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Motes and Mounds at Royal Sites in Ireland

Michael Herity, *Fellow*

The recurring features of some major Royal Sites are identified as a complex normally including late prehistoric burials in the form of ring-barrows, small cairns or mounds, standing stones, large embanked enclosures and linear earthworks or 'avenues'. These often occur on sites whose antiquity dates back to the Neolithic. Rare high motes or mounds at a number of these sites, some prominent examples of which have an associated circular enclosure as at Tara, Carnfree and Tailtiu, are identified as royal seats dating in many cases to the pre-Christian Iron Age and probably in all cases to the pre-Norman.

Irish archaeology recognises many sites like Tara, Eamhain Macha, Cruachu and Tailtiu as Royal Sites. The term derives from literary sources, which recognise some of these sites as the titular seat of a king, some as places of assembly, at which games were regularly held, presided over by the king, and some as the inauguration place of each new king. Each little *tuath* had its own sacred site where the king was inaugurated (Byrne 1973, 27) but early literary sources record only a small proportion of these. This paper continues an inquiry into the archaeological remains at known Royal Sites in Ireland begun in papers on the remains at Cruachu (1983; 1984; 1987; 1988) towards identifying their recurring archaeological features and proposes some observations and generalisations which may be significant in attempting explanations of their social and ritual function. As Cruachu and Tara have the greatest complexes, the analysis of the kinds of monuments and the eras they represent can appropriately begin with these two. Clogher is briefly analysed because of the valuable excavation and dating evidence produced by Warner's excavations (1982; 1988). The paper then goes on to discuss a number of sites often identified as Anglo-Norman motes, and motes and baileys, returning to a question debated in the pages of this *Journal* in the first decade of the century (see Westropp 1904; Orpen 1907).

CRUACHU AND CARNFREE, COUNTY ROSCOMMON (Figs. 23, 24)

The monuments of the Rathcroghan/Carnfree complex lie on two great ridges running north-east/south-west in north Roscommon, the ancient Mágh n-Aí of the O'Connor kings. The highest point is in the north-west where a small number of ring-barrows lie above the 500' contour in Rathkineely and Ballyglass. South-east of here and lying at the centre of the northern ridge above the 400' contour is the cemetery of Rathcroghan, skirting which to the north lie the minor cemeteries of Toberrory and Moneylea. On subsidiary ridges to the south-west stand the Bronze Age tumuli of Carnakit and Castleruby.

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Carnfree and the tumuli around it in Carns and Carrowgarve lie above the 300' contour at the north-east side of the more southerly ridge; here also there are minor cemeteries south of Carns at Ballaghabawmore and in Manor and Rathmore townlands. Further still to the south there are tumuli in Carrowbaun and Grange townlands. The most powerful spring well is situated at Ogulla below the 300' contour between Castleruby and the village of Tulisk; other important wells on the northern ridge have had names given to them: Toberrory, Tobercroghoor, Tobar Caoch.

The oldest monuments in the area are a group of three megalithic tombs of the Neolithic: a probable Court Tomb in Glenballythomas townland at the south end of the 'plateau' of Glenballythomas, the south-facing slope of the northern ridge below Rathcroghan, and two Passage Tombs are situated at the east end of the southern ridge in Sheegeeragh townland.

A number of Early/Middle Bronze Age tumuli are found in the area. There appear to be ten of these, eight of which are situated around and south of the southern ridge. There are single examples on the ridges of Castleruby and Carnakit in the north. The concentration of eight earlier Bronze Age tumuli in Rathmore, Carns, Manor, Sheegeeragh and Grange townlands in the south contrasts with the profusion of late prehistoric ring-barrows around Rathcroghan and Rathkineely in the north. There appear to be two classes of tumuli, a group of six unditched and a second group of four ditched tumuli, the former being generally sited in more prominent positions. Two of these tumuli are named: a ditched bowl barrow in Carns townland is known as Duma Selga and at the focus of the Carns cemetery is the inauguration mound faced with drystone walling, Carnfree, named after Fraoch, the hero of the Early Irish saga, *Táin Bó Fraich*. One tumulus, in Grange townland, has been excavated. Two Food Vessels and a Pygmy Cup were associated with the primary burial and the secondary burial, consisting of cremated remains under an Enlarged Food Vessel Urn, was associated with the oval bone pommel of a grooved, six-riveted dagger resembling Wessex types found in excavations by Ó Ríordáin (Hardaker 1974, 28-9).

The Rathcroghan complex has three well-defined 'avenues', linear pairs of earthworks formed by digging the ground out of the centre and piling the material at the edges to form parallel banks. In one case, an avenue can be seen to be earlier than an adjacent ring-barrow, where the ditches surrounding the Rathscreg ring-barrow cut the banks of an avenue. The same avenue runs south-west in the direction of Flanagan's Fort, also a ring-barrow (Herity 1983, 130-31). Other linear earthworks are found south-west of the Rathcroghan focus. These are the Mucklaghs, consisting of a pair of massive curved, double banks, each with three ditches; both are roughly parallel and run from north-east to south-west (Herity 1983, 131).

Later prehistoric monuments at Rathcroghan are to be found in many places across the area. Monuments of this later prehistoric period appear to fall into six categories in the Rathcroghan area (Herity 1984): ring-barrows, the most numerous class; small cairns and mounds; standing stones; avenues and other linear earthworks (the Mucklaghs), and large embanked enclosures. The greatest concentrations of these later prehistoric sites are to be found around the two major foci of Rathcroghan and Carnfree, with the other scatterings mentioned above on neighbouring ridges and eminences. They are found generally above the 400' contour in the north-west at Rathcroghan and Rathkineely, and above the 300' contour in the Carnfree focus on the southern ridge. The ring-barrows of the later prehistoric period have been classified into three groups (Herity 1984): those consisting merely of an internally ditched enclosure (A1); those also having a raised centre or

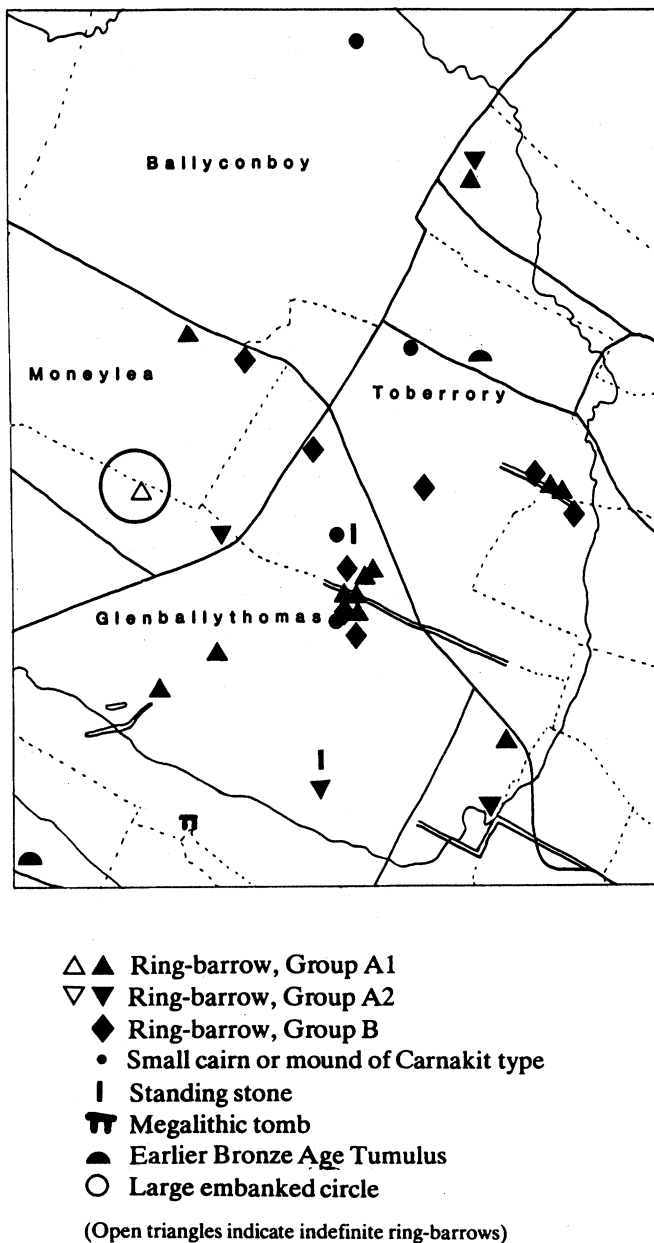


Fig. 23 Ritual monuments in the Rathcroghan focus, Stone Age to late prehistoric.

