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IRISLEABHAR STAIRE THIOBHRAID ÁRANN

# *The Rian Bó Phádraig – Fact or Fiction: the Problems Facing Medieval Roads in the Twentieth Century*

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## **Introduction**

The Rian Bó Phádraig, 'Track of St. Patrick's cow', is a medieval road that reputedly connected the ecclesiastical centres of Cashel, Lismore and Ardmore.<sup>1</sup> Spanning the counties of Tipperary and Waterford, the road is approximately ninety-six km in length and takes on average six days to walk. Traditionally, the road is believed to have functioned as a pilgrim's road connecting the aforementioned centres of Cashel, Lismore and Ardmore. The Rian is not an individual road but a network of three separate roads that are known collectively as the Rian Bó Phádraig (Nugent 2001: 1). The route from Cashel to Lismore and on to Kilwatermoy falls under the title of the Rian Bó Phádraig while the remaining distance from Lismore to Ardmore runs along two other roads (See fig. 1). Upon departing Lismore, the Rian runs in an easterly direction along a section of road known as Bóthar na Naomh, 'the Saint's road,' until it reaches the townland of Knockalahara, where it turns south, heading towards Ardmore.<sup>2</sup> This final section of the road from Knockalahara to Ardmore is associated primarily with Saint Declan<sup>3</sup> and known locally as Bóthar Dhéagláin, 'St. Declan's Road'.<sup>4</sup>

As with other medieval roads, the Rian has deteriorated steadily through the ages. A combination of intensive agricultural practices, road building and forestation has resulted in the destruction of the majority of its physical remains (ibid: 98). Today, the route of the Rian can still be traced, running roughly parallel to or under modern road networks with a small section of the road (3-4 km) surviving above the ground in a reasonable state of preservation. This section of road is located in the Knockmealdown Mountains of Co. Waterford. The tradition of pilgrimage along the route has long ceased and if it were not for the efforts of Rev. Power, who at the turn of the century documented and recorded the Rian, it is likely that memory of the road would have faded from existence (Power 1905). In recent times the memory of the road has been revived by tourists and hill walkers who walk this ancient road for recreational purposes.

This article sets out to discuss modern attitudes towards the Rian. The twenty-first century has seen scholars put forward many negative views concerning the road and the work carried out by the aforementioned Power. Indeed many archaeologists and historians now question the accuracy of the present route of the Rian, with some going so far as to question the road's very authenticity. The aim of this paper is to outline and discuss these attitudes.

## **Rev. Power and the Rian**

In 1905 Rev. P. Power carried out an in-depth study on the Rian in counties Tipperary and Waterford (Power 1905). Power was Professor of Archaeology in the early part of the last century at University College Cork. He used a combination of fieldwork, placename studies and historical research to chart the route of the Rian as it departed from Cashel to Lismore and then on to Ardmore. His article was the first academic attempt to study or document a medieval Irish

