

JOHN HURST DISSERTATION PRIZE 2009

In 2004, the Medieval Settlement Research Group announced the launch of a prize, set up in honour of the late John Hurst, who did so much to promote the field of medieval archaeology and in particular the study of medieval settlement. To encourage new and young scholars in the field, an annual prize of £200 is offered to graduate students for the best Masters dissertation on any theme in the field of medieval settlement and landscape

in Britain and Ireland (c. AD 400–1600). Directors of Masters courses in Archaeology, English Local History, Landscape Studies and related fields are invited to submit high-quality completed dissertations for consideration by the MSRG Committee. We are delighted to present below summaries of their research by the joint 2009 prize winners, Patrick Gleeson and Niamh Arthur:

Constructing kingship in early medieval Ireland: power, place and ideologies of kingship

By Patrick Gleeson¹

Introduction

Ireland's hierarchy of kingship encompassed roughly one hundred and fifty petty kingdoms, each with their own king, alongside a series of over-kingships and provincial kingships. The ultimate seat of prodigious kingship, and one synonymous with high-kingship by the 9th century was Tara. This hierarchy's complexity is set apart by kingship being vested in places. Unfortunately many narratives remain chimeras due to a bias towards more prominent institutions. Local, small-scale kingships endure in obscurity. This dissertation aimed to integrate such kingships into a narrative of Irish kingship between AD 400–800 by examining the changing role of *place* in ideologies of kingship.

Methodology

The methodology entailed site-based analyses of four excavated royal sites: Garranes, Lagore, Clogher and Moynagh Lough. Though Lagore's chronology and phasing is a controversial topic (Hencken 1950; Lynn 1985/6; Warner 1985/6), recent dating of the human remains obliges long overdue re-interpretation. Clogher remains inadequately published but much evidence could be gleaned from annual excavation reports lodged with an online excavation database and some cursory publications by the excavator (Warner 1988; 2000). All sites permitted appreciation of temporal and spatial patterning and a detailed reconstruction of their stratigraphy, phasing, chronology and evolution was produced.

After reconstructing each site's chronology, individual phases were scrutinised under a series of headings: defences, entranceways, structures, activities, zoo-archaeological remains, artefacts, dating, historical context and landscape context. Subsequent discussion focused on the meaning of the material culture, analysing the mentalities, monumentalities, iconographies and ideologies contributing to the construction of kingship. Observed patterns were placed in context by comparison with other royal sites, and through integrated

multidisciplinary analysis the role of place and the archaeological assemblage in constructing kingship was discussed.

While this thesis rejected Jackson's (1964) view of early medieval texts as windows on the Iron Age, such sources are understood as fundamentally useful for elucidating early medieval perceptions of the world. Mythology is a meaningful ideological construct and though compiled almost indubitably by monastically orientated 'men-of-letters' (McCone 1991), it provides essential context within which to interpret archaeological remains. Consequently, mythology, literature and documentary sources were utilised to understand the perceptions of landscape, place and kingship.

Research Context

The 5th, 6th and 7th centuries saw Ireland's politico-geography change dramatically. The Uí Néill swept forth from Connaught, conquering the midlands in the late 5th and early 6th century (Charles-Edwards 2000, 441-69) and the Cenél Conaill and Cenél nÉogain expanded from eastern Ulster into the northwest (Lacey 2006). Later, a branch of the Cenél Conaill themselves conquered the midlands from the original Uí Néill, and re-forged their identity as 'descendants of Níall' (Lacey 2006, 165-6). In its traditional form that identity was reified as part of 8th century *realpolitik* which saw a concerted re-casting of genealogies (Lacey 2006, 258-88). These centuries saw dynasties rising and falling as kingships formed and liquidated. Indeed, the dominant settlement architecture of this period, the ringfort and crannog, emerge during the 6th and 7th century and may embody a form of monumentality deeply implicated in the changing social structure (Stout 1991). The need to demonstrate political standing necessitated, but also resulted from emerging groups fashioning new seats of kingship (Charles-Edwards 2000, 480). Such enterprises gravitated towards landscapes which themselves were palimpsests of millennia of activity (Newman 1998). Far from being an inert constant, preserving an authentic aesthetic, *place* was fundamentally implicated in medieval society's discourses of power and ideology.

