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SÍD CRÚACHAN AND ITS NAMES

ABSTRACT¹

This article discusses the alternative names by which the important Otherworld site of *Síd Crúachan* was known and the traditions associated with them. It also considers the fact that Medb of Crúachu is not associated supernaturally with *Síd Crúachan* and the significance of this for the question of her origins.

RÁITH CRÚACHAN, SÍD CRÚACHAN, AND MEDB

Ráith Crúachan (Rathcroghan) is the highest point in a densely monumentalized landscape containing over sixty individual monuments and sites in an area of roughly ten square kilometres in the plain of *Mag nAí* in northern County Roscommon.² Today, it is a broad circular mound with a basal diameter of around 90 metres. Archaeologists who have studied this landscape speak of there being two complexes of monuments and sites, the northerly one named after *Ráith Crúachan*, and the southerly one after *Carn Fraích* (Carnfree). *Carn Fraích* is identified as an inauguration site in the written sources: in fact, twelfth-century and later sources represent it as the primary inauguration site of the provincial kings of Connacht since time immemorial, and its use for specific inaugurations is detailed into the fifteenth century.³ Yet the mound of *Ráith Crúachan* was the symbolic heart of the provincial kingdom of Connacht, and this symbolism persisted, especially among the descendants and partisans of the Uí Briúin Aí kings of Connacht (named from *Mag nAí*), including the rulers of the later Ó Conchobair and Mac Diarmata lordships. Thus while terms such as *dol for Carn Fraích* ('to go upon Carn Fraích') pointed up the venue of inauguration of kings of Connacht, titles such as *ri Crúachan* and *airdrí Crúachan* inscribed the symbolic importance of the plain of *Crúachu* and, implicitly, that of its focal monument, *Ráith Crúachan*.

Ráith Crúachan also features prominently in tales and verse from the early eighth century onwards as the residence of the legendary king and queen of Connacht, Ailill and Medb. While this supposedly existed in the material world, it is portrayed as having an Otherworld counterpart in *Síd Crúachan* ('The *Síd*-mound of *Crúachu*'), through which humans might enter the Otherworld or from which its supernatural denizens, the *áes side*

¹My thanks are due to the editors of *Celtica* and the anonymous reader for valuable comments, criticism and points of information.

²John Waddell, Joseph Fenwick and Kevin Barton, *Rathcroghan: Archaeological and Geophysical Survey in a Ritual Landscape* (Dublin, 2009); John Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth* (Dublin, 2014), especially 56–69.

³Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, *Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland c. 1100–1600* (Woodbridge, 2004), especially 60–8.

(‘the *síd*-folk’), might emerge. The influence of *Síd Crúachan* on human society was, like that of all *síde*, by turns benevolent and malevolent.

Various medieval texts portray *Síd Crúachan* and *Úam Chrúachan* (‘The Cave of *Crúachu*’) as contiguous.⁴ The Old Irish tale *Echtrae Nerai* (‘The Adventures of Nerae’) tells of its protagonist Nerae going into *Úam Chrúachan*, proceeding along a track within it and thereby entering *Síd Crúachan*.⁵ The cave in question has been identified since the nineteenth century, at latest, with the site in the townland of Glenballythomas about 800m south-west of *Ráith Crúachan* (NGR M7958 8311) now more usually called *Uaimh na gCat*, in English Oweynagat (‘The Cave of the Cats’). This consists of a souterrain of c. 3 metres in length, with passages opening to the south-east and the north-west; the north-west passage, which is partly artificial for c. 10 metres, joins a natural fissure which continues for a further 37 metres.⁶

Síd Crúachan and *Síd in Broga* at Newgrange (the *Síd* of the *Bruig* ‘Abode’ [of Óengus, son of the Dagda and Bóand]) are the two most celebrated *síde* in Irish literature, with the former perhaps the most notable Otherworld site in the so-called Ulster Cycle, and certainly Connacht’s most notable Otherworld site.⁷ The souterrain in *Uaimh na gCat* incorporates two *ogam* inscriptions on capstones which are presumed to be reused, formerly upright, pillar stones. One of these is incomplete and partly illegible, while the other reads *VRAICCI / MAQI MEDVVI*, ‘of Fróech, son of Medb’. The preservation of final *-I* in both names in the latter inscription suggests it is of pre-sixth-century date.⁸ As the name *Fróech* is of rare occurrence, it is difficult not to assume some kind of continuity between the Fróech commemorated here and the figure known to later literature as the Connacht warrior Fróech mac Idaith/Fidaig.⁹ But the name *Medb* is also of rare occurrence in medieval sources, as we shall see, despite being among the small percentage of personal names that had both masculine and feminine forms. That the name found in the *Uaimh na gCat* inscription is also borne by the legendary Queen Medb of Connacht bears further consideration here.

⁴E.g. Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), *Acallamh na Senórach*, in Whitley Stokes and Ernst Windisch (eds), *Irische Texte*, fourth series, 1 (Leipzig, 1900), 213–16 (ll. 7626, 7646, 7677, 7679, 7683).

⁵Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), ‘The Adventures of Nera’, *RC* 10 (1889), 212–28, at 216–19 (§6).

⁶For its location, and a full description (incorporating earlier accounts), see Joseph P. Fenwick and Matthew Parkes, ‘Oweynagat, Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon and associated karst features’, *Irish Speleology* 16 (1997), 11–14. On other caves in the vicinity see Caoimhe Hickey and David Drew, ‘Caves of County Roscommon’, *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society* 23, no. 1 (2003), 35–50. For an avowedly speculative view of the site’s former uses and possible role in medieval cult practises, with extensive citation of literary and archaeological references, see John Waddell, ‘The Cave of Crúachain and the Otherworld’, in Jacqueline Borsje, Ann Dooley, Séamus Mac Mathúna and Gregory Toner (eds), *Celtic Cosmology: Perspectives from Ireland and Scotland* (Toronto, 2014), 77–92.