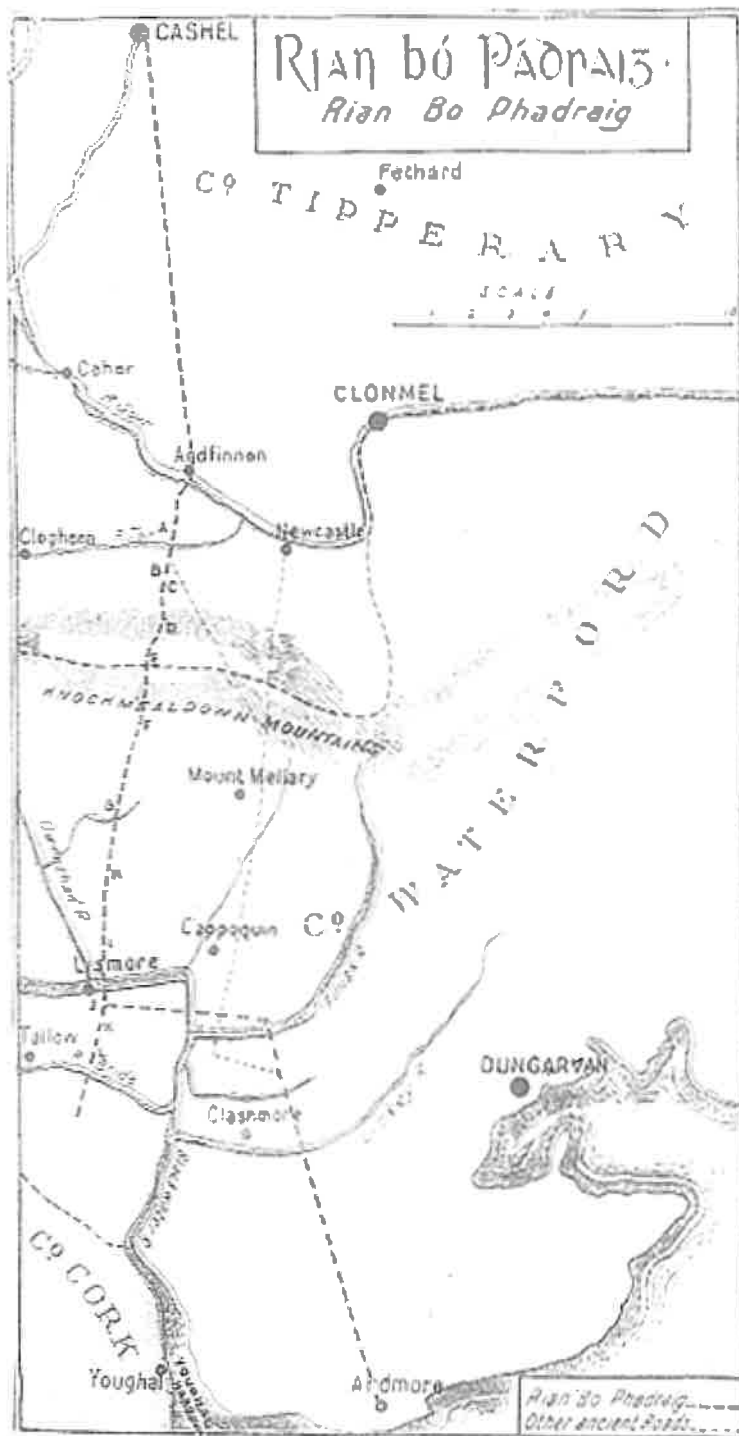


Figure 1: The Roan Bó Phádraig (after Power 1905, Sketch-Map. No. 1)

road. Unfortunately, one hundred years later, Power remains one of only a handful of scholars to have conducted a study on a medieval road.

Power's work on the Rian was highly regarded throughout much of the twentieth century and considered to be the most authoritative source on the Rian. The route of the Rian (as proposed by Power) was marked as an archaeological monument on the RMP maps of Tipperary and Waterford.<sup>5</sup> Today, the majority of information that is available regarding the road derives from Power's article. Thus, when the route of the Rian appears on walking maps and tourist information leaflets it is the route delineated by Power in 1905 that is used.

The last 15-20 years have seen a developing trend of archaeologists and historians questioning the accuracy of Power's approach to recording the road and the very evidence that proposes this road is of the medieval era. In fact, this recent debate has led to the de-listing of the greater part of the Rian from the RMP maps of Co. Waterford.<sup>6</sup> It is likely that the Department of Heritage and the Environment will follow suit and de-list the road in Tipperary in the future.

### **The Antiquity of the Rian**

It has been generally accepted that the Rian dates to the medieval period and was constructed following the establishment of Lismore in the seventh century (Nugent 2001: 99; Power 1905: 112). Studies on European roads have shown that the only way to verify the date of construction or use of a medieval road is through historical records or excavation (Hindle 2002). Both these methods of dating have been applied to the Rian with inconclusive results. Herein lies the problem that many scholars have with accepting a medieval date for the Rian.

The Irish medieval record does not mention the use or construction of the Rian, thereby failing to confirm a medieval date for the road. Although references to Cashel, Lismore and Ardmore can be found among the literature (annals, hagiographic tales and the saga material), there is no direct reference to a road fitting the Rian's profile, which connected all three places. The earliest written source pertaining to the Rian dates to eighteenth century, when Charles Smith, a prominent antiquarian, recorded the physical remains of the Rian in the Barony of Coshmore and Coshbride Co. Waterford (Smith 1746: 355-357). Smith states that local tradition believed the Rian was of great antiquity and likely to be of medieval date.<sup>7</sup> However scholars argue that the road cannot be dated earlier than the eighteenth century and that all evidence put forward by Power to suggest that the Rian was used or built in this period is purely circumstantial.

Still, the dearth of references in the historical record does not necessarily disprove the existence of the road in the medieval period. It is possible that the road was recorded in a source that has not survived to modern times.<sup>8</sup> At present, the author knows of no medieval account detailing the entire route of any individual road and of only a handful of references to individual roads. There is also a very limited amount of material pertaining to a national infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the medieval record abounds with the references to marching armies, the movement of kings and wandering saints. The ease and speed with which these journeys were undertaken strongly suggests the existence of some type of road network (O'Lochlainn 1940, 465; Power 1905: 110). The medieval writer, when detailing the journey of any group or individual was concerned solely with where the traveller was going, i.e. the starting and terminal point of the journey, not how the journey was completed and there was scant reference to the route taken. Given this attitude, which is very much akin to the modern attitude to roads, it would not seem unusual for an important road not to be mentioned at all in the record (Hindle 1998: 6).

