

Reclaiming the Spoils of Annwfyn

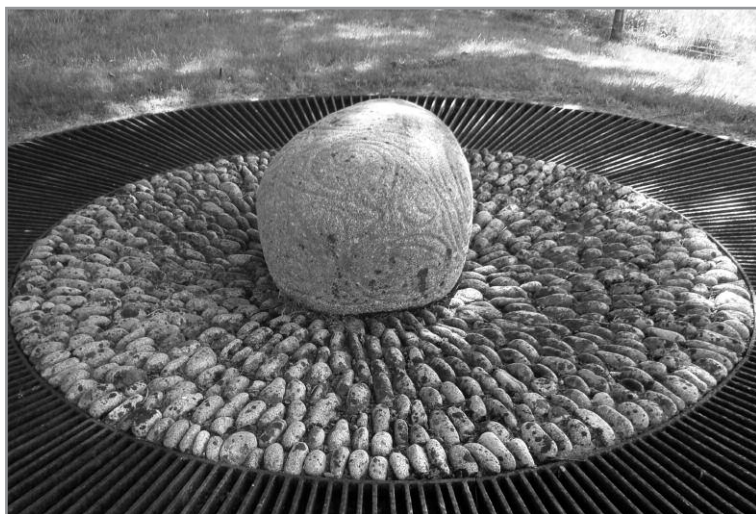
Regia Altera and the landscape of the Mabinogi
eBook Edition

by Gerard Beggan

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The Castlestrange La Tène egg-stone

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“Nothing is more glorious, more respectable, more honourable than to bring to light the knowledge of antiquity..... in order that each successive generation might possess knowledge of their ancestors.”

Micheál Ó Cléirigh, 1636
(Co-writer of the *Annals of the Four Masters*)

Foreword

Few themes in Celtic Studies have generated so much scholarly attention as the Mabinogi legends and the question of their origins. These stories, the earliest versions of which are embedded into the Welsh landscape and are to be found in manuscripts written in Middle Welsh, are rich works which have been investigated from many angles. Lady Charlotte Guest, who first published a translation to English of the complete Mabinogion between 1838 and 1845, marvelled at many of the strange names of people and places arising therein. Deeming these to be the earliest features of the tales and the least likely to change, she wondered from whence they had come – the obvious implication being that they had not come from Wales.

There clearly is an Irish influence in the composition of the four legends called *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. That a predominant part of their subject matter is based upon ‘*borrowings*’ from Irish tales has been widely promulgated by Welsh academics, though there is no agreement as to how and when such ‘*borrowings*’ took place. One result of this lack of knowledge is that it is held by some scholars that they had been handed down from generation to generation by Welsh story-tellers.

Kuno Meyer (1858-1919), a German scholar distinguished in the field of Celtic philology and literature, founder of the School of Irish Learning in Dublin and Professor of Celtic languages at the Royal Irish Academy had proposed that these legends had been transmitted to Wales not earlier than the 9th century and they were handed over *by oral tradition*. Recent research by Professor John Carey, an American who trained in Celtic Studies at Harvard University, concluded that there was a “pervasive Irish influence on the composition of the first three branches of the Mabinogi” *through a cluster of texts* that probably came from Ireland to Wales in the ninth century. He deduced that Welsh bards drew freely on these materials, re-weaving their contents with the Welsh landscape “*in a spirit of intellectual self-assertion*”. More recent investigations by Professor Patrick Sims-Williams of Aberystwyth University concluded that there was relatively little *literary* traffic between Ireland and Wales, at least through the vernacular (sic)

languages, adding that Irish influence on medieval Welsh literature is *slight*, medieval Irish literature being more often a rich and indispensable quarry for *analogues* rather than for sources.

Contrasting with most other investigations *Reclaiming the Spoils of Annwfn – Regia Altera and the landscape of the Mabinogi* is a new approach to this enquiry. The author, using insights gained from his previous local history research in the ancient territory of *Seinchineoil* in north-east Co. Galway and including a small adjacent district in Co. Roscommon, in conjunction with information gleaned from the scholarly Mabinogi literature, identified for closer study a zone traversed by the upper River Suck. Using a multidisciplinary line of inquiry drawing on Irish (oral and written) and involving landscape study, place-name research, national and local history, local enquiry, mathematical and scientific insights and documental research, a range of new information was uncovered, leading to the discovery of the origins of the Mabinogi and their ultimate fate.

