

## Tuille Aire

Moore, K.R.

Camborne School of Mines, Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Exeter

In the shadow of the pilgrims' mountain, Croagh Patrick, on Ireland's Atlantic coast, lies the fortress of the wood: Coill daingean or Killadangan. A stone circle surrounds a straight row of stones that increase in height towards the mountain ridge. They stand amongst derelict and overgrown potato ridges in a field, protected from seawater by an ancient encircling bank and ditch. On the lower ground outside stand five isolated stone sentinels. Moats of brackish water around their base are windows through the salt marsh to a cobble and silt substrate, a grounding that holds the stones upright – impervious to time.

The *seanchaí*<sup>1</sup> (pronounced 'shanachie') were the keepers of the oral histories of Ireland, who continue to inspire the modern-day storytellers of Connaught through theatre and festival. The *seanchaí* told of the pagan King of Killadangan who declared himself lord and master of sea and land. Great was his armour and his attire, and his endeavours in fighting the incoming tide. When the King spoke to his servant Thulera (Tuille Aire), he declared 'should the water disobey me, I am determined to punish its contumacy'. The King and Thulera carried their chairs to the dry riverbed to await the waters and, with the rising of the tide, they braced themselves by partaking of a few horns of Irish whisky.

The inebriated servant quietly slid into a slumbering oblivion while the King stood, raised his sceptre and bade the water be gone. The King fought the relentless tide alone, slashing at the water with his sword, and in desperation he called on Manannán mac Lir, the 'Son of the Sea', to pull back the waters. Instead, the sea deity decreed that the King should pay with his life for his vanity, pride and temerity. When the people woke in the morning, they found the King lying dead in the channel with his sword raised above his head and his servant still sitting in his chair, appearing to slumber on. The men were mourned for nine days and on the tenth day were buried in the field of Annagh, where stands the Killadangan Megalithic Complex. Annagh is also Eanach, which translates as 'the watery place', a salt marsh.

The King and Thulera do not lie alone in the field of Annagh. Centuries later, the *seanchaí* say, the twin sons of the Irish chieftain William O'Malley slew one another in dispute over a lady and were laid to rest there. The *seanchaí* embed themselves in their narrative by allegiance to the clan O'Malley and thereby the famous pirate queen Gráinne Ní Máille<sup>2</sup>, who fought English Earls and Irish Chieftains alike. Centuries later again, the watery place became a site of terrible faction fighting between Saxon and Celt. During the mass brawl, a wooden-legged Londoner named Cox met Malachi of the broadsword. Malachi the Celt drove his claymore to the hilt through the heart of the Saxon, who now lies in rest in the watery place.

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<sup>1</sup> The Irish language that supports translation is given in italics. The tale of the King of Killadangan and his Lazy Servant Thulera is described in full in J. Barry's (1988) 'Tales of the West of Ireland'. The King's speech is a direct quote from Barry's text.

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of how the pirate Queen's name was overlooked by official histories but whose deeds in withstanding the English invasion were preserved in the oral tradition, see T. M. Murray (2005) 'Gráinne Mhaol, Pirate Queen of Connacht: Behind the Legend', *History Ireland*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 16-20. Gráinne *Mhaol* is the local name that means bald or short-haired Gráinne.

The sleeping servant Thulera was lowly and the *seanchaí* say his name lived on as insult to those who were lazy. But Thulera<sup>3</sup> derives from *tuile aire* ('flood danger') or *tuille aire* ('deserves attention'). It reminds us that the most ancient of Annagh's legends relates to the power of the sea, and to the tensions between inhabited lands and sea. Thulera speaks of powerlessness in the face of marine incursion. His story embodies a prehistoric solastalgia, the distress induced by change in an environment to which he is intimately connected. In this watery place, the tensions that echo through the oral tradition are feudal, invasive, cultural and natural.

The *seanchaí* adopt and overprint Thulera's story in a stratigraphy of their own imaginings, hagiographies and cares. The King of Killandangan, Thulera, the twin sons of O'Malley, and Cox: five men lie in rest in the stories of Annagh. Five stones stand outside the central ritual complex. Two of the standing stones are a pair and one is cracked: they echo the story of the O'Malley twins, who duelled after sharpening swords on stone. The *seanchaí* may imagine the standing stones as the tombstones of the buried men of Annagh who fought invasive forces that were cultural and military, and their stories bury the ancient meanings.

Thulera's narrative is a geomyth, one of those ancient stories that explain the origin of features in the landscape or recount geological events. The 'flood' geomyths are a confluence between folklore, sense of place, and troubling environmental change. They are narratives of grief and disquiet, in which the Otherworld is a means to process human powerlessness in the face of nature. The landscape-changing myths are recorded in topography and sediment, and by the ancient *seanchaí* and then the modern story-telling *seanchaí*, who embed themselves in nature and place, creating new stratigraphies of meaning. There is geology of the mind as well as the land<sup>4</sup>.

Annagh is a tombolo, a spit of low-lying land that connects the mainland to a series of denuded drumlins in Clew Bay. The word 'drumlin' derives from the Irish *drum*, meaning rounded hill or mound, and it describes a feature that is static in a landscape. Yet inherent in the word is an origin story, a way of coming into being by the action of glacial ice. Melting ice first deposits a blanket of silt-rich clay, then re-advancing glaciers carve it into a hummocky drumlin field. The drumlins rise above the marsh of the tombolo long before the humans embed the names of place into the oral histories.

