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Reflections on the making of a 'royal site' in early Ireland

Conor Newman

Abstract

This paper explores aspects of the tension at play between archaeology and history in the analysis of the famous 'royal' sites of Late Prehistoric Ireland paying particular attention to factors that may have led to the aggrandisement of these essentially prehistoric complexes during the medieval period, centuries after they had, to all intents and purposes, fallen into disuse. Attention is also focused on the connection between these sites and the institution of medieval kingship, exploring what contribution, if any, prehistoric sacral institutions may have made to the medieval concept of kingship. It is postulated that Imperial Roman Britain provided the major catalyst in the development of the warrior king and in the apparent fragmentation of Late Iron Age Irish society into 150 or so tuatha (petty kingdoms) during the Early Historic Period and that the 'royal' sites were exploited during this period of upheaval as symbols of legitimate pedigree, symbols of ancestral claims on the land. Attention is also focused on diachronic analysis of the 'royal' sites as prehistoric ritual complexes, many of which have evidence of activity stretching from the Neolithic to the Late Iron Age and into the first few centuries of the Christian Period.

Keywords

Royal site; medieval kingship; sacral authority; ceremonial complex; Tara.

There are five celebrated royal sites in ancient Ireland, Teamhair, Crúachain, Emain Macha, Dún Ailinne and Caisel, all since identified with extant archaeological monuments and complexes, namely Tara (Co. Meath) (Plate 1), Rathcroghan (Co. Roscommon), Navan Fort (Co. Armagh), Knockaulin (Co. Kildare) and Cashel (Co. Tipperary), with a sixth, Uisneach (Co. Westmeath), described in some sources as the umbilical centre of Ireland, the meeting place of the five provinces, a royal site in its own right, with traditions of druidical fire ceremony (Byrne 1973). These sites are, however, royal with a lower case 'r', since they are for the most part *prehistoric* sites that, as far as we know, acquired the title 'royal' posthumously, that is to say in the Historic and Medieval Periods when they became symbols of kingship, places of inauguration. According to the medieval chroniclers, each fulfilled the role of provincial capital, a seat of sacral kingship, and had associated with it other locations of special significance, stations on the

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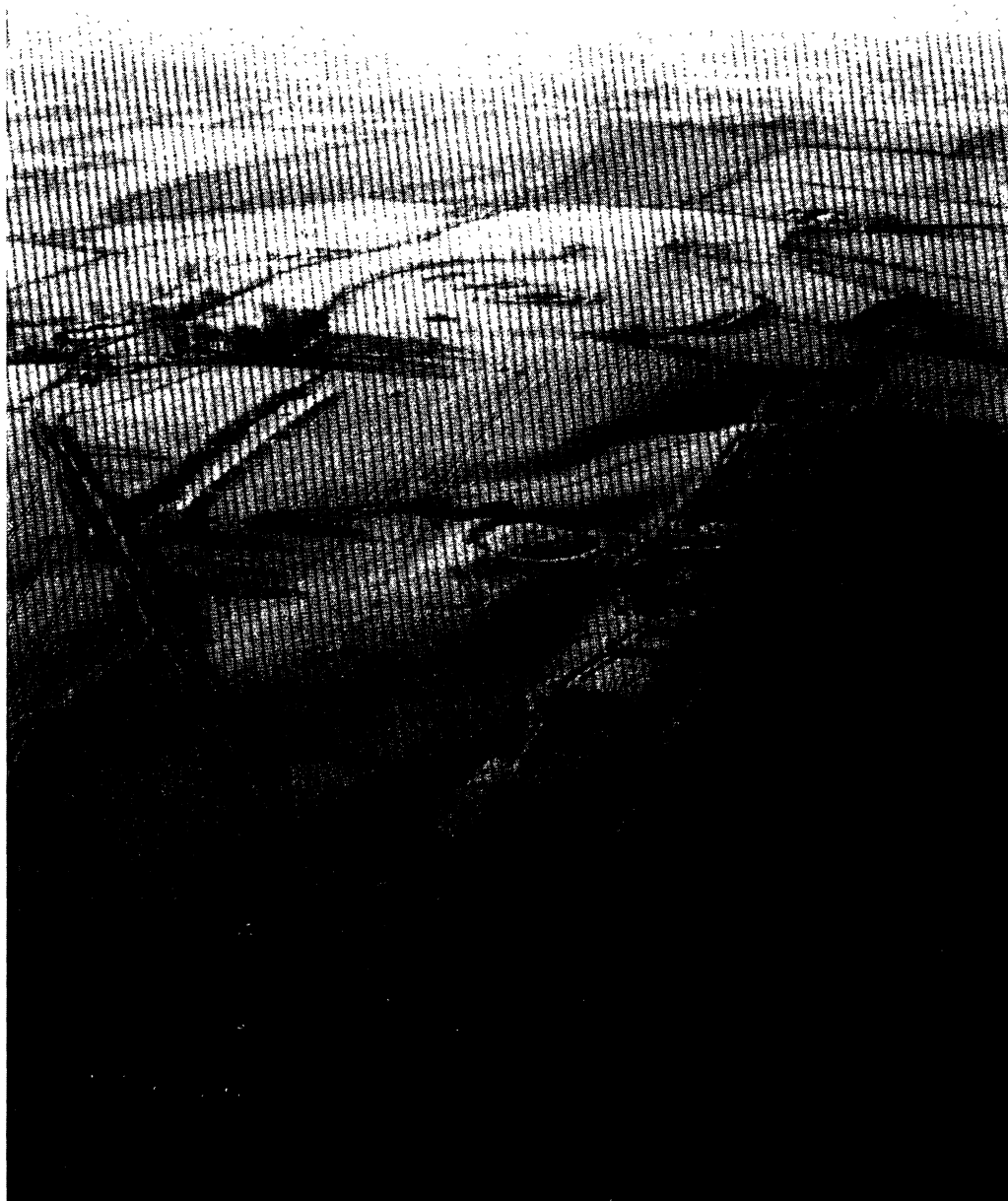