⁷On the ‘Ulster-Connaught Cycle’ as an alternative title, see Thomas Charles-Edwards, ‘*Táin Bó Cúailnge*, hagiography and history’, in John Carey, Kevin Murray and Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh (eds), *Sacred Histories: A Festschrift for Máire Herbert* (Dublin, 2015), 86–102, at 88.

⁸For images and description see the ‘Ogham in 3D’ internet site hosted by the School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (<https://ogham.celt.dias.ie>). See also Damian McManus, *A Guide to Ogam* (Maynooth, 1991), 207, 121, 122.

⁹For sites in Mag nAí named for Fróech mac Idaith/Fidaig, see above at pp. 105–12.

In addition to the instance of Medb with masculine inflection in the *ogam* inscription, there is the further instance of [uir] *Medbu nomine ... prespiter bonus* ([a man] of the name of Medb ... a good priest') in Tírechán's account of St Patrick in his *Collectanea* in the Book of Armagh, with the same character appearing as *prespiterum Medb* in the *Additamenta* in the same manuscript. Tírechán tells that this Medb was from *Irlochir*, had studied at Armagh and later, as a monk of Armagh, had founded a church at *Imgoe Mair Cerrigi*.¹⁰ The *Additamenta* include him among Patrick's *familiam ... in regione Ciarrichi* along with a certain bishop named Sachellus and some others. Sachellus is identified by Tírechán as bishop of *Bassilica*, presumed to be the church he names more fully as *Bassilica sanctorum*.¹¹ This important church has been described as 'a genuine fifth-century church' and 'the centre of evangelization in Connacht'.¹² Known today as Baslick, its site is some eight kilometres west of *Ráith Crúachan*. This suggests that Medb's church of *Imgoe Mair Cerrigi* was nearby, and at any rate in the territory of the Cíarraige of Mag nAí (soon to be identified as the territory ruled by the Uí Briúin Aí).

The earliest identifiable historical female named Medb is also connected to the Cíarraige. This is Medb, mother of St Cáelainn who was patron saint of the Cíarraige in Connacht. Cáelainn's church was formerly known as *Daire Cáelainne* ('Cáelainn's Wood'), *Termonn Cáelainne* ('Cáelainn's Precinct') and *In Termonn Mór* ('The Great Precinct'); it is located about two kilometres south-west of Baslick, in what is now the townland of Termon More. Fortunately, Medb's genealogy is recorded in the tract on 'The mothers of Irish saints'.¹³ Although it contains unresolved difficulties, it is clear that it identifies Cáelainn's father with an unspecified branch of the Cíarraige, and Cáelainn's mother, Medb, with the Cíarraige Lúachra, the most significant branch of the Cíarraige in Munster, who were located in the north of what is now County Kerry. As we have seen, Tírechán identified *presbiter Medb* as having come to the Mag nAí region from *Irlochair* ('East Lóchair/Lúachair'), which territory bounded Cíarraige Lúachra. There is an early tradition that the Cíarraige migrated from Munster to Connacht in the time of Áed (†577) son of Echu Tirmcharna, a progenitor of the Uí Briúin Aí, and were given land in a transaction for which Cáelainn acted as surety, acquiring in the process the land for her own *Termonn Mór*.¹⁴

¹⁰Ludwig Bieler (ed. and trans.), *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), 150 (§33.2).

¹¹*Ibid.*, 146 (§29.2), 148 (§32.5).

¹²Charles Doherty, 'The basilica in Early Ireland', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 303–18. Also Charles Doherty, 'The cult of St Patrick and the politics of Armagh in the seventh century', in Jean-Michel Picard (ed.), *Ireland and Northern France AD 600–850* (Dublin, 1991), 53–94, at 79–81.

¹³Edited and discussed in Paul Grosjean, 'The pedigree of Saint Caelainn', *JCS* I.1 (November 1949), 193–8.

¹⁴For the modern edition of this text see Vernam Hull, 'The migration of the Cíarraige', *Speculum* 25 (1950), 184–9. On the various branches of the Cíarraige in Connacht, this text, and St Cáelainn, see Nollaig Ó Muraíle, 'Some early Connacht population-groups', in Alfred P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in Early and Medieval Irish Archaeology, History and Literature in Honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin, 2000), 161–77.

Contact between the Ciarraige of Munster and of Mag nAí is suggested not only by what Tírechán relates concerning the travels of *prespiter Medb*, and by St Cáelainn's genealogical background, but also by the interest shown by the presumed Munster poet Luccreth moccu Chérai in the traditions of Ailill and Medb and their involvement in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Three poems which are usually regarded as Luccreth's work are extant. His *floruit* is deduced from the ascription to him of a genealogical poem in praise of the Eóganacht king, Cathal Cú-cen-máthair, and his ancestors; he ruled Munster from 662 until his death in 665 or 666.¹⁵ Another poem (with an ascription in this case merely to 'Lucreth') is concerned with the eruption of Loch nEchach and the subsequent migrations of the Ulidian Corco Óche, in particular to Munster where they were well received by a remote Eóganacht king, Ailill Fland Bec.¹⁶ These two poems would seem to indicate that Luccreth's career was spent in Munster. However the third poem shows remarkable familiarity for Luccreth's time with the events narrated in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Beginning with the dramatic statement, *Con-alla Medb míchuru, / mac do Róich rúadchuru*, 'Medb enjoined evil contracts, bloody contracts for mac Roich', it frames the migrations of Fergus mac Róich by reference to Fergus's expulsion from Ulster, his descendants' time at Tara and subsequent move to Munster, and Fergus's leadership of Medb's forces in the *Táin*.¹⁷ Assuming a *floruit* for Luccreth around the mid-seventh century, this poem provides what is very likely the earliest extant outline of the events of the *Táin* and also the earliest references to Queen Medb.¹⁸ I suggest that one can hardly rule out the possibility

