

|               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Title         | The Sword in the Stone: previously unrecognised archaeological evidence of ceremonies of the later Iron Age and early medieval period                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Item Type     | book part                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Authors       | Newman, Conor                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Citation      | Newman,C.(2009) The Sword in the Stone: previously unrecognised archaeological evidence of ceremonies of the later Iron Age and early medieval period, in G. Cooney et al (eds), Relics of old decency: archaeological studies in later prehistory. Festschrift for Barry Raftery, 425-36. Wordwell, Dublin. |
| Rights        | CC BY-NC-ND                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Download date | 2026-10-08 22:43:36                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Item License  | <a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/ie/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/ie/</a>                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Link to Item  | <a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/2041">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/2041</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

Relics of Old Decency:  
archaeological studies in later prehistory

Festschrift for Barry Raftery

*Edited by Gabriel Cooney, Katharina Becker, John Coles,  
Michael Ryan and Susanne Sievers*

**Wordwell**



First published in 2009 by  
Wordwell Ltd  
Media House, South County Business Park, Dublin 18  
Copyright © The authors

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher. This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data are available for this book.  
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 905569 37 3

Cover design: Nick Maxwell

Cover images: Rathgall, Co. Wicklow (DOEHLG); horse-bit photograph (Robert Sands); horse-bit drawing (Raftery 1983, fig. 5, no. 49, no provenance, Ireland).

Copy-editing: Emer Condit

Typesetting and layout: Wordwell Ltd

Book design: Nick Maxwell

Printed by Gráficas Rigel, Asturias

This publication has received support from the Heritage Council under the 2009 Publications Grants Scheme.

# The Sword in the Stone: previously unrecognised archaeological evidence of ceremonies of the later Iron Age and early medieval period

Conor Newman

An enduring symbol of the defiant Celt is the figure of Arthur, the boy whose destiny was writ large by his drawing from a stone the sword of kingship. An evocative motif to be sure, and one that is central to an Arthurian *oeuvre* of monumental proportions, covering the full gamut from legitimate scholarship to fantasy and conspiracy theory. Doubtless, Nennius would remain sanguine about what has become of his Arthur in the twelve or so centuries since he penned his *Historia Brittonum* (see Morris 1980), the historian in him probably approving of the position adopted by most scholars nowadays, which is to drop anchor a safe distance offshore from Tintagel. In discussing a genuine ceremonial tradition of swords, stones and kingship, therefore, this paper runs the risk of attracting the wrong sort of attention. Barry Raftery, of course, would say 'press on regardless', and so it is in this spirit that I offer up this somewhat speculative essay to a mentor and friend.

## Introduction

This paper is intended to introduce ongoing research into the occurrence of blade marks on stones by describing the phenomenon, offering some explanations and indicating some avenues for future investigation. When not ignored altogether, such marks have been disregarded variously as the vestiges of vandalism, of ploughing and even of illiterate ogham; only very occasionally are they described as blade-sharpening grooves. The corpus of stones bearing such marks, however, is sufficiently distinctive to merit closer attention. The grooves themselves are typically straight, narrow and V-sectioned. Sometimes deepening along the middle of the groove, they clearly result from repeated sawings of a narrow metal blade back and forth across the surface of a stone, and under considerable downward pressure. The marks generally occur in groups and rarely, if ever, do they criss-cross one another, and then only at the furthest extremities of the groove lines, where such is probably inconsequential. In so far as initial impressions last, it is worth mentioning at the outset that at first glance these marks look like slash marks made by a sword, which is why,

however unscientific it may be, I shall occasionally refer to them as sword marks or sword grooves in this essay. And while this impression, it will be proposed anon, is perhaps intentional—or at least not discouraged—it is an impression that logic at once disavows, as it does also the proposal that these are sword-sharpening grooves: whilst drawing a blade, edge-on, along such a groove may give it a more pointed tip, it would blunt the blade and render the sword useless. Perhaps, then, this explains the patches of highly polished, smoothed surfaces that nearly always occur adjacent to the grooves: these are surfaces that are clearly the result of a more orthodox sharpening action.

Another possibly important dimension of the stones bearing such marks is the unevenness and resultant rounded hollows on some of the surfaces where the blade grooves occur. I am not referring here to the very slight concavity acquired by some of the burnished surfaces but rather to the distinct, bowl-shaped hollows that resemble broadly those that otherwise characterise bullaun stones; the two phenomena may be thematically connected because blade grooves also occur on *de facto* bullaun stones.

The grooves and polished surfaces can, of course, be explained in quite prosaic terms as later manifestations of the prehistoric *polissoirs*, the far wider grooves that are thought to have been caused by the sharpening and smoothing of polished stone axes (e.g. Blanc *et al.* 1995). When the range of stones in Ireland and Britain upon which the sword marks occur is considered, however, the inquiry takes an altogether more intriguing turn, for the list comprises in the main cross-slabs, high crosses, bullaun stones, ogham stones, inauguration/assembly stones and occasionally church buildings, e.g. door jambs, quoin stones, etc. These are no ordinary stones, available willy-nilly for people to scar so rudely. On the contrary, they are icons of tribal and cultural identity, and, moreover, most of them are sacred. Only very rarely is the associated ornamentation or inscription damaged by any of these grooves, and in only one or two cases are the bullaun hollows scarred. Apart from the ecclesiastical theme dominating this range, another motif of importance is that of boundaries, for in one sense or another all of these stones

## RELICS OF OLD DECENCY

mark boundaries or points of transition, be they political and religious boundaries or personal, biographical transitions from, say, layman to king.