Plate 1 The Hill of Tara (viewed from the north). In the foreground is the ring-barrow of Ráith Gráinne, to the left of which can be seen the faint outlines of at least three other barrows and to the right of which are the Claonfherta or Sloping Trenches partially covered in bracken. Left of middle are the parallel banks of the Banqueting Hall, to the left of which are two interlocking barrows. The Rath of the Synods is in partial shadow from trees in the churchyard and beyond it is the outline of Ráith na Ríg (the Fort of the Kings) surrounding the Mound of the Hostages and, further south, the figure-of-eight monuments of the Forradh (right) and Tech Chormaic (Cormack's House; left). (Photo: courtesy of the Office of Public Works)

royal itinerary, such as the sites of Tailtiu (Teltown) and Tlachgta (the Hill of Ward), Co. Meath, where the king of Tara presided over an *óenach* or assembly at Lugnasad (MacNeill 1962; Byrne 1973: 58). Tara, however, emerges into the light of history as a place of sacral pre-eminence (Bhreathnach 1995: 1–9). Later still, the king of Tara is described as high-king of Ireland and was somehow acknowledged as such nationally. In reality, however, autocracy appears not to have been achieved on a national level until the ninth century AD. The possibility that an equivalent, possibly sacral, authority could have existed, even in embryonic form, during later prehistory is central to the question of the roots of early Irish kingship and has been tacitly accepted by many archaeologists working in this field.

Excavations during the 1960s and 1970s at Navan Fort (Waterman 1997) and Knockaulin (Wailes 1976, 1990) precipitated a quantum leap forward in the archaeological knowledge of such sites, revealing longevity of use, earlier prehistoric pedigree and significant common cultural, architectural and spatial motifs (at least for the later phases) indicating possible contemporaneity and commonality of purpose, and, most importantly, revealing the predominantly ritual character of these sites with little evidence for settlement. In short, the evidence seemed to support, in some measure, what the documents were saying, that these really were monuments apart. On foot of this, it was postulated that other royal sites, about which the documentary sources remained mute, might be identified on the basis of features they had in common with the excavated and surveyed sites, prompting both Wailes (1982) and Warner (1988, 1994) to compile check-lists of such features (Warner taking greater cognisance of the multitude of smaller, less well publicized medieval royal and inauguration sites dotted around the country as well as taking account of the distinction that may have existed during the medieval period between royal residences and inauguration sites; the latter were often prehistoric monuments). When Warner's criteria are added to the list the range of tell-tale signs of royalty broadens alarmingly, to the point, in fact, where one might start to query the value of the exercise and rue not heeding the veiled warning contained in Byrne's laconic observation that 'Many Irishmen boast descent from kings' (Byrne 1973: 1). The exercise, of course, is worthwhile and progress to date must be measured against the inherent complexity of the issue. Moreover, the original criteria suggested by Wailes retain their value as indicators of a specifically prehistoric, though, as we shall see, not necessarily royal, complex type – which I have elsewhere (Newman 1997: xiv–xv) described with the more neutral term 'developed ceremonial complexes' – as evidenced in the case of Raffin Fort (Co. Meath) which, rather conveniently, fulfils *all* of the criteria and appears not to be mentioned in the sources (Newman 1993). This is a phenomenon which will be returned to later.