A consideration of the Mabinogi literature raised a question as to the politics of promulgated knowledge. Given that a Norman connection with at least some of the legends available to her was suspected by Lady Guest, it seems a great wonder that more attention has not already been given to the invasion of Ireland by Welsh Normans as a line of inquiry into the origins of these legends. As matters have stood until now, a dearth of incontestable landscape evidence has allowed the proliferation of partisan opinions – whether expressed through the process of dating Middle Welsh documents or in arguments about ‘analogues’, ‘borrowings’, ‘cognates’, ‘correspondences’, ‘phonetic similarities’, ‘native etymologies’, etc. Unfortunately, these latter considerations can as readily be employed as tools for political shenanigans as for the maintenance of academic objectivity.

In the case of the origins of the Mabinogi, coherent landscape information becomes of vital importance, for it is lack of concrete landscape evidence (combined perhaps with under-usage of common sense) that has allowed nimble imaginations to promulgate *Caer Sidi* as a magic island in the ocean, *Annwfn* as a Celtic *Underworld*, *Defwy* as possibly a river between this world and the next, *Caer Dathyl* as a golden fortress and *Matholwch* as possibly “a typical name for an Irishman” – to take just a few examples.

History too was of vital importance in this research, notably history as

it related narrowly to the local landscape, but viewed also in the international and ecclesiastical context. A poet's topography is related to landscape, and allusions to such landscape by composers of certain poems now recorded in Middle Welsh can be helpful indicators to a researcher. Thus, when one is informed by one poet that there was a well above Caer Sidi, then its promotion by *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* as 'a magic island in the ocean' seems risible, particularly if another poet says that 6,000 men stood upon its walls. And if a poem states that king Aeddon Mór hailed from the land of Gwydion then that is a good reason why one might try to discover his roots.

The chief findings from this study are that the remnants of the hitherto unlocated pre-historic royal seat which is called Regia Altera in Ptolemy's map of Hibernia are still extant in land anciently called *Seinchineoil* and this was the abode of Mallolwch (*alias* Matholwch) king of Ireland. The Mabinogi tales originated in the environs of this royal seat, and probably were narrated for the purpose of royal entertainment. A conclusion is that the earliest known abode of pre-historic kings of Ireland is Regia Altera, now in north-east Co. Galway.

In course of time the Mabinogi tales evidently became the property of the O'Connor kings of Connacht and Ireland, and were recorded in manuscripts which were held in Regia Altera which by that time was transformed into a medieval monastery. This abbey, called *Mainistir na Liath* in Irish, but phonetically written *Monasternalea* in English and translated as *Abbeygrey*, *Gray Abbey* and *Abbey Grey* has been totally demolished, save for its graveyard. Together with recorded poetry these legends were seized by hostile Welsh Normans in early 1177 from Abbeygrey, and probably by mid-May of that year had been transferred to Wales *in a batch*. Appropriate modification took place to facilitate their being embedded into the Welsh landscape, probably for the enhancement of medieval Wales and to boost the status of its princes.

American John Bollard, a Rochester University graduate who is recognised world-wide as an expert on the Mabinogi, wrote "*I propose not only that there is no such thing as "The Mabinogion", but that – until further notice – there may not even be a "collection" of medieval Welsh tales, at least not from a medieval perspective*". The present research results bear out that proposition. Evidently some appalling error of judgement occurred when it

was thought that the original manuscripts of the Mabinogi were scribed versions of Welsh legends handed down for generations by Welsh story-tellers.

Section One of this booklet establishes that the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* originated at the royal seat called Regia Altera in Ptolemy's map of Hibernia. Section Two establishes that the Middle Welsh poem *Preiddeu Annwn* relates to a real event, that being an attack on Abbeygrey by Welsh Normans in 1177, and the seizure therefrom of a batch of manuscripts of legends and poetry which were subsequently taken to Wales. The author attempts to offer his own understanding of that poem and asserts that, until it can be established to the contrary, not a syllable of these legends ever passed the lips of a Welsh story-teller prior to 1177, if indeed ever at all. In light of these findings it is for Celtic Studies specialists to re-asses apolitically the extent of Irish influence on Medieval Welsh literature, re-dating manuscripts if needs be.