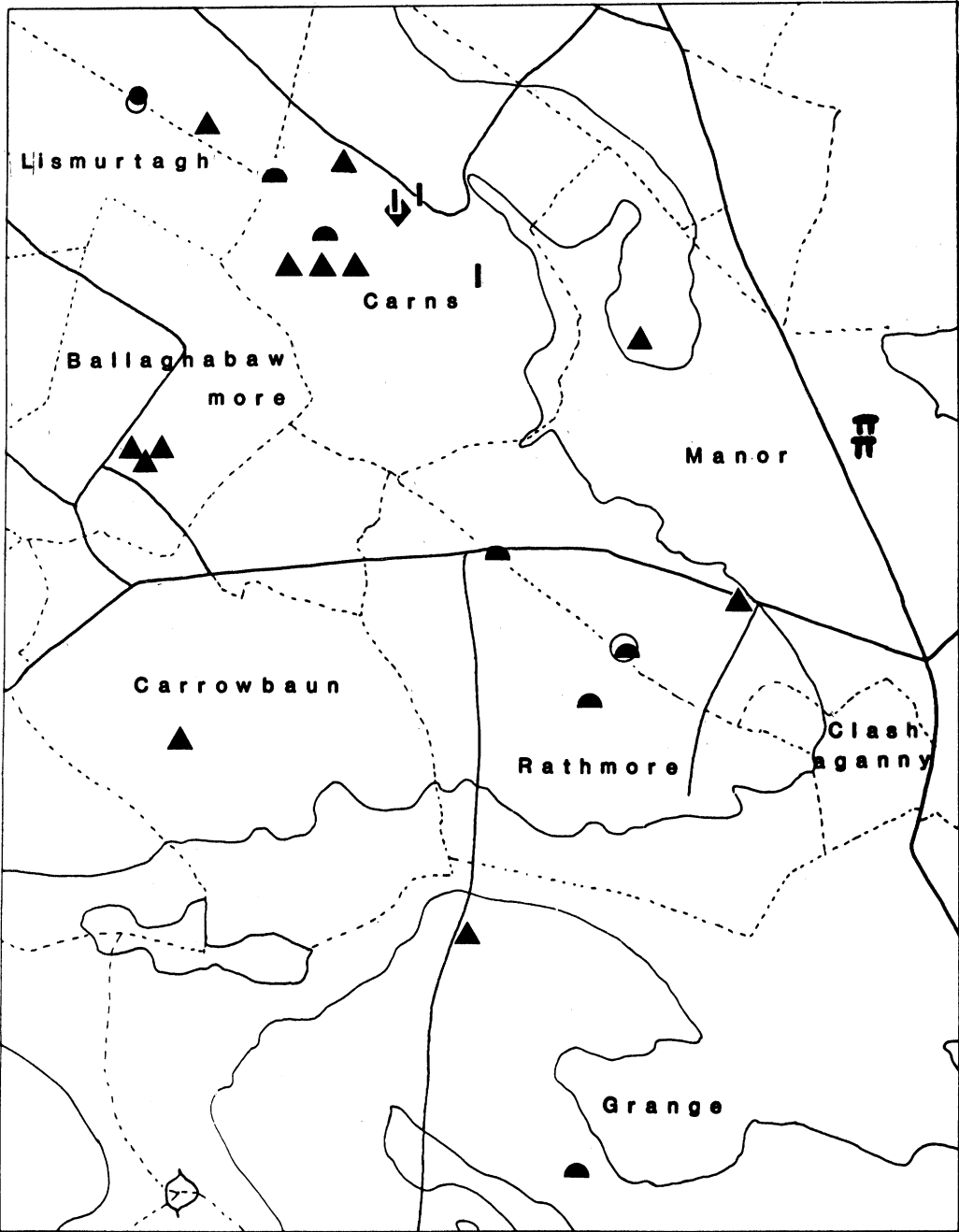


Fig. 24 Ritual monuments in the Carnfree focus from Carnfree south-east to Grange, Stone Age to late prehistoric.

constructed from a hillock or ridge (A2); and those of either form with a central monument (B). Ráith Cruachan itself is an enormous Group B ring-barrow with a height of 6.6m and a basal diameter of 103m. The small cairns and mounds with diameters between 3.4 and 11.4m, of which six are known, are also confined to the northern end of the area close to Rathcroghan, between Ballyconboy and Balloony. Five standing stones are found close to the two main foci; two, including Daith's Stone, are found on ring-barrows. Misgaun Meva is one of two close to Ráith Cruachan. Of the fifth group of monuments outlined in 1984, five large embanked enclosures with diameters ranging from 80 to 240m were noted in Glenballythomas, Tonroe, Carns, Manor and Caran. These are found near throughout both of the major foci, and all except one, Tonroe, enclose other monuments. Except for the one in Glenballythomas they have a prominent hilltop location, and may be cognate with similar enclosures on eminences neighbouring Tara, at Ráith Méadhbha, Ringlestown and Riverstown.

A rare and distinctive earthwork is found at the edge of Lismurtagh townland and extending into Carrowgarve townland. This is a composite monument consisting of a circular earthwork with bank and outer ditch on the north. Conjoined with this at the south is a second earthwork consisting of a dished mound 50m in diameter, higher than the earthworks around it and encircled by a wide bermed bank and a shallow ditch. A comparison with the monuments at Tara known as *An Forradh* and *Teach Cormaic* has been suggested (Herity 1984, 129).

Of the early Christian period, no small amount of monuments survive, including scores of ringforts. These were mostly univallate, but some bivallate and multivallate sites were recorded. There were also four stone forts, including the unusual site at Cashelmanannan, now largely destroyed, which had three walls, 2-5 metres thick and 2-5 metres apart, enclosing a central pear-shaped area 36m in maximum diameter. Nine forts have souterrains, and there are a further four souterrains not specifically related to ringforts. Oweynagat appears to be one of these, which leads to a natural cavern and contains in its roof two ogham stones, one of which reads VRAICCI . . . MAQI MEDVVI (Rhys 1898,230). It is associated with the remains of a circular enclosure about 20m in diameter, greatly destroyed by the building of a roadway about 60 years ago, possibly ritual in character (Ferguson 1864; Herity 1987, 138).

Most of the ringforts are found between 200' and 400' OD, shunning the damper ground below. They are built in several major concentrations, notably around Cammoge and Manor townlands at the ends of the two major ridges and beneath the major ritual foci. The relationship between ringforts and the later prehistoric monuments is interesting. In spite of the similarity in topographical location of the ringforts and the pagan ritual monuments in this area, the spaces taken up by these two classes of monuments are found not to overlap to any great degree (Herity 1983, 138; 1987, 135, fig.31). Although the reasons for this may be very complex indeed, it seems possible that this apparent avoidance of the sacred focal areas by the ringfort builders is due to a respect on the part of the ringfort builders for the land used for the sacred focal monuments. Five early ecclesiastical foundations are also found within the area of this royal site, three of which have holy wells, Toberelva, Aghclare/Carrowbaun and Ogulla. The other two, Carns and Kilnanooan, are situated close to each of the major pre-Christian foci. Considering that each of these foundations is in an area in which ringforts are scarce, their number, presence and siting is perhaps notable in view of any importance that the site had as a ritual centre in the period before Christianity. This is also clear from Tirechán's memoir, in which it is stated that St. Patrick visited some of the sites in this

area, the well of Clébach (Ogulla) and Duma Selca in Carns townland (Bieler 1979, 142-49).

Around the Rathcroghan and Carnfree areas ancient field systems arranged in rectilinear grids overlie all the monuments described above. These are marked by great field banks up to 6.5m wide and surviving to 1m in height today. These use the ring-barrows and wells as markers for laying out the grids – around Carnfree they use the older burial mounds – and incorporate the three avenues around the Rathcroghan focus. While these grids are based on and overlie the prehistoric monuments and cordon off or overlie the ringforts they are in turn overlain by a number of small settlements of houses and gardens dating to about the 16th century. The townland boundaries largely follow the banks of the field system while the main roadways still used today appear to have been laid out later. All the evidence together would suggest that the field system was established sometime between the 12th century and the 16th century and a plausible case can be put forward for preferring the earlier date (Herity 1988).

THE HILL OF TARA, COUNTY MEATH (Figs. 25, 30)

The monuments at Tara are sited on a long ridge which runs north-south for a distance of about 2 km, rising out of the rich grassland of Meath to a height of 512 feet (155m) above sea level. Though the ridge does not stand out prominently on the landscape except from the west, the view from its summit is extensive, reaching 121 miles across the Central Plain to Sliabh an Iarainn in Leitrim. Like Cruachu, Tara reaches back into the Stone Age: *Dumha na nGíall* (the Mound of the Hostages), a Passage Tomb of the Neolithic period, is one of the prominent monuments at the focus. This tomb, which has one decorated orthostat, yielded a large number of cremated primary burials accompanied by a rich assemblage of finds in the excavations (Ó Ríordáin 1969, 28). It also had a very large number of secondary burials of the Early/Middle Bronze Age, some in cists and with an impressive assemblage of Food-Vessel and Urn pottery (Kavanagh 1976, 350-51). Among the latest of these was a single inhumed burial, that of a boy who lay in a flexed position and wore a necklace of bronze, amber, jet and faïence beads (Ó Ríordáin 1955, 163-173).