Realization that the common ground shared by these sites applies on two levels – that archaeologically they are prehistoric sites/complexes that form a coherent group on the basis of morphology, scale, siting, etc., and historically they are distinguished in the documentary sources as having special significance – seemed to point, rightly or wrongly, towards the conclusion that the sacral elements of medieval kingship, which are clearly pagan, such as the myriad taboos of kingship, some of the rites of passage linked with inauguration and the inauguration sites themselves (not churches or castles but ancient sites), were genuine artefacts of late prehistoric kingship, rooted in these places. Some historians are, however, justifiably critical of the relevance of the documentary sources in the context

of late prehistoric Ireland (eg. McCone 1990), and though few would argue that the analysis of early Irish kingship can be divorced from these prehistoric cult centres, this is a long way off saying that early medieval kingship arose, more or less spontaneously, from cognate sacral institutions of Late Iron Age Ireland. On a very unsophisticated level, the use of these prehistoric complexes during the medieval period as places of inauguration might have derived simply from a desire to concord the sustaining role of the divine in early kingship with the medieval tradition that ancient burial mounds were otherworld dwellings (*side*) (Byrne 1973: 20), and a desire to associate, legitimately or otherwise, with ancestral territorial markers; early medieval kings were, after all, warrior-kings. An important element of the debate seems, thus, to turn on the question of the consubstantiation of the two elements of sacral kingship and their respective origins. It is implicitly evidenced by large-scale ritual and socio-political monuments distributed around the country that there were sacral and political authorities at various times in prehistoric Ireland (if not throughout the period). But were they distinct or cognate institutions? Were there priest-kings who played a leading role in both religious and secular spheres?

Unlike those parts of Europe that came into direct contact with the great Mediterranean civilizations, there are no contemporary written accounts, biased or otherwise, of the political or religious institutions of Iron Age Ireland. Ptolemy's map of the second century AD provides indirect evidence insofar as it records at least one 'royal' centre and locates a number of tribes in what would appear to be specific regions: to the outsider at least, there was some evidence of the familiar concepts of tribal territories and central authority. It would be naïve, however, to impose the European model on Irish society without taking cognisance of (a) the influence exerted on Barbarian religious and political organizations by cognate institutions in the neighbouring Classical world, and (b) the catalytic role of down-the-line trade with advanced civilizations of the Mediterranean in sustaining and stratifying Barbarian society (Cunliffe 1988, 1997: 39–67). Ireland may have been a bridge too far, too peripheral to be influenced in the same, almost direct ways. Likewise, the archaeological jury is still very much out on the whole question of the Celtization of Ireland (Waddell 1991; Champion 1996). The archaeological record is confusing and has not come to the support of linguists who have postulated a folk movement or invasion of iron-using Celtic speakers around the middle of the first millennium BC. The view through Jackson's (1964) 'window on the Iron Age' of an heroic, Celtic-like society, where status for most was gained through martial prowess, has likewise become quite opaque with some now arguing that the story is too distant in time from the events it purports to relate to be creditable, or that aspects of the *Táin* are nothing more than parables on contemporary, medieval politics (see Ó hUiginn 1992; Mallory 1992; Koch 1994). Archaeologists have found little in the material record from Iron Age, or indeed Early Historic Ireland, to support Jackson's vision. Paradoxically, it is Late Bronze Age Ireland (c. eighth to seventh century BC), with its fabulous gold jewellery, superbly designed weapons, massive cauldrons, wheeled vehicles and hillforts, and its strong tradition of votive offerings, that has all the trappings of an heroic age.

But Irish people had some contact with Celtic Europe. There is a handful of direct imports and much of Irish Iron Age art is based on La Tène styles (Raftery 1984). Key artefact-types such as swords, scabbards and dress-fasteners derive their form from Celtic European prototypes. On the question of religion, place-name and other evidence

suggests that there was some common ground between Ireland and her European neighbours. Some of the panoply of gods worshipped in Ireland have the same names and/or attributes as those on the Continent (Green 1986) and while religious architecture appears to be distinctly Irish, elements of the iconography of some components may, at a stretch, parallel those found among the Celts in Europe (e.g. Lynn 1992).

