

## Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland c.1100–1600: a Cultural Landscape Study

**Review Number:**

498

**Publish date:**

Wednesday, 1 March, 2006

**Author:**

Elizabeth FitzPatrick

**ISBN:**

0415289637

**Date of Publication:**

2004

**Publisher:**

Boydell and Brewer

**Place of Publication:**

Woodbridge

**Reviewer:**

Mark Zumbuhl

For many medieval historians, royal inauguration means a coronation ceremony, generally at a long-established church, often a cathedral. In Ireland however, inauguration ceremonies mostly took place at special open-air assembly places. This volume is particularly concerned with the nature of these sites and their location in the Irish landscape, rather than the attendant ritual; as the author puts it, the focus is 'on the stage, rather than upon the plot, props and players of royal election ritual' (p. 1). In this the work succeeds admirably; Dr FitzPatrick has produced a volume which successfully synthesises earlier work and distils a large amount of original research, providing a number of useful insights into the topic, always with an eye on comparative material from Britain and the Continent.

There has been considerable interest in later medieval Gaelic society in recent years; the two modern classics of the field by Kenneth Nicholls and Katherine Simms are still in print and are cited several times in the present work.<sup>(1)</sup> FitzPatrick is particularly interested in the nature and use of assembly sites and it is probably fair to say that she has made this topic her own. Several articles on the subject have appeared from her pen and the year of publication of the present volume also saw articles on 'Parley sites of Ó Néill and Ó Domhnaill' and 'Royal inauguration mounds in medieval Ireland: antique landscape and tradition'.<sup>(2)</sup> *Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland* is a rewritten version of her PhD thesis (Trinity College Dublin, 1998).

The central argument of the book is that inauguration-sites, and indeed the entire paraphernalia of king-making, were chosen to reinforce the legitimacy and credibility of the candidate by reference to the historical and mythological associations of the site and props. This idea is familiar to all scholars of inauguration ritual. In the medieval Gaelic world, both Ireland and Scotland, the concern to express royal status was expressed in many texts, especially aetiologies, genealogies and king-lists, composed or modified in the interests of the ruling elites to bolster their legitimacy. This monograph offers us a glimpse into some of the physical and spatial expressions of royal status which hitherto have not been discussed in such detail.

The work is organised into six chapters plus a prologue and epilogue; appendices tabulating attested and possible inauguration-sites, footprint stones at church and secular sites; and an additional appendix by Michael J. Simms 'Provenancing the Chair of Clann Aodha Buidhe'. The chapters have rather colourful titles ('The Hill of the Shoutings', 'The Mountain Seat of Fionn') which stand in contrast to the book's straightforwardly utilitarian title. The narrative is fluent and enjoyable to read; FitzPatrick engages closely with written sources, quotations from which provide additional interest beyond the fieldwork descriptions.

The prologue presents a summary of the Irish ceremony of royal inauguration. The biggest difficulty is that sources for what actually took place at such ceremonies are scarce. There are no historical accounts of an inauguration ceremony pre-dating the arrival of the English, though there are references to certain practices in literary texts. Many of these pertain to kings in the legendary past, and must be used with the utmost caution. No text specifying what should be done in such a ceremony has survived, and there is very limited evidence for the adoption of a royal anointing ritual, though Michael Enright has argued such a case (and indeed suggested the origins of European royal anointing lie in Ireland, an idea which has not been popular). (3) The later medieval sources are descriptive rather than prescriptive, observing ceremony rather than ordering it. There are some points of commonality in the surviving accounts, but it is clear that we should think in terms of varied rather than uniform practice. FitzPatrick argues that the common regalia of throne and crown were not adopted by Irish kings and chiefs, and indeed they are largely absent from the limited number of medieval visual portrayals of kingship which survive. She is keen to stress that the apparent simplicity of imagery and ritual was not a sign of archaism, and that inauguration-practice did move with the times, even if it was different to much European practice. This sentiment is in line with historiographical developments in the last three decades which have seen primitivist and nativist analyses of early Irish society rejected by most scholars.