A small section of the Rian in Co. Tipperary was excavated in the late 1990s. The excavation took place c. 2.2km south of Goatbridge, Co. Tipperary (see Fig. 2) in the townland of

Kildanoge in the foothills of the Knockmealdown Mountains. The surrounding area had been planted with forestry in the 1940s. Unfortunately there was 'no direct evidence found on the excavation that indicated a definite date for the trackway' (O'Donnell, 1999: 189). The results from the excavation suggested that the portion of the track excavated was likely to be contemporary with a nearby nineteenth century house: 'While there was no evidence to suggest an early date for the excavated section of track, it is possible' that the ancient Rian ran along the present trackway and the features as it is observed today is the result of a long and continued use' (ibid).<sup>10</sup> Given the nature of the majority of medieval roads it is not an unusual result to fail to successfully date the road.<sup>11</sup> The difficulty in differentiating between prehistoric tracks, medieval tracks and post medieval tracks dating would be predominantly

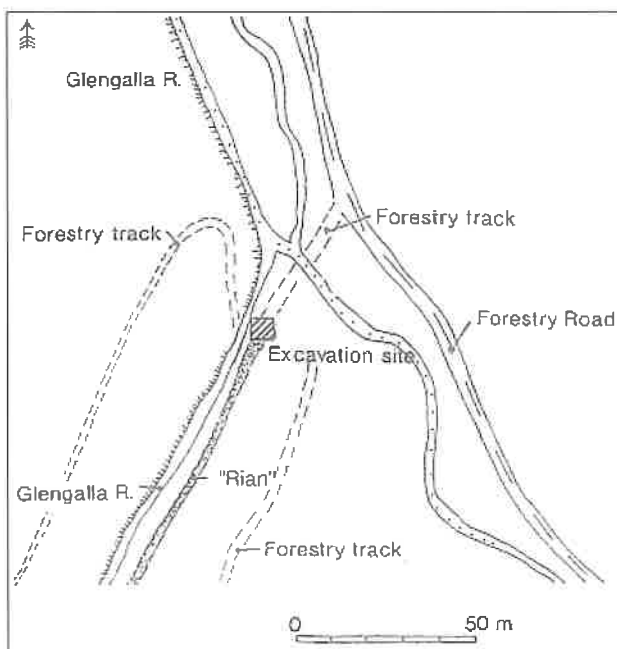


Figure 2: Map of excavated section of the Rian Bó Phádraig (after O'Donnell 1998, figure 1).

dependant on the recovery of artefacts from the excavation. Given that both types of dating failed to establish a medieval date for the road, some scholars are doubtful about the existence of the road during the medieval period. But just as the aforementioned evidence cannot confirm a date earlier than the eighteenth century for this portion of the Rian, neither can it definitely deny the possibility of the roads existence in this period. Therefore, the possibility of a medieval date for the road should not be discounted until a detailed study of the intact section of the road in the Knockmealdown Mountains has been carried out. It is quite possible that excavation of this sole surviving section of the Rian could confirm a medieval date for the road.

Currently, there is some available evidence that may help to strengthen the position for a medieval date for the Rian. Hagiographical evidence from the twelfth century, *Lives of St. Declan and St. Mochuda*, implies the existence of a road system, which roughly corresponded to the route of the Rian in the twelfth century.<sup>12</sup> Although this material does not prove the existence of the Rian at the time the texts were written, it does strongly imply the existence of a road system similar to the Rian in similar terrain. Thus, it lends credence to the theory proposing the medieval date of the Rian. Furthermore, in the course of their journeys, both Saint Declan and Saint Mochuda, stopped at many church sites that are directly connected with the route of the Rian, so it could be hypothesised that the Rian formed part of a wider road network in the region. In fact, Power does mention the existence of another road in the Knockmealdowns to the east of the Rian above the village of Newcastle Co. Tipperary (see fig.1) (Nugent 2001: 3-4; 99; Power 1905,126-129).

The major destination points on the Rian, Cashel, Lismore and Ardmore were all very high status ecclesiastical centres. By the 12th century all three sites were connected politically; Ardmore was part of the diocese of Waterford and Lismore, which was in turn part of the

Archbishopric of Cashel.<sup>13</sup> The study of ecclesiastical settlement has revealed a strong connection between route ways and religious settlements. Research has shown that monasteries especially the larger sites, favoured locations beside good agricultural land and close proximity to roadways, hence, many sites are positioned beside major roadways and/or river fords. (Manning 1995: 14; Nugent 2001: 102). Therefore, it would seem reasonable to conclude that Cashel, Lismore and Ardmore may have been built on or near a route way that would in turn have connect all three.