¹ Dept of Archaeology, University College Cork

Some suggest Irish kingship ideology was a sacral one. For Doherty (2005) the genesis of Irish tradition emerged from a wider Indo-European root. Central to such suggestions are similarities between the cult of the horse, inauguration and the *Aśvamedha* (horse-sacrifice) of ancient Indian tradition (Gonda 1966). Nevertheless, Jaski (2000) has highlighted some problems with the basic tenets of that sacral thesis: the unblemished king, the ruler's truth, and the sacred marriage. Namely, some blemished kings continued to reign despite being so stricken, the precepts of the ruler's truth actually refer to *all* those with duties of lordship, and the evidence for a sovereignty goddess is questionable when territories oscillated and the image of Ireland as bride persisted as literary topos into the 18th century (Jaski 2000, 58-89). While not denying sacral kingship ever existed, such ideas are problematic for early medieval Ireland and alternative interpretations are possible. There is every reason to regard such creeds as testaments to monuments of human endeavour, rooted in physical experience, and their very exceptionality may lie entrenched in beliefs that those who accorded with such ideals were mortal and human.

The poet's salient role in constructing kingship is often acknowledged (Byrne 1973, 7-28; Fitzpatrick 2004) but remains imperfectly examined. As holy men in their own right, poets were liminal figures mediating between human and divine (Nagy 1982). Indeed, the poetic ritual *Imbas forosna*, 'all-embracing knowledge which illuminates', proffered knowledge of past, present and future realities (Nagy 1982, 142), and is strikingly analogous if not cognate with the prerequisites for true kingship (see McCone 1991, 171-3). Nevertheless, how exactly mantic rituals and poetic craft helped fashion kingships remains poorly understood.

Site Interpretation

Garranes, seat of Uí Echach Muman, was a trivallate ringfort used from the 5th-6th century for producing high status secular ornaments (Ó Ríordáin 1942). It sits at the heart of a prehistoric landscape, but is circled by early medieval ringforts. On the basis of archaeological, landscape and historical evidence Garranes appears to have been a monument implicated in re-imagining the Uí Echach's 5th-6th century dynastic identity as 'Éoganacta Ráithleann', and thereafter became an *Oenach* (assembly) site whose importance was annually affirmed as 'memoryscape' after that group moved their seat northwards pressing claims to Munster's over-kingship.

A combination of evidence suggests Lagore was a ceremonial site of Tara's kingship in the late 6th-7th century, only becoming a royal site of the Uí Chernaig Sotail when that dynasty emerged as a distinct kindred in the late 7th century. Radiocarbon dating of Lagore's human remains suggested periods of deposition in the Bronze Age, Iron Age and early medieval periods (Newman 2009). This aided interpretation and identification of six distinct phases of late 6th-10th century date. Significantly, all human remains exhibited a pattern of deposition whereby skulls and skull fragments were deposited in the northeast, while whole bodies lacking heads, and other long bones tended towards a south-western deposition.

The use of Lagore clearly changes over time; namely no human remains were stratigraphically later than the 7th century. Similarly, structural evidence became more substantial and is focused on the site's centre. Such changes may be connected to the emergence of the Uí Chernaig Sotail and their consequent dynastic attachment to Lagore as a place of kingship.

Clogher, seat of the Uí Chremthainn branch of the Airgialla, saw an internally ditched and palisaded oval enclosure built in the 5th century, replaced by a ringfort in the late 6th century. Correspondingly, an Iron Age sub-rectangular enclosure appears to have been remodelled at this time with an internal ditch constructed which funnelled down the eastern hillslope before connecting to a trackway. A sunken roadway was also constructed by sinking its route, the resulting upcast formed two banks which lined its route. This roadway ran across the north face of the hill before turning through ninety degrees, entering the core of the enclosure at the northeast. Through all phases, whether Iron Age or medieval, Clogher's interior was entered from the northeast (Warner 1988; 2000).