Many of the monuments in the ridge have been identified as those described in the *Dindshenchas* account, composed about the year 1000 or shortly afterwards (Gwynn 1935, 111), chiefly by the work of O'Donovan, Petrie and Macalister. It seems likely that these stylized early texts were composed by people who knew the topography of the ridge, or visited it to compose their descriptions, long after the site had been deserted.

Two burial mounds within 200m of the north-west side of *Dumha na nGíall*, called Dall and Dorcha in the *Dindshenchas*, together with a third analogous tumulus north-east of *An Teach Míodhchuarta* appear to belong to this early phase of the Bronze Age. In addition the two gold torcs – there appears to have been a third (Herity 1969, 23) – from the hill, now in the National Museum, probably date to the period around 1200-1000 BC.

Parts of the hill are covered with a great efflorescence of monuments of the late prehistoric period, most of them ring-barrows; these appear to be sited for the most part on the northern half of the ridge. The half-destroyed Ráith Laoghair, 90m in diameter, which had been dug out when the Ordnance Survey was making its map in the 1830s (Petrie 1837, 168-70), may well have belonged to this class. At the southern end of the ridge, on its own eminence, stands Ráith Meadhbha. This is a large embanked enclosure with a diameter of 225m; it appears to have no ditch.

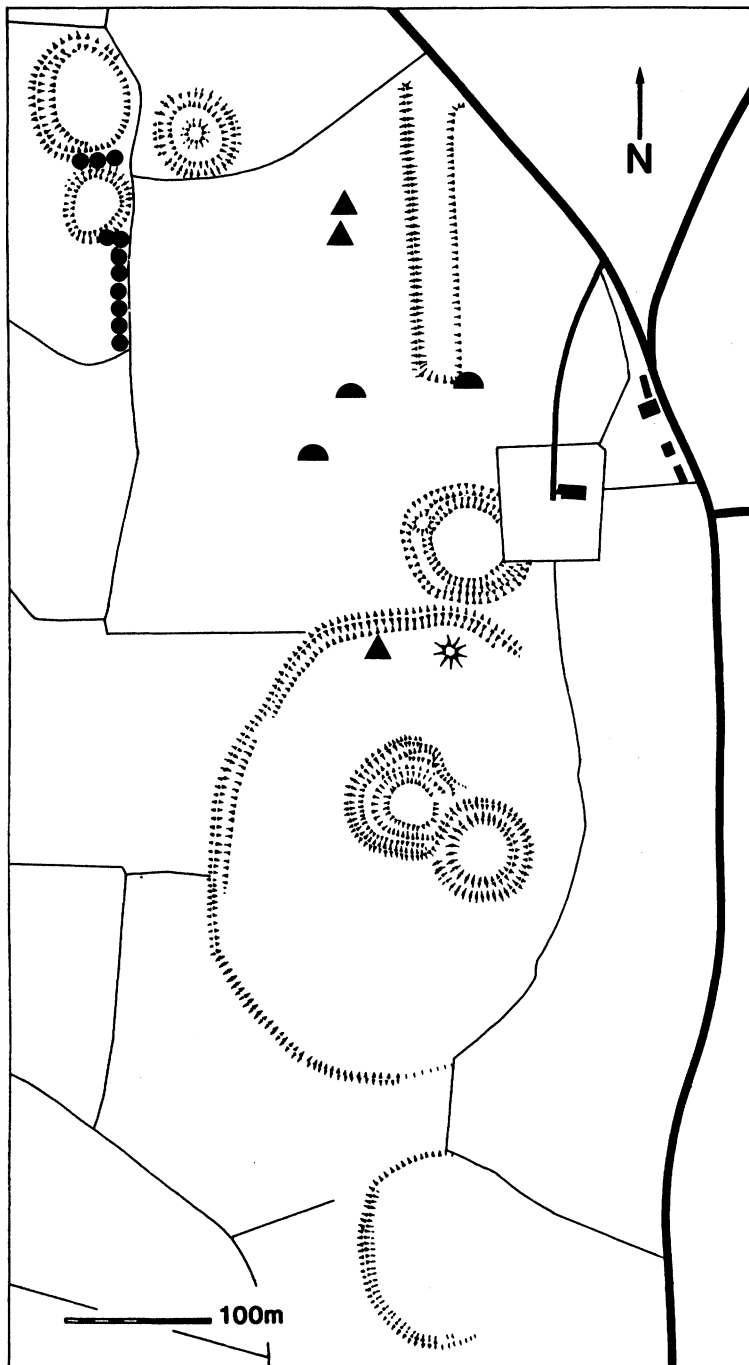


Fig. 25 Ritual monuments on the Hill of Tara, county Meath.

Near the highest point of the ridge is a complex of unusual monuments. At the very highest point, at the focus, is a pair of conjoined circular monuments, a simple circular embanked enclosure on the east side which is called *Teach Cormaic*, 64m in diameter and on the west side *An Forradh* (the Royal Seat) (Petrie 1837, 156-8). This latter monument is a high circular mound, surrounded by two closely-spaced sets of banks and ditches which are built at a level appreciably lower than the top of the mound, 70-75m in diameter. The outer ditch curves out to widen the bank inside and thus to include a small mound, apparently as old as or older than the main monument, within the complex.

These and *Dumha na nGíall* (the Mound of the Hostages) lie within a great oval embanked enclosure with internal ditch called *Ráith na Ríogh* with a maximum diameter of some 450m, which runs along the upper contours on the east and west sides of the ridge. This would be conventionally called a hillfort but might be better regarded as a monument to enclose sacred space at the focus like the "hillfort" with the same function around the domed hill of Eamhain. A section excavated across the ditch and bank close to *Dumha na nGíall* by Ó Ríordáin in 1953 showed that the ditch was 3.3m deep and was cut into the underlying rock. On the inside of the ditch was a trench which could have held a great palisade of wood (Ó Ríordáin 1969). South of *Dumha na nGíall*, about 50m distant, is a faintly marked ring-barrow c.18.50m in diameter.

Immediately north of *Ráith na Ríogh* is the complex embanked monument of *Ráith na Seanad* (The Ráth of the Synods). This monument is enclosed by three banks and ditches with a total diameter of 84m. Between the two broad, bermed, outer banks is a low mound 10m in diameter known locally in Petrie's day as *The King's Chair* (Petrie 1837, 175), which is perhaps the oldest part of the main structure. Though the site was much disturbed by the British Israelites at the end of the last century, excavations revealed that it had been constructed in four structural phases, each one involving an expansion in the size of the monument and the addition of rock-cut trenches, banks and timber palisades. Wooden houses had stood in the central part of the monument. The site yielded several Roman items including a Roman lock, a lead seal and a piece of Roman glass, which date the use of the site from the 1st to the 3rd centuries AD (Ó Ríordáin 1969, 25-6).

Seventy-five metres north of here is the southern end of a pair of parallel earthen banks with a sunken space between. This is the so-called *Teach Míodhchuarta* (Hall of the Mead-Circling), which is about 225m long. West and north of here are crowded complexes of ring-barrows of which the most prominent are *Ráith Gráinne* and the north and south *Claonfhearta* (Sloping Burial-Mounds). At least 10 small ovoid mounds, between 5 and 6m across, are to be found south of these, placed generally in a line going north-south along the edge of the ridge, except for three which lie in line east and west between the two *Claonfhearta*, dramatically sited on the edge of the ridge, as if falling off it, and are between 6.20m and 7m in diameter. Two further examples north of here are 8m and 10.50m in diameter.

Recently, in a programme led by Newman, a reconstruction of destroyed circular enclosures of a size appropriate to ring-barrows on the northern slopes of the hill has been attempted on the basis of a combination of information from aerial photography and topographic and geophysical surveys conducted under the aegis of the Discovery Programme (Newman 1993).

Four wells still extant in Castleboy, Fodeen and other townlands are named in the *Dindshenchas*, Nemnach, Lóeg, Tobar Finn and Caprach Cormaic, which Macalister identified with St. Patrick's Well on recent local tradition.

In addition several other probably related monuments are found in the area surrounding the ridge of Tara. About 1.75 km west of *Ráith Méadbha*, in Ringlestown, is a large embanked circular enclosure with a diameter of about 120m; it has an external fosse and an outer stone-faced bank; there are also traces of an internal fosse. At the north-east and south-east sides are entrances through the inner bank. One kilometre north of this in Riverstown is part of another embanked curvilinear enclosure with a diameter of about 130m. The bank survives only as a stretch running from the east side to the west-south-west side. At the east side is an external ditch. There is an entrance gap at the south-east side. Half a kilometre east of this site and in the same townland was a linear earthwork running north-south for a distance of about 700m, of which only two short stretches survive; the earthwork is 18m wide and consists of two parallel banks with an intervening ditch. Condit identified this as a roadway (Condit 1993). About 1.5 km north-north-west of Tara is a roughly circular raised monument defined by a scarp and with an average diameter of 58m. The centre of the raised area has a large mound surrounded by a berm. This is marked Rath Miles on the OS Six-inch sheet and appears to be a ring-barrow of Herity's class B (1984, 131-134). Rath Lugh in Lismullin townland north of here, described in the Archaeological Inventory of County Meath (Moore 1987, 79) as a raised oval area defined by a scarp and outer fosse, 69m by 50m across, may be a ring-barrow, also of Class B.