In Britain, as we shall see, the phenomenon seems to be largely restricted to Wales and Scotland. In Ireland stones thus marked appear to be quite widespread, though the present survey is far from complete. To date there is only one place known to the writer where the stones in question can be guardedly described as otherwise nondescript, namely a collection of four stones (which may well be fragments of one big stone) built into the wall of the disused cathedral at Moone, Co. Kildare. While the marks, in and of themselves, remain broadly undatable, the stones upon which they occur range in date from the fifth/sixth century AD to the twelfth century. Much later specimens are known but these are probably an unrelated phenomenon.

## Case-studies

A number of interesting themes and questions emerge from this brief overview, but before these can be pursued further it would be useful to examine in a little more detail select examples of these sword marks.

*Cross-slabs*

Thus far, blade grooves occur with the greatest frequency on freestanding cross-slabs or cross-inscribed pillar stones, where, as a rule, they are confined to the lower portion of the stone, more often than not close to ground level. The finest such Irish example is undoubtedly the Kilnasaggart pillar stone in south County Armagh (Pl. 1), which is graced with a multiplicity of crosses and a quite lengthy Irish inscription on the south face commemorating one Ternoc son of Ceran, who, the inscription tells us, bequeathed the place to the protection of Peter. Ternoc is identified as the man whose obit appears in the Annals of the Four Masters under the year AD 714, suggesting an early eighth-century date for the pillar.

In addition to having various burnished patches, the lowermost quarter of the pillar is scarred with at least 55 V-sectioned grooves of varying length and depth. The grooves are confined to the north face of the slab (the deep groove near the base on the south side mentioned by Macalister (1949, 114–15) is not a sword mark; see Petrie 1878, 27–30 and Pl. XIX). This is now below the grass-line and has not



Pl. 1—North face of the cross-inscribed pillar at Kilnasaggart, Co. Armagh, decorated with no fewer than eleven crosses, ten of which are encircled. (Inset: Some of the 55+ blade grooves scored into the base of the pillar. This surface is also smoothed or burnished.)

been examined by the writer. The small circular enclosure wherein the pillar now stands dates from the nineteenth century (Reade 1856–7; Ua Cuinn 1908–11). Whether revealed through excavation or ground survey is unclear, but Reade (*op. cit.*, 317) reports, with illustration, that the inscribed pillar stood on the northern edge of a unique arrangement of two concentric rings of radial long-cist graves. There is no clear indication of these on the surface today, though round and about the pillar is strewn haphazardly a collection of small stones and slabs. Some of the stones are rudely hollowed out and now collect rainwater, others are inscribed with rough crosses.

Virtually nothing is known about the early church associated with this cross-inscribed pillar (see Petrie 1878, 27–30). Monumental slabs such as these might have marked the boundary or entrance to a monastic or church enclosure, though of this one nothing remains. Present



## PREVIOUSLY UNRECOGNISED EVIDENCE OF CEREMONIES OF THE LATER IRON AGE AND EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD



Pl. 2—Left: Cross-slab from Nash Manor, Glamorgan. In addition to the more typical pattern of horizontal and diagonal blade marks across the lower part of the slab, a change to vertical grooves occurs slightly higher up the slab, extending right up to the base of the cross. Right: Memorial slab from Penmachno, Gwynedd, with deep blade grooves across the base. (Both images from Redknap 1991, pls on pp 48 and 58 respectively.)

evidence suggests, therefore, that the pillar marks a possibly exceptional cemetery. The broader location of this slab, however, is altogether more informative, for it stands squarely in the middle of a narrow pass that is one of just a handful of gaps in the 65-million-year-old volcanic ring-dyke that surrounds Sliabh Gullion (the celebrated ‘Ring of Gullion’; see Stott 1997) and forms the virtually impregnable southern border of Armagh. Known as the ‘Gates of the North’, through here once ran the Sligh Midhluachra as it wound its way from Tara to Dunseverick on the north Antrim coast. Stated simply, it would not be possible to make one’s way along this pass without encountering the cross-inscribed pillar, and it is clear that the slab and the graves around it mark out this pass,

signalling to the traveller that they are now in border territory. Whereas blade marks such as these are capable of emitting very clear signals of ownership and the force of arms, the importance of boundaries as places of assembly where laws and treaties were enacted and renewed suggests that the blade marks on the stone should be considered against this backdrop as well.

Other slabs that compare closely with the Kilnasaggart pillar in respect of the blade grooves and burnished surfaces, and their location on the slab, occur in Wales, namely at Nash Manor, Glamorgan, and Penmachno, Gwynedd (Pl. 2; Nash-Williams 1950, nos 250 and 104 respectively). The Nash Manor cross-slab probably dates from the eighth or ninth century, whereas the Penmachno memorial slab bears a Latin inscription that sustains two different readings. It is evidently an early slab, and one reading of the horizontal line as IN TE(M)PO[RE]/IUSTI[NI]/CON[SVLI(S)] (the time of Justinus the Consul) suggests a date as early as c. AD 540 (Redknap 1991, 53).

