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Source: *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1995), pp. 22-26

Published by: Cumann Seanchais Ard Mhacha/Armagh Diocesan Historical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25746704>

Accessed: 08-05-2020 20:10 UTC

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By

EDEL BHREATHNACH

The development of Tara as a centre of national importance in the early medieval period, apart from the legacy of its prehistoric significance, was expressed in a variety of manners. Its mythological past was associated with the greatest of heroic kings, Cormac mac Airt being one of the most distinguished. Lug and Medb, the loftiest of the otherworld pantheon, confirmed the suitable candidate in the sovereignty of the kingship of Tara. Patrick, the national apostle, was linked inevitably with Tara. His most dramatic triumph over paganism took place at Tara. Control of a greater part or the whole of the island of Ireland by a king or a dynasty was proclaimed through control of Tara, or the assumption of the title *rex Temro*, 'king of Tara'.¹ The dominant position accorded to Tara can be traced also in the vocabulary used to describe the site, which conveys ideas of strength, power and dominance. This brief paper is a survey of some of these descriptions, based on texts generally dated to the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries — the period during which were created the foundations for the image of Tara which survives to this day.

Muirchú maccu Machtheni, the late seventh-century author of the Life of Patrick, confirmed the idea of Tara as a capital or as a place of national significance by his choice of language. Lóegaire mac Néill, the king portrayed by Muirchú as being king of Tara when Patrick was a missionary in Ireland, is described as *imperator barbarorum regnans in Temoria, quae erat caput Scotorum*² (emperor of the barbarians (Bieler: non-Romans) ruling at Tara, which was the capital of the Irish). *Caput* is a word with a wide range of meanings. Muirchú is most likely to have had the definition of 'a capital' or 'a chief city' in mind when he included it in his text.³ That Muirchú's intention was to depict Tara as the capital of the Irish, the most powerful royal court in the land, is confirmed by his later description of the

¹ For a review of scholarship on Tara to date, see E. Bhreathnach, *Tara: a select bibliography* (Dublin, 1995).

² L. Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, (Dublin, 1979: *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*, 10), I, 10. I use Bieler's text despite its shortcomings. In this instance, Bieler's additions *quae <tunc> erat caput <regni> Scotorum* are not included, as they are added from manuscripts later than the Book of Armagh.

³ *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (ed. P.W.G. Glare) (1985 edition), pp. 274-5; *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British sources*. Fasc. II C, (prepared by R. E. Latham), (London 1981), 276-8. One of the other meanings of *caput*, 'a source, fountain head' could lie behind its use in the phrase (not found in the Book of Armagh text) to describe Brega, the plain in which Tara is situated, *ubi erat regnum maximum nationum harum, quod erat caput omnis gentilitatis et idolatriae* (because it was there that there was the greatest kingdom among these tribes, the head of all paganism and idolatry) (Bieler, I 13).

summons to Tara by Lóegaire mac Néill of all persons of note to celebrate a feast of pagan worship: *magis . . . uocatis ad Loigaireum uelut quondam ad Nabucodonossor regem in Temoriae istorum Babylone . . .*⁴ (the druids . . . were also summoned to king Lóegaire at Tara, their Babylon, as they had been summoned to king Nabuchodonosor). Scholars have commented considerably on the undoubted biblical resonances and imitations in this passage.⁵ Its significance in creating a powerful and dominant image of Tara needs to be reiterated. Once Tara had been described in the Life of Patrick as *caput Scotorum* and *istorum Babylone*, it would be difficult to diminish its importance, even in the choice of words to describe it. This is borne out by other texts.

Muirchú's contemporary, and author of the work known as the *Collectanea*, bishop Tírechán, is less dramatic than Muirchú, though his depiction of Tara is nonetheless notable. Patrick proceeded *ad ciuitatem Temro ad Logairium filium Neill*⁶ (to the city of Tara to Lóegaire mac Néill). By choosing *civitas* to describe Tara, Tírechán is unlikely to be emphasising the ecclesiastical connotations of the word, but may be aware of the 'political' inferences associated with it. Is Tírechán implying that Tara, like the old Roman administrative capitals (*civitates*) on the Continent which were revitalised by later Frankish dynasties,⁷ is a seat of authority? Its power is based on its prehistoric pedigree and in the late seventh-century on the political authority of one particular dynasty, the Uí Néill. The significance of the Tírechán's portrayal of Lóegaire's house as a *domus regia* has been noted recently, the implication being that the king lived in a royal house in Tara, the royal Uí Néill ceremonial centre.⁸ Muirchú's use of phrases such as *in palatio Temoriae* 'in the palace of Tara' and *Adueniente ergo eo in caenacolum Temoriae . . .* 'As he entered the banquet hall of Tara'⁹ corresponds with the idea that Tara was a royal site with suitably regal edifices.