Monuments of the early Christian period are largely lacking in the area around Tara; the nearest ringfort seems to be in Skreen townland, at the base of the eastern end of the ridge, where there is also an ecclesiastical foundation. It appears as though the area, like the foci at *Ráith Cruachain*, was regarded as sacred and thus avoided by ringfort builders.

CLOGHER, COUNTY TYRONE, SHEET 58/59

Warner's excavations conducted over several seasons beginning in 1969 have yielded a range of evidence of both structures and finds which justify a brief examination of the site and this recent evidence in this context (1983; 1988). A complex of monuments covers the whole summit of Castle Hill at Clogher. A ring-barrow 12.3m across with its entrance at the north-east occupies the site near the nose of the hill at the south end. North of this stands a combination of kidney-shaped platformed mound, measuring 13m east-west across its north face and about 2m in height; it is enclosed by a ditch outside which there is a bank, well marked on the west side. As Warner records finding a fine complete Neolithic bowl in a shallow pit on the mound, it appears that it can be assigned to this period. Standing on this platform, one commands a view of the large circular enclosure, 60m in internal diameter, which adjoins it on the north; this is now defined by a well-marked bank and shallow inner ditch with its entrance slightly north of east. Warner's excavation dated the building of this 'ringfort' to about 600. Its predecessor was an oval enclosure, 50m in mean diameter, bounded by a palisade outside which was a wide shallow ditch and a double palisade, reminiscent in its structure to *Ráith na Seanad* at Tara. Mound and enclosure form a pair which are separated from the ring-barrow to the south by a curved ditch, shallow but clearly marked, which follows the lines of the outer enclosure around the west, south and east sides of the kidney-shaped platform. The whole hilltop is surrounded by a bank which runs around the edge of the summit and assumes a complex form of multiple, stepped banks, terraces and ditches at the north end. Its building is assigned to either the first century BC or the first century AD (1983, 8).

The potential for a parallel between his mound at Clogher and the mound called *An Forradh* at Tara “which might mean ‘high seat’ (cf Welsh *Gorsedh*)” did not escape Warner (1988, 57), who also saw two other mounds as potentially relevant, *Duma na nGiall* and the mound known as the King’s Chair in *Ráith na Seanad*. The association of a circular palisaded enclosure with the mound at *Ráith na Seanad* and a circular embanked enclosure, *Teach Cormaic*, with the monument known as *An Forradh* provide further parallels with the prehistoric conjunction of mound and enclosure at Clogher.

A remarkable feature of Tara, Cruachu and some other sites is the long tradition extending back through the Bronze Age to the Neolithic which is represented in the monuments of the Rathcroghan/Carnfree complex in Glenballythomas, Sheegeeragh and from Carns south as far as the excavated burial mound of Grange, and in Tara in the Passage Tomb of the Mound of the Hostages with its rich secondary burials, in the finds of the Tara gold torques on the hill, and in what appear to be Bronze Age burial mounds of Dall and Dorcha. Finds of Neolithic pottery in Warner’s excavations at Clogher, in Waterman’s at Eamhain and in Wailles’s at Dún Ailinne represent similarly ancient traditions. If the arrival of Indo-European traditions in Ireland can indeed be ascribed to the later Neolithic (Herity 1991, 44), then ideas of kingship may have been present at these sites from that remote period; the rich burial of a youth aged 14-15 years with faience beads among the latest secondary burials at Tara (Ó Ríordáin 1955) might then be interpreted as that of a prince or even of a young king.

A review of recurring prehistoric features at six prominent Royal Sites presented in the table below suggests the following comments. The early prehistoric presence may prove to be even stronger if excavations are fruitful at Tailtiu and Uisneach. Large embanked enclosures are not universal: Tailtiu and Uisneach appear to lack them, and the number, form and siting which they assume at Cruachain/Carnfree are different; none of these structures could be described as a ‘hillfort’ (Ó Ríordáin 1979, 53). The linear earthwork, either in the form assumed by ‘the Knockans’ at Tailtiu or the Mucklaghs at Cruachu, or in the form of avenues or roadways, is present at five of six sites. As small cairns and standing stones are vulnerable, their absence need not reflect any more than a failure to survive.

	Ring-barrow	Small mounds	Standing Stones	Large embanked enclosures/ ‘hillforts’	Linear earthworks/ ‘avenues’
Cruachu	*	*	*	*	*
Tara	*	*	*	*	*
Clogher	*			*	*
Eamhain	*			*	
Tailtiu	*				*
Uisneach	*				*

It appears that the late prehistoric period is represented by a great burgeoning: cemeteries of ring-barrows with which we can include also the tiny burial cairns of Tara and the north of Cruachu belong to this period, as may at least one of the avenues at Cruachu, the one underlying Rathscreg, and the five large embanked circles in that complex. The enclosing of large areas of sacred space by such monuments as Ráith na Ríogh at Tara and the hilltop defining the edge of Castle Hill at Clogher, dated by Warner's excavations to the period bracketed by the last century BC and the first century AD, seems also to be a regular feature of these sites. The regular occurrence of ring-barrows on Royal Sites (and a combination of electronic prospection methods and aerial photography is suggesting that the numbers of circular enclosures of a size appropriate to ring-barrows were originally much larger at sites like Tara and Eamhain Macha) suggests that ring-barrows were in their time regarded as a *sine qua non* of these Royal Sites. Together with poetry celebrating some Royal Sites as cemeteries, this evidence suggests that a glorification of ancestors, perhaps even amounting to ancestor-worship, may have been one of the marks of a Royal Site.

Fifty mounds, I certify,
Are at Oenach na Cruachna,
There are under each mound of them
Fifty truly-fine warlike men.

The three cemeteries of the Idolators are
The cemetery of Tailten, the select,
The cemetery of the ever-fair Cruachan,
And the cemetery of the Brugh.
(Petrie 1845, 102).

What other monuments are regularly found on Royal Sites besides cemeteries of ring-barrows and the complex of monuments associated with them? Many Royal Sites appear also to have monuments like the composite *An Forradh* and *Teach Cormaic* at Tara, a monument type which is rarely, if ever, found outside the royal milieu. The combination of high platform and circular enclosure at Clogher seems to be analogous, and so may the high mound at Eamhain which covered such a complex of circular wooden halls dating as far back as the Dowris phase of the Late Bronze Age. *Ráith na Seanad* at Tara can be analysed in terms which view this as a similar conjunction of low mound (Could the King's Chair, the name used by the local people in Petrie's time, be a folk reduction of Royal Seat?) and open circular area, both enclosed by a triple series of unusual bermed banks flanked by ditches, which, the excavation evidence reveals, were once palisaded. These are represented at their simplest as high mounds, possibly with the function of royal seats (Warner 1988, 57) or as a conjunction of mound and circular enclosure like *An Forradh* and *Teach Cormaic*, or *Ráith na Seanad* at Tara.

It would seem appropriate to seek related monuments or complexes, ideally at sites referred to as royal in either the folk tradition or in literary sources. It appears that such monuments occur relatively rarely on the Irish landscape. A group of five complex sites which appear to be appropriate candidates are presented here first, in Down, Tyrone, Donegal, Meath and Dublin.

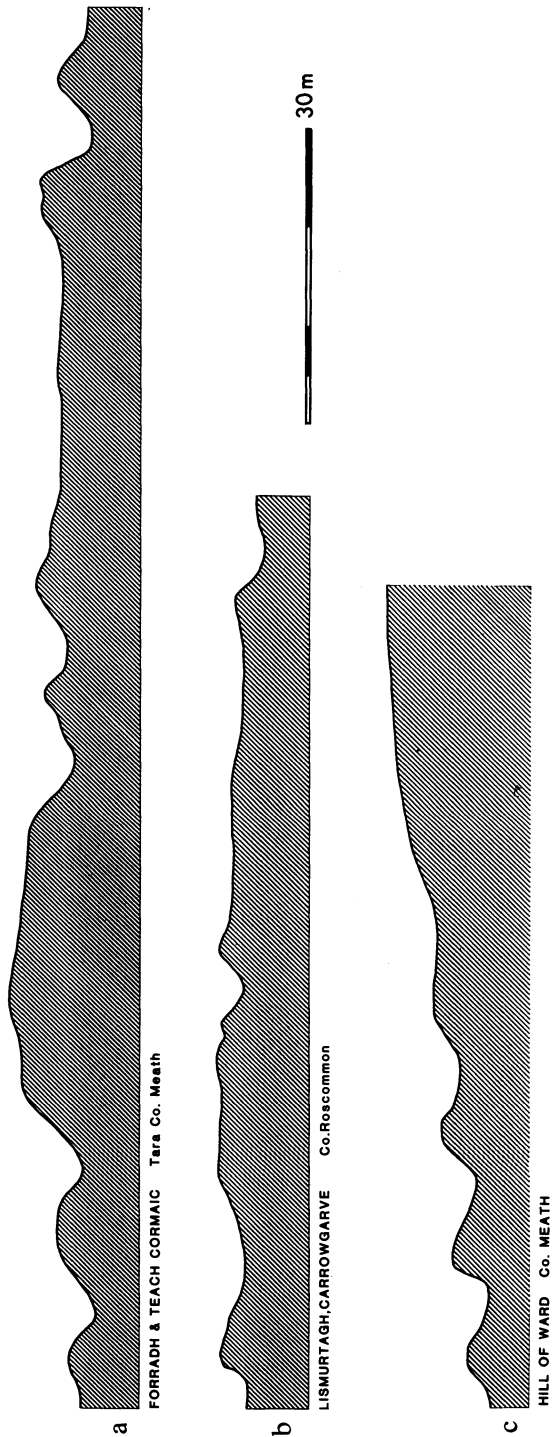


Fig. 26 Sections of composite monuments, a. *An Forradh/Teach Cormaic*; b. *Lismurtagh/Carrowgarve*; c. *Tlachtga, Hill of Ward*, section from outer bank to centre.