### **Not Mentioned in OS survey of 1830s**

The next important issue raised against the authenticity of the Rian is the fact that the road was not recorded during the Ordnance Survey of Ireland in the 1830s. The OS Namebooks and *OS Letters* have survived for both Counties Waterford and Tipperary but they do not at any stage refer to the Rian in either county. It has been suggested that the omission of OS records, coupled with that in the medieval record, raises doubt about the road's existence, especially the Tipperary section.

It must be noted, the Ordnance Survey was not an archaeological survey of Ireland and although the survey team did record, sometimes in great detail, many archaeological sites around the country, they were not always consistent. Particular emphasis was given to stone monuments such as castles and churches while some sites such as *fulachta fiadh* were virtually ignored. Time constraints did not always allow for detailed descriptions of monuments and some monuments failed to be recorded at all by the survey team. An example of such a monument being omitted is St Kevin's Road, Co. Wicklow. The survey did mention the *Bóthar na Naomh* in Co. Waterford (part of the Rian) by name, but the description is brief and not very informative.

### **Problems with Rev. Powers Approach to Recording the Road**

Issue has been taken with the accuracy of the route of the Rian as proposed by Power along with his methods for recording the road. Power's approach to recording the Rian was as follows. Having consulted documentary evidence and placename evidence he began his examination of the road in the field. Where physical remains were visible the road was charted, if there were no physical remains Power was forced to reconstruct that section of the road with the aid of local folk memory. If neither physical remains nor folklore evidence was available (as is the case for much of the route in Tipperary), Power was forced to hypothesise the route for this section of the Rian; reconstructing the road using common sense and his experience as an archaeologist.

It is Power's use of folklore to recreate vast tracts of the road that causes most concern. Many archaeologists believe that folklore alone is not reliable enough to recreate the exact route of the road. Ó Lochlainn, in his 1940 article on Irish roads, stated 'Local tradition must not be trusted too far. So many new roads are made every year under local relief schemes that antiquity in the popular mind is very soon ascribed to almost any disused portion of roadway.' (Ó Lochlainn 1940: 473) The possibility that the exact route of the Rian was remembered from generation to generation without some form of corruption occurring would appear to be doubtful. The general consensus is that Power relied too heavily on local memory to recreate the route of the Rian; therefore, the majority of the present route (with the exception of the extant physical remains recorded in 1905) cannot be taken too seriously. Without physical evidence to support the local folk memory, the accuracy of Power's route cannot be entirely relied upon.

However, it would be incorrect to view Power as naively placing all his faith in folk memory.

It must be acknowledged that Power himself seemed well aware of the limitations of folk memory, stating that 'Local tradition, as far as it bore on the matter, has been laboriously examined, weighed and sifted and of every detail corroboration- often cumulative-has been carefully obtained' (Power 1905: 112).

## Conclusion

The study of medieval roads has been long neglected by Irish scholars. To date, there has been little or no attempt to define the physical appearance of the medieval road or discuss how the medieval road should interact with the local landscape. As of yet, there are no guidelines or even discussions available on how to approach the study of roads or how to overcome the many difficulties, such as the lack of physical remains and paucity of documentary evidence. These are considerable obstacles that face anyone wishing to record or recreate the route of a road.

Of course, the issues raised earlier in this paper concerning the Rian's antiquity and the accuracy of its route are questions that could be posed of many other medieval Irish roads. The lack of documentary evidence pertaining to the vast majority of medieval roads means, that in a lot of cases, the route of the road is only remembered through local folk tradition. The high level of destruction suffered by this type of monument means that physical remains are not always available to excavate and confirm the road's history.<sup>14</sup> How can we verify the existence or antiquity of a road such as the Rian? Is it possible to understand such a road without documentary evidence or excavation? How can we find clues about the history of the road from the evidence that is available concerning the road, i.e. the route, folklore and placename evidence?

In the course of my current research, it is my intention to move towards answering these questions by developing a model for a typical medieval road, against which roads such as the Rian can be assessed. It is my plan to develop this model using documentary, cartographical and archaeological evidence. This model will aid in the identification and recording of the medieval road, by attempting to define the nature of the monument, e.g. how the road was constructed, what it looked like. It will also serve to analyse how the road should behave in the landscape, i.e. its interaction with local topography, territorial boundaries and other archaeological monuments. The use of aerial photography can also greatly increase our understanding of a road as the process often allows for the identification of parts of the route that are not visible during field walking.