¹⁵AU s.a. 665, but other obits in this entry in AU appear s.a. 666 in other annalistic sources; the ambiguity is likely consequent on the plague in these years. For editions of the poem, see Kuno Meyer, *Über die älteste irische Dichtung*, 2 vols (Berlin, 1913), i, 53–8; and M. A. O'Brien (ed.), *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1962), 199–202. Myles Dillon argued that six short poems which follow '*Cú cen máthair maith cland*' in all the manuscripts (and which are edited in O'Brien, *op. cit.*, pp. 203–4) are in fact 'supplementary quatrains for each branch of the Eóganachta': cf. Dillon, 'A poem on the kings of the Eóganachta', *Celtica* 10 (1973), 1–14, at 13. Notwithstanding its attribution to Luccreth moccu Chérai, James Carney was inclined to regard this poem as the work of Cormac mac Cuillenáin (†908): cf. James Carney, 'Three Old Irish accentual poems', *Ériu* 22 (1971), 23–80, at 67. He accepted the other two poems as Luccreth's work, and was inclined to date them as early as c. 600 AD (cf. Carney, 'Three Old Irish accentual poems', p. 75; also James Carney, 'Early Irish literature: the state of research', in Gearóid Mac Eoin (ed.), *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Celtic Studies, Held in University College, Galway, 6–13 July 1979* (Dublin, 1983), 113–29, at 122.

¹⁶Edited by Kuno Meyer, 'The Laud Genealogies and Tribal Histories', *ZCP* 8 (1912), 291–338, at 308.

¹⁷For edition of the poem, and the preceding prose (*De causis quibus exules Aquilonensium ad Muminenses adducti sunt*), see Meyer, 'The Laud Genealogies and Tribal Histories', 305–7; for edition with translation of poem and prose, see P. L. Henry, '*Conailla Medb míchuru* and the tradition of Fiacc son of Fergus', in Séamus Mac Mathúna and Ailbhe Ó Corráin (eds), *Miscellanea Celtica in memoriam Heinrich Wagner* (Uppsala, 1997), 53–70; and Garrett Olmsted, 'Luccreth's poem *Conailla Medb míchuru* and the origins of the *Táin*', *Mankind Quarterly* 29 (1988), 3–72. See also Garrett Olmsted, '*Conailla Medb míchuru* and the origins of the *Táin*', *EC* 29 (1992), 333–42, and idem, 'The earliest narrative version of the *Táin*: seventh-century poetic references to *Táin Bó Cúailnge*', *Emania* 10 (1992), 5–17.

¹⁸While the poem *Verba Scáthai*, which is believed to have been in the manuscript *Cín Dromma Snechtai*, also provides an outline of the *Táin* and a reference to Medb, the contents of

that Luccreth moccu Chérai had some form of contact with the Cíarraige Aí. In any case, this early cluster of characters named Medb in the vicinity of *Ráith Chráachan* is striking: the patronym in the inscription in *Uaimh na gCat*, the priest contemporary with Patrick who founded *Imgoe Mair Cerrigi*, the mother of Saint Cáelainn, patron of the Cíarraige, and Queen Medb in Luccreth moccu Chérai's poem.

The occurrence of the name *Medb* in historical sources is also remarkably limited and localised. It may come as a surprise that none of the annals records any figure named *Medb* apart from Queen Medb. Even the late and largest genealogical collection, that compiled by Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh (†1671), has only five of the name, all female: Medb of Crúachain, Medb Lethderg of Tara, Medb, wife of Cathair Már (remote ancestor of the Laigin), and two women from the historical period, both of Uí Briúin ancestry, namely Meadhbh, daughter of Domhnall Ruadh Ó Máille and Meadhbh, daughter of Flaithbheartach Ó Ruairc.¹⁹ Between them, the published metrical and prose versions of the twelfth-century *Banshenchas* provide references to four historical women named Medb.²⁰ The paternal identity of one is not given.²¹ Of the other three, two are surnamed Ó Ruairc,²² and one is named as a daughter of Indrechtach (†752) mac Muiredaig, cautiously identified as a scion of the Síol Muiredaig of Mag nAí.²³ Clearly, then, the name Medb was predominantly used by descendants of Uí Briúin, and its earliest attestations are localised to Mag nAí, even before the Uí Briúin emerged as the ruling dynasty there.

This suggests that what limited popularity the name Medb had may have originated from its use among the local élite of the Cíarraige Aí and the emerging Uí Briúin Aí, and that the naming of Queen Medb of Crúachu may well be a reflex of this and not of the supernatural nature long ascribed to her. In fact, there is no evident aetiological link between Queen Medb and *Síd Crúachan*: while she is identified repeatedly in the sources as 'Medb of Crúachu' (*Medb Chráachan/Chráachna*), I am not aware that she is ever identified as 'Medb of

this lost manuscript are usually dated to the late seventh or early eighth century. The most closely dated texts in it are those argued to have been composed either during the reign of Finnechta Fledach (675–95), and perhaps specifically in 688–9, or c. 720; on this, see John Carey, 'On the interrelationship of some *Cín Dromma Snechtai* texts', *Ériu* 46 (1995), 71–92, at 86–9; and Edel Bhreathnach, 'Niell cáich úa Néill nasctar géill: the political context of *Baile Chuinn Chathaig*', in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin, 2005), 49–68, at 59–68.

¹⁹Nollaig Ó Muraíle (ed. and trans.), *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach*, 5 vols (Dublin, 2003), i, 490 (§221.4); 600 (§266.3). A rough generation-count puts both historical women in the fourteenth century. The woman identified by Mac Fhirbhisigh as 'Meadhb, dara inghean Baitér de Lacy, bean Gefray Genefeld' (ibid., iii, 106 (§798E.2)) is in fact Maud (†1304), grand-daughter of Walter de Lacy, wife of Lord Geoffrey de Geneville, Justiciar of Ireland.