The annals of this period, fraught as they are with uncertainties about the earliest stratum of entries, do not contain detailed references to Tara as a fortress. Tara appears regularly as part of the title *rex Temro*. One exception is the entry in the Annals of Ulster in 780 *Congressio senodorum nepotum Neill Laginentiumque in op[p]ido Temro ubi fuerunt ancorite 7 scribe multi, quibus dux erat Dublitter*¹⁰ (A congress of the synods of the Uí Néill and Laigin in the *oppidum* of Temair, at which were present many anchorites and

⁴ Bieler I, 15.

⁵ K. McCone, *Pagan past and christian present* (Maynooth, 1990), pp. 33-4.

⁶ Bieler, 132 paragraph 12.

⁷ I. Woods, 'Kings, kingdoms and consent' in P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Woods (eds) *Early medieval kingship* (Leeds, 1977), pp. 23-6.

⁸ C. Swift, 'Tírechán's motives in compiling the *Collectanea*: an alternative interpretation', *Ériu* 45 (1994), pp. 69-71 (Bieler, p. 132, 13).

⁹ Bieler, I 19.

¹⁰ S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)* (Dublin, 1983), p. 234.

scribes, led by Dublitter). The meeting of the Uí Néill and the Leinstermen, probably at the behest of the former who wished to impose their authority over the latter, at Tara, attests to the lingering prestige of the site itself as a place where the rule of law could be imposed.¹¹ As if to reinforce Tara's status and prestige, the annalist uses the expression *in oppido Temro*, 'in the fortress, hillfort or town of Tara'.

An Old Irish poem on the origin of Tara,¹² possibly dated to the ninth century, proclaims the splendour of Tara:

*cathir Themra cona li
cia ri lasa torgaibed*¹³

(who was the king by whom the splendid city of Tara was built)

It includes also a likely description of the monument known as Ráith na Ríg, — a prehistoric hillfort —, as it is viewed from the summit of the hill:

*At-chonterc in [n-]aurthuili
iadais frisín(d) [n-]jard,
pa maa pa n(d)-adbal in borg
asais dun imchelt hall.*¹⁴

(He saw the outer trench (?), it closed in against the height, greater still was the fort (?encircling rampart), a surrounding fort arose yonder)¹⁵

The use of the word *borg* to describe prehistoric hillforts is particularly prevalent in the Prologue to *Félire Óengusso*, the calendar of saints compiled by a certain Óengus mac Óenguba in the first half of the ninth century.¹⁶ The Prologue contains the famous verse where the desolation of Tara is compared with the flourishing state of Armagh:

*Adbath borg tromm Temra
la tairthim a flathe,
col-lín corad sruthe
maraid Ard mór Machae.*¹⁷

¹¹ A similar use of Tara, though more malevolent, is recorded in the Annals of Ulster 817 (Mac Niocaill, 272). Máel Dúin mac Cinn Fáelad, princeps of Raphoe was slain, seemingly at the request of Aed Oirðnide, king of the northern Uí Néill and claimant to the title *rex Temro* (d. 819). In response, the community of Colum Cille went to Tara to excommunicate (*do escúine*) Áed.

¹² M. O Daly, 'On the origin of Tara', *Celtica* 5 (1960), pp. 186-91.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 187, lines 3-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188, verse 4.

¹⁵ This verse is difficult to interpret (see ed.'s notes p. 190), although it would seem to be attempting to describe relatively accurately the layout and features of Ráith na Ríg.

¹⁶ P. Ó Riain, 'The Tallaght martyrologies, redated', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 20 (1990), pp. 21-38.

¹⁷ W. Stokes, *Félire Óengusso Céili Dé. The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London, 1905; reprinted Dublin, 1984), p. 24, lines 165-8.

(Tara's mighty fort perished with the death of her lords: with a multitude of venerable champions the great Ard Macha abides).