Chapter 1 is an essay in sources and method. It summarises the evidence for locating inauguration-sites, here divided into documentary and toponymic categories. The opening section argues convincingly that the end of the Gaelic order in the Tudor and Jacobean periods was the important break in use and awareness of the location of inauguration-sites. Whereas other important places such as tower houses and churches were adopted by plantation society, assembly sites had no place in the new order; indeed, the Tudor administration attempted to ban the practice of open-air assembly early on. Knowledge gradually faded, and it was not until the nineteenth century that serious efforts were made to locate such places: the author acknowledges the important debt modern scholars owe to John O'Donovan and the Ordnance Survey Letters as sources of information.

It seems to me that there is something of a theoretical problem, or at least ambiguity, present in this chapter and elsewhere. This is the question of how one may define 'assembly' and 'inauguration' sites. Pages 15–29 refer now to evidence for assembly sites, now to evidence for inauguration-sites, and other chapters similarly mix terminology. As the author is well aware, it is not easy to make a clear distinction between the two categories, particularly as some of the attested inauguration-sites had multiple functions. General assemblies may have been held at inauguration-sites, but could inaugurations be held at a site previously only used for assembly or parley? The evidence does not allow the questions of functions and categorisation to be answered definitely, but a clear statement of the issues would have been welcome. This book in fact includes a good deal of information about assembly sites in general, rather than narrowly focusing only on places of inauguration; a strong point in its favour, but not one immediately apparent from the title.

The basic methodology employed is to find citations of inauguration-sites in the documentary record and where possible to locate them in the modern landscape. In many cases such identifications can be made with confidence; in a roughly equal number of instances the identifications are tentative or conjectural. There are numerous references in Irish sources, particularly chronicles, hagiography, bardic poetry and genealogy. Sources of English origin also occasionally refer to inauguration-sites, particularly from the sixteenth century as the effort to eliminate Gaelic practices gained momentum. From the very end of the period under consideration a number of Tudor maps record such sites. To these sources can be added modern folkloric or oral testimony which may identify sites not recorded elsewhere but which must also be used with particular care. There is also the evidence of place names, particularly the incidence of elements which may be suggestive of assembly. The usual problems of onomastic investigation apply here, particularly the extent to which coinages had specific technical meanings concerned with assembly or inauguration rather than more broadly descriptive ones. Given that elsewhere in the book Dr FitzPatrick is appreciative of practices in Gaelic Scotland, the absence of reference to Scottish toponymy is notable, given that many of the elements identified also occur in Scotland, such as *tulach* (often appearing as *tilli/tilly-* on modern maps). There are also differences between the Irish and Scottish onomastic packages for Gaelic assembly sites and this is certainly an area for future research.

From an archaeological point of view, we must ask whether inauguration-sites can be identified on situational and morphological grounds, in other words, whether fieldwork alone could spot a site that is absent from the documentary record. The answer is a qualified 'perhaps'. FitzPatrick argues that inauguration-sites do tend to share certain features, principally some degree of elevation, but with convenient access (generally they are not at very great elevations), and commanding views of the landscape around, especially of prominent features with their own historical/mythological associations. But the actual nature of the sites which have been definitely located on the ground varies considerably: some were artificial mounds (which could be re-used prehistoric monuments), some rocky knolls, others natural terraces. There is no one set of features definitely diagnostic of assembly-functions. FitzPatrick concludes that the mound (enclosed or not) was the most common type, and chapter 2 examines a number of such sites in detail.