²⁰Margaret E. Dobbs (ed. and trans.), 'The *Ban-Shenchus*', *RC* 47 (1930), 282–339; 48 (1931), 162–234; 49 (1932), 437–89.

²¹*Meadhbh bean Fhloind*, ibid., 48, p. 194.

²²Ibid., vol. 48, 194 and 228.

²³*Meadb ingen Indrechtach m. Muiredaig ri Durlais*, ibid., 48, pp. 186 and 225. His identification with *Indrechtach m. Muiredaigh Minn* (AU 752) was made by Dobbs. For the suggestion that he was of the Síol Muiredaig, see Gearóid Mac Niocaill (ed. and trans.), *The Annals of Ulster* (Dublin, 1983), 207, note.

Síd Crúachan’ or ‘Medb of the *Síd*’, nor as far as I know is *Síd Crúachan* ever called *Síd Meidbe*.²⁴ However *Síd Crúachan* is named for at least one other female. A tradition recorded in the *Dindshenchas*, the *Banshenchas*, and *Cóir Anmann* tells that *Síd Crúachan* (aliter *Crúachu*, *Ráith Chruáchan*) was given this name to requite *Cróchen Chróderg*, maidservant to the Otherworldly Étaín Echraide, for accompanying Étaín when she eloped from her husband with the god Midir.²⁵ Before Étaín and Midir proceeded to his *síd* in Brí Léith (now Slieve Golry in Co. Longford), they and Cróchen spent three nights together in a *síd* that was then known as *Síd Sinche* (‘Sinech’s *Síd*’). At Cróchen’s request, Midir granted that the place would thenceforth be named for her, and so the name *Síd Crúachan* supposedly came into being. In some versions, Cróchen is identified as Medb’s mother.²⁶

Until recently, it was generally accepted that Medb of Crúachu was in origin a sovereignty goddess. On foot of this, one would have expected her to be linked supernaturally to *Síd Crúachan*, or to some Otherworld site. But not alone is Queen Medb not so linked to *Síd Crúachan*, it was recently noted that ‘no figure named Medb is accorded supernatural traits or associations anywhere in medieval Irish literature.’²⁷ For over a century, the case for Medb’s divine nature was based largely on associating her name with Proto-Celtic **medu-* ‘mead’, and assuming that a feminine form of an adjective derived from this had been applied to Medb of Crúachu because the meaning, still supposedly transparent, was thought to be reflected in her character and actions. However, a recent in-depth review of the evidence by Britta Irslinger shows that Queen Medb’s supposed links to mead and ritual intoxication are not actually borne out by the sources: the traditional image of Medb as intoxicating or drink-dispensing goddess does not stand up to close scrutiny.²⁸ Irslinger endorses as ‘equally possible and plausible’ an alternative etymology proposed for the name Medb which takes it to be an adjective with the suffix **-wo/wā* based on the root **med-* ‘to measure’.²⁹ In the sense ‘one who measures/rules, a ruler’, Medb would seem an appropriate name for either sex while also being particularly apt for a woman constantly represented as a

²⁴For the name ‘Medb of Crúachu’, see Tomás Ó Máille, ‘Medb Chruachna’, *ZCP* 17 (1927) 129–46, *passim*.

²⁵Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), ‘The prose tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*’, *RC* 15 (1894), 272–336, 418–84; 16 (1895), 31–83, 135–67, 269–312, at 15, p. 463 (§55); *MD* iii, 348–55; Dobbs, ‘The *Ban-Shenchus*’, *RC* 47, 292, 322; *RC* 48, 171, 208; Sharon Arbutnot (ed. and trans.), *Cóir Anmann: A Late Middle Irish Treatise on Personal Names*, 2 vols (London, 2005, 2007), i, 74 (§287).

²⁶See *MD* iii, 354–5 (ll. 85–8); Dobbs, ‘The *Ban-Shenchus*’, *RC* 48, 171; Arbutnot, *Cóir Anmann*, i, 74 (§287).

²⁷John Carey, ‘Tara and the supernatural’, in Edel Bhreathnach (ed.), *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin 2005), 32–48, at 47.

²⁸Britta Irslinger, ‘Medb “the intoxicating one”? (Re-)constructing the past through etymology’, in Mícheál B. Ó Mainnín and Gregory Toner (eds), *Ulidia 4: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Dublin, 2017), 38–94.

²⁹Irslinger, ‘Medb “the intoxicating one”?’, 85. For the alternative etymology, see George-Jean Pinault, ‘Gaulois *Epomduos*, le maître des chevaux’, in Pierre-Yves Lambert and George-Jean Pinault (eds), *Gaulois et celtique continental* (Genève, 2007), 291–307.

queen.³⁰ One may add that Doris Edel has argued compellingly that tales of Queen Medb are grounded in the contemporary reality of queens and female successors to kingship and the polemics associated with that reality, and that the mythologising of Medb is a later development that occurs in tandem with a change in literary fashion from an epic to a more mythological mode.³¹

As regards the inscription *VRAICCI / MAQI MEDVVI*, ‘of Fróech, son of Medb’, while one may take it at face value as memorializing Fróech, son of a man named Medb, both otherwise unknown, it seems more than fortuitous that these are also the names of two of the main characters in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and other tales of the so-called Ulster Cycle. In an influential article, Tomás Ó Máille contended that the Leinster queen, Medb Lethderg, who was associated with the kingship of Tara, was ‘the Leinster equivalent of Medb of Cruachan’ and that the traditions associated with the two showed that Medb signified ‘nothing less than the sovereignty of Ireland’.³² It was assumed that Medb’s primary association was with the sovereignty of Tara and that with Crúachu secondary.³³ However, on the basis of the material considered here, I suggest that Medb’s primary association was with Crúachu, not Tara, and her essential identity that of queen, not sovereignty goddess. I also venture to suggest that the earliest extant verse and tales that feature Medb in her role as queen of Crúachu could conceivably derive from authors with connections to, or at least a keen interest in, the contemporary local ruling dynasties, the Cíarraige Aí and the Uí Briúin Aí.³⁴

³⁰It is noteworthy that the term *rechtaid géill* ‘(female) hostage ruler’ in *Bretha Crólige* is glossed ‘who takes hostages, as for instance Medb of Crúachu’ (*CIH* 2294.36; 2295.7). Fangzhe Qiu, ‘The Ulster Cycle in the law tracts’, in Mícheál B. Ó Mainnín and Gregory Toner (eds), *Ulidia 4: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Dublin, 2017), 9–22, at 14, notes that this is ‘probably the only reference to Medb of Crúachu in the *CIH*’.