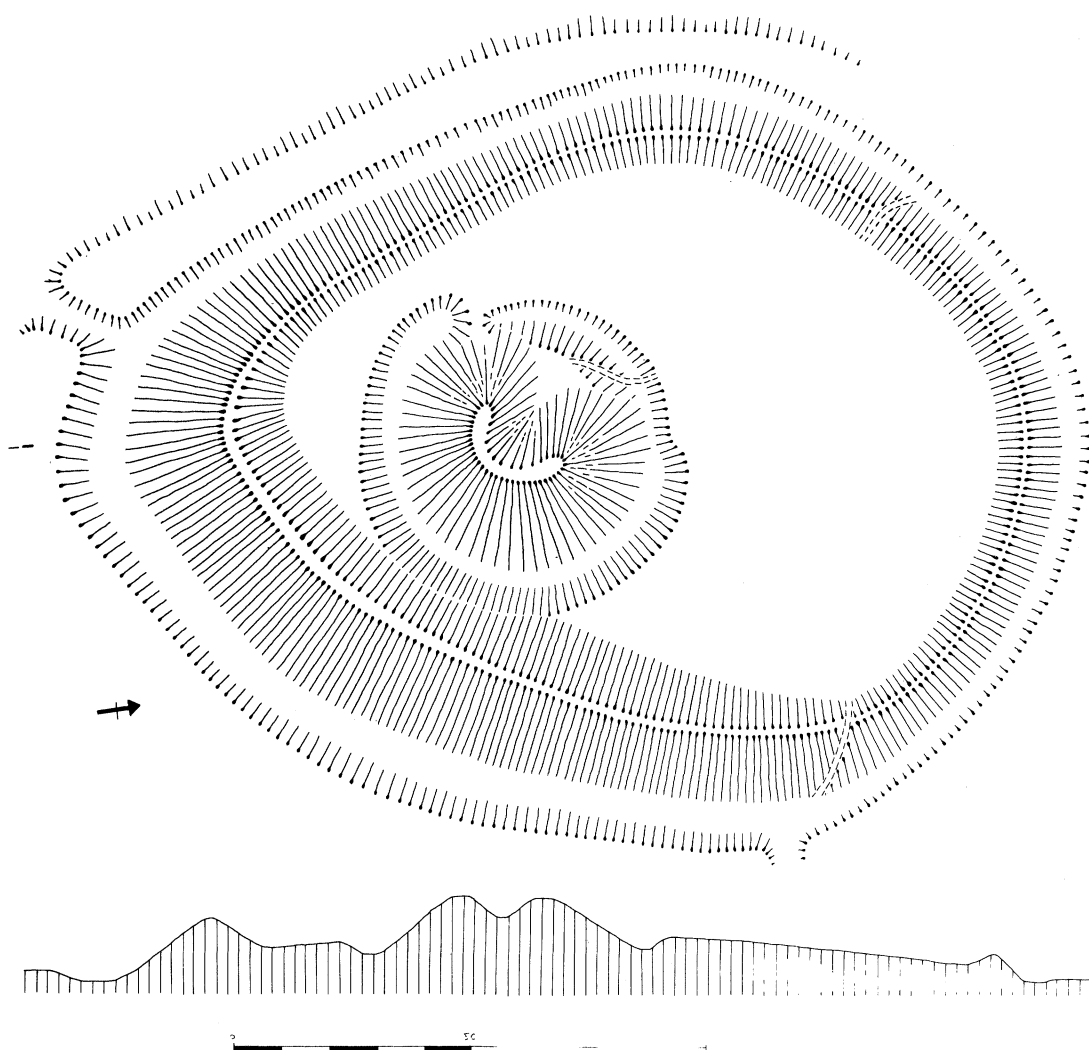


Fig. 27 The Mote of Downpatrick, county Down (after ASNI).

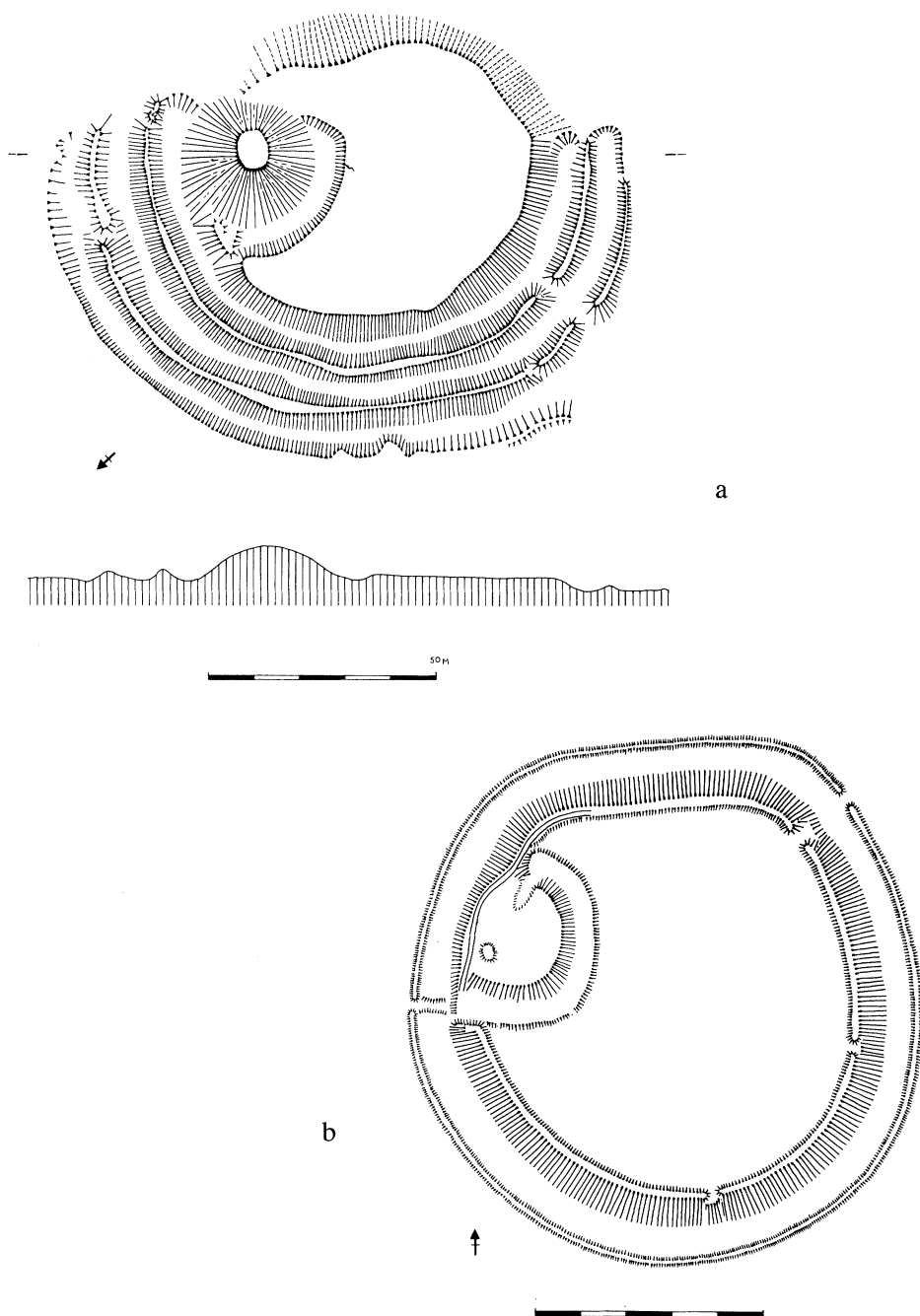


Fig. 28 a. Plan and section of *Ráith Airthir*, county Meath.
 b. Plan of *Sessiaghmagarroll*, county Tyrone (after Davies and Paterson).