FitzPatrick notes that the origins for inauguration at mounds are 'presumed to lie in late prehistory' (p. 43) but counsels caution against assuming any continuity of practice into the middle ages. Some have assumed inaugurations to have taken place at prehistoric ritual centres (such as Tara/Temhair and Navan Fort/Eamhain Macha) but archaeological evidence for such activity in late prehistory is absent and the literary evidence is of much later date. She suggests instead that the practices of the known medieval kingships more probably reflected the circumstances in which they came to power. This is very probable, though of course for the early middle ages there is no evidence of how most Irish kingships came to be. FitzPatrick's broader argument is that Irish kings were interested in ancient monuments in what she terms 'ceremonial' landscapes (p. 52) because by possessing them royal dynasties gained the aura of antiquity which we know from other sources (principally genealogies) to have been a requisite of royal status. Several locations are discussed in detail, including Magh Adhair (Co. Clare), inauguration-site of the Dál gCais and Uí Bhriain, and Carn Fraoich (Co. Roscommon), inauguration-site of Síol Muireadhaigh and Uí Chonchobhair. In both cases landscapes with existing historical or mythological/heroic associations were appropriated by Irish royal dynasties. The argument is convincing, though the suggested dates in each case must be considered conjectural; though the rise in political fortunes of Dál gCais provides a good context for the production of their genealogy and the adoption of Magh Adhair, definite evidence is wanting.

FitzPatrick also discusses 'the invention of tradition' which may have occurred when political changes required rulers to adopt a new inauguration-site; one argued instance is the later medieval lordship of Tír Fiachrach in north Connacht. FitzPatrick appears to make a distinction between 'genuine' claims of associations between royal ancestors and sites on one hand, and 'fabricated' traditions on the other. I do not see that it is useful to make such a distinction, for it seems to be based on a difference between sites used in the earlier medieval period and those which appear later (p. 68). 'Traditions' such as those connected with the landscape around Carn Fraoich are no more 'genuine' for having been created centuries earlier than those for some other sites.

Chapters 3 and 4 are particularly concerned with stones and stone chairs, attested as furniture at several inauguration-sites. FitzPatrick summarises some of the literary evidence for significant stones (principally the Lia Fáil at Tara and Leac Chathraighi at Cashel/Caiseal) and considers evidence for leaca(stones) at attested sites, starting with place names containing the word. Again, there is variation: the term might refer to an actual dressed stone at the site, or simply exposed bedrock; the later medieval period saw the appearance of the stone chair (cathair). FitzPatrick suggests the variation is partly due to changing historical circumstances as the kings of early Gaelic society were gradually reduced to the status of lords. The general principle is sound but the case for the adoption of stone chairs reflecting the self-perceptions of later medieval Gaelic chiefs is difficult to prove given that there are very few examples, most of them in Ulster.

The importance of inauguration leaca is incontestable; the obvious point of comparison is the Scottish 'Stone of Destiny', but FitzPatrick refers to other examples from around the world. She devotes a long discussion to the significance of footprint-marks observed in several stones, though the evidence is rather inconclusive; this segues into a discussion of the practice of the 'rite of the single shoe' which is definitely attested in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries among the Uí Chonchobhair and Méig Uidhir. This section, though interesting, does stray somewhat from the author's intention to focus upon the stage rather than the plot, and given that the evidence connecting any rites with footprint-marks is extremely slight (as is admitted) some of the material is of questionable relevance.

Chapter 5 is titled 'By consent of God and man: the influence of the Church'. It appears that FitzPatrick subscribes to Francis John Byrne's view that ecclesiastical influence on Irish kingship amounted to 'little more than enamelling' as he put it, at least in terms of inauguration ceremonies.<sup>(4)</sup> Her main reason for so doing is that throughout the period inaugurations seem to have remained at traditional secular sites; their occasional appearance at churches or cathedrals were infrequent diversions. This stands in contrast to mainstream European practice in the period. FitzPatrick accepts that clerics were probably present at most inaugurations; the question of the extent to which they officiated is more complex, but the evidence does suggest that normally an important vassal lord, or an ollamh (chief poet) held the office of inaugurating the king, rather than a churchman. The main contrary evidence here is the so-called Second Life of St Máedóc of Ferns, written probably in the twelfth century but preserved in a later manuscript. This describes the successor or comharba of the saint officiating at the inaugurations of the kings of Bréifne and Leinster, and describes ecclesiastics carrying the reliquary known as the Brecc Máedóic (which survives to this day) three times around the candidate. This was perhaps an adaptation of a secular ritual to an ecclesiastical context, for other texts describe the candidate himself performing a thrice righthandwise turn (deiseal) as part of the ceremony, a gesture for which there are analogues elsewhere.