In the case of the Rian, we will never be able to fully verify the accuracy of the entire route of the road. As Power himself states, some sections of the route were based entirely on his own hypothesis, while the greater part of the route outside of the Knockmealdown Mountains was recreated using folklore alone. It is my contention that although the issues raised earlier regarding the antiquity and existence of the Rian are very negative, given our lack of understanding of the medieval road as a monument type we should not be so ready to dismiss Power's work. The route of the Rian as proposed by Power should be regarded as a product of the time in which it was recorded. Power used all means available to him – documentary research, placename studies and fieldwork when recording the Rian. In the twenty-first century, published studies on European roads, along with the development of avenues of research such as GIS and especially aerial photography are today widely available. These resources (that were not available to Power) can greatly aid in the study and recording of archaeological monuments. It is possible that an intensive aerial photographic study of the route of the Rian and its surrounding area will uncover traces of the route of the road that are at present unknown. Also,

comparison of the Rian to other known medieval roads in Ireland and Europe may allow us to expand upon our understanding and knowledge of this road.

The question of the road's antiquity may also be clarified in the future by examining the Rian's association with other medieval monuments such as castles, church sites and ringforts. Also, excavation of the intact section of the route in the Knockmealdown Mountains may also give a definite date for that particular section of the road.

To conclude, due to the paucity of documentary evidence and the extensive destruction of the physical remains of the road throughout the ages, it may never be possible to know the full history of the *Rian Bó Phádraig*. However, it is possible that some of that history may still be retrieved through further study, the result of which will enable us to answer some of the many questions concerning the road.

## Notes

- 1 For details on the legends associated with road's name see (Power 1905: 112).
- 2 *Bóthar na Naomh* is believed to have been an ancient highway running east-west from Lismore.
- 3 St. Declan was a pre-Patrician saint associated primarily with the Decies region in Munster. The territory of the Decies corresponds roughly with the present day Catholic diocese of Waterford and Lismore.
- 4 *Bóthar Dhéagláin* is in turn divided into the two sections called *Bóthar na Riológ* and *Bóthar na Trínse*.
- 5 RMP Map 76, 82, 88 & 91 in Co. Tipperary & 12, 21, 29, 30, 34, 35, 38 & 40, in Co. Waterford.
- 6 With the exception of a three-four km section of the road that survives in the Knockmealdown Mountains, the rest of the route of the road has been de-listed from the RMP maps of Co. Waterford. The *Waterford County Inventory* refers only to the upstanding section of the Rian in the Knockmealdown Mountains.
- 7 Smith believed that road dated to the early medieval period (fifth century). This seems unlikely as the road connected Cashel, Lismore and Ardmore, so the road is unlikely to have existed prior to the foundation of Lismore in the seventh century.
- 8 The medieval record as it survives today is a biased record as the material that is available for study is dependent on what has managed to survive the ravages of time.
- 9 This is based on an initial search through the historical records. The situation may change as search nears completion. The early Irish law tracts (Kelly 1997: 393; 538) do refer to roads, but they are concerned purely with the monetary values of the different types of road as a way of increasing the value of adjacent land.
- 10 It should be noted Power recorded a multitude of 'modern turf tracks' running along side the Rian in this very area where the excavation took place. (Power 1905: 117) It is possible that one of these roads was excavated and the true route of the Rian was destroyed during the extensive forestry work in the area. Some roads in Britain especially in mountainous area, show similar characteristics to the Rian as described above with multiple trackways forming beside each other over time as the route of the road changed, often to avail of an easier route for the traveller. The majority of medieval roads were after all only dirt tracks formed and maintained by the traveller over time. As such, the route of the road was fluid and could change and move to suit the needs of those who used the roads. (Hindle 1998: 6; 1993:57).
- 11 Studies of European roads would show that the majority of medieval roads were little more than dirt tracks; initial research would suggest that the majority of Irish medieval roads were of similar construction. (Hindle 1982: 194-195).
- 12 As the texts were written in the twelfth century the road in question cannot be dated earlier than the time of composition of the texts. It should be noted the author of these Saints Lives appears to believe that this road system existed in the time of the Saints, the fifth century in the case of Declan and the seventh century in the case of Mochuda (Nugent 2001: 3-4).
- 13 For a more detailed account of the three sites see, (Nugent 2001: 16-17; 53-57; 93-97).



- 14 Excavation may not always successfully date a medieval road, as the dating process is largely dependent on the recovery of artefacts, which may or may not be present. Some roads may also have a history of continuous use from prehistoric time the present.

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