Moynagh Lough, a royal site of the Mugdorne, had six phases of 6th-9th century date (Bradley 1991). However, it was not palisaded until the mid 8th century, implying earlier activities were clearly visible from the adjacent land (Bradley 1991, 13). The first discernable entrance was also 8th century, but to the northeast and contemporary occupation itself, including structures and metalworking areas, was positioned along a northeast/southwest axis (see Fig. 1). As at Lagore it appears a mental topography was governing the location of activities through a number of phases. While early phases' material culture was consistent with a royal codification, structural evidence was too ephemeral to support permanent habitation. By the 8th century, however, larger structures suggest a greater emphasis on the use of the site for production and feasting, representing a departure in the way Moynagh Lough was used which also finds parallels with Lagore.

Discussion

Many studies take it as axiomatic that the locus of sacred kingship existed simultaneously on both divine and human planes: kingship was fundamentally bound to the Otherworld (Carey 1999; 2005; Ó Cathasáigh 1978). Carey (1987) has shown that the Otherworld existed on an alternative time-geography; it was a place where all of time existed in an eternal present and such beliefs served to link the past, ancestors and divine with the present. In literature that supernatural realm was depicted variously as being off the coast, on islands, underneath lakes, rivers and seas, beneath hills and burial mounds, or in dwellings hidden by storms, darkness and mist. Moreover, it was accessible through royal places themselves (Carey 1982; 2005). Royal spaces accordingly were conceived of and created as a nexus of the planes of existence. As inherited, interpreted and imagined landscapes, the hallowed precincts of royal sites were theatres of performance and 'memoriscapes' of mythological pasts, presents and futures. A labyrinth of interconnected common cultural, architectural, iconographic and spatial motifs permeates royal sites and