³¹Doris Edel, ‘Myth versus reality: Queen Medb of Connacht and her critics, ancient and modern’, in Doris Edel, *The Celtic West and Europe: Studies in Celtic Literature and the Early Irish Church* (Dublin, 2001), 152–76; see also eadem, ‘Early Irish queens and royal power: a first reconnaissance’, in Michael Richter and Jean-Michel Picar (eds), *Ogma: Essays in Celtic Studies in Honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin* (Dublin, 2002), 1–19. Irslinger, by contrast, leaving aside the issue of the etymology of her name, is inclined to regard Medb as originally divine: ‘A thorough re-examination of the evidence shows that there are reasonable, non-linguistic arguments to corroborate the hypothesis that Medb was originally conceived as a goddess, even though absolute proof is missing’: see Irslinger, ‘Medb “the intoxicating one”’, 91.

³²Tomás Ó Máille, ‘Medb Chruachna’, *ZCP* 17 (1927), 129–146, at 136, 139.

³³See, for instance, T. F. O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), 170.

³⁴The complex issue of the provenance of the *Táin* would have to be considered if this suggestion were to be pursued further. On the dating of the earliest extant version to the second half of the eighth century, and some of the underlying material to the seventh, see Thomas Charles-Edwards, ‘*Táin Bó Cúailnge*: hagiography and history’, *passim*. He makes the salutary comment that ‘coincidence of local setting should not be taken too easily as evidence for the place of origin of the *Táin*. The difficulty is the mobility of those most likely to have developed the narrative sequence of the Ulster Cycle up to the eighth century, namely the *filid*, and those most likely to have written the earliest text of the *Táin*, churchmen’ (p. 97). We have encountered one such person in the *filí*, Luccreth moccu Chérai.

SÍD CRÚACHAN, SÍD NÚAMAIN, AND SÍD NOCHAILL

Returning now to the alternative names of *Síd Crúachan*, we may begin with a doubtful case, that of the name *Síd nÚamain*. The attestation of this name in the Old Irish tale *Aislinge Óenguso* appears to be unique.³⁵ The tale describes the ultimately successful quest for an extraordinarily beautiful girl who appears to Óengus, son of Bóand and Dagdae, in an *aislinge*, and whose initial unattainability causes him to fall into a wasting sickness (*serg*). In the Ireland-wide search for her, help is given by leading figures, human and divine, from the ancient over-kingdoms. The divine helpers include Bóand, implicitly associated with the Otherworld complex named for her as *Bruig na Bóinde* ('Abode of the Boyne') in Brega; Dagdae, called *rí síde nÉrenn* ('king of the *síd*-mounds of Ireland') in the tale; and Bodb, called *rí síde Muman* ('king of the *síd*-mounds of Munster'), whose abode is identified as *Síd al Femen* ('the *síd* beyond Femen'). Eventually, the beautiful girl is identified as *Caer Ibormeith*, *ingen Ethail Anbuail a ssíd Úamain i crích Connacht*, and Ethal is called *rí int síde* ('king of the *síd*').³⁶ When Ethal declares that he is unwilling to give his daughter to *macc in Dagdai* ('Dagdae's son'), Ailill and Medb, with help from Dagdae, overrun his *síd*, capture him and force him to reveal where *Caer* is to be found, with the result that she and Óengus are happily united. Ethal is then released and he and Óengus each form an alliance (*cairdes*) with Ailill and Medb which provides them with crucial assistance when they embark on the great *Táin*.³⁷

Narrative symmetry would seem to require that Ethal's *síd* be the pre-eminent *síd* of Connacht, namely *Síd Crúachan*, just as *Bruig na Bóinde* is the pre-eminent *síd* of the Midlands, and Bodb's *síd* (*Síd al Femen*) the pre-eminent *síd* of Munster. In addition, the name *Síd nÚamain* could conceivably inscribe the famously fearsome aspects of *Úam Chrúachan*. The *Úam* is said in various texts to have been the abode of malevolent animals or birds. The fullest account of these is in the ninth-century tale *Cath Maige Mucrama* ('The Battle of Mag Mucrama'); this refers to heathenish pigs, three-headed creatures who lay Ireland waste, and birds whose breath withers the crops, and it also titles *Úam Chrúachan* 'Ireland's gate to hell' (*Dorus iffirn na hÉrend*).³⁸ Cats are mentioned in some other texts, e.g. the Old Irish tale *Fled Bricrenn* ('The Feast of Bricriu') refers to *tri caittini a húaim Crúachan ... i. tri bíasta*

³⁵Francis Shaw (ed. and trans.), *The Dream of Oengus: Aislinge Óenguso* (Dublin, 1934), 55 (§8); Wolfgang Meid (ed. and trans.), *Aislinge Óenguso: Oengus' Traum* (Innsbruck, 2017), 56 (§8, l. 99). Neither editor comments on the name.

³⁶Shaw, *The Dream of Oengus*, 55 (§8); Meid, *Aislinge Óenguso*, 56 (§8, l. 99). The name *Caer Ibormeith* should perhaps be taken as *Cáer Iborméith* (and understood to mean 'Plump Yew-Berry'), but I have retained the editors' spelling here. Her name and her father's appear in variant forms in *Airne Fingein*, on which see below.