Similar sentiments are found in the poem *Genair Patraicc*, otherwise known as Fíacc's Hymn:

*I nArdmachae fil ríge
is cian doréacht Emain:
is cell mór Dún Lethglasse
nímdil cid dithrub Temair.*

(In Armagh is the kingdom: long since has Emain been forsaken: Downpatrick is a great church: it is not dear to me that Tara should be desolate)¹⁸

Two other prehistoric sites — both hilltop locations — may also be described in *Féilire Óengusso* as *borg*.¹⁹ Dún Ailinne, Knockaulin, County Kildare, an ancient seat of the Laigin is *borg Aillinne úallach*²⁰ (Ailenn's proud fort). Of Emain Macha, Navan Fort, County Armagh, it is said *Borg Emna ro tetha*²¹ (Emain's fort had vanished). It is also used in the line *ro lín burgu betha*²² (it has filled the forts of the world), a phrase which is reminiscent of a line of rhetoric included in the genealogy of the Leinster tribe, the Fothairt, *orofalnamar ara betha borgcaib*²³ (since we ruled over the forts of the world). *Borg*²⁴ is a borrowing into Irish from one of three sources, Latin, Old English or Old Norse. It is not widely attested and in the earliest references to specific sites (Tara, Emain and Dún Ailinne) appears to relate to prehistoric hillforts. While Marstrander in his discussion of Norse borrowings into Irish preferred medieval Latin as the source,²⁵ the possibility that *borg* was borrowed from Old English or Norse cannot be discounted.²⁶ The word appears as a place-name element in Scotland in the form *borgue*, most likely reflecting Scandinavian influence, one example of which

¹⁸ W. Stokes and J. Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus. A collection of Old-Irish Glosses scholia prose and verse*. (reprint Dublin, 1975), p. 317, lines 43-4.

¹⁹ The doubt here is due to manuscript readings which render it possible that *borg* is being confused with Old Irish *bru(i)g*. See *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (compact edition) (Dublin, 1983), pp. 146, 212.

²⁰ Stokes, *Féilire* p. 25, line 189.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25, line 193.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 23, line 140.

²³ M. A. O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* volume i (Dublin, 1962: reprinted 1976), p. 79, 12.

²⁴ *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (compact edition) (Dublin, 1983), p. 146.

²⁵ C. J. S. Marstrander, *Bidrag til det Norske sprogs historie i Irland* (Kristiana, 1915), p. 121.

²⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary* vol. ii (Second edition), pp. 416-7 (borough); J. de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches wörterbuch* (Leiden, 1961), p. 50. For a recent comment on the difficulty in distinguishing between Old Norse and Old English as a source for borrowing into Irish, see McCone, K. et al (eag) *Stair na Gaeilge in ómós do Pádraig Ó Fiannachta* (Maigh Nuad, 1994), p. 333.

describes a stone-fort which guards a small bay called Castle Haven at the mouth of the river Fleet.²⁷ Similarly, Anglo-Saxon contacts with Ireland prior to the ninth century were sufficiently varied and well-established to allow for such a borrowing.²⁸

In summary, the vocabulary used to describe Tara in the earliest documentation formed part of the deliberate creation of a royal ceremonial centre of renown, whose pagan past was frowned upon, but whose contemporary authority needed to be confirmed and strengthened even by the vocabulary used to describe the site.

NOTE

The author is grateful to Jenny Rowland, Tim Clarkson, Manchester, and David Howlett, Oxford, for their comments on the possible origins of *borg* in Irish, conveyed through ANSAXNET.

²⁷ D. Brooke, 'The Northumbrian settlements in Galloway and Carrick: an historical assessment', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 121 (1991), pp. 295-327. See also *borgue* in *The Scottish National Dictionary* (ed. W. Grant) (Edinburgh, 1941), p. 220.

²⁸ See, for example, D. Ó Cróinín, 'Rath Melsigi, Willibrord, and the earliest Echternach manuscripts', *Peritia* 3 (1984), pp. 17-49.

*Audite omnes amantes Deum sancta mereta
Viri in Christo beati Patrici episcopi
Quomodo bonum ob actum simulatur angelis
Perfectamque propter vitam aequatur apostolis.*

Hear ye all, lovers of God, the holy merits
Of the man blessed in Christ, Patrick the bishop,
How for his good ways he is likened to the angels,
And because of his perfect life is deemed equal to the apostles.

from *Audite omnes* by St Secundinus
trans. Ludwig Bieler