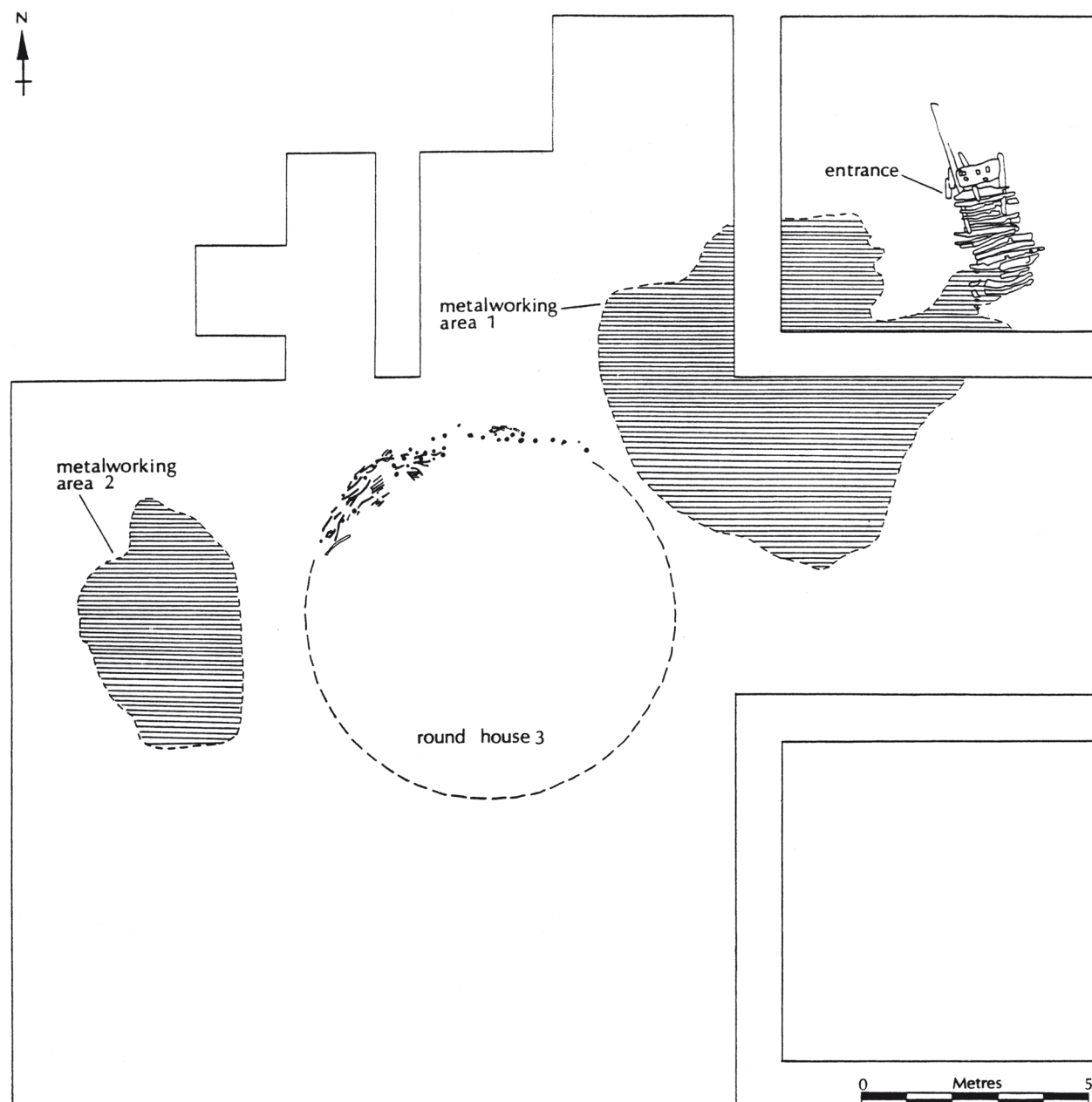


Figure 1 Schematic plan of Phase X (early 8th century–c748AD) at Moynagh Lough. Note the orientation of the occupation is along a northeast/southwest axis (from Bradley 1993, fig. 8.3).

represents a tradition and monumentality of ideologies of kingship. Though expressed, experienced and reiterated through mythopoeic acts, these were understood physically.

Fashioning royal sites was therefore demiurgic. Though crannogs are artificial constructions, the early medieval lexicon universally speaks of *inis*, 'island', giving no hint of either natural or artificial beginnings (see O'Sullivan 2004). Similarly, Clogher's inauguration mound was originally a natural knoll (Warner 2004, 35). Some mounds may have been perceived as supernatural spaces appropriate for inauguration precisely because they were understood as locales conquered from the immortal realm.

Indeed, Newman's (2007) re-interpretation of Tara's *Téich Midhúarta* engages with similar precepts. He

interprets this double banked and sunken approach as an inauguration avenue: the gaps in its banks assemble the monuments of the hill into one integrated ceremonial campus (2007, 415). Hewn into the hillslope, this was 'the Otherworld into which the king must pass...the nexus from which he must eventually emerge' (Newman 2007, 422). Newman names Crauchain's *Mucklaghs* and Tailtiu's *Knockans* as monumental kin (2007, 422). The similarities of Clogher's sunken roadway, including a twist to the route, may support a similar interpretation.

A consistent literary theme regarding Otherworld journeys is that of 'dreaming' or 'vision' at a mound. Such journeys, however, are not ones of 'distance traversed', but more 'vision obscured' (see for instance Carey 2005, 40-3). Indeed analogously, by monumental sleight of hand formal avenues at a plethora of royal sites



Figure 2 The Clogher Inauguration mound (image courtesy of Michelle Higgins).

restrict visual access to the sanctuary core immediately prior to entry (see Newman 2007, fig. 10). If Otherworld visions were acted out in reality by poets and kings, these were peregrinations and sojourns of the mind performed for the assembled body politic.

Moreover, understanding poets as holy men raises the possibility that such rituals as *imbas forosna* may have had a contemporary reality. The island status of Lagore and Moynagh permitted an intrinsic connection to the supernatural realm associated with primordial kingdoms and inherently bound to ideologies of kingship. The poet is often depicted performing rituals in liminal locales close to water, the most appropriate location for *Imbas* revelation (Nagy 1982). The character of Moynagh and Lagore contrived that they possess ability to facilitate such activities. Indeed, Moynagh and Lagore's early phases arguably contain high status material culture associated with tiny structures not consistent with a use for 'habitation', but perhaps rather more as theatres for ceremonial performance of kingship rituals.

The recurrent northeast/southwest axis at royal sites possesses well known prehistoric antecedents, notably the ritual pools of the Navan Fort complex (Newman 1998, 138-9). It was, however, also an integral aspect of early medieval royal landscapes. To note a few, it is the orientation of standing stones crowning Finnermore hill, assembly site of Clogher's kings (Warner 2005, fig. 2), but also of the *Mucklaghs* of Cruachain (see Waddell and

Cooney 2009, fig. 17), which is so monumentally cognate with Tara's *Téich Midchúarta*.