### High crosses

A far later date is implied for the blade grooves that occur on the base of the Market Cross at Kells, Co. Meath (Pl. 3), which is generally dated to the ninth century AD. The grooves, of which there are over 30, occur around the top of the base stone, an area that is not ornamented but is uncommonly undulant, with both the bowl-like concavities mentioned already and burnished or smoothed surfaces. The occurrence of the blade grooves on the Market Cross raises the possibility that similar score marks visible on the *dextra Dei* arm of the unfinished cross (Pl. 4) in the grounds of St Patrick’s Church at Kells represent the same phenomenon, applied perhaps when the cross lay recumbent and abandoned.

Though considerably more eroded, V-sectioned grooves, and an equally undulant surface, also occur on the base of the south cross at Lorrha, Co. Tipperary (Pl. 5), which now supports only a fragment of the original shaft. The fragmentary condition belies what was clearly once a highly accomplished cross. Though the grooves on the Lorrha base have lost their original crispness owing to erosion, there can be no doubt that they represent the same thing we see at Kells. Once again, Wales provides a comparable specimen, with Redknap and Lewis (2007, 357) observing that the upper surface of the cross base at St Cynwyd’s Church, Llangynwyd, Glamorgan, ‘. . . is much abraded by grooves



## RELICS OF OLD DECENCY



Pl. 3—Market Cross, Kells, Co. Meath. There are over 30 blade marks on the upper surface of the cross base. The surface is also extremely undulant, and there are a number of patches of burnishing which are the results of sharpening.



Pl. 5—Badly eroded blade marks, burnished surfaces and hollows on the base of the south cross at Lorrha, Co. Tipperary.



Pl. 4—The unfinished cross in the grounds of St Patrick's Church, Kells, Co. Meath. Blade marks occur on the panel on the *dextra Dei* arm but can really only have been cut into the stone when it was lying recumbent.

caused by secondary use for sharpening'. Moreover, since it might be considered as a high cross on the basis of its height alone, the late tenth-century disc-headed cross-slab known as *Maen Achwyffan* (Stone of Lamentations), Clwyd, might also be included in this category, for it too has the remains of a number of blade marks along the damaged left lateral of the lowermost, undecorated panel (see Redknap 1991, 41; Nash-Williams 1950, no. 190). Thus, when considered alongside the Irish specimens, these Welsh examples can perhaps now be seen to adhere to an emerging pattern.

#### *Inauguration/assembly stones*

A quite different context is provided by the Mullaghmast stone. Now in the National Museum of Ireland (see Kelly 1983), this assembly stone originally stood on Mullaghmast Hill (*Maistiú*), Co. Kildare (see map in Fitzgerald 1891–5), home to Áine, one of the fairy queens of the mythological Tuatha Dé Dannan, and seat of the Uí Muiredaig sept of the



## PREVIOUSLY UNRECOGNISED EVIDENCE OF CEREMONIES OF THE LATER IRON AGE AND EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD



Pl. 6—Blade marks on the left-hand side of the Mullaghmast pillar stone (now in the National Museum of Ireland).



Pl. 7—Blade marks and burnished surface on the top of the Mullaghmast pillar stone (now in the National Museum of Ireland).

Leinster dynasty the Uí Dúnlainge (Byrne 1973, 150). Mullaghmast is traditionally regarded as the burial place of Ailill, son of Dúnlaing, buried upright facing his old enemy, Lóeguire, king of Tara (*ibid.*, 65, 194). The stone is embellished with beautiful, raised curvilinear ornament of the type found on sixth-century AD Irish metalwork, and friezes of incised, compass-drawn circles and tangential arcs familiar from the pages of later manuscripts and bone objects. The stone appears to be otherwise unshaped and to be naturally square in section (see Raftery 1984, 298–300, fig. 147). It is decorated on all but one side that, for the sake of convenience, can be thought of as the back of the stone. Thus, deep V-sectioned grooves occur on the top and on the two latera. On the left face there are four deep grooves, two of which are scored into the base-line of a frieze of nested triangles (Pl. 6) near the top of the stone; the other two cut diagonally across the edge of the circles-and-arcs frieze. Similarly, the incised ornamentation on the right face is also affected by one long diagonal groove and two far slighter ones. The two deep grooves on the top of the pillar (Pl. 7) are the most striking, however, not least because they are offset against a large burnished area which has an extra lustre from being touched and rubbed by passers-by. Areas of burnishing also occur on the right arris of the stone, close enough to ground level that I am disinclined to think that they could be the product of animals scratching.