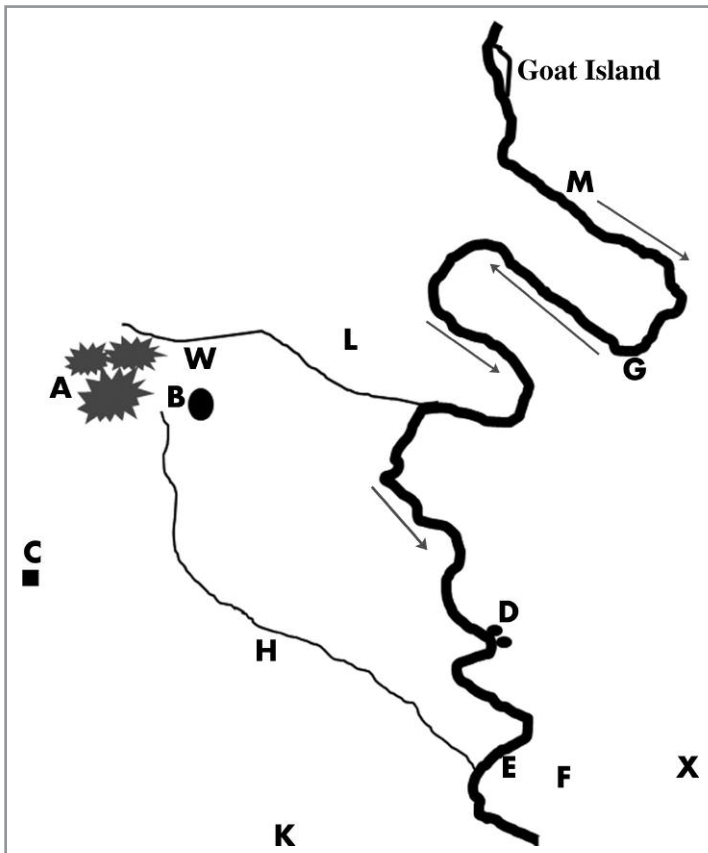
Section Three puts the historical ambience of the ancient region of Cruffon in north-east Co. Galway into verse format, and is intended as a light-hearted tribute to those medieval gaelic poets whose works were seized at Abbeygrey and subsequently attributed to a spurious Taliesin.

Sketch of the upper River Suck from Castlecoote bridge to Mount Talbot bridge in the Mabinogi landscape in ancient *Seinchineoil*

- A. Mount Mary; *alias* Sliaw-furri – ‘the mountain of the high (= royal) seat’; *alias* the mountain of the ‘Old Tribes’.
- B. Regia Altera bounded by rivers; *Mat Sól Loc’s* (Mallolwch’s) abode, *alias* Caer Sidi, Caer Ochren, the Glass Fortress, etc., etc.; location of at least two medieval monasteries in succession.
- C. ‘Caer Dathyl’ on an artificial island, *alias* ‘the rocky place of the magician’; pre-historic raised *tóchar*; two extant mounds; abode of Mat son of Mathonwy; site of the Four-Peaked Fortress; isle of the strong door; holy well dedicated to St. Brendan the Navigator.
- D. Remnants of twin fortresses.
- E. The ford of Garrower (*Geárr Ór*); (M.W.: Uelen Rhyd).
- F. Pryderi’s hill-top tumulus.
- G. The ford of Athleague called *Áth Liag Maonacháin*.
- H. *Cill na Rí* tribal royal cemetery; extant barrow grave; *Acha Reathar* racing field; óenach site; original site of the *La Têne* egg-stone, i.e. Annwfn; Bran’s Wood; contains *Doire na bhFleadh* – ‘the oakwood of the banquets’; site of the ‘Battle of the Trees’; is now Aghran townland (*alias Achren, Aghrane, Ochren, Aughrane, etc.*).
- K. Killeroran; historic name is *Cluain Acha Liag*; probably the original site of the Turoe *La Têne* stone; broken standing stone in situ; some land here granted to St. Kieran, founder of the monastery at Clonmacnoise (died c.549); site of the Battle of *Achadh Liag* in 775; two churches registered here in the 1306 *Church Taxation List* for the Diocese of

Elphin; fields reportedly littered with horses' teeth, seen only when the land is under tillage; evidently site of inauguration of *Uí Maine* kings; last inauguration in 1595 using improvised wooden church called *Cill Rua Rí*.