The existence of central authority, sacral or secular, local, regional or national, in Iron Age Ireland can only be inferred from analysis of the archaeological evidence. It is clear from the scale of the monuments at the 'royal' sites that concerted and co-ordinated labour was required in their construction, large numbers of people were rallied and organized and, when it was ritual monuments that were being built, inspiration for the designs would have come from the religious quarter even if the workforce was mobilized by a secular authority. Morphological similarities between the 'royal' sites, in turn, support the postulated existence of a co-ordinated *cognoscenti*, a group of people whose job it was to interpret the supernatural and to identify the most appropriate symbolic forms to render the supernatural intelligible and to align society with its perceived order. In the context of Iron Age Ireland, such a *cognoscenti* has been equated with the nebulous institution of druidism as known from Britain and the Continent but, in deference to the problems of identifying the particular strain of Celticism in Ireland, it might be unwise to project the same personages wholesale unto the Irish Iron Age ritual stage, even though there was without doubt an Irish equivalent (see Ross 1995). Though few in number, proximal, contemporary and predominantly secular monuments are extremely important. They balance the picture by demonstrating the probability of a direct connection between ritual and secular spheres of activity. A vital piece of dendrochronological evidence, for example, connects a phase in the construction of the Dorsey, part of the border of ancient Ulster, with the Forty Metre temple at Navan Fort, capital of ancient Ulster. Both were built in 95/94 BC (Baillie 1988; Ballie and Brown 1989), the former defining a tribal territory, the latter a statement of tribal unity sealed by divine imprimatur, both the results of collective, tribal endeavour. A similar, and I would argue largely contemporary, linear earthwork was built 1km to the west of Tara, at either end of which lie large, strategically-sited and heavily defended enclosures (Newman 1997). These sites provide the link between Tara, as ritual centre, and its secular, political landscape. Even from these two examples we can see that it is probable that there was both sacral and secular authority in late prehistoric Ireland: but were they embodied in one and the same institution, one and the same person?

Before the Forty Metre temple was built at Navan there stood on the same spot a succession of circular wooden houses, some attached figure-of-eight style to larger, fenced compounds (Waterman 1997). The material record indicates the possibility of high status with the inclusion of a fine, enamelled ringheaded pin and exotica such as the skull of a Barbary ape, indicating long-distance contact, possibly trade. More important in the present context, however, is the fact that these buildings are sandwiched between two major ceremonial monuments; a Late Bronze Age hengiform enclosure with circle of free-standing timber poles and the Forty Metre Structure. There can be no doubt that the occupants of these houses were well aware of the fact that they were camped on sacred ground and it is probable that they partook in the decision to erect the Forty Metre Structure on the same spot. Whether or not they enjoyed sacral and/or secular power is, strictly speaking,

unknown, although it is a reasonable assumption that they did. On this point, it is interesting to note that in plan their figure-of-eight house-compounds mimic the ground plan of the 'Rose' phase ceremonial structure/temple at Knockaulin (Lynn 1991; see below). Similar structures have been postulated for one of the pre-earthwork, Iron Age phases of the Rath of the Synods on Tara (Cooney and Grogan 1991) and there may be a Late Bronze Age example at Raffin (Newman 1995a). The numbers of non-royal domestic sites of the Iron Age is small but interestingly none assumes this figure-of-eight shape, and so the evidence at the moment seems to be hinting at the possibility that this architectural form is reserved for special people and special places. Since this form, the figure-of-eight, is a recurring motif among the ritual monuments comprising the 'royal' sites (see below), it seems quite reasonable to suggest that these people were at least closely involved in spiritual matters, if not priests. The occupants of these houses at Navan Fort, Tara and now possibly also Raffin, are probably the closest to sacral kings or priest-kings that Irish late prehistory has yet to offer.

As Ireland emerges into the light of history around the seventh century AD, we are presented with a situation where there exist about 150 *tuatha*, or petty kingdoms, each headed by a secular, though possibly quasi-sacral, authority, a warrior-king, described in contemporary sources as a sacral king. Whether the same institutions obtained towards or even before the beginning of the millennium is unknown. The case that this multitude of independent autonomies was the result of a recent fragmentation of five, or so, regional/provincial tribal territories (*cóiced* ~ fifth) – four of which gave their names to the present provinces – is based in large measure on analysis of the antique political organization described in mythologies and genealogies. And while the historical usefulness of these sources has come under serious scrutiny, there seems to be a good deal of support among historians for the idea that late prehistoric Ireland was, at least notionally, divided into these larger areas (Byrne 1973: 46 ff; Ó Cróinín 1995: 41–7). It is of no little consequence, therefore, that four of the great 'royal' sites are distributed between the present four provinces, the fifth, Tara, being located in Meath which derives its name from *Mide*, the fifth or Middle Province. Archaeological analysis of the distribution of these five great 'royal' sites would have led, independent of the documentary sources, to the same conclusion, namely that there may have been five regional sub-divisions in Iron Age Ireland. A critical question, then, is when this fragmentation occurred and what caused it.