³⁷Speaking of the relationship of *Aislinge Óenguso* to *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, John Carey has called attention to an allusion in the Middle Irish poem *Dúan in Chethrachat Cest* to a story in which Óengus is said to have slain many warriors of the Ulaid: see his *The Mythological Cycle of Medieval Irish Literature*, Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures 3 (Cork, 2018), 21–2.

³⁸Máirín O Daly (ed. and trans.), *Cath Maige Mucrama: The Battle of Mag Mucrama*, ITS 50 (Dublin, 1975), 48–9 (§§34–7).

druidechta, ‘three cats from the Cave of Cruachan ... i.e. three beasts of magic’.³⁹ However it is difficult to know whether this tradition accounts for the name *Uaimh na gCat*/Oweynagat as this appears not to be recorded in pre-modern literature.⁴⁰ Another index of the fearsome reputation of *Síd Crúachan* is the occurrence of the title *Úath Úama Crúachan*, ‘The Terror of Úam Chrúachan’, in the medieval Irish list of tales known as List A.⁴¹ In view of all of this, I suggest that *Síd nÚamain* means ‘*Síd* of Fear’ and is a plausible alternative name for *Síd Crúachan*. As Thurneysen noted, the change from original *omun* ‘fear’ (cp. Welsh *ofn*) to *ómun* was ‘probably due to the influence of the synonym *úath* (arch. **ōth*) “terror”’.⁴² Both editors of *Aislinge Óenguso* have dated the tale’s composition to the eighth century (early or mid-century).⁴³ Diphthongization of *ō* to *úa* had occurred by this time.

Ethal Anbuail and his daughter Caer Ibormeith also figure under variant forms of their names in the tale *Airne Fíngéin* (‘Fíngen’s Night-Watch’).⁴⁴ This relates that the eponymous Fíngen is visited by an Otherworldly woman named Rothniam who tells him of all the wonders that happened in Ireland and the Otherworld on the night of Samain. One of these was the appearance of three great lakes, Loch nEchach, Loch Ríach and Loch Léin. Speaking of Loch Ríach (Lough Ree, Co. Galway), the woman says: ‘it is in it that Caer Abartaig from Síd Féthail Anbudaig bathed the garment of Mac Ind Óc with the abundance of all the wonderful colours of the world ...’⁴⁵ Mac Ind Óc is another name for Óengus, whose love for Caer Ibormeith is described in *Aislinge Óenguso*, as we have seen.⁴⁶ *Airne Fíngéin* tells that another wonder associated with Samain was the finding of three amazing artefacts, one of which was ‘the diadem of Brión from the *side* of Crúachu’, Brión being the ancestor of the Uí Briúin of Connacht.⁴⁷ However the tale’s primary concern is to celebrate the first wonder related by the woman, namely the birth of Conn Cétchathach, apical ancestor of *both* the Uí Néill and the Connacht

³⁹George Henderson (ed. and trans.), *Fled Bricrend: The Feast of Bricriu*, ITS 2 (London, 1899), 72, 73. Thurneysen dated the earliest redaction of this tale to the eighth century: see Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage* (Halle, 1921), 447–50.

⁴⁰In a note on the line *Dí chait a huaimh Chruachon* (‘two cats from *Uaimh Chruachan*’) from a *Fiannaigeacht* poem, William Wilde wrote: ‘I remember, when a boy, being warned by one of the old people against entering it, because it was said to have been inhabited by wild cats, and other venomous creatures of that description.’ (W. R. Wilde, ‘On the unmanufactured animal remains belonging to the Academy’, *PRIA* 7 (1857–61), 181–213, at 190).

⁴¹Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1980), 43. As noted *ibid.*, 66, the list is thought to be based on an older list of the tenth century.

⁴²*GOI* §62.

⁴³Shaw, *The Dream of Oengus*, 32–8 (esp. 37); Meid, *Aislinge Óenguso*, 48–9.

⁴⁴Joseph Vendryes (ed.), *Airne Fíngéin* (Dublin, 1953). On the basis of the oldest linguistic forms, Vendryes dated ‘le noyau primitif du récit’ to the ninth or tenth century (*ibid.*, p. xxii).

⁴⁵*is ann ro nenaig Caer Abartaig a Síd Féthail Anbudaig cétaig Mic ind Óc co n-ilur n-dath n-ingnad in betha* [...]: Vendryes, *Airne Fíngéin*, 13 (ll. 168–9). The translation above is mine.

⁴⁶Óengus is called *In Macc Óc*, and his home is referred to as *Bruig Maicc Ind Óic*: cf. Meid, *Aislinge Óenguso*, 58 (ll. 160, 174 and 178).

⁴⁷*Cathbarr Briain a sidaib Crúachan* [...], Vendryes, *Airne Fíngéin*, 7 (l. 96). It is also mentioned in *Echtrae Nerai*, where it is called *in barr (Briuin)*: cf. Meyer, ‘The Adventures of Nera’, 218–20 (§§8, 9).

dynasties.⁴⁸ The fact that the Connachta are not the primary concern may be why *Síd Crúachan* is not specifically referenced in relation to Caer and her father in this tale. Indeed, she is not associated explicitly here even with the province of Connacht. But we have other evidence that this was her traditional context in that she is described as *Coer abarboeth, ingen Etail Anbuail a Sidaib a crích Connacht* in a Middle Irish narrative on the naming of *Loch Bél Sét* (Lough Muskry, Co. Tipperary), found in the *Leabhar Breac*.⁴⁹ Still, the identification of *Síd Fethail* and *Síd nÚamain* as alternative names for *Síd Crúachan* remains a matter of conjecture.