- L. The land of goats.
- M. Present site of the *La Tène* egg-stone.
- W. The well above *Caer Sidi*.
- X. Extant gnomon post-hole for *Clog na Séad* or the *Clock of the Jewels*; *Mat Sól Loc's* (Mallolwch's) sun-arena; St. Patrick's 'Well' with simple shrine erected to St. Patrick; pilgrim site.



Section One

Regia Altera and the origins of the Mabinogi

Persons engaging in Celtic Studies in universities world-wide are likely to become acquainted with a set of legends called ‘The Mabinogion’. These highly praised stories,¹ described as “the jewel in the crown of early Welsh literature and a classic of European literature”² can be found in full in two Welsh manuscripts – *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch* (*The White Book of Rhydderch*), written about 1300-1325 and *Llyfr Coch Hergest* (*The Red Book of Hergest*), written in the interval 1375-1425. The first complete translation of the tales to English was made widely available when Lady Charlotte Guest published eleven tales in *The Mabinogion* in seven volumes between 1838 and 1845, followed by a three-volume set in 1849.³ Four of these tales are connected narratives, inter-connectedness being made manifest through some of the character-names and place-names occurring in two, three or all four of them, e.g. Pryderi, Pwyll, Gwawl, Annwfn. Each tale ends with the words “*and thus ends this branch of the Mabinogi*”. Hence the four tales are known as *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. Briefly, these are *Pwyll Prince of Dyfed*, *Branwen daughter of Llyr*, *Mat son of Mathonwy* and *Manadán son of Llyr*.

The *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* abound in names of people and places which are patently Irish words written *phonetically* and, though arising in Middle Welsh text, seem to have been recorded from oral narration by a listening scribe. For historic reasons Irish people are unusually familiar with Irish place-names written phonetically in English, and with facility can ‘reconvert’ them to the native language. Two features are to be noted: 1. often two or more Irish words are fused together to form one English word, thus ‘*Béal an Átha Mhóir*’ is ‘Ballinamore’⁴ and 2. when recording phonetically, no spelling rules exist. Consequently various scribes have indulged their fancies in their methods of representing sounds. As a result a place-name is often written using a variety of spellings, e.g. Cloonlyon, Clonelion, Clonloyne, etc.

In her introduction to the *The Mabinogion* (1849 edition) Lady Guest marvelled at the strange names in these ancient legends. Knowing they were

not Welsh she wrote: “*Whence then came these internal marks, and these proper names of persons and places, the features of a story usually of earliest date and least likely to change?*”⁵ In these names, some of which also arise in medieval Welsh poems, the aforementioned two features are found. Irish words are fused and the scribe’s fancy is evident in spelling.⁶ In particular, one gets Mabinogi⁷, Annwfn, Annwyn, Annwfn, Caer Dathyl, Caer Siddi, Kaer Sidi, Ochren, Achren, etc. A further peculiarity, pointed out by Professor Ifor Williams (Bangor University), is that the Welsh letter ‘ll’ was used to denote the sound of the Irish letter ‘s’ or English ‘sh’.⁸

Because of peculiarities in the existing manuscripts Thomas M. Charles-Edwards has proposed that the *Four Branches* were written in the period 1050-1120,⁹ a date with which Sioned Davies concurs, though asserting that the material, or part of it certainly, can claim to have its roots in the distant past.¹⁰ She later wrote ‘(the stories)....evolved over centuries before reaching their final form: as such, they reflect a collaboration between oral and literary culture.’¹¹ Drawing on myth, folklore and history, the tales allegedly passed through generations of story-tellers before being written down in Middle Welsh in the fourteenth century in the form now known¹² – by which time myth became corrupted and they were greatly distorted.¹³