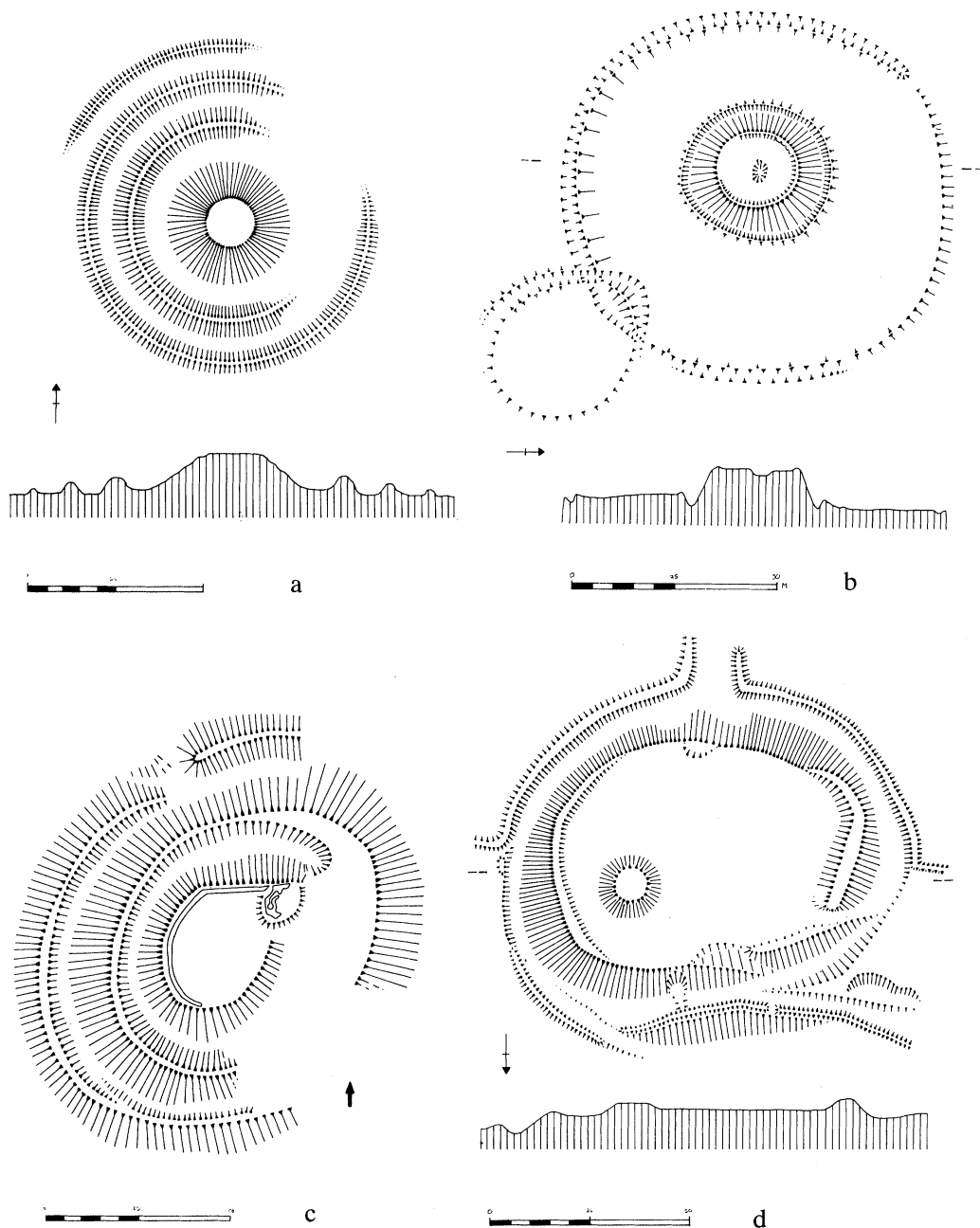


Fig. 29 a. Plan and section of Moat at Kilfinnane, county Limerick (after Lynch)
 b. Plan and section of Moat at Slane; plan after Moore 1987, section after Westropp.
 c. Plan of embanked mound at Castleknock, county Dublin (after Ball).
 d. Plan and section of Glasbolie mound and enclosure, county Donegal (after Lacy 1983).

DOWNPATRICK TD., COUNTY DOWN, SHEET 37 (Fig. 27)

This monument lies in low marshy ground beside the Quoile River 450m north of Downpatrick Cathedral. The site is anything but commanding; it is overlooked, indeed dominated, by the high ground on which the Cathedral and town are built. It consists of a roughly circular mound set within a pear-shaped enclosure, c. 210m by 165m, which comprises a raised central area surrounded by a great bank and a wide ditch. The bank is largest on the south and south-east sides, rising 6m above the ground inside the enclosure and 13.5m above the bottom of the ditch. The mound is placed in the southern half of the enclosure, and is itself surrounded by a ditch which adjoins the enclosure bank to the east. It rises 12m above the surrounding ditch and has a basal diameter of 75m. The north-western portion of the ditch is slight and the mound here has a large cleft in it, making it roughly crescentic in plan (ASNI 1966, 203).

Westropp identified the monument as Dúndáleathglais, or Ráthceltchair, mentioned frequently in the Annals from as early as the fifth century AD (1904, 322-3). Orpen rejects this identification; he asserts that Ráthceltchair/ Dúndáleathglais was sited elsewhere, enclosing the ancient monastery at Downpatrick, and that the monument under discussion is Norman in origin (1907, 137-9).

Ráith Airthir, GIBSTOWN DEMESNE TD., MEATH, SHEET 17 (Fig. 28a)

This is a massive triple-ramparted enclosure, partly destroyed, originally ovoid or circular in shape, which stands 120m north-east of the church site of Donaghpatrick (*Domhnach Phádraig*) in which stands the triangular end of a stone gabled tomb-shrine of the early Christian centuries. The south-eastern sector, amounting to about a third of the monument, is destroyed. The central space is ovoid, flat and raised slightly above the level of the embankments around it; it is about 80m by 60m in extent, bounded by a low wide bank extending 5-8m inside the innermost surrounding ditch. At the north-east end of this enclosure stands a domed mound with a slightly flattened top, about 5m in height and 30m in diameter at the base; this is bounded by a ditch, 4.2m wide, and slight bank, 2.3m wide, on the west side. The low bank surrounding the inner oval enclosure joins the mound at the north inside the innermost of the ditches which surrounds both the mound and the open central space, cutting off the end of the west ditch of the mound in the process. Mound and open space together occupy an ovoid area 77m in length from north-east to south-west, into which the mound and its ditch and bank intrude 36m at the north-east.

Outside the innermost ditch, the remains of three banks which originally surrounded the monument can be seen, especially at the north-western sector between the north-east and the south-west. The innermost of these stands 2.7m high and 8m wide outside a ditch 4m wide and 4.4m deep; the middle bank stands 2.2m high and 8-9m wide outside a ditch 7 to 8m wide and 2.2m deep; the outermost, clearly discernible only in the north-west sector, stands 2m high and 5.6m wide outside a ditch up to 4.2m wide. The outer ditch and bank would originally have run under the road to the west and south-west side of the monument. At present, the remains of the monument occupy an ovoid area 130m by 95m; in its pristine form it would have been at least 160m north-east/south-west and 140m north-west/south-east.

The monument stands between the 100' and 200' contours about 100m east of the sloping west edge of a gently sloping terrace above the flood-plain of the Blackwater River. It has been identified as a "motte and bailey" in the Meath Inventory (Moore 1987, 159). The Annals record "the profanation of the Bachall-Isa and the relics of Patrick by Donnachadh, son of Domhnall, at Rath-airthir, at the fair (*aonach*)" in the

eighth century (AFM, *s.a.* 784) which suggest that it then functioned as an assembly-place. The Dinshenchas poem refers to 'The triple rampart (*tredua*) of Tailtiu, famed beyond all lands, the spot where the kings used to fast . . . That no disease might visit the land of Erin.' (Gwynn 1924, 156-57). It appears to be the best candidate for the site of the royal assembly (*agon regale*) referred to in Tírechán as at Tailteann (Bieler 1979, 132-3). It was thus probably in existence in pre-Christian times and an integral part of the pre-Christian Celtic Royal site of Tailteann.

This mound was confidently placed as early as Patrick by Westropp (1904, 327) and admitted by Orpen to belong 'possibly' to pre-Norman work (1907, 141). It is part of the complex of Tailteann, which also includes the ring-barrow of Ráith Dubh (MacNeill 1962, 311-12).

Sessiaghmagaroll, SESSIAGH TD., TYRONE, SHEET 61 (Fig. 28b)

North of the village of Benburb and to the east of Curran Lake is an oval earthwork occupying the top of a hill 297 feet above sea level. It is about 111m in maximum diameter and consists of an enclosure surrounded by a great bank and ditch, outside which is a further low bank. This outer bank is 1.2m high. Rising 3.6-4.5m above the ditch is the far more impressive inner bank, which is 1.2-1.8m high inside. Inside this bank, at the west end, is a mound separated from the enclosed area in the interior by a ditch about 2m deep. This ditch does not seem to have been joined to the main outer ditch. The mound inside it is about 6m high and of irregular oval shape; it is 16m in diameter at the top. There has been some disturbance to the mound: a gash in the northern face, and the foundation trench of a circular wooden summer-house on the top. T. G. F. Paterson and O. Davies in 1938 recorded finding two sherds of soft grey pottery about 0.65cm thick in the spoil apparently from the gash at the northern side of the mound (Paterson and Davies 1938).