Researchers working on the archaeology of Late Iron Age / Early Christian Ireland, c. AD 300–500, would be delighted to have even a fraction of the material evidence available for the earlier part of the Iron Age, for here is a truly dark age. Recent research has emphasized elements of cultural continuity manifest in both artefacts (Newman 1995b) and burial practices (see McCormick 1994; Grogan 1984). However, Ireland was also coming under very strong influence from Roman Britain and it is quite possible that Roman military and political organization provided the inspiration and catalyst for early Irish warrior kingship (de Paor 1993: 26–8). One of the reasons why Cunliffe's (1988) model of the way European Celtic society evolved in response to trade with the Classical world appears not to apply in the Irish context may, as I have already suggested, be because Ireland was really too far removed from these markets. The Roman conquest of Britain changed all that. The Mediterranean came to our doorstep for over three and a

half centuries (nearly sixteen generations). How did this affect Ireland? Waddell (1992: 39) has postulated that the Roman conquest of Britain represents the first major interruption of long-standing contacts between Ireland and her nearest Celtic neighbour and it is easy to see how this could have impacted negatively on old, established links; connections that in the past generated wealth and status amongst an Irish prehistoric ascendancy and which, when strained or severed, might have threatened the basis and precipitated a shake-up of the established order. Although archaeological evidence of Irish interaction with the Roman world is quite paltry, access to the wealth of Roman Britain, be it through commerce or theft, was likely to have had a major impact on the power politics of late Iron Age Ireland. Prior to the Conquest, procurement of Mediterranean exotica was attainable only by the élite and, once obtained they were, without doubt, exploited as symbols of power: this is why the Barbary Ape skull at Navan is so significant. Raids on Roman Britain, a short boat trip away, promised instant wealth without risk of retribution. Instant wealth meant, potentially, instant status, a shake-up and, ultimately, a breakdown of establishment. Yet, then as now, the transition from *nouveaux riches* to real socio-political clout could be accelerated by directly associating with 'old money' and old money in Late Iron Age Ireland was land, the ownership of which was symbolized by ancient burial grounds (principally mounds) and conferred by sacral inaugural rites at these mounds. Thus, unbeknownst to itself, Imperial Rome may have changed forever not just the face of Irish religion but also the faces of Irish politics and of the Irish landscape. In the present context, the presence of Roman material at status sites and holy places such as Tara, Newgrange (the traditional burial ground of the pagan kings of Tara), Freestone Hill and Lough Foyle (if Warner (1982) is correct in suggesting that the Brougher Hoard is a votive deposit to the god Manannán – who, as it happens, is also associated with Newgrange), is of interest because it indicates that this material was reaching the most influential people in the land. Yet, as I have said, Roman material is rare in Ireland, so, if the theory is valid, why is there not more? The answer may lie in the fact that gold and silver had limited value in a coinless society such as existed in Ireland in the first half of the first millennium AD and is likely to have been melted down. Instead, slaves, and later cattle, were the primary unit of currency (Kelly 1988). So, the most profitable haul from a raiding expedition is likely to have been slaves, who, though archaeologically invisible, were kidnapped in great numbers.

If the above scenario identifies even some of the archaeologically-invisible forces that may have contributed to the political reordering of late prehistoric Irish society, direct archaeological evidence of this phenomenon is even more obscure. Raffin Fort, however, may supply some of the missing links. Heretofore, I have stressed the fact that in fulfilling all of Wailes' criteria for the identification of a 'royal site', Raffin is simply a smaller version of complexes like Tara, Navan Fort, etc., that it represents a lower order of such sites, servicing a smaller catchment area. All this is true but the admittedly few radiocarbon dates suggest that the all-important Iron Age components are in fact late in comparison to the dates returned from the larger sites. Dates from the three major components, (i) a ring-ditch (UB-3435: 1676±168 BP 30 BC–AD 670) with surrounding circle of free-standing poles, (ii) a skull-burial (UB404: 1753±32 BP: AD 213–377), and (iii) the hengiform enclosure (OxA-6711: 1595±45 BP: AD 340–570), suggest that the importance of Raffin climaxed around the third to fifth centuries AD, at a time when the big



Plate 2 Raffin Fort, Co. Meath. Raffin Fort is located about 20km north of Tara. This photograph, taken during the final season of excavation (1995), shows the foundation trenches of a large round building of Late Bronze Age date superimposed on the post-holes of an Early Bronze Age multi-ringed timber circle. Bottom left are the remains of a small rectangular building, probably of Neolithic date.