Celtic scholars are not of one mind regarding the origins of these Mabinogion legends which are deemed to have been stories for the entertainment of princes and kings. A main tenet of academics in Wales regarding them is that a predominant part of their subject matter is based upon borrowings from Irish tales.¹⁴ Discovering the place of their historic origins and dating their first recording in Middle Welsh are both long-standing objectives in academia.¹⁵ One of the four stories – *Branwen daughter of Llyr* – is thought¹⁶ to have pre-dated the division of Ireland into five provinces.¹⁷ As Patrick Sims-Williams has pointed out, the tale belongs to an Ireland governed by monarchs and not by provincial kings competing for the high kingship.¹⁸ In it *Mallolwch*,¹⁹ king of Ireland, sailed to Wales with thirteen ships to woo Branwen, sister of Bran, king of the Britains.²⁰ The story ends in tragedy arising from the treatment of Branwen in Ireland by Mallolwch’s people who, after a son was born, were unforgiving of an insult offered to their king while he had been in Wales to marry. Her brother Bran, on being informed of this abusive treatment, sailed over to Ireland with an enormous army. Bran pursued Mallolwch across the Shannon²¹ to

his royal abode. Although a peaceful solution was agreed, a combat arose while feasting and everyone was killed *except seven* of Bran's warriors.²² According to legend Bran's head was brought back to Wales by these survivors, and after death he became guardian of Britain.²³

Ptolemy's map of Hibernia is said to have been constructed from data held in the great Library of Alexandria.²⁴ The data in that map pre-date the division of Ireland into five provinces, making it of special relevance to the legend *Branwen daughter of Llyr*. Two competing centres of royal power are shown on the map, *Regia* in the north of the island²⁵ and *Regia Altera*²⁶ in the mid-west. A comparison of maps (Fig. 1) shows that *Regia Altera* and the little town of Ballygar in Co. Galway are, or very nearly are, the same place.²⁷ Elsewhere Ballygar has been shown to have been the royal seat of the *Uí Maine* which emerged in the 4th century in an extensive region anciently called *Seinchineoil*.²⁸ Hence, the *Uí Maine* royal seat emerged at the place of the earlier royal seat called *Regia Altera*.²⁹

An informed landscape search seeking traces of a pre-historic palace in the general environs of Ballygar identified them at an enormous circular mound on mountainous land in the angle between the Suck and Shiven rivers.³⁰ The Galway scholar, historian and Irish chieftain Rory O'Flaherty, writing in Latin in the 17th century, called this high ground 'Sliaw-furri' – the 'mountain of the high (i.e. royal) seat'. It is to be noted that when writing in a foreign language O'Flaherty resorted to phonics to convey and retain the Irish name of the mountain.³¹ This high ground in a region anciently called *Seinchineoil*³² was known also as *Sliabh seana-thuath*³³ – 'the

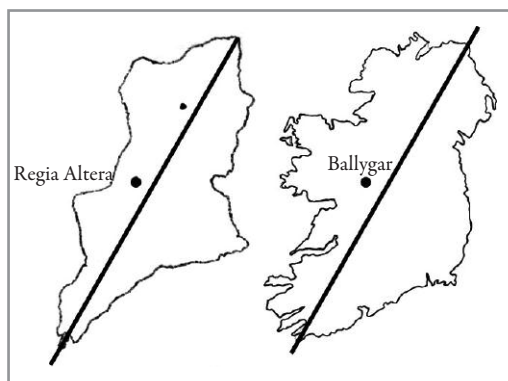


Figure 1

mountain of the Old Tribes'. Once again and equally notable, in 15th century papal letters relating to an abbey on this mountain³⁴ the use of phonics also arose.³⁵ One deduces that use of phonics was not unusual when writing Irish names in a foreign language, whether English, Latin or Middle

Welsh. It is not necessarily indicative of oral narration.

Describing this enormous circular mound, better known locally as Abbeygrey or Monasternallea,³⁶ the antiquarian Thomas Westropp wrote: “Abbey Grey, or Monasternallea, in Athleague, on the Suck, is girt by a large mound 600 feet inside, and 700 feet over all, with a fosse 25 feet wide.”³⁷ Shown distinctly on the 25-inch Ordnance Survey Ireland map (hereafter OSI) and labelled ‘Abbey Grey Fort’, its overall extent is therein given as 8.428 acres. Three access points are plainly shown on this OSI map. Ramparts inside the fosse were also 25 feet wide. Trees and bushes nowadays grow on these ramparts, making the wheel-like site easily visible from the air.³⁸ Stated to have been known locally as “The Ring”,³⁹ at least two abbeys were built here consecutively – evidently a Cistercian abbey⁴⁰ which was in ruins before c.1370 and a Carmelite monastery dating from c.1440.⁴¹ Of these, only a graveyard remains at the centre of the site. In the sketch here (Fig. 2) the positions of its three entrances are shown.