The significance of the occurrence of these marks on an inauguration or assembly stone is self-evident and brings to

mind similar marks that occur on the so-called AII stone at the *caput* of the MacDonald lordship at Finlaggan on Islay in the Southern Hebrides. First noted by Pennant in 1776, this quartzite boulder was rediscovered in 1997, half-submerged on the west shore of Loch Finlaggan (Caldwell 2003, 72–3, fig. 28). The presence on a nearby stone of the clearly inscribed letters AI (in Lombardic style) is interpreted as an abbreviation of Angus I, and has perhaps fuelled speculation that the far more irregular marks on the AII stone are also lettering, in this case commemorating Angus II. Caldwell concedes, however, that such a reading is without sound basis, but does allow for the possibility that these stones were indeed associated with the rituals of lordship and may have been where the lord of the Isles sat on important occasions. Unlike the AI inscription, the putative ‘II’ on the AII stone lacks cross-bars and the ‘A’ is quite malformed. In short, the marks are amenable to alternative interpretation, and in light of the evidence from Ireland one wonders whether they might be sword marks. Having now seen the Kells and Mullaghmast specimens, David Caldwell kindly informs me that the incisions in the AII stone are deep and V-shaped in cross-section but notes that there is no burnishing of the surface of the stone as there is on the Irish specimens. Though a boundary of no special significance from the beginning of the sixteenth century onwards, he has outlined to me the possibility that the AII stone may once have marked the boundary between the landholdings of Portaneilean and Laichtcarlane.

## RELICS OF OLD DECENCY

*Bullaun stones*

Although their association with early church sites is unequivocal, the true purpose of bullaun stones remains something of a mystery. Siting is clearly relevant to how they functioned, insofar as they are sometimes found near the boundaries of church enclosures or in places associated with a tradition of pilgrimage or *turas* rounds. Lichen unfortunately masks, for the most part, the blade marks on a previously unrecorded bullaun stone, now turned sideways and enveloped in a drystone field wall, near Rathgureen on the Maree peninsula, Co. Galway (Pl. 8). The longest of the grooves runs right across the basin of the bullaun itself. Nearby to the west is another bullaun stone, and about 75m beyond this a possible ecclesiastical enclosure. A few metres to the north of the scored bullaun stone are a holy well and a souterrain.

Bullaun hollows are normally positioned on a horizontal surface of the stone, where, invariably, they collect rainwater or sometimes hold rounded 'prayer' stones, turned by the pilgrim upon completion of this prayer station. Occasionally, however, bullaun stones are turned sideways. A splendid specimen in the church grounds of Killedeas, Co. Fermanagh, with multiple bullaun hollows is now standing entirely upright in order to display a magnificent encircled cross on the opposite side of the stone (Newman and Walsh 2007). This suggests that the bullaun stone *per se* was abandoned sometime during the eighth or ninth century AD. Also standing on its edge is another previously unrecorded bullaun stone at Derrymore, near Inagh, Co. Clare (Pl. 9), identified by Mr P. J. Clancy and brought to my attention by Clodagh and Michael Lynch. Here to the right of two well-formed bullaun basins are five V-sectioned score marks. The association of blade marks and bullauns is worthy of further attention, particularly given the occurrence of bullaun-like hollows among the sword marks on the Kells and Lorrha cross bases. It remains utterly unclear why, or even how, these surfaces were made undulant and dished, but perhaps an avenue to explore here is the tradition that associates bullaun stones with *turas* or pilgrimage rounds, since the sword grooves themselves, as we shall see, seem also to refer to a cyclical or repetitive event; both actions speak to the invocation of divine intervention.

**Literary and historical accounts**

We are fortunate in having a couple of early documentary



Pl. 8—Blade marks, obscured somewhat by lichen, on a bullaun stone, Maree peninsula, Co. Galway.

references, literary and historical, that seem not only to explain the grooves themselves but to evoke something of their symbolism as well. In an episode in *Acallam na Senórach* Patrick and Cailte are guests of one Coscrach na Cét, hospitaller to the king of Leinster. Cosrach asks Cailte how a peculiar stone near his fortress got its name:

'Why is this mighty stone here on the lawn called the "Rock of the Weapons"? 'This is the rock' said Cailte, 'on which the *Fian* used to sharpen their weapons each year on the day of *Samain* and the edges they put on them did not dull in battle, in skirmish or in fighting. On that rock was the best token of peace that existed in Ireland and Scotland in the reigns of Conn and Art and Cormac and Cairbre Lifechair, the ribbed armlet containing eight ounces of gold.'

This prompted Cailte to recite the following verse:

Know you Cosrach, this stone that kings embraced,  
To which Finn of Almu frequently came?

Whetstone of the Weapons, its hosts are all dead,  
Though the stone, ever since, remains in its place.

Great spears of destruction and warriors' swords,  
By this stone well-sharpened at Samain each year.

(trans. Dooley and Roe 1999, 125)



## PREVIOUSLY UNRECOGNISED EVIDENCE OF CEREMONIES OF THE LATER IRON AGE AND EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD



Pl. 9—Mr P. J. Clancy beside the bullaun stone bearing blade marks at Derrymore, Co. Clare (photo: Michael and Clodagh Lynch).