‘royal’ stars were very much in the descent and coeval with the thriving middle and catastrophic finale of Roman Britain. Is it possible, therefore, that instead of representing a lower political order, Raffin represents a new, *alternative* order, founded on ‘new money’ legitimized by mimicking architectural forms that had previously symbolized old, established power?

There are in addition natural factors that contributed to the historical aggrandizement of the five big ‘royal’ sites, such as quality of land, population size and wealth, and these are likely to have been at play long before the Medieval Period and to have determined that here, during the Prehistoric Period, were large populations capable of undertaking the construction of the largest, most ambitious ceremonial monuments where, ultimately, would be located the most influential seats of power in Early Medieval Ireland: power based on the continuing fertility of the land. To be sure, their association with kingship and inauguration is highly significant, but it has also, to an extent, retarded the archaeological consideration of these sites as ‘conventional’ (if one can ever say such a thing) ritual landscapes or ritual complexes, not least because we have been persuaded to think of them as monuments apart. Archaeology, therefore, will make an important and legitimate

contribution to this field of research by progressing, as it eventually must, from the identification and diachronic analysis of 'royal sites' towards the application of theoretical models of social structure based on the analysis of prehistoric monuments and landscapes.

Evidently, large and/or conspicuously-sited monuments, in particular burial monuments, recommended themselves as appropriate places for ritual activity to successive generations and, in this way, their symbolic and spiritual importance grew. The hilltops of Knockaulin, Co. Kildare and Tara, Co. Meath, saw ritual activity in one form or another over a period of about 4,500 years and the hilltops of Raffin, Co. Meath (Plate 2), and Navan, Co. Armagh, for 2,500 and at least 1,000 years respectively. These are considerable amounts of time, sufficient indeed to have witnessed significant social change and theological advancement, phenomena that can, and usually do, impact on the nature of ritual architecture as well as on the regulations governing ceremony. In the present theoretical climate, which seems to favour the notion of general social continuity over that of episodic replacement of indigenous populations, discernible changes in architecture and ceremony are likely to be viewed as products of normal, unbroken social evolution. Nevertheless, however unfashionable they now may be, periodic upheavals resulting in the migration of entire social or tribal groups and conglomerates (and not just the displacement of an élite, upper echelon) are known to have occurred. They were, for example, relatively commonplace during the fifth to seventh centuries AD, aptly named the Migration Period, and, though it might be argued that the political background to these early medieval peregrinations was extraordinary, even unprecedented, there is no reason why the phenomenon should be confined to the Historic Period.

The passage of time

The aforementioned ritual sites and complexes enjoyed lengthy periods of use and so ought to be susceptible to diachronic analysis. However, archaeological survey and excavation can be rather blunt tools when it comes to assessing whether activity at these sites is continuous or episodic, whether, when reused, the original purpose of a monument endures or is disregarded or forgotten, or whether changes in ritual architectural styles and ceremony herald the arrival of new population groups into an area or merely indicate the evolution of religious thought. I have argued elsewhere (Newman 1993, 1997) that classic evidence of hiatus is rarely encountered in the stratigraphic record from multi-period sites because subsequent activity can destroy a newly regenerated sod horizon. Such evidence is seldom straightforward. Notwithstanding the fact that the construction of the Mound of the Hostages on Tara is likely to have been the culmination of a protracted ritual sequence, the amount of time it took to build is probably only a tiny fraction of its total life-span as a functioning ritual monument. If, as we believe, the Mound of the Hostages was the 'target' monument upon which the Banquet Hall (Tech Mid-chúarta), a 200m long cursus-type monument, was aligned, then it must have enjoyed a new lease of life some numbers of generations after it was first built. Later still, the passage tomb enjoyed a third lease of life when, during the earlier Bronze Age, burials were dug

into the mound and placed into the passage itself, disturbing the primary deposits. In assessing whether or not the disturbance to the primary burial deposits is a result of indifference it should be remembered that moving about cremated bone, in a very restricted space, is a messy business, no matter how careful one is and that inevitably fragments will become scattered in a haphazard way. None the less, the burial rite exercised around the beginning of the second millenium BC is quite different. To what extent this may represent a break in social and/or religious continuity is not known. In some instances, the mores of a new religion encourage complete dissociation from the precepts and relics of the old order but this, evidently, was not the case at Tara where a passage tomb was specifically selected and reused.