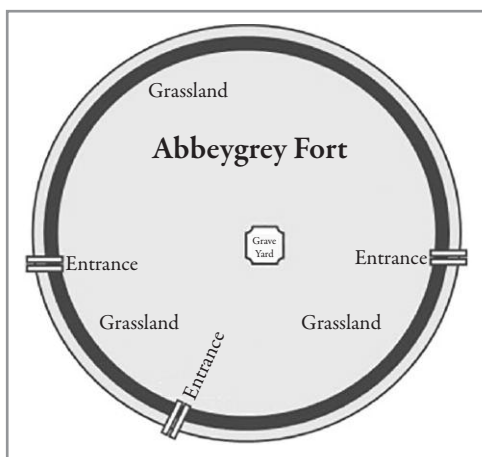


Figure 2.
Regia Altera, a wheel-like, triple ring fortress

It will be shown in Section Two of this booklet that Abbeygrey was the legendary royal residence at which Bran encountered Mallolwch in the tale *Branwen daughter of Llyr*. Hence, the present writer's research suggests that the story of Branwen is a fiction which may have had as its basis some true historical event. Historically the name 'Bran' arose at the *Uí Maine* royal seat in the townland⁴² name *Ros Broin*⁴³ (Bran's Wood), a name which was superseded in the 18th century by the name 'Hermitage'.⁴⁴ The wood to which the name refers is deemed locally to be ancient. In 1641 the land denominations *Ros Broin* and *Cuar Ri*⁴⁵ combined were known as 'Ballagar'⁴⁶ (sic), thus juxtaposing the name 'Bran' and an ancient tribal royal

residence. At first sight this reference to Bran at an ancient royal seat seems to link the legend of Branwen with Regia Altera. As it seems unsafe to make such linkage at this stage, such association will shortly be established by means other than by the name *Ros Broin*. *Ros Broin* has been translated as ‘*Bran’s Wood or Point*’.⁴⁷

The Welsh pronunciation of Mallolwch sounds like ‘match-owe-luk’ or ‘mat-show-luk’,⁴⁸ the second syllable being explosive and heavily stressed. This renders Irish *Mat Sól Loc*,⁴⁹ meaning ‘Sun-arena Mat’. Although nowhere in the legend *Branwen daughter of Llyr* is Mallolwch associated with the sun yet the present writer is not the first to make such association.⁵⁰

To have been given the name ‘Sun-arena Mat’ there must have been some particular place in the landscape which could be regarded as a sun arena. The landscape near Regia Altera does not disappoint. At a distance of about 6 miles from Regia Altera lies a curious topographical feature near a lake which is a turlough. Known for centuries as *Glún Phádraig*⁵¹ but recently renamed Cluain Patrick, it is recorded as a national monument.⁵² Long celebrated as a local holy well and pilgrimage site,⁵³ there is an enduring local belief that St. Patrick visited this place.⁵⁴

The “well” essentially is a shallow dry hole gouged in *extensive*⁵⁵ level bare slabrock which generated the name *Cluain Maoil Lige*.⁵⁶ That this hole (Fig. 3)⁵⁷ was the post-hole of a gnomon sun-clock becomes evident. A gnomon requires a stable platform, particularly because latitude can be accurately determined by using a stable gnomon. This hole in slabrock is ideal.⁵⁸ Moreover, a bespoke sun-clock site can unquestionably be regarded as a ‘sun arena’. Curiously, the whole platform here becomes flooded by a seasonal adjacent turlough⁵⁹ lake. To select an immovable floodable platform for a sun-clock would be folly unless its purpose included the study of the night sky, because a flooded gnomon platform can be used to study and measure the movements of stars reflected in water.⁶⁰



Figure 3

That some ancient feature in the landscape hereabouts was a clock of major noteworthiness⁶¹ is affirmed by the nearby land-name *Clog na Séad*,⁶² meaning ‘Clock of the Jewels.’⁶³ “Jewels”, when associated with a flooded gnomon platform and a clock, can be explained as a figurative reference to reflected stars and to astrology.⁶⁴ In Section Two *Mat Sól Loc*’s association with Regia Altera will be confirmed. The legend therefore makes it logical to connect *Mat Sól Loc* with this sun-place and, as he was the owner of a fleet of fine ships, probably with astronomy too. One therefore has two distinct places associated with this ancient legendary sun king of Ireland.

