

## The Grianán of Aileach – a note on its identification

Referring to the great, restored cashel on the top of Greenan Mountain in north Co. Donegal, nowadays known as the Grianán of Aileach (Lac[e]y 1983, 111-3), Richard Warner says that the monument ‘is usually, though not necessarily correctly, identified as “Ailech”, capital of the Cenél Eogain from around the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD until its demolition in 1101 (AU, *sub anno* 1101)’ (Warner 1983, 178). As Warner suggests, there is something of a problem with this identification. In ancient times, the name Ailech, in this Donegal connection, was used in a variety of ways as the name of both a specific place and also as the name of a number of larger kingdoms. An additional complication is that some commentators have suggested that the specific location of Ailech was not the site of the Grianán but a nearby place, now mainly in Co. Derry, known by the townland names of Elaghmore and Elaghbeg (e.g. Morris 1936, 29).

In his famous paper on the ‘Irish Law of Kingship, with special reference to Ailech and Cenél Eoghain’, James Hogan reflected on (and to some extent added to) this confusion. Writing about the conquest of Donegal by the northern Uí Néill around the fifth century, Hogan says:

The new kingdom and its dependencies ... was known as in Fochla or in Tuaiscert – both terms meaning the North ... From about 780 on a much commoner name for the kingdom of the Northern Uí Néill is that of Ailech, derived from the prehistoric stone fortress of this name situated near the present town of Derry, in the peninsula of Inis Eoghain. However, Ailech had not always been the seat of the kings of the Northern Uí Néill. Before the eighth century it had been simply the headquarters of the sub-kingdom of Cenél Eoghain [i.e. Inis Eoghain], and it was not until the close of the eighth century, when the Cenél Eoghain became the dominant dynasty of the Northern Uí Néill, that their sub-kingdom developed into the over-kingdom of Ailech. (Hogan 1932, 201-2)

In this extract Hogan himself uses, and suggests an ancient usage of, the name Ailech in three quite separate senses: (i) the name of the well-known stone fortress on

Greenan Mountain; (ii) from the fifth-century onward the name of the sub-kingdom of the Inis Eoghain peninsula – the homeland territory of Cenél nEógain; and (iii) from c. 780 onwards (i.e. from the collapse of the power of the Cenél Conaill) the name of the over-kingdom of the northern Uí Néill, previously referred to in Irish variously as in Fochla or in Tuaiscert - and (we can add) in Latin as Aquilonis. As mentioned above there is a fourth relevant usage of Ailech, in the form of the two townland names: Elaghmore, Co. Derry and the adjoining Elaghbeg, Co. Donegal.

The resolution of this confusion, I would suggest, depends as much on the facts of geography as of history. However, the geography of the area has changed considerably since the early medieval period. Much of the relevant low-lying land, which will be mentioned below, has been reclaimed from open water and bogland. In addition, the political geography of the area has been altered also, by the establishment of the boundaries of the relevant baronies and counties in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and by the development of the suburbs of the city of Derry, and the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, in the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Although his error is understandable, Hogan is not correct in locating the ‘prehistoric stone fortress’ of Ailech (or the ‘town of Derry’ for that matter) on the Inishowen peninsula, although this is often stated to be the case by other commentators as well. Geographically the Inishowen peninsula ended ‘naturally’ just north of Derry and the Grianán, along a line of low-lying former bogland running between the Foyle and Lough Swilly, known sometimes as the Pennyburn Depression (Lac[e]y 1988, 378-9; and 1990, 1-2). This line of bog (formerly open water – at least at the time of the maximum marine transgression c.3,000 BC, and in earlier glacial times when it served as an alternative channel for the River Foyle - the exit of which was then blocked by the advance of the Scottish glaciers), literally, completed the ‘island’ nature of *Inis Eoghain*, ‘the island of Eoghan’. The extent of this former bog is detectable on any contoured map of the area and is shown on early 17<sup>th</sup> century maps.

South of that line is an isolated group of hills of which Derry and the Grianán form the respective eastern and western ends, and which is delimited to the north and south by low-lying, formerly boggy land, which is now much reclaimed. This area is a quite separate geographical unit from the Inishowen peninsula. The area is now split

by the border between Cos. Derry and Donegal and, indeed, by the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. An Inquisition taken in Derry in 1609 found that ‘the auntient and knowne meares of the countrey of Inishowen, als O’Doghertie’s countrey ... tyme out of mynde’ included part of this area (Colby 1837, 207). However, whereas, since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the section of this area lying in Co. Donegal has formed part of the Barony of Inishowen, it does not belong geographically to the peninsula of that name. This is a most important distinction, in that the line of bogland referred to above almost certainly served as the boundary, at least in the sixth century (see below), between the territories of the Cenél nEógain to its north, and the separate lands to its south. These latter lands have traditionally been said to have belonged to the Cenél nÉnna but Francis John Byrne has recently pointed out that there is no evidence for the existence of Cenél nÉnna in this part of Donegal prior to the 11th century (Byrne 2001, xvi). It is more likely that at that time this territory belonged to the Cenél Conaill who had established the nearby monastery of Derry in the second half of the sixth century (Lacey 1998, and forthcoming). Elaghmore and Elaghbeg, then, would have been in Cenél nEógain territory while, at this time and probably up to the mid to late eighth century, the site of the Grianán would have been in Cenél nÉnna/Cenél Conaill territory.