Newman's re-interpretation of *Téich Midchúarta* as an inauguration avenue suggests a ceremonial inauguration route which entered the sanctuary *temenos* through two aligned north-eastern entrances in *Ráith na Ríg* and *Téich Cormaic* respectively (2007, 434). Geophysical survey of *Ráith na Ríg*'s interior shows two linear features north and south of both entrances, which, if projected along their northeast/southwest alignment connect to field boundaries ascending the hill's eastern flank (see Fig. 3). This putative avenue highlights an extended emphasis on approaching Tara's sacred core along a northeast/southwest axis.

Mythology locates *Téich Duinn*, 'the House of the Dead', where all Irish should assemble before the journey to the Otherworld, on an island off the southwest coast identifiable with the 'Bull Rock'. This mythos' most symbolic form envisages the departure of spirits of the dead following the course of the sun, passing under the archway of the *Donn*'s dwelling, into the sea, and thence to the Otherworld (O hOgáin 1999, 59). This axis may betoken such an ideology's reification, etched into the very fabric of the imagined landscape itself. Though reified in historical moments, ramifications for these palimpsests were eternal. Myths belong to the world of symbols, and their proper hermeneutics are a matter of insight.

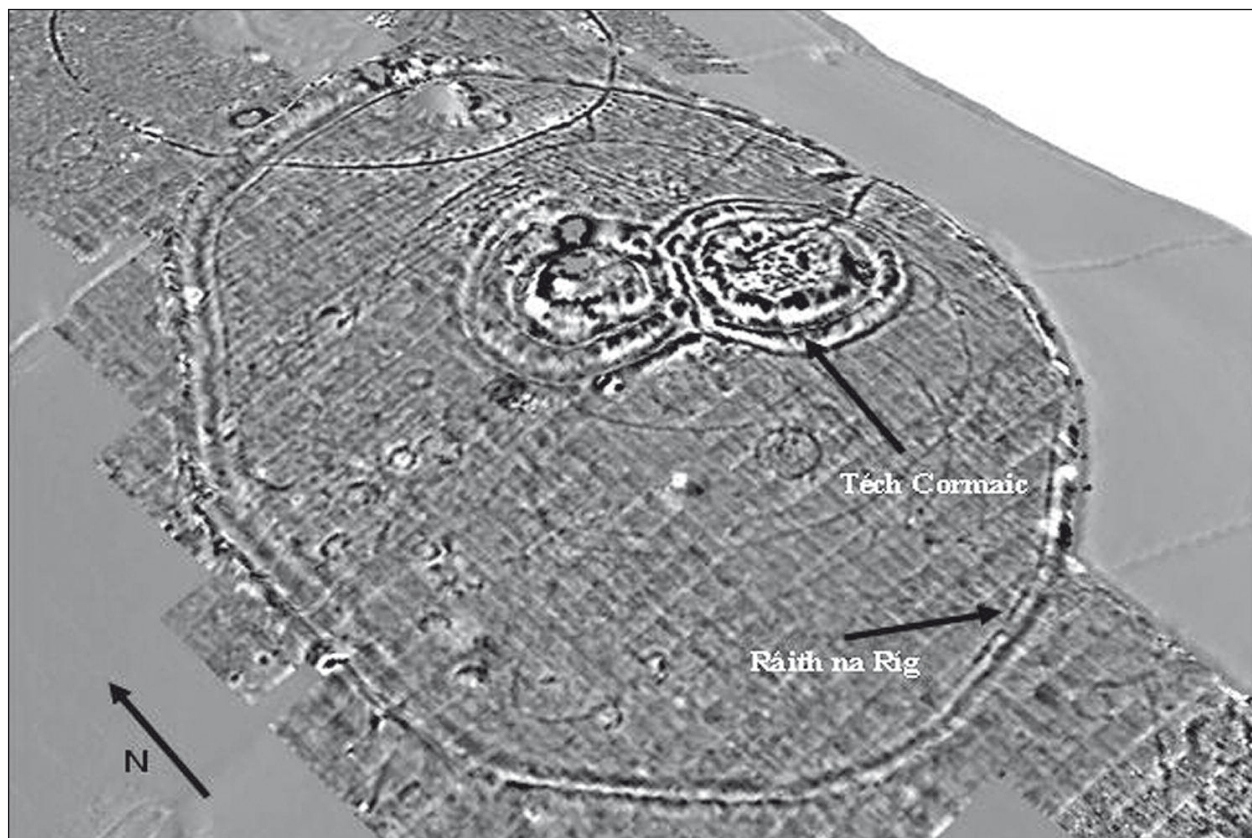


Figure 3 Geophysical survey of the interior of Ráith na Ríg has shown two northeast/southwest orientated linear features on either side of the north-eastern entrances to Ráith na Ríg and Téich Cormaic. These align with extant field boundaries further down the north-eastern face of the hill (Geophysical image courtesy of Conor Newman and Joe Fenwick).

All expressions exalt movement from northeast to southwest and we might posit material expressions and opposing points to be topographical kennings, conventions for activating a sanctuary's ability to commune with the transcendental actuality of the Otherworld. A movement from northeast to southwest may be conceived as an act of embodiment, something conducive to synergy between potentate and place. In that manner a king's corporeal fabric could symbolise the kingdom in its eternal and present states.

Though reiterated over an extended period, this axis' most explicit expressions antedate the 7th century. Perpetuated by virtue of its centrality to the ideology of an arcane and tenacious institution, one might see in some more implicit 8th century expressions a departure which suggests a more fundamental integration into the praxis of place. Ensnared in habitual patterns of movement and lifecycles, it lurked mute, ready to be called, assembled and focused in accordance with the exigencies of particular moments.