We are on safer ground with the next name, *Síd nOchail*. *Síd Crúachan* was known by this name, or variants thereof, down to early modern times. The earliest reference to *Síd nOchail* occurs in the tale *De Chophur in Dá Muccida* ('On the Quarrel (?) of the Two Swineherds'). Two versions of this tale are extant.⁵⁰ The earlier was dated by Thurneysen to the ninth century, the later to the first half of the twelfth.⁵¹ The protagonists are two swineherds named Rúcht and Friuch, the former in service to Ochall Oichni, 'the king of the *síd*-mounds of Connacht', the latter in service to Bodb, 'the king of the *síd*-mounds of Munster'. Bodb's *síd* is clearly identified as *Síd ol Femen*, and Ochall's as *Síd Crúachan*.⁵² The tale describes the sequence of transformations, into animal and human forms, that the two swineherds undergo before finally being reborn as the famous bulls, the *Finnbennach* and the *Donn Cúailnge*. While Rúcht and Friuch have the main roles, Ochall and Bodb also feature fairly prominently in the longer version. Their association with the two swineherds does not end with this tale: it features also in the *Dindshenchas*, in the lore concerning *Luimnech* (Limerick), which tells of a battle led by warriors named Fáebur and Rind, the names borne by Rúcht and Friuch in one particular transformation in *De Chophur in Da Muccida* in which they take

⁴⁸On this, see Dan M. Wiley, 'The politics of myth in *Áirne Fingein*', *CSANA Yearbook* 8–9: *Narrative in Celtic Tradition: Essays in Honor of Edgar M. Slotkin* (Hamilton, New York, 2011), 276–88.

⁴⁹Printed in Shaw, *The Dream of Óengus*, 19. As Shaw notes, *ibid.*, the account of Caer here 'obviously derives from *Aislinge Óenguso*'.

⁵⁰For both versions see Ulrike Roider (ed. and trans.), *De Chophur in Da Muccida*, Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Sprachwissenschaft 28 (Innsbruck, 1979). The meaning of *cophur* is contested: see Roider, *De Chophur in Da Muccida*, 62–78, and Grigory Bondarenko, *Studies in Irish Mythology* (Berlin, 2014), 183–95. For a newly identified analogue in Welsh tradition to the transformation of the swineherds into dragons, see Carey, *The Mythological Cycle of Medieval Irish Literature*, 23–4.

⁵¹See Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage*, 278. His dating is echoed in Roider, *De Chophur in Da Muccida*, 19.

⁵²... *muccaid Ochail Oichne ocus muccaid Boidb, rīg side Muman, alaile rí side Connacht. Síd mBoidb iss ed Síd ar Femun. Síd nOchail iss ed Síd Crúachan*: Roider, *De Chophur in da Muccida*, 24, 26 (from the earlier version; the wording in the later version is essentially the same: cf. *ibid.*). A character named Oichne occurs in the first recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as the name of one of two fosterlings of Ailill and Medb who are among the Connacht warriors who fatally wound the Ulidian Cethern mac Fintain: see *TBC* 1, 97 (l. 3224). The only other occurrence of the name of which I am aware also links it to *Ráith Crúachan*: it is in a verse cited in Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, which relates that *Ráith Crúachan* had three earlier names: *Druim na nDruadh, Tulach Oichne* and *Ráith Eochach* (cf. Patrick S. Dinneen (ed. and trans.), *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn le Seathrún Céitinn* (London, 1908), ii, 186).

on the form of warriors. The verse tells of Ochall and Bodb guaranteeing the protection, respectively, of Fáebur and Rind:

Ochall a Cruachain chróebaig
rogab fõesam fir-Fóebair;
oc Síd Buidb ná fòelsad fill
fofríth fõesam do rúad-Rind.

‘Ochall from woody Cruachan
undertook protection of true Faebur;
at the Sid of Bodb, who would not endure treachery,
was found protection for fierce Rind.’⁵³

The prose speaks of Fóebar putting himself ‘under the protection of Ochall from *Síd Cruachan*’ ([for] *faessam Ochaille a Sidh Cruachna*) and of Rind putting himself ‘under the protection of Bodb from *Síd Femin*’ (*for foesam mBuidb a Sid Femin*).⁵⁴

I contend that Ochall, together with a daughter of his named Áine, also features in a poem prophesying the *Úa Conchobair* kings of Connacht. The editor of this poem, Brian Ó Cuív, deduced that it was ‘composed between about 1190 and 1228 as part of an attempt by men of learning to provide a corpus of texts which could be seen to be supportive of a build-up of *Ua Conchobair* power in Connacht.’⁵⁵ The poem begins with an anonymous speaker addressing an unidentified man and asking that he not sit on ‘*Síd nEóchaill*’ (spelled thus by Ó Cuív) as this is the prerogative of *Sil Muiredaig* (the ancestors of the *Úa Conchobair* royals):

‘A fhir, ná suid ar an síd,
Síd nEóchaill co n-ilar gním [...]

Dlegait Sil Muiredaig móir
a uaisle ocus a onóir [...].’

“O man, do not sit on the fairy mound, *Síd nEóchaill* of the many deeds [...]
The race of great Muiredach are entitled to its nobility and its honour [...].”⁵⁶

⁵³ *MD*, iii, 272–3 (ll. 87–90).

⁵⁴ Stokes, ‘The prose tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*’, *RC* 15, 453. The story of the battle fought by these warriors is also related in the *dindshenchas* of *Áth Luain*, but without reference being made to Ochall and Bodb: see *MD*, iii, 366–75, and Stokes, ‘The prose tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*’, *RC* 15, 464–7. For discussion, see Kevin Murray, ‘Sources of Irish mythology: the significance of the *dinnsenchas*’, *North American Journal of Celtic Studies* 3.2 (2019), 155–70, at 158–61.

⁵⁵ Brian Ó Cuív (ed. and trans.), ‘A poem of prophecy on *Ua Conchobair* kings of Connacht’, *Celtica* 19 (1987), 31–54, at 31.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 40 (qq. 1ab, 2ab).