The literary nature and licence of the text notwithstanding, this is indeed a remarkable account and explanation of a stone that clearly bore the marks of repeated sharpenings. It describes an annual ritual enacted on a special religious occasion and resulting in magical, lasting sharpness. Moreover, the stone is here characterised as a treaty stone of sorts, a monument to peace, thereby introducing the concept of the marking or foreswearing of oaths, and the possibility that the commemoration and renewal of such might be marked in a tangible and public way.

Another literary text, *Aisling Meic Conglinne* ('The Vision of MacConglinne'), places such a stone in a royal household and introduces motifs that resonate with descriptions of the inaugural cry of the Lia Fáil, as well as the large whetstone-sceptre, such as the one from Sutton Hoo, designed to be rested on the knee (e.g. Enright 2006).

MacConglinne rose and went hastily, impatiently, like a fiend, in his furious rush and warlike bold pace across

the royal house. And there was a huge block and warrior's stone of strength on which spears and rivets were wont to be fastened, and against which points and edges were wont to be ground; and a warrior's pillar-stone was that flag. And he lifted it on his back and bore it to the place where he had been before on the bed rail, thrust the upper end of it in his mouth, rested the other end of it on his knee, and began grinding his teeth against the stone.

What the learned, and the elders, and the books of Cork relate is, that there was no one in the neighbourhood of the dún inside or outside, that did not hear the noise of his teeth against the stone, though it was of the smoothest.

(trans. Meyer 1892, 46)

A text with a different historical pedigree is the late seventh/early eighth-century text *Baile Chuin Chedchathach*,



## RELICS OF OLD DECENCY

one of the earliest regnal lists of Tara. Recently edited in Edel Bhreathnach's *The kingship and landscape of Tara* (2005), it contains the following stanzas:

- |                                   |                                    |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 19. Áed Allán bais bith           | Áed Allán who will strike a blow   |
| 20. Bid fuiri fir<br>nDiermata.   | Diermait's truth will be upon her. |
| Dis-ngig Diermait díá<br>rirsetar | Diermait, by whom courts will      |
| lis . Lond daig án<br>con- fri    | request it. Glorious savage flame, |
| Irthine –n-acht.                  | he drove towards Irthine.          |
| 21. Ailt fuiri Féchno.            | A blade over her Féchno.           |

I am very grateful to Dr Bhreathnach for providing me with the following commentary. The text includes two phrases that might suggest the idea of striking a sword against a stone as part of the seizing of the kingship of Tara. Of the Uí Néill king Áed Allán (d. 598) the text states *Áed Allán bais bith* 'Áed Allán who will strike a blow', and of the king Fergal mac Maíle Dúin (d. 722), who is regarded unfavourably in the text, the phrase *Anflaith for a mbia bith trom* 'an unking who will strike a heavy blow' is used (Bhreathnach 2005, 84 (19), 86 (33)). This may be a metaphorical allusion to striking a blow on the Lia Fáil, and hence the screech that emanated from the Lia Fáil when recognising the legitimate heir to the kingship of Tara may be a metaphor for the sound of the grinding sword against the stone. The phrase *bais bith* is a *figura etymologica*, deriving from *bened*, meaning 'to strike a blow'.

A connection between the archaeological phenomenon of V-sectioned grooves on the one hand and these historical and literary accounts on the other seems probable and will surely reward further investigation. Apart from the textual evidence, the multiplicity of such grooves alone suggests a recurring event, a ceremony, invoking or underwritten by a union of powers, those represented by the church and those of secular authority. The symbolic charge of such an occasion must have drawn on the fact that the stones in question were, in the main, recognised Christian monuments. It may also have derived from the use of ceremonial or ancestral swords, and in particular the historical and symbolic importance attached to the act of sharpening them, which is testified to by, among other things, the existence of whetstone-sceptres. The corpus of poems in praise of

swords—such as Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn's *Séad Airm* ('A Precious Weapon'; Knott 1922–6) and Dallán mac Móre's tenth-century *Mochen a chlaidib Cherball* ('The Song of Carroll's Sword'; Meyer 1899)—suggests that the historical renown of a royal sword accrued through heroic succession: Cerball mac Muirecáin's sword belonged to previous heroic kings of Leinster, and was handed over symbolically from one generation to another at ritual sites such as Carman, the primary *óenach* site of Leinster (Bhreathnach 2007, 36–7). Rock, on the other hand, may have made for a better material to symbolise the qualities of immutability and incorruptibility suited to the concept of a kingship that boasted divine imprimatur. According to Bhreathnach (pers. comm.), however, the sword and the ceremonial stone could also be combined for a quite different end, as reflected in the annalistic entry (AFM *s.a.* 732) concerning the beheading of Áed Rón, king of the Ulaid, on Cloch an Chommaig in front of the church at Fochart, Co. Louth (*benaid a chend de for Cloich an Chommaigh i ndorus teampaill Focháirde*). If the combined magic of the stone and sword upheld the office of king, it also had the power to undo it.