The site is traditionally regarded as an inauguration site.

GLASBOLIE, DONEGAL SHEET 103 (*Ard Fothadh*) (Fig. 29d)

In south Donegal near Ballintra is an oval enclosure lying along a ridge and bounded by a massive bank 3 to 4m high on the west, outside which lie a deep ditch and a second, smaller bank. The area enclosed is 72m by 56m in extent; close to the east end stands a circular mound 15m in diameter at the base, 8m in diameter at the top, and 5m high. The total area occupied by the monument is 108m east-west by 88m north-south. The site has been identified with Ard Fothadh (Lacy 1983, 115, fig.56), near Ráith Cungi, burial-place of Assicus of Elphin (Bieler 1969, 140-41; see also Gwynn 1924, 90-91; Hogan 1910, 41; AFM *s.a.* 639), and accepted as an inauguration site of the Uí Néill (Raftery 1994, 83).

Cnucha, CASTLEKNOCK WITHOUT TD., DUBLIN, SHEET 17 (Fig. 29c)

The monument is constructed on a high, steep-sided mound, ovoid in shape, with its long axis north-south. The mound is natural, the more westerly of a pair located on a plateau with a steep drop to the River Liffey on its south face. It is visible as a prominent feature of the ridge at the edge of the plateau from the Liffey plain to the south-east. The buildings and tennis courts of Castleknock College stand immediately beside it on the east and north sides. Around the outer edge is a bank with a ditch inside, close to ground level. Close to the top of the mound is a great bank, also with a broad ditch inside it, which encloses the ovoid area 55m across from north-east to south-west in which the graveyard of the Vincentian Community is situated at the south, and the mound on which the 12th century

Anglo-Norman castle stands at the north. The long, east side of the mound has little of the original ramparts remaining. Both outer and inner banks and ditches are well defined at the north and south. The line of the outer ditch is clearly defined on the west side and the massive inner bank is also clearly defined on this west side as well as at the north and south, where the deep wide ditch is at its deepest. The inner bank survives as a ledge along the western side. The original maximum length of the long north-east south-west axis can be estimated at 130/140m; of the shorter axis at right angles to this 100/110m.

In pre-Norman times, this monument appears to have had on its summit a mound commanding an adjoining oval enclosure from the north. These occupied the whole area at the top of a steep ovoid natural mound, which was girdled by two concentric sets of ditch and bank enclosures, its elements and their arrangement suggest that it belongs to the same group as Ráith Airthir, Glasbolie and the others.

This site is included in the Dindshenchas poems, and record that it got its name from one Cnucha, a woman of substance (she was reputedly the wife of Dela mac Loith and, in a different poem, the nurse of King Conn of the Hundred Battles). Cnucha is said to have named the hill by dying here, and was subsequently interred in it. The older name of the place is *Fert in Druad*, the Ring-Ditch of the Druid.

Fert in Druad a aimn reme
ri cét-remes Ugaine
co remis Cuinn i Cnuc Brain,
co Tánic ingen Chonnaid.

“Fert in Druad was its name of old, in the ancient days of Ugaine till the days of Conn at the Raven’s Hill, till the coming of Connad’s daughter” (Gwynn 1924, 266,-67; Hogan 1910, 2788-79; Ball 1920,1-7).

The manner in which the mound at each of these sites is related to the open enclosure opposite, both being then surrounded by the bank and ditch of the larger enclosure, is distinctive, as is the detail of how a smaller ditch restricts access to the mound from the open area at Ráith Airthir and Sessiaghmagaroll. Tradition suggests that Glasbolie and Sessiaghmagaroll were used for inaugurations. Ráith Airthir is described by Tírechán’s appropriate term ‘*agon regale*’ and in the eighth century appears to have been used in connection with assemblies perhaps at the time of the Tailteann games (Lucas 1986). All in all, the evidence fits well with the interpretation of the mound as a royal seat or *forradh* and the open space as an assembly area.

In the following section, the evidence for five unusual and impressive mounds in Clare, Carlow, Louth, Meath and south Limerick is rehearsed. The historical, literary and archaeological evidence cited for four of these— Mágh Adhair, Dún Dealgan, Dind Rí, and Duma Sláine – appears to place them with little doubt in the prehistoric period. The fact that it is surrounded by three close-spaced banks and ditches brings Kilfinnane into relationship with this series.

Mágh Adhair, COUNTY CLARE

The site is located north-east of the Hell River in, according to Westropp, “a sort of amphitheatre, fenced by crags, and enclosed by a low bank, marked here and there by blocks of stone” (1896, 55). The inauguration mound is flat-topped, measures from 25.5-30m on top and is over 6m high. It is surrounded by a ditch and a bank with a

causewayed entrance feature. A smaller mound, of earth and large stones, c. 3m high and with a diameter of 5.1m on top, lies 9m from the inauguration mound on the bank of the Hell River. North of the great mound is a boulder of purple conglomerate 1.2m long by 0.9m high with a small oval basin on its upper surface. Across the stream, over 42m to the west, stands a limestone pillar 1.9m high in the line of the two mounds and the causewayed entrance to the larger one. Near it is a shattered stone, the possible base of a second pillar. A half mile to the south-west is a triple stone fort, Cahercalla. It consists of a massive central cashel 30m in internal diameter and with walls 5.1m thick and 2.4m high. the second wall is smaller. The diameter of the third, outer wall is 103.5m.

The historical records of Mágh Adhair begin late in the ninth century. In the *Annals of the Four Masters* under 877 AD we read that Flann Sinna of Cashel invaded Thomond whilst ravaging most of Munster. When passing Mágh Adhair he stopped to play chess on its green, in mockery. In Brian's reign, Malachy, Ard Rígh, overran Thomond in 982 AD and cut down the ancient tree of Mágh Adhair, presumably a sacred *bile*. The insult was repeated on a later tree in 1051 AD by Aedh O'Connor, king of Connacht. According to Westropp, "after the second disaster we hear little of interest about the place" (1896, 59).

Dún Dealgan, CASTLETOWN TD., LOUTH, SHEET 7

This large circular mound, 10m in height and steep-sided, with a diameter of 43m at the top, is enclosed by a great ditch up to 18.5m wide and an outer bank up to 5m wide and 1.5m high. A wide gap in this outer bank at the east opposite a causeway across the ditch seems to indicate the entrance. It stands high up on a ridge running north and south and is very obvious from the flat ground on the north side.

Drawings in Wright's *Louthiana* (1748, Plate VIII, IX) show a square bailey on the south, which has been largely destroyed by the early years of this century. Both of Wright's drawings also show a small enclosure about 9m across enclosed within the thickness of the outer bank, which swells to accommodate it. Wright shows a low bank around the top of the central mound. A late 18th century building known as 'Byrne's Folly' now stands on top of the mound. There is a souterrain in the south side of the mound. About 60m away on the north-east stands a phallic pillar of Iron-Age type which is shown in an idealised drawing in Wright's Plate VIII (Hogan 1910, 382, *s.v.* *Dún Delca*).

Duma Sláine, SLANECastle DEMESNE TD, MEATH, SHEET 19 (Fig. 29b)

The Hill of Slane rises more than 120m above the rich plains of Meath. From its summit there is a fine view, particularly to the east and south. Visible on the southern horizon are the hills of Tara and Skreen.

A large mound 45m in diameter stands on the summit. This mound has very steep sides and is 9m wide across its flat top, which is surrounded by a low bank. This mound is surrounded respectively by a deep rock-cut fosse and external bank, and 30-40 metres distant, a further low earthen bank. Underlying this external bank to the east, and laid out along the southern edge of the ridge, is an oval earthwork 38m in diameter, with a ditch and external bank along its southern edge. This appears to be a ring-barrow. Further to the east is a second very low circular earthwork. Overlying these monuments is a system of medieval field fences.

Slane is traditionally identified as the place where St Patrick lit the Paschal Fire; in the churchyard on the summit are the remains of an early Christian gable-shaped shrine known as Erc's tomb or the Bishop's Tomb. Muirchú, biographer of Patrick, refers to

the place as *Ferti virorum Feec*, the Burial-Ditches of Fécc's Men (Bieler 1979, 84-5). The place is also referred to as *Ferta Ferr Féicc* in the Dindshenchas, before the death of Sláine, king of the Fer mBolg changed its name (Gwynn 1924, 270-71). The large mound may be the *duma* mentioned in the Dindshenchas in which Sláine is said to have been buried, this is of the same class as Dún Dealgan and Dind Ríg. The oval earthwork, with the second similar enclosure immediately east of it, appears to be a ring-barrow, the appropriate term for which might appear to be *ferta*.