Rinduff is the point of Annagh that reaches furthest into the sea on the southern shore of Clew Bay. It is *rinn dubh*, which translates to 'black point', but another meaning is 'tempestuous point' or 'rough point'. The reason is clear when the peak flood and ebb (tidal) currents are funnelled around to the end of the tombolo and the water boils with atrocious ferocity between a narrow passage between drumlins. The surging tidal waters *tuille aire* (deserve attention) and recall Thulera to this place.

The son of the sea, Manannán mac Lir, invades the bay on the tide. The crested waves of the tidal rapids recall the tresses of hair of *mna* (wife of) Manannán, who is sea and power: *mong* means both 'crested wave' and 'hair tresses', and *mong mna Manannán* are storm waves. The water surface is the confluence between the realms of the ordinary folk and the Otherfolk, at times turbulent and dangerous, at times still and dark, at times a window-flat pane with a haze of mist or sublimated ice crystals. Manannán mac Lir inhabits Tír fó Thuinn, the land under waves.

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<sup>3</sup> Teresa Ryan and Dad (Jim) Burke, 1914-2015, are thanked for their assistance with translation of Thulera and place-names in Co. Mayo.

<sup>4</sup> In his book *Underland*, R. MacFarlane (2019, pg 37) relates humans to rocks on a geochemical basis with his words '*There is geology of the body as well as the land*'.

Tír fó Thuinn is a folkloric lived place: for every creature – whether human, livestock or other – that lives on land, there are at least as many in the sea<sup>5</sup>. Their domestic and mythical submarine lives entwine in messy complexity, and domestic places were sometimes places of quest. Illanatee, ‘island of the house’, and Illanakishta, ‘island of the kitchen’, are the names of drumlins that form islands around Annagh. There is no way of knowing whether the island names describe the abodes of humans or exploits of Otherfolk. As the abode of gods, monsters and Otherfolk, the Otherworld extends beneath the land as a chthonic realm accessed by rivers, lakes and holy wells. The five stone sentinels stand in brine pools that connect the worlds of the ordinary folk and the Otherfolk.

The cobble and silt at the base of the brine pools are glacial till, left by those long-vanished glaciers that scoured and ground once-strong rocks to detritus. The silt particles are fine and packed to preclude the passage of water from the salt marsh; they are known as *scim*<sup>6</sup>, the fairy film that links the gritty reality of this world to the Otherworld beyond. Scim may hold water, but water is the ephemeral master of scim: water liberates particles from drumlins and abandons them in the Otherworld. The history of water is intangible but its story whispers and shouts in the stratigraphy of drift. The particles and soils inhabit that literal, littoral place where they overprint, bury and obscure human meanings.

Mineral soils and organic soils transgress one another in salt marsh, over drumlins, along shorelines. The marsh, the sand banks and the peat bogs expand with perpetual rains<sup>7</sup> and untangle the geomyth wrought by water. Increased Late Neolithic and Middle Bronze Age rainfall accelerated the erosion of drumlins and transported silt-scim ever faster into the Otherworld<sup>8</sup>. The inexorable migration of scim lowered parts of the land and shallowed the deeper waters of Clew Bay, and extended the reach of the littoral zone that joins land and sea. The water spread laterally, transgressing the land and the littoral space of Annagh. It extended the confluence of realms: the living, the lived, the land above, the underland and the land beneath waves.

The fighting of Thulera’s incoming tide is no longer an allegorical tale. The geomyth that is Thulera describes a vibrant place: a place of rapid and alarming change; a place of learning. The scim tells that the sea level rose and the land flooded to the distress of the *seanchaí*, who placed it in their history. Those *seanchaí* that wander the land, that wonder the land, repeatedly and variously attach meaning to place. Rocks and soils, enlivened by waters and skies, in myriad physical and spiritual senses, ground us. The modern *seanchaí* are the residents, pilgrims and scholars who strive to process in oral and written words their stories of solastalgia; to create new spiritual belongings and scientific beliefs to interpret the places that *tuille aire* (deserve attention).

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<sup>5</sup> A repeating theme of the Sea Stories gathered by Lady Gregory is that for every creature (human, livestock, other) that lives on land, there are at least as many in the sea. ‘Visions and beliefs in the West of Ireland’ 1970 reprint, pg 15-30.

<sup>6</sup> A detailed explanation of the word scim is found in M. Magan’s (2020) book ‘Thirty-two words for field: Lost words of the Irish Landscape’.

<sup>7</sup> Rainfall rates relating to growth of peat bogs are 225 days rain a year: Moloney et al. (1995). Blackwater survey and excavations; Artefact decomposition in peatlands. Lough More, Co. Mayo. Dublin: Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit (Pg. 165).

<sup>8</sup> K. R. Moore (2006) summarised the evidence for climatic wet shifts that affected the Clew Bay in ‘Prehistoric gold markers and environmental change: a two-age system for standing stones in western Ireland’, *Geoarchaeology* 21(2), 155-170. C. Corlett (1998) described the silting up of Clew Bay in ‘A survey of the standing stone complex at Killadangan, County Mayo’, *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, 50, 135-150.