The mundanity of the humble whetstone belies the fact that superior symbolic importance attached to some specimens, the so-called 'whetstone-sceptres', and these were an intimate item of royal regalia. The symbolic potency of a whetstone-sceptre was undoubtedly related to the ceremonial sword and the capacity of the sceptre, in symbolising the sharpness of the royal sword, to represent also the vitality and keenness of the kingship itself. We might profitably consider the implication of the above-quoted passage from *Acallam na Senórach*, namely that lasting, magical sharpness resulted from a ceremonial communion of special whetting stones and swords gripped in the hands of the rightful, of those divinely chosen, or fated, to be heroes or hero-kings. That such could remain in the realm of the symbolic is suggested by the magnificent whetstone-sceptres from Sutton Hoo, East Anglia, and Newtownlow, Co. Westmeath, which appear never to have been used to sharpen blades. On the other hand, the *de facto* occurrence of blade grooves and burnished surfaces on crosses, cross-slabs and so on suggests that this was also a living tradition, surrounding real ceremonial events and producing sword grooves that were distinctive, visible and public.

The ostensibly contradictory actions that produced respectively the blade grooves and the burnished surfaces are reconcilable when visualised through the prism of ritual and ceremony, and the notion that the outcome might be a

highly symbolic lasting, sacral sharpness. Against such a backdrop the stone is best seen not as passive but as an object of special agency that has the ability to gift, lend or bestow sharpness unto the sword. The giver of sharpness, it is also the source to which the sword must be returned so that its life-force might be renewed. Blunting the sword against the stone—the V-sectioned grooves—may have symbolised a returning of the potency of the sword to the stone, and accordingly the burnished surfaces may represent renewal of the blade, and with it revitalisation of the lineage and of the kingship, or indeed renewal of oaths, treaties, alliances and laws. In short, the sword-as-potent-weapon is drawn from the stone by the rightful and just king. Where the stone is a Christian monument, the imprimatur of the highest Christian authority is called upon to bear witness to the event; in the case of older monoliths, more ancient deities may have presided over this renewal of power. A sword thus charged was then available for use in other ceremonies because its mark was the seal of authenticated authority.

### Deeper traditions: making one's mark in late Iron Age Ireland

While one can appreciate that collectively such marks might be conceived of as mementoes of reaffirmed treaties and oaths, or indeed as a roll call of ancestral kings, we should not lose sight of the fact that each individual stroke bears testimony to a historical person and is therefore their mark or signature. In the final part of this essay I want to briefly explore a wider tradition of making one's mark in this way by examining some of the potentially earliest examples of blade marks on stones.

The earliest datable score mark known to me occurs at the start of a partially Latinised Primitive Irish inscription (for summary see Redknap and Lewis 2007, 538–9) on a reused memorial(?) slab from the Roman town of Wroxeter, near Shrewsbury in Shropshire (Pl. 10). The full inscription across three lines reads:

CVNORIX  
MACVSMA  
[Q]VICO[L]I[N]E

(Hound-/Wolf-king of the son of the tribe of Holly).

Wroxeter (*Viroconium Cornoviorum*) was one of the

comparatively few Roman towns that continued as a commercial centre into the fifth century. Possibly the capital of the early medieval kingdom of Powys, it may have been ruled for a brief time by Cunorix, who was probably of Irish descent. Jackson regarded the inscription as dating from the fifth century and speculated on the possibility that Cunorix might have been a *foederatus*, settled in Wroxeter (Wright and Jackson 1968), but more recently Swift (1997, 54ff) and others have argued on linguistic and historical grounds for a date closer to the sixth century. Regardless, it is tempting to speculate that the inscription was carved by a literate countryman at Cunorix's behest, and that, using his sword, Cunorix then made his own mark, his signature, on the stone beside his name. A deep blade groove and burnished surface also occurs on the largest stone at Mitchell's Fold Stone Circle, on the Shropshire–Powys border. Overlooking Wroxeter from the west, this monument arguably marks one of the passes into Powys, and lies close to the projected line of Offa's Dyke.

Depending on how it is to be interpreted, such may not be unprecedented because a similar blade groove also occurs on the ogham stone from Killeen Cormac, Co. Kildare (Fitzgerald 1899–1902; Swift 1997, 57, 90–1). The ogham inscription reads OVANOS AVI IVACATTOS and is preceded by a single, definitive blade groove before the first ogham letter (Pl. 11). The blade mark itself is quite different from the ogham letters, which are oblong and pecked into the surface, thus raising the question: is this the actual mark or signature of Ovanos?



Pl. 10—Single blade mark prefixing the word CVNORIX on the slab of the same name from Wroxeter, Shropshire (damage visible to the right is recent and may be where the stone was struck by the plough that unearthed it).



## RELICS OF OLD DECENCY



Pl. 11—Ogham stone from Killeen Cormac, Co. Kildare (now in the National Museum of Ireland). A single blade mark precedes the ogham inscription of oblong strokes. The Killeen Cormac stone is unique in Ireland on account of having a Latin inscription—part of which is visible on this photograph—carved vertically up the face of the slab. Three very short blade grooves occur on the arris of the stone near the stem of the third stroke of the letter V.