Crucially, in literature the Otherworld was associated with an un-Fallen and eternal existence (Carey 1999, 1-38). It symbolised the loss of Eden and attendant change to human consciousness. Hence kingship derived from the Otherworld could *imply* kingship sanctioned by God. Doherty suggests the 7th century saw concerted efforts to Christianise inauguration sites (2005, 9), and in so doing, places and people wherein heaven and earth met. This saw ecclesiastical sanctuary and the cult of relics

grow hand-in-hand with removal of burial and assembly to the church (Ó Carragáin 2003), now ultimately an orthodox nexus of the planes of existence.

A plethora of elements of the iconography of early insular monasticism possess possible roots in prehistoric practices (Carver 2009). The early churches known as shrine chapels appear to be 8th century constructions over saint's graves, housing the saintly relics and formalising their cults (Ó Carragáin 2003). Nevertheless, the majority of these and other early churches, such as Skellig Michael's oratory are in fact orientated northeast/southwest. Moreover, Skellig Michael, western Christendom's most audacious shrine to St. Michael was located off the southwest coast adjacent to *Téich Duinn*. St. Michael was after all the conductor of souls to heaven. That the 'Cauldron of Posey' could list *imbas forosna* alongside faculties of the Holy Spirit (Breathnach 1982, 57-8) suggests this was not so much an issue of Paganism versus Christianity, but rather more a theological discourse about the semantics of ideology. Such changes to the practice of kingship may result directly from the emphasis on orthodox practice following the Easter controversy. But neither can they coincidentally run in step with a redrawing of the geopolitical map. Following the fragmentation of the Síil nÁedo Sláine, the Tara kingship passed to the northwest (Charles-Edwards 2002). The ensuing 8th century Cenél nÉogain paramountcy saw them ally with Armagh whose claim to primacy was built on *romanitas* and apostolic orthodoxy

(Lacey 2006, 289-319), a correlation too suggestive to dismiss.

Conclusion

Small-scale kingships were constructed according to similar ideologies and iconographies as those of the more prominent institutions. Appropriately, royal sites were deeply implicated in ideological discourses of early medieval Ireland and *place* was exploited to Christianise the ideology and arcana of an institution which was as much a spiritual and religious office as a political one. Kingship was constructed in the image of tradition, and consequently its fashioning was as much an act of creation as its archetype. The subjective nature of meaning necessitated its evanescence, and when a new genesis was required Irish kingship was tenacious enough to be re-interpreted and re-imagined. Kingship was an eternal palimpsest and process, always in a state of being and becoming.

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