At its most southerly point the Inishowen peninsula proper tapers to a commanding rocky outcrop that overlooks the former bogland below it. This rock rises to about 200 ft (60 metres) above sea level and is located in the townland of Elaghmore, Co. Derry. Immediately to the west (but actually across the Irish and county border) is the townland of Elaghbeg, Co. Donegal. This rocky outcrop, which almost certainly gave its name in the form Ailech to the two townlands, now supports the ruins of the castle of ‘Illagh’, ‘Ellogh’ or ‘Elagh’, probably built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This castle, which belonged to the O’Dohertys, is mentioned in a number of documents from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Davies and Swan 1939, 202-3). The rock and its castle overlook the area of Donegal known now as Bridgend but which was described in the Inquisition of 1609 as ‘the cawsy[causeway], under Ellogh’. It is likely that this causeway was in direct descent of an ancient route-way that had existed here, across this wetland, from very early times and which was guarded from the rock. The castle at Elaghmore clearly dates from later medieval times and no remains from the earlier medieval period are to be found there now. However, it is

extremely unlikely that such a commanding position would have been neglected in the early medieval period. The site, effectively, ‘guards’ the approach to Inishowen from the south.

Although I have previously argued for the identification of Ailech with the site of the Grianán (Lacey 1984), it seems to me now that the resolution of the problem lies along the following lines. Ailech, as the name of a specific site in antiquity, and also as the name of the Cenél nEógain ‘homeland’ kingdom of Inis Eoghain, derives from the place now known as Elaghmore (Ailech Mór) in Co. Derry. This strategic place was certainly of importance in terms of guarding the approach to Inis Eoghain and may therefore have been the site of a fortification of the local kings. As mentioned above there are no signs of such a monument now although its building materials could have been recycled for the construction of the later castle, and there is a major earthen fortification at Dundrean Co. Donegal, 1km to the northwest (Lac[e]y 1983, 173). In addition, another, now destroyed, ‘Fort’ was close by (ibid., 207).

At the battle of Cloítech in 789, the Cenél nEógain, led by Áed Oirdnide, defeated the Cenél Conaill and excluded the latter from the overkingship of the northern Uí Néill (a kingdom previously referred to as in Fochla, in Tuaiscert, or Aquilonis - all meaning ‘the North’ but which from now on would, increasingly, be known as ‘the kingdom of Ailech’), and from the valuable plain south of Greenan mountain known in ancient times as Mag nÍtha (Ó Corráin 1972,17). The ‘burning of Derry’ in the previous year, 788 (AU), also seems to have been part of this south-pushing campaign against the Cenél Conaill by the Cenél nEógain (Lacey forthcoming)]. It is possible that shortly after this battle the Cenél nEógain moved their ‘headquarters’ from Elaghmore, across the wetland boundary, to the top of nearby Greenan Mountain where there was already an ancient hillfort. This would provide a *terminus post quem* for the building of the Grianán, the well-known cashel that still stands there to today. The Grianán, from which can be seen a great deal of the new kingdom of Ailech (ie the older, but renamed, kingdom of the northern Uí Néill) and which, in turn, can be seen from a great many parts of this over-kingdom, would have been an ideal, visible symbol of the extent and power of the newly invigorated Cenél nEógain. As part of this actual physical move, the Cenél nEógain would, as it were, have brought with them the title of their kingdom Ailech, originally named from the nearby site (itself

visible from the Grianán) but which now referred, not only to that site, not only to the homeland kingdom of Inis Eoghan, but now, in its new guise, to the over-kingdom of the northern Uí Néill. This suggested late 8<sup>th</sup> or early 9<sup>th</sup> century date for the construction of the Grianán would fit with the archaeological evidence being collected about similar structures by Claire Cotter as part of the Discovery Programme's Western Stone Forts Project (pers. comm. and forthcoming).

To sum up, I am arguing that the various sites and kingdoms referred to in ancient times as Ailech, take their names originally from the site of Elaghamore where there may well have been a (now destroyed) Cenél nEógain fortification in the period from the fifth to the eighth centuries. After the decisive battle of Cloítech in 789, when the Cenél nEógain won total control of the over-kingdom of the northern Uí Néill, the successful kings relocated to the site now known as the Grianán, which was then built inside an existing prehistoric hillfort, as a visual symbol of their new mastery of all the landscape visible from that commanding monument. The actual builder may have been the victor at Cloítech, Áed Oirdnide; he did not die for another thirty years.

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