FitzPatrick argues that where we see the greatest level of ecclesiastical influence on inauguration practice we are seeing the outcome of strong reforming tendencies. The first period considered is the twelfth century, when the Gregorian reform movement arrived in Ireland, sponsored initially by the Uí Bhriain kings of Munster. Reflexes of the reform movement seem to appear in a note describing an idealised inauguration ceremony at Cashel (p. 178). FitzPatrick follows Donnchadh Ó Corráin in seeing the note as a propaganda exercise rather than reflection of actual royal practice, but suggests that the mention of two locations, Cormac's Chapel and Lis na nUrlann nearby may be suggestive of a triumphal procession from one venue to another, a ritual for which there are analogues.

FitzPatrick also devotes a good deal of space to inauguration-ritual in the kingdom of the Cinéal gConaill (roughly present-day Co. Donegal), for here there is strong evidence for the transfer of inauguration to church sites. Raphoe Cathedral was the inauguration venue of the ruling Ó Domhnaill king in 1258 and FitzPatrick would point the finger at Maol Pádraig Ó Scannail, bishop of Raphoe and reforming Dominican friar. Here too I find the argument persuasive, though the case for Carraig an Dúin as the traditional inauguration-site is more doubtful, given the almost total lack of evidence. There are no further records of Ó Domhnaill inaugurations for over two centuries and when they reappear in 1461 the venue is another church, Kilmacrenan/Cill Mhic Nenáin, which is quite close to the putative original site at Carraig an Dúin.<sup>(5)</sup> Late accounts of inauguration there emphasise the ecclesiastical aspects of the ritual, but these are particularly interested in rubbishing the infamous account of bestial king-making in Cinéal gConaill penned by Gerald of Wales in 1185x8 and republished by Camden in 1602. This narrative is familiar to many medievalists who otherwise do not concern themselves with Ireland. FitzPatrick is agnostic as to whether Gerald's account was a distorted memory of past practice or in some way reflective of then-current reality; as scholars in the past have noted, some elements chime with other Irish sources while others seem most unlikely. Overall, I think there is scope for a further look at ecclesiastical influence – though secular sites remained the norm, clerics may have wielded more influence than is allowed for here.

Chapter 6 examines political geography: how inauguration-sites related to other centres of lordship, and how centres related to landholding patterns. These are very important topics, but only a limited amount of space has been given to them. The business of mapping out the centres of lordships and their relationships with patterns of landholding is a difficult one and as a field of research is underdeveloped, partly because the evidence is often patchy in geographical and chronological distribution. That political geography varied greatly over time makes the task even more formidable and this perhaps is one reason why the coverage is somewhat limited. FitzPatrick offers us several short case studies from Ulster during the last decades of the sixteenth century, a period for which there is a good deal of documentary evidence for landholding. She particularly highlights the importance of the lucht tigh, a term originally signifying a king's household but later referring to the area of land which was to provide for it. Estates in these lands belonged to the ruler's important vassals (in some cases reflective of their earlier position as providers of food and hospitality), the inauguration-sites often lying in lands held by clients who possessed the office of inaugurator. Sometimes this office could change from one family to another, without the landholding pattern changing, with implications for the relationship between ruler, official and site.

FitzPatrick considers the residences of ruling families to have been their main centres and, in the sixteenth century at least, these were generally located close to inauguration-sites. In examining the diachronic picture, FitzPatrick asserts that while inauguration-sites generally remained fixed, residential centres moved with changing political circumstances. She rightly questions whether the concept of caput regionis existed, and if it should be equated with the lord's main residence, inauguration-site or other site where assemblies were held. To some extent these discussions convey a static image of lordship. In the early medieval period itinerancy was an essential feature of kingship. Even in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when rulers lived mainly in one defended castle and attached settlement, they were often on the move and in the field; so in one sense the centre was wherever the lord was. FitzPatrick includes a discussion of the ramifications of internecine feud among Gaelic families, which often led to competition for the traditional inauguration-site, or occasionally to the adoption of different sites by different factions. This discussion would have been most relevant also to the question of residences and political centres – for example, one wonders to what extent the central residence was attached to the office of kingship (as was some mensal land) or was a reflection of which branch of a dynasty held the office at the time.

