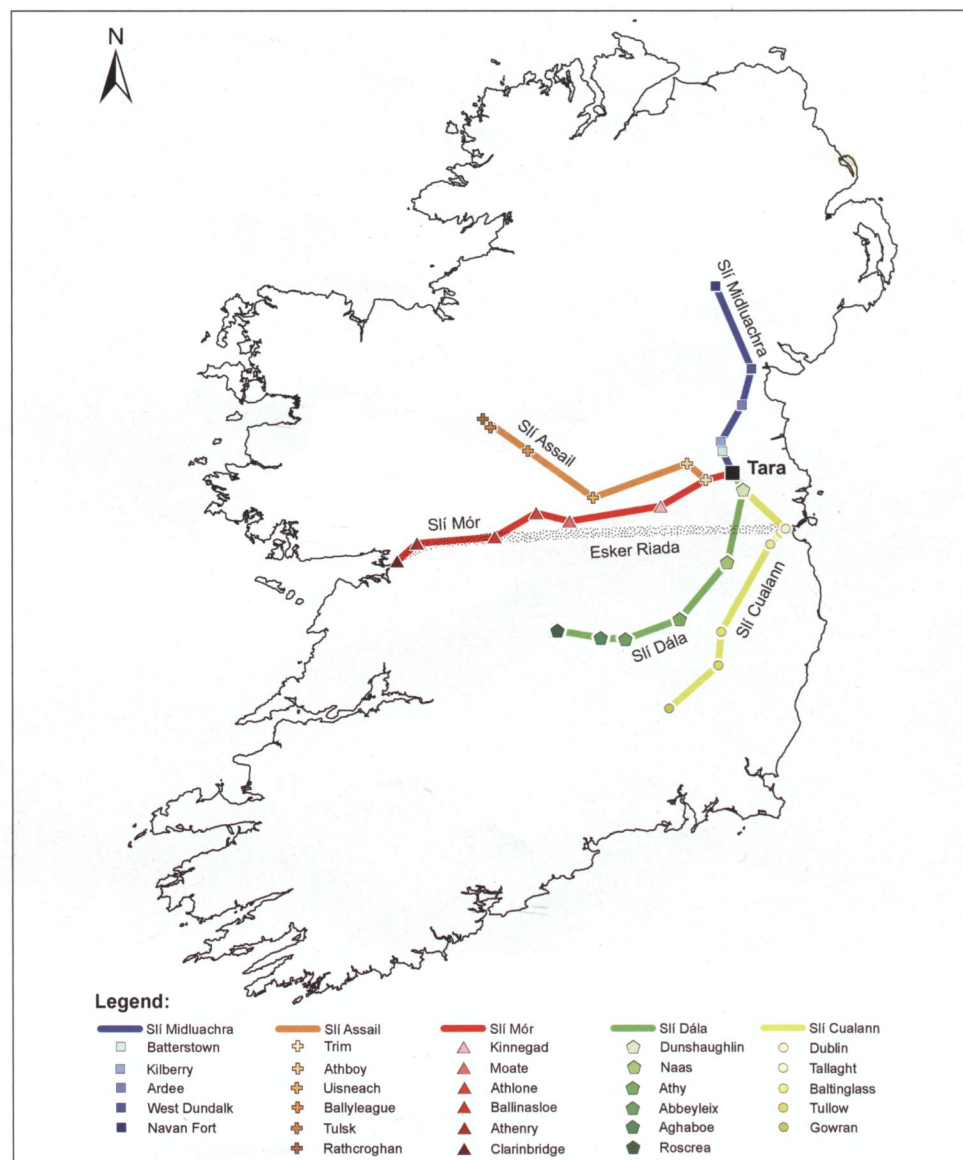
According to O’Keeffe, there is no evidence to indicate that the original *Slí Cualann* went beyond Oldbawn before AD 350. It appears, however, to have been extended southwards from Tallaght to Baltinglass, Tullow and Gowran during the period AD 351–800.

Conclusions

As mentioned above, contradictory perspectives have been documented in respect of (i) the convergence of the five major routeways either on Dublin or Tara and (ii) the extent to which the *Slí Mór* and the Esker Riada coincided.

According to Ó Lochlainn, the routes radiated out of Dublin (Fig. 1). This proposition, which otherwise has an air of hindsight about it, has been strongly supported by Geissel’s detailed reappraisal of the route of the *Slí Mór*. Conversely, both O’Keeffe and Stout (unpublished) contend that the five ancient routes appear to have converged on Tara.

O’Keeffe and Geissel have advanced markedly different perspectives as regards the coincidence of the *Slí Mór* and the Esker Riada. According to O’Keeffe, only the western section of the Esker Riada, from Ballinasloe to Clarinbridge, coincided with the *Slí Mór*. Conversely, Geissel concluded that the *Slí Mór* and the Esker Riada were generally congruent but that they diverged between Dublin and Celbridge, and probably also in County Offaly between Rahugh and Durrow.



Given the diverse range of diagnostic features (Box 2) used in determining the routeways and, more particularly, the relative emphasis given to certain features by individual investigators, the emergence of conflicting perspectives was almost inevitable. In reality, Ireland would have featured a wide variety of routeways in the first millennium AD and scholarship has yet to contextualise this presumed reality against the semi-mythical routeways discussed here. ■

Acknowledgements

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