All of the excavated 'royal sites' saw at least some activity during the Neolithic period. At Navan Fort the remains, comprising some truncated pit features and a criss-cross of cultivation ridges, were largely destroyed by intensive later activity on the same spot (Waterman 1997). The former presence of a passage tomb within the Navan Complex has also been postulated, and it has even been suggested that the stones filling the famous Forty Metre Structure were taken from a nearby Neolithic cairn and used symbolically to represent the souls of dead warriors. At both Raffin Fort (Newman 1995a) and Knockaulin (Johnston 1990) portions of fairly substantial, sub-rectangular ditched enclosures were uncovered, and at the latter site a pit containing a fragmentary Linkardstown-type pot, a form heretofore known only from burial contexts. At Tara the evidence is on a different scale. Here we have, it would appear, a large, possibly palisaded hilltop enclosure followed, in turn, by a passage tomb of modest proportions and, if our classification is correct, a very substantial cursus (the Banqueting Hall). Moreover, it is distinctly possible that some at least of the mounds in the surrounding countryside contain passage tombs. Together, these elements suggest a moderately-sized, stable community of early farmers; neighbours to those who created the Boyne Valley, Loughcrew and Fourknocks cemeteries, they may even have participated in the construction of these great tombs. British and Irish comparanda for the earliest enclosure suggest the strong likelihood of a ritual function or at least a strong ritual association (Newman 1997). The passage tomb and cursus speak for themselves.

Activity of earlier Bronze Age date is attested through excavation, or can at least be inferred through survey, at few of the 'royal' and cognate sites. At Knockaulin the evidence consists solely of a fragmentary Food Vessel found in a pit. At Raffin Fort (Newman 1995a) part of a multi-ringed timber circle was uncovered, with evidence of a cremated burial placed around one of the posts. There is also evidence of a palisaded enclosure; the relationship between the two features as yet unknown. Tara, again, appears to be the exception where there is not only the evidence of extensive burial in the Mound of the Hostages but also the construction of nearby Rath Medb, the largest embanked enclosure (*sic* Stout 1991) in Ireland, and another at Riverstown about 1km to the north-west and the evidence of numerous barrows (of various types) across the Hill of Tara, many of which are likely to date from the earlier to Middle Bronze Age (Newman 1997). Again, these monuments and burials testify to a vibrant and successful community, one that, since the Neolithic Period, has consolidated and is now capable of asserting its independence through the construction of the most ambitious monuments.



Plate 3 North end of the Hill of Tara, Co. Meath. Raking light of the rising sun picks out the more low-profile sites at Tara. This very suggestive photograph seems to show a 'string' of five barrows immediately to the East of Ráith Gráinne. Only the last two on the right have been confirmed topographically and geophysically, the others remain on the 'possibles' list. (Photo: courtesy of the Office of Public Works)

A major facet of prescribed ritual behaviour during the Early Bronze Age appears to have been satisfied by associating directly with passage tombs (see Mount 1994). In the case of Tara this involved placing burials in the tomb itself. Bronze Age activity in the Boyne Valley and at Loughcrew is well documented and includes the erection of standing stones, stone circles, pit circles and a variety of burial monuments including cists, barrows and ring-ditches. Other aspects of the religious lexicon were satisfied by constructing henges or embanked enclosures which, with the notable exception of the Giant's Ring at Ballynahatty, Co. Down, which surrounds a passage tomb, are typically a little distance from the passage tombs, possibly, as Stout has suggested, closer to sources of copper ore.

It is very difficult to say what was happening at Tara or in its hinterland around the close of the second millennium BC. The discovery of two splendid gold torcs at Tara confirms the site's continuing status and the predominance of Middle Bronze Age and Late Bronze Age artefacts among the corpus of stray finds from the immediate hinterland indicates a strong presence at this time. I have postulated elsewhere that some of the ring-ditches and barrows on Tara (Plate 3) may date from this period, but apart from these no major monuments appear to have been constructed in this immediate area.

The centuries around the birth of Christ witnessed a revival in ritual monument building at Tara. The very large ring-barrows at Tara may have been built around this time and so also was Ráith na Rí, the largest enclosure at Tara, and possibly also the Rath of the Synods (Ráith na Senad). In the immediate hinterland we see the construction of some substantial earthworks, including the enclosures of Rathmiles, Ringlestown Rath and Rath Lugh and the 1.5km long linear earthwork at Riverstown. It is probably significant that this type of military consolidation was happening at around the same time at Navan Fort and it may be a prelude to the sort of fragmentation spoken of earlier.