KILFINNANE, COUNTY LIMERICK, SHEET 56 (Fig. 29a)

The earthwork occupies a commanding position at 661 ft OD overlooking the great plain of county Limerick. The central mound is roughly circular, c. 10.4m high above the level of the ground outside the outer vallum. The top of the mound is level, with a diameter of 16.2m. The inner vallum is 4.9m high over the outer ground, 7.8m wide at the base and 2.7m wide at the top. The next vallum is 3.2m high, 4.7m wide at the base and 1.8m wide at the top. The outer vallum is 1.6m high, 2.7m wide at the base and 0.9m wide at the top. The overall diameter of the monument was 101.1m north to south. The greater part of the outer vallum has been removed (measurements after Lynch 1911, converted to metric scale).

In the list of royal forts in the Book of Rights (*Leabhar na gCeart*) there is a poem attributed to St. Benean in the fifth century in which we read of "Drumfinghin of the wood, with it Treada na Righ," the triple-banked fort of the kings. According to Westropp (1917, 470), "this is unmistakably Kilfinnan".

BALLYKNOCKAN, CARLOW, SHEET 16 (*Dinn Ríg*)

At the south end of a prominent gravel ridge above the west bank of the River Barrow, a short distance north of where the Ballynolan River enters, is a very large mound, steep-sided, flat-topped, 40m in diameter at the top and 10m high. This is surrounded by a deep and wide ditch with a large external bank rising 5.7m at the north; the total diameter is about 85m. If this mound is prehistoric, then it can plausibly be identified as Dinn Ríg, as claimed by O'Connor of the Ordnance Survey (OSL Carlow 1839, 249-54), following Keating and O'Flaherty and followed by Hogan (1910, 345), Byrne (1973, 131-2) and Smyth (1982, *passim*). Manning has identified the Ballyknockan mound as "a typical example of an Anglo-Norman motte" and has interpreted a passage in the *Expugnatio* of Giraldus Cambrensis as meaning that this mound was constructed and used in the twelfth century (1985, 187). There seems to be little doubt that the passage in Giraldus applies to Ballyknockan from the topographical information given and the words *castrum erexit* might appear to leave little room for doubt. However, what appears to be the remains of a stone building are shown on top of the mound on an Elizabethan map published by Smyth (1982, Plate A). Could this be the remains of the '*castrum*' referred to by Giraldus? Manning is rightly cautious in allowing the alternative possibility of building by Giraldus on a pre-existing mound (Brindley and Kilfeather 1983, 78).

COMMENT

Examination of the complex Royal Sites of Tara and Cruachu, and of Clogher reveals that their development took place apparently over millennia but with particularly marked activity on each in the late prehistoric period. Cruachu, whose monuments are spread widely over the area around two focal ridges, its earlier Bronze Age monuments tending to concentrate in the south-east, its later prehistoric monuments tending to achieve their greatest density around Rathcroghan in the north-west, seems to exhibit in these features

a linear development from south-east to north-west. That it seems to lack a classic hillfort has been commented upon (Ó Ríordáin 1979, 53), though it is suggested above that the five great circular enclosures listed, four of them enclosing earlier or contemporary monuments, may represent the enclosing of sacred space in the manner of *Ráith na Ríogh* at Tara, Eamhain, Knockaulin, or the earthworks enclosing Castle Hill at Clogher. It might even be suggested that whereas the distribution of Rathcroghan's monuments represents a slow organic growth over millennia and centuries, those of the other, more compact sites represents the application of formulae already worked out and familiar to the builders.

In some cases, like Clogher and Rathcroghan, this development continues as far as the Anglo-Norman period: at Clogher the palisaded enclosure north of the mound was replaced by a rather larger embanked enclosure in the seventh century (Warner 1982, 10; 1988, 58). At Tara, by contrast, the development of the complex appears to have been arrested about the time of St Patrick or shortly afterwards.

The present study has raised again a major problem of classification of Irish field monuments. The debate on the identification of Norman mottes conducted in the pages of this *Journal* (Westropp 1904, 1905; Orpen 1907) was part of a larger debate embracing Britain and Ireland, in which some principles more appropriate to the monuments of Britain appear to have been applied to Irish monuments. While Orpen made cogent arguments, well-documented statistically, and accepted that Mágh Adhair 'should not be classed with mottes' (1907, 143) and allowed that the surrounding earthworks of the Donaghpatrick mound (*Ráith Airthir*), analogous to those at Kilfinnane, 'do not clearly conform to Norman type' (1907, 141), he asserted that the mote near Downpatrick 'conforms to what I have called the Norman type' (1907, 137). Echoes of this view, based on the form of the monuments, still find their way into print (McNeill 1975), even in this last decade of the century (Brindley and Kilfeather 1993, 78). Excavations at monuments in the North provide a warning for those who would propose that all or most flat-topped conical mounds are Norman mottes.

Gransha in Down (Lynn 1985) and Big Glebe in county Londonderry were thought to be Anglo-Norman mottes before excavation, Big Glebe 'because its appearance and position exactly fitted the standard concept of what a motte should be' (Hamlin and Lynn 1988, 41-44). But excavations revealed that Gransha was a more complex multi-layered mound with no phase later than the tenth century and that Big Glebe was built up in a single operation and abandoned before the end of the early Christian period. Knowth in Bregia, a Passage Tomb dating from the Neolithic, revealed evidence of refurbishment of the great tumulus and use as a burial place in the pagan Iron Age, and occupation from the early historic period into the Anglo-Norman in Eogan's excavations (1968, 354-380; 1974, 68-111). This great mound was chosen by the Síl nAedo Sláine as their royal seat from the beginning of the ninth century (F. J. Byrne in Eogan 1968, 383) and in 1175 was used as a mote during the Anglo-Norman conquest of Meath (F. J. Byrne in Eogan 1968, 399).

A new approach to that question might begin with a detailed survey of the form, proportions, siting and distribution of all mottes and their associated enclosures, and a rehearsal of the appropriate excavation evidence. An interdisciplinary debate might then be begun with experts in the early literature and in the appropriate areas of history. The least to be expected from such a debate is the sharpening of the questions to be addressed in excavation.

A further comparison can be tentatively suggested in regard to the identification of monument classes at Royal Sites in the case of Tlachtga, in Wardstown townland, county



Fig. 30 Aerial view of focal monuments at Tara, including *An Forradh* and *Teach Cormaic*, *Duma na nGiall* and *Ráith na Seanad*.



a



b

Fig. 31 a. Aerial view of Tlachtga, Hill of Ward, county Meath.
 b. Aerial view of conjoined enclosures at Lismurtagh and Carrowgarve, near Carnfree, county Roscommon.

Meath. This monument consists of a series of four concentric embankments around a raised circular central platform standing at 390' OD on the highest point of a low hill known as the Hill of Ward, 2km east-north-east of Athboy. The site commands a wide view towards east and west, and north beyond Kells. The monument has been eroded by ploughing on the east side and the western half especially is a mass of trenches attributed to Owen Roe O'Neill's army, which is said to have camped here in 1645 (Fig. 26c, 31a).

The circular platform at the centre, 39m in diameter, is surrounded by a wide ditch with a bank beyond; this is successively surrounded by three further ditch-and-bank features, the banks partly stone-built, giving a total estimated diameter of 135m (Herity 1983, 139). There are faint traces of a second, somewhat smaller, raised platform on the edge of a trenched area inside the outer bank but one at the compass bearing 284°, slightly north of west (Hogan 1910, 639).

If a circular platform analogous to the King's Chair once existed here, then a comparison could plausibly be proposed with *Ráith na Seanad* (the Rath of the Synods) at Tara. Two further observations may help in focussing our view of these sites. *Ráith na Seanad* and the conjoined *Forradh* and *Teach Cormaic* at Tara (Fig. 26c, 28) have been identified above as variants of the same kind of composite monument; the question arises, why two close to the focus on the same site? Did they have different functions? The conjoined monuments in Lismurtagh and Carrowgarve townlands (Fig. 26b, 31b) cognate with *An Forradh/Teach Cormaic* are sited close to Carnfree, which functioned as an inauguration mound. What specialised royal function did this pair of monuments serve? It may be significant that there is no analogue at the Rathcroghan focus. It seems appropriate to quote from the primary meaning of *forad* given in the Academy's Dictionary (*DIL s.v. forad*): "a mound or platform, prob. in most cases of earth, used as a seat or stand for spectators, but also as a post of outlook; it varied in size and shape, being often large enough to accommodate a number of persons, but sometimes apparently intended for only one; it may in some cases have been circular; at the great interprovincial assemblies each king had a special f. and there seems to have been a f. set apart for women."

Two lines of enquiry suggest themselves to bring the question further. A full survey of the archaeological remains at known Royal Sites, among them Cornashee, Knockainy, Tullahoge and Mullaghmast, could begin a more extended interdisciplinary debate in which the evidence from literary and historical sources might also be rehearsed and assessed. And a search could be begun for some sites, well-known in the literature, but not precisely located on the ground, among them Carmu, site of Aonach Carman, Forrach Phádraig, Bile Tortain, Odbha, Aonach Colmáin.

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