The epilogue considers the official attempts to ban Gaelic practices in the Tudor period, and the impact of the Nine Years' War (1594–1603) on election practices and inauguration ritual. In the period leading up to the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, Ó Néill and Ó Domhnaill, the leading Gaelic rulers of the day, travelled widely in Ireland rallying support, removing opposing chiefs from office and on several occasions installing more amenable candidates in their stead. These interventions often involved disregarding traditional practice, and it is an interesting 'what if' question to wonder whether any of these changes would have



persisted if the old Gaelic order had survived beyond the first decade of the seventeenth century. In the event it did not, and with the changes in society accompanying the new political scene and the plantations, most inauguration-sites were abandoned.

This review copy is handsomely produced and free from errors of typesetting or typography, with a few exceptions (the bottom line of p. 26 is repeated at the top of p. 27; p. 43 'Limavaddy' for 'Limavady'; p. 132 'seantóman' not capitalised; p. 211 'Thigearnán' for 'Tigearnán'). In covering the period from 1100–1600, there are issues as to where one uses Middle Irish and Early Modern Irish orthography in representing names; generally FitzPatrick goes with the conventional break c.1200 but there are occasional odd hybrid forms (p. 131 'Noíghiallach'; p. 211 'Tigearnán', better either Tigernán or Tighearnán). Figures and photographs are well-reproduced, even at small scales. The accompanying maps, mainly by Catherine Martin, are clear and well-executed. The appendices are useful, though one has to refer to footnotes in the main text to recover references to the sources for this information. Oddly, though there are indexes of names (of places, persons and groups) there is no general or subject index.

A few minor points which may aid prospective readers (particularly those without Irish): the poem cited on p. 21 is not translated in full; on p. 90 no date is offered for the composition of *Betha Meic Creiche* (it is perhaps of the twelfth century); on p. 100 Leac Chathraighi is not translated; it means 'Stone of Patrick' and is mentioned by Tírechán in the late seventh century (6); on p. 112 'Munter-Malmore' is an Anglicisation of Muintir Mhaol Mórdha, an early name of Uí Raghallaigh of East Bréifne; on p. 178 FitzPatrick follows Byrne's translation which omits a clause from the Lecan text: insert 'in Cashel' after 'Lis na nUrlann', which has implications for FitzPatrick's suggested identification of that site on p. 179.

For the archaeologist, the book does a great deal to contextualise the significance of inauguration and assembly sites in medieval Gaelic society. For the historian and literary scholar, the volume highlights the importance of sites not just as significant locations in themselves but as parts of a complex landscape. Dr FitzPatrick's book is a significant contribution to our understanding of the Gaelic world in the later medieval period.

## Notes

1. K. W. Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland in the Middle Ages* (2nd edn, Dublin, 2003); K. Simms, *From Kings to Warlords* (Woodbridge, 2003). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Appearing in *Regions and Rulers in Ireland, 1100–1650: Essays for Kenneth Nicholls*, ed. D. Edwards, (Dublin, 2004), pp. 201–216; and *Assembly Places and Practices in Medieval Europe*, ed. A. Pantos and S. Semple, pp. 44–72 (Dublin, 2004). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. M. J. Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons: the Origin of the Royal Anointing Ritual* (Berlin, 1985). (New York, 1985). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-kings* (2nd edn, Dublin, 2001), p. 255. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Though as FitzPatrick points out, in 1399 Mac Suibhne was inaugurated at Kilmacrenan at the behest of Ó Domhnaill, which suggests it was already the Uí Dhomhnaill inauguration-site. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, ed. L. Bieler (Dublin, 1979), p. 162. [Back to \(6\)](#)

## Other reviews:

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/498#comment-0>

## Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2871>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>