The ‘land of Annwfyn’ is mentioned in the Mabinogi legends. Welsh Celtic scholars proclaim it to have been a Celtic Underworld, for somewhat spurious reasons.⁶⁵ In reality it is a much less exotic place, as shall now be explained.

In 1641 in the former Parish of Killeroran⁶⁶ the land denomination *Bealach Fhearta Tír Uibhe* was put on record.⁶⁷ Translated as ‘the road to the tumulus in the land of the egg’ the name, when examined, is a storeroom of forgotten local information. It implies firstly that somewhere in the locality there was some highly important egg-like entity.⁶⁸ Second, the land in which this egg-like entity lay was locally known as *Tír Uibhe* – ‘the land of the egg’. Third, this egg-like entity was near a tumulus (*fearr*⁶⁹) – and *vice versa*. And finally, a road led to this tumulus in ‘the land of the egg’.

Lying nowadays on the avenue to a gentleman’s residence in Castlestrange townland, overlooking the river Suck and a few miles north-east of Regia Altera, there is a famous pre-historic egg-like granite stone. Ornamented in *La Tène* style, it is deemed by academics to have originally belonged to a pre-historic royal or religious site of major importance.⁷⁰ In 1902 its inscribed ornamentation was judged by George Coffey – first keeper of antiquities at the National Museum of Ireland – to be unmistakeably of a “distinctly early” (sic) *La Tène* style, certainly falling within the period c.150 BC – 325 BC.⁷¹ Coffey deemed that the stone had been moved from its unknown original site.

The age, ornamentation and present location of this stone all suggest it belonged to the nearby royal seat Regia Altera.⁷² Called “The Castlestrange *La Tène* stone” this artefact is not merely popularly deemed egg-like;⁷³ the ratio of its length to its width⁷⁴ is precisely the same as that of an average pullet’s egg.⁷⁵ It therefore represents a *bird-egg*, and a royally ornamented

one at that.⁷⁶

One shall now attempt to identify the tomb near which, according to the place-name *Bealach Fhearta Tír Uibhe*, this exotic egg-stone formerly lay, bearing in mind that it is evidently to be associated with an important royal or religious site accessible by a road which gave its name to land in Killeroran Parish. In 1641, again in the former Parish of Killeroran, a land denomination was recorded as ‘Killnerea & Agherahar’.⁷⁷ This compound name means ‘*the cemetery of the kings & the racing field*’. Such a name is not merely indicative of the presence of a royal cemetery; it also is indicative of a religious site, because early gaelic kings were deemed to be god-like, alive or dead. This compound name also indicates that this place must have been an *óenach* site – a place of public assembly for public administration and for horse-racing and athletics.⁷⁸

In the woodland which was formerly known as *Ros Broin* but which nowadays is known by two unrelated names - ‘Aughrane’ and ‘Castlekelly’⁷⁹ a prehistoric barrow grave exists in a still wooded demesne field which was called ‘Timberhouse Park’ by Denis H. Kelly (d.1877) – he being an extensive landowner, noted scholar and last chieftain of the Skrine branch of the gaelic Kelly tribe of *Uí Mainne*. Lucidly marked “Barrow” in the OSI map of the Castlekelly demesne, this tomb lies in the land denomination which was recorded as ‘Killnerea & Agherahar’. Within a couple of hundred metres lie the remnants of an ancient ring-fort – one of many which were common in the wider environs of Ballygar⁸⁰ and indicative of an ancient habitation in this region.

In the land-name ‘Killnerea & Agherahar’ the component ‘Killnerea’ is a reference to an ancient tribal royal cemetery which includes this barrow grave.⁸¹ Further, there is no other royal cemetery in the region, and so this is the only ancient tomb in Killeroran Parish that would correspond to ‘*fheart Tír Uibhe*’, the conclusion being that this tomb was in land known as *Tír Uibhe* – the land of the egg. In short, the ‘land of the egg’ is known, and the totality of place-name information and archaeological evidence places this ornate stone near this royal tomb, in *óenach* land not far from the royal enclosure of Regia Altera. This is in accord with an observed pattern, i.e. the custom of early gaelic kings taking up residence near an ancient tribal cemetery.

Returning to consider the local place-name *Bealach Fhearta Tír Uibhe*

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