The precisely located, single blade marks at Wroxeter and at Killeen Cormac allow for the possibility that they represent personalised signatures. Elsewhere, however, because of either their position on the ogham stone or the fact that there are multiple blade marks—e.g. the single, 23cm-long, V-sectioned groove across the face of the now-broken ogham stone in the grounds of the church of St Ciarán of Saighir at Tullaherin, Co. Kilkenny (Anon. 1854–5), or the multiplicity of V-sectioned grooves on the ogham stone from Portmarnock, Co. Dublin (Macalister 1945, 21)—different explanations are demanded. Is it possible that in the case of the latter the genealogical aspect of the ogham inscriptions recommended them as appropriate places to commemorate important political and historical events, recording successive ceremonies with a blade mark?



Pl. 12—Ogham stone from Coolineagh, Co. Cork. Extracted from the wall of St Olan's Church and presented to Royal Cork Inst. (now University College Cork) in 1838. The inscription reads VIDETT[ JS (Vidett[o/a]s) and is partially over-scored by two deep blade grooves, alongside which are a number of slighter blade marks.

The blade marks on the ogham stone (Pl. 12) removed from the wall of St Olan's Church, Coolineagh, Co. Cork, and now on exhibition at University College Cork (for inscription see McManus 2005, 21), remind us of how closely such marks compare in form to ogham letters, which are sometimes so narrow or V-sectioned that they were clearly not carved or pecked out but were made by drawing a blade back and forth across the edge of the stone. Such similarities may not be entirely coincidental and may actually speak to a common ancestry. Notwithstanding what has been written about the broader genesis of stroke alphabets such as ogham and runes (e.g. McManus 1991, 6–18; Moltke 1985), the question now arises as to whether it is possible that the inventor of the ogham cipher chose to adopt a stroke alphabet in the knowledge that such would segue into an already existing tradition of making one's mark, one's sign, with the slash of a blade. Or could it have



been the other way around, that the stroke alphabet inspired the practice of making one's sign this way? The significance of a person's signature cannot be understated, particularly if it occurs on an object or in a place that has, through association, become historically and/or symbolically charged. The act of writing one's name out in full is likely to acquire even greater symbolic potency when cultural meaning is embedded in the very form of the letters themselves.

The chronological range of the stones bearing sword marks is impressive. Although the marks themselves are undatable, the available evidence, historical and archaeological, suggests that this was a tradition that endured for some centuries, with the latest specimens dating from the twelfth century, such as those occurring on a jamb stone of the door of the church of St Multose, Kinsale, Co. Cork (Ní Ghrádaigh 2003). Another possible example occurs on a cornerstone of the parish church of SS Mary and David at Kilpeck, Herefordshire, Wales, built around 1140 (Karolina Ploska, pers. comm.). It may yet prove significant that the earliest-dated stones, like the Wroxeter memorial and some of the ogham stones, have only one or two such grooves, whereas the later-dated, demonstrably Christian stone monuments tend to have multiples of such markings. Trending such as this may be indicative of the evolutionary trajectory of the tradition as it moved from one domain into another, acquiring along the way new aspects such as the inclusion into the ritual programme of actions surrounding the employment of the bullaun-like hollows. It is possible, therefore, that this distributional pattern is in fact tracking the increasing involvement of the church in secular affairs during the early medieval period: what may have started out in the fifth or sixth century as a peculiarly secular ritual might have been commandeered and transformed by the church, which saw to it that ancient memorial stones were replaced by Christian ones just as the ancient gods were superseded by the new, Christian one. In prescribing the ideals of kingship and the exercise of royal functions, particularly in the area of legislation, the church gradually assumed authoritative primacy in the secular world. As Bhreathnach observes, 'kings appear to have often sought the assistance of churchmen to resolve difficult situations and to have acted jointly with them in imposing both ecclesiastical and secular legislation on wide geographical areas. The *fir flathemon* of *Audacht Morainn* remained a basic concept but needed the blessing of the church to flourish' (Bhreathnach 2007, 26).

The motif of a sword that can be drawn or sharpened only with the aid of divine intervention or magic permeates this examination in one guise or another, bringing us back to the image of Arthur. In her definitive treatment of the sword in Anglo-Saxon England, Ellis Davidson (1962, 142) suggests that the tradition of a sword, like Excalibur or Gram, 'secured in some way so as to seem impossible to draw' may be contained in the unique term *fetelbilt*, which, though appearing in the story of Beowulf, does so in a way that fails to shed light on its original meaning. This essay goes one step further in suggesting that this was not just a literary motif but may have found expression in the deceptively simple act of drawing a blade across the surface of a stone.

## Acknowledgements

The ideas advanced in this paper, for which the writer must take full responsibility, arise from ongoing research. In due course a far more comprehensive corpus will be published, and those who have brought to my attention sword marks not mentioned here will be duly acknowledged. With respect to the thesis set out here I am indebted to Edel Bhreathnach, Emma Bird (at Wroxeter), David Caldwell, P. J. Clancy, Joe Fenwick, Clodagh and Michael Lynch, Paul Mullarkey, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, Karolina Ploska, John Waddell and the director of the National Museum of Ireland and the staff of the Irish Antiquities Division. Thanks are also due to my kids, whose forbearance has been rewarded by their developing a keen eye for sword marks.