It goes on to tell of a foray made by one Cathal Úa Conchobair to Munster before which he had a vision in which he was visited by two females of Otherworldly appearance.⁵⁷ The first of these, named Aíbend, prophesies his imminent defeat, while the second explains that Aíbend's prophecy is merely a deceitful strategy (*cealg*) to mislead him into abandoning his foray. She then foretells his success on this foray, and the successes of various Úa Conchobair kings into the future. She identifies herself in quatrain 24 as Áine, the daughter of *Eóchaill a Síd Chruachna*:

‘Eóchaill a Síd Chruachna cuirr
m’athair, a rí cinid Chuinn,
Áine m’ainm féin ac fledaib
do Shíl mórgarg Muiredaig.’

“‘Eóchaill from rounded Síd Cruachna is my father, o king of Conn’s race; my own name at feastings by the great strong Sí Muiredaig is Áine.’”⁵⁸

In the absence of other references connecting an Áine to Sí Muiredaig, Ó Cuív cited J. V. Kelleher’s suggestion that Áine of the poem represents a transferral to Connacht of the Munster goddess Áine, associated with Cnoc Áine and other places, whose father was named Eógabal: the poet, suggested Kelleher, may have altered the name Eógabal to Eóchaill and made Áine’s father a Connacht figure, ‘knowing that few of his hearers would know the old Munster legend and fewer would care.’⁵⁹ However, in the unique copy of the poem in the Book of Uí Maine, the toponym in quatrain 1*b* is written *sith neothaill* and the personal name in 24*a* is written *Eochaill* (and not *Eóchaill* as in Ó Cuív’s edition).⁶⁰ While it is true that length-marks are frequently omitted in this and other texts in the manuscript, the clear association of Ochall/Ochaill with *Síd Crúachan* in the earlier material cited above renders it highly likely that the poem’s *Eochaill a Síd Chruachna* is the same character.

Traditions concerning Ochall survived into the modern period. At least two Early Modern Irish texts refer to him. The poet Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn (c. 1550–c. 1591), who lived in the barony of Lemy, County Sligo, addresses one of his poems to an unnamed woman whom he claims to have seen in an

⁵⁷The man in question was identified by Ó Cuív, *ibid.*, as Cathal (†1010) son of Conchobar (†973).

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 32.

⁶⁰The manuscript reading *neothaill* in 1*b* is not mentioned by Ó Cuív. His note (p. 50) says: ‘In emending to *nEóchaill* I have taken into account the occurrence of the name *Eóchaill* in §24 and the existence of the name *Ráth nEóchaill* (TD 40 §21).’ The latter form, in a poem by Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn, is in fact written *Ráth nEochaill* (on this, see below).

aisling and whose like, he says, will not to be found even in the preeminent *side* of Ireland, one of which is *Ráith Eochuill*:

Ní fuil i Síth Bhóinne Breagh
bean do chrotha acht an chéidbhean,
ná i Sídh chaomhchlochach na gCuan,
a mhín aolchrothach ionfuar.

Ná i Síth Easa Ruaidh rámhúigh,
ná i nDún oide an Ioldánuigh,
ná i Síth bhláith tirmleapthaigh Thruim,
ná i Ráith ilreachtaigh Eochuill.

‘There is not in the fairy mounds of the Boyne a woman of thy
beauty save that woman, nor in the fair castles of *Síodh na gCuan*,
thou gentle, white-formed, pleasing one.

Nor in the fairy mound of oared Assaroe, or in the castle of the
Ioldánach’s fosterfather, or in the smooth, warm-couched mound
of Trim, or in the many-shaped castle of *Eochall*.⁶¹

Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh’s *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach* provides a reference to ‘Oc[h]all Crúachna’, in a section dealing with the prehistoric kings of Connacht. Speaking of a certain Forga, who fought along with Art son of Conn Cétchathach in the battle of Mag Mucrama, it says:

Agus as isin chath sin Mhuighe Mucramha do marbhadh Forga
(iar ffairinn). Ad-bearaid araile a bhreth tar és an chatha i Sidh
Rionduilbh mc Ocuill Cruachna, conadh ann atá o sin anall.

‘And it was in that battle of Magh Mucramha that Forgha was
killed (according to some). Some say that he was brought after
the battle into *Síodh Rionnuilbh* s. Ocoll of Cruachain, and that
he is there ever since.’⁶²

⁶¹Eleanor Knott (ed. and trans.), *A bhfuil aguinn dár chum Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn (1550–1591): The Bardic Poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn*, 2 vols, ITS 22 and 23 (London, 1922, 1926), i, 271; ii, 179–80 (poem 40, qq 21–2). It seems to me that quatrain 16 of this poem epitomizes the twelfth-century poem ‘*A fhir, ná suid ar an síd*’ (see footnote 16 above), and I suggest that Ó hUiginn’s *Ráith ilreachtaigh Eochuill* may have been inspired by the reference in the earlier poem to *Síd nEochuill* (the reference to *Ráith Eochuill* appears to be unique). In passing it may be noted that Knott’s translation of *ráith* as ‘castle’ is anachronistic; the word is commonly used of an earthen rampart or mound: see dil.ie/34837 (s.v. ‘2 ráth, ráith’). In any case, *Ráith Eochuill* seems to be a proper noun here.

⁶²Nollaig Ó Muraíle (ed. and trans.), *Leabhar Mór na nGenealach: The Great Book of Irish Genealogies, compiled (1645–66) by Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh* (Dublin, 2003), 236, 237 (§61.7).

In the absence of further evidence, one cannot determine whether *Síodh Rionnuilbh maic Oc[h]aill* was regarded as an alternative name for *Síd nOchaill/Síd Crúachan*, or the name of a different *síd*, perhaps in this vicinity, associated with Ochall's son, Rionnubh.

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