The Iron Age also saw the deployment of a very interesting strategy whereby older monuments were incorporated into the fabric of new ones in ways that seem deliberately designed to preserve the structural integrity of both, namely, the earlier mound is incorporated into the fabric of the bank surrounding the later one and protrudes outwards so as not to compromise the circularity of the later monument. It would be naïve to conclude, however, that this sort of behaviour is necessarily indicative of social and, to some extent at least, religious continuity without considering also the possibility that the earlier monument is in fact being exploited or explicitly subjugated for political ends. In the case of Tara, however, there are aspects of this phenomenon that allow for a more benign explanation, that is, a genuine desire to integrate old and new. Four of the six or so incorporated monuments on the Hill of Tara appear to be bowl-barrows while the monuments doing the incorporating (*i.e.* the newer monuments) are all large ring-barrows. Chronological analysis of the Irish excavated corpus of these two types is problematic to say the least but preliminary indications are that the former are Bronze Age and the latter Iron Age. Similarities between the two monument types suggest some ideological common ground, even if it was based then, as now, purely on perceived architectural grounds.

In plan, these six or so conjoined earthworks at Tara achieve a figure-of-eight shape – a large circle attached, tangentially, to a smaller one – and this is a noteworthy, recurrent theme throughout Ireland but is particularly visible at the ‘royal’ sites where it presents in the form of earthworks, wooden buildings and in the juxtaposition of monuments and natural and quasi-natural features in the surrounding landscape. The Forradh and Tech Chormaic dominate the crown of the Hill of Tara in a massive figure-of-eight, while the Forradh itself also achieves this shape, fractal-style, through the way in which it incorporates a barrow into its north-eastern quadrant (in reality it incorporates up to three mounds into its middle bank but only one protrudes in an exaggerated and significant way). Cognate examples are known from the crown of the Hill of Uisneach (Macalister and Praeger 1928) and at Lismurtagh (Waddell 1988: pl. 15), which is part of the Rathcroghan complex, and, at a stretch, one could argue that the juxtaposition of Ráith na Rí and the Rath of the Synods is yet another example of this motif. Lynn (1991) has analysed the clear parallels between the huge figure-of-eight wooden buildings at Knockaulin and their smaller, domestic counterparts at Navan Fort. Recent geophysical prospection (Kvamme 1996; Ambos et al. 1996) in the area between Sites A and B at Navan has revealed a virtually identical juxtaposition of large and small circles, the smaller having been partially uncovered during excavation of Site A in the 1960s. Significantly, this couplet is on a scale approaching those at Knockaulin, as are the series of such couplets, presenting as a crop-mark, immediately to the south-east of Tara (Newman 1997: pls 36–8). Finally, similar, though not identical structures have been identified through excavation in a pre-earthwork

phase below the Rath of the Synods (Cooney and Grogan 1991: fig. 8) and through geo-physical survey beneath the surface of Rathcroghan Mound (Fenwick et al. 1996).

Cooney and Grogan (1991: 36–7) have speculated further on this theme citing, *inter alia*, the juxtaposition of Haughey's Fort and the Kings Stables ritual pool and Navan Fort and Loughnashade ritual lake as expressions of the same theme: each important enclosure having its own sacred pool located, figure-of-eight-style to the north-east. Proof that this is prescriptive behaviour is provided by the fact that the Kings Stables is essentially man-made. As it happens the common axis is north-east / south-west, and since this is repeated in almost every other example cited above it is quite likely to be deliberate and to have had special significance. The discovery of an artificially embanked pond to the east-north-east of Tara, very similar in size and shape to the Kings Stables, thus assumes considerable importance as it is likely to have been the ritual pond associated with Tara. Two ponds are also present on the summit and on the south-eastern flank respectively of the Hill of Uisneach.

Finally, one is reminded of the provocative meaning of the name Emain Macha, the Twins of Macha, which has been interpreted as describing a couplet comprising either (1) Ard Macha, *i.e.* the monastery town of Armagh situated on the adjacent hill to the east of Navan Fort, and Navan Fort itself (e.g. Aitcheson 1994), or (2) Haughey's Fort and Navan Fort, the two adjacent, prehistoric hilltop enclosures (Mallory 1995). Both are plausible theories and have much to recommend them, even though the sites in question are at some remove from Navan Fort. A far shorter step, however, is required if one accepts the highly suggestive evidence of a recently published vertical aerial photograph (Kvamme 1996: fig. 1) of the greater Navan region which shows what appears to be the southern-half of a large circular enclosure immediately to the east of Navan Fort. If projected, this enclosure describes a circle, around the same size as Navan Fort itself, which intersects tangentially with the south-eastern side of Navan Fort, figure-of-eight style. Is it possible that this is the footprint of an adjoining site? If so, then it immediately makes more sense of the Irish name for the site, encouraging us to consider the relationship to be that not merely of twins but of Siamese twins.

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