## References

- Anon. 1854–5 Transactions. *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 3, 86.
- Bhreathnach, E. (ed.) 2005 *The kingship and landscape of Tara*. Dublin. Four Courts Press.
- Bhreathnach, E. 2007 Perceptions of kingship in early medieval Irish vernacular literature. In L. Doran and J. Lyttleton (eds), *Lordship in medieval Ireland. Image and reality*, 21–46. Dublin. Four Courts Press.
- Blanc, C., Certain, F. and Soust, J. 1995 Polissoirs et affutoirs de la Vallée d'Ossau (Pyrénées-Atlantiques). *Archéologie des Pyrénées occidentales et des Landes* 14, 70–84.

## RELICS OF OLD DECENCY

- Byrne, F.J. 1973 *Irish kings and high-kings*. London. [publisher?]
- Caldwell, D. 2003 Finlaggan, Islay—stones and inauguration ceremonies. In R. Welander, D. Breeze and T. O. Clancy (eds), *The Stone of Destiny: artifact and icon*, 61–76. Edinburgh. Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.
- Dooley, A. and Roe, H. 1999 *Tales of the Elders of Ireland: Acallam na Senórach*. Oxford University Press.
- Ellis Davidson, H.R. 1962 *The sword in Anglo-Saxon England*. Woodbridge. Boydell Press.
- Enright, M. 2006 *The Sutton Hoo sceptre and the roots of Celtic kingship theory*. Dublin. Four Courts Press.
- Fitzgerald, Lord W. 1891–5 Mullaghmast: its history and traditions. *County Kildare Archaeological Society Journal* 1, 379–90.
- Fitzgerald, Lord W. 1899–1902 Killeen Cormac. *County Kildare Archaeological Society Journal* 3, 149–63.
- Kelly, E.P. 1983 Catalogue entries in M. Ryan (ed.), *Treasures of Ireland: Irish art 3000 BC–1500 AD*. Dublin. [publisher?]
- Knott, E. 1922–6 *The bardic poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn, 1550–1591*, vol. 1. London. Irish Texts Society.
- Macalister, R.A.S. 1945 *Corpus inscriptionum insularum Celticarum*, vol. 1. Dublin. [publisher?]
- Macalister, R.A.S. 1949 *Corpus inscriptionum insularum Celticarum*, vol. 2. Dublin. [publisher?]
- McManus, D. 1991 *A guide to Ogam*. Maynooth Monographs 4. Maynooth.
- McManus, D. 2005 *Ogam stones at University College Cork*. Cork University Press.
- Meyer, K. 1892 *Aislinge Meic Conglinne, The Vision of MacConglinne, a Middle-Irish wonder tale*. Edited [from the Lebar Brecc, p. 213, and H.3.18, p. 732] with a translation (based on W. M. Hennessy's), notes and a glossary. With an introduction by Wilhelm Wollner. London.
- Meyer, K. 1899 The song of the sword of Cerball. *Revue Celtique* 20, 7–12.
- Moltke, E. 1985 *Runes and their origin: Denmark and elsewhere*. Copenhagen. [publisher?]
- Morris, J. (ed.) 1980 *Nennius: British history and the Welsh Annals*. London. [publisher?]
- Nash-Williams, V.E. 1950 *The Early Christian monuments of Wales*. Cardiff. University of Wales Press.
- Newman, C. and Walsh, N. 2007 Iconographical analysis of the Marigold Stone, Carndonagh, Inishowen, Co. Donegal. In R. Moss (ed.), *Making and meaning: Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Insular Art held in Trinity College Dublin 25th–28th August 2005*, 167–84. Dublin. Four Courts Press.
- Ní Ghrádaigh, J. 2003 Fragments of a twelfth-century doorway at the Church of St Multose, Kinsale? *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 133, 68–77.
- Petrie, G. 1878 *Christian inscriptions in the Irish language*, vol. 2. Dublin. Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland.
- Raftery, B. 1984 *La Tène in Ireland: problems of origin and chronology*. Phillips-Universität, Marburg.
- Reade, G.H. 1856–7 The Pillarstone of Kilnasagart. *Journal of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society* (new. ser.) 1, 315–18.
- Redknap, M. 1991 *The Christian Celts: treasures of late Celtic Wales*. Cardiff. National Museums of Wales.
- Redknap, M. and Lewis, J.M. 2007 *A corpus of early medieval inscribed stones and stone sculpture in Wales*, vol. 2. Glamorgan, Brecknockshire, Monmouthshire, Radnorshire and geographically contiguous areas of Herefordshire and Shropshire. University of Wales Press.
- Reeves, W. 1853 Kilnasagart. *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 1, 220–5.
- Stott, A. 1997 The Ring of Gullion, County Armagh. In F. H. A. Aalen, K. Whelan and M. Stout (eds), *Atlas of the Irish rural landscape*, 316–28. Cork University Press.
- Swift, C. 1997 *Ogam stones and the earliest Irish Christians*. Maynooth Monographs, Series Minor 2. Maynooth.
- Ua Cuinn, S. 1908–11 Kilnasagart. *County Louth Archaeological Journal* 2, 00–00.
- Wright, R.P. and Jackson, K.H. 1968 A late inscription from Wroxeter. *Antiquaries Journal* 48 (2), 296–300.