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Source: *The Journal of Irish Archaeology*, Vol. 15 (2006), pp. 15-37

Published by: Wordwell Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20650849>

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The liminal boundary: an analysis of the sacral potency of the ditch at Ráith na Ríg, Tara, Co. Meath

Gerard Dowling

Current approaches to the analysis of artificial boundaries demarcating socially significant space in prehistory emphasise the processes of investing them with profound, 'non-utilitarian' significance. It is argued that their significance stemmed from the perception of physical boundaries as liminal spaces. The concept of liminality as a 'space between' or 'non-space' imbued with magico-religious properties facilitates a framework for understanding why prehistoric ceremonial, funerary and settlement boundaries frequently provide the context for ritual activities and practices associated with formal or structured deposition. In exploring aspects of this approach to artificial boundaries, this paper seeks to appraise the potential meaning attaching to the late prehistoric hengiform enclosure known as Ráith na Ríg on the Hill of Tara, Co. Meath. Reading Ráith na Ríg as a liminal or transitional space—a sacred boundary zone that demarcated the ceremonial space of the interior from the surrounding environment—provides a context within which to understand why human remains, animal bones and artefacts were repeatedly deposited in its internal ditch. This paper proposes that the enclosing elements of Ráith na Ríg may have been intended both to intensify and to contain in their own right the symbolic potency of the boundary zone and the consecrated space of the interior.

INTRODUCTION

Recent excavation of a small portion of the bank and internal ditch along the northern orbit of Ráith na Ríg ('the royal enclosure') on the Hill of Tara, Co. Meath (Roche 2002, 19–83), carried out as an adjunct to unpublished work on the site in the 1950s (Ó Ríordáin 1953, cited in Roche 2002), unearthed a fascinating assemblage of ditch deposits. These deposits—human skulls, an infant burial with dog bones, disarticulated burnt and unburnt animal bones, etc.—and the context of their recovery correspond closely with British and European prehistoric and Iron Age sites and so ought to be analysed within the canon of current international scholarship on the meaning and significance of such deposits. Of particular relevance to this discussion is the tenet that prehistoric communities invested artificial boundaries with profound religious significance. Indeed, in a recent interdisciplinary study of the kingship and landscape of Tara, Co. Meath (Bhreathnach 2005), Mac Giolla Easpaig proposed that the Old Irish place-name *Temair* (modern Tara) may have derived from the Indo-European root **tem-* 'to cut', implying a space that was cut off for sacred purposes. According to Mac Giolla Easpaig (2005, 441), this etymology, which relates the word *temair* to the Greek *temenos* ('sanctuary') and Latin *templum* ('sacred precinct'), suggests that, as a place-name, *temair* was 'a toponymic generic used to refer to sites of a sacred character'. This interpretation of sacred space, which emphasises the potential sacral significance of the physical boundary used to enclose that space,

complements previous work on the subject by Doherty (1985), who argued that the Old Irish word *forrach*—an assembly place within which one could seek protection (see also Mac Giolla Easpaig 2005, 443)—may originally have denoted a pre-Christian 'sanctuary' marked off by a special cut or furrow. Doherty (1985, 56–9) went on to propose that the early Christian church, to replicate the ideal biblical model of the Christian city on earth, may have absorbed pre-Christian conceptions about the sacral significance of artificial boundaries. Hence, in order to sustain the ritual purity of Christian sacred centres a type of monastic enclosure (Old Irish *termonn*; Latin *terminus*) was utilised whose multivallate boundary provided a gradated form of sacred space. In this way the sacred lands of the monastery were divided into three separate precincts: an inner core (*sanctissimus*) entirely restricted to the clergy, a middle precinct (*sanctior*) into which the ordinary laity were permitted, and an outer zone (*sanctus*) in which those guilty of crime could seek sanctuary. As monastic centres offered sanctuary or asylum to members of the secular community, the sanctity of the ecclesiastical boundary (*suburbana*) was guaranteed under early Irish law (F. Kelly 1984, 140–1); to contravene right of protection, a legal privilege also available to those within the house and precincts of a freeman (*maigen dígona*), was to commit the crime of *díguin* ('violation of protection'). Moreover, in a discussion of the annual assembly convened at Teltown, Co. Meath (*óenach Tailten*), Swift (2000, 113–16) suggested that 'secular sanctuary' may have been guaranteed to persons within the precinct or enclosure

(*blai*) of that gathering. In this context, the word *blai*—meaning ‘immunity from liability’ (F. Kelly 1984, 251, n. 44)—may have denoted a discrete area of land whose spatial limits may have been demarcated by standing stones (*ail-blai*) and/or prehistoric burial mounds (*gnoth-blai*).

Developing such ideas concerning the inviolability of enclosure, this paper aims to explore how the artificial boundaries employed to enclose prehistoric funerary and ceremonial monuments may have embodied religious significances for prehistoric communities in Ireland. It will be argued that this significance provides a foundation for understanding why those boundaries, particularly enclosure ditches, frequently formed the focus for ritual activities, such as the lighting of fires, and provided the context for the deposition of ritually charged material such as human and animal remains, metalwork, etc. Given that such a range of material was discovered in the excavated section of the ditch at Ráith na Ríg on the Hill of Tara, this paper also considers the potential ‘meaning’ ascribed to that material and to the enclosure itself.

Recent, post-processual approaches to ceremonial, funerary and settlement boundaries in Britain emphasise how prehistoric and Romano-British communities invested artificial enclosures—earthen banks, ditches, palisades, etc.—with profound symbolic and ritual significance (e.g. see Hingley 1984; 1990a; Parker-Pearson and Richards 1994a; Brück 1995; Hill 1995). This approach, underwritten by current theoretical developments that have allowed archaeologists to generate better-integrated interpretations of the nature of ritual and ceremonial activity in prehistory (Brück 1999a; Bradley 2003; 2005), suggests that the significance of artificial boundary zones was asserted by practices associated with formal or structured deposition. The inclusion of ‘special’ deposits in the perimeter ditch, in those areas of the ditch that lie close to the entrance and/or under the enclosing rampart may have served to reinforce and revitalise symbolically the power of that boundary (see also Fitzpatrick 1997, 78–9; Green 2001; Cunliffe 2005, 576). In this context, physical boundaries may have been perceived as sacral or liminal locations, that is, ‘a space between’ or a ‘non-space’ (McGlade 1990, cited in Hill 1995, 82; Bristow 1998; Smith and Brookes 2001, 6). The importance of these interpretations lies in the fact that they facilitate an alternative perspective on the potential *meaning* of artificial boundaries for prehistoric communities by introducing a framework that seeks to move beyond purely functionalist explanations such as those concerned with demarcation, defence and status.

Apart from a small number of site-specific analyses (Warner 2000; Lynn 2003, 114–15; Cleary 2006, 30;

Waddell, forthcoming), the non-utilitarian significance of physical boundaries in prehistoric Ireland has not been explored in any great detail, despite the fact that excavation at a broad range of prehistoric sites, including ceremonial and funerary enclosures of Iron Age date, clearly indicates that the boundary zone, and in particular the enclosing ditch, was frequently singled out for special deposits and other ritual activity. In interpreting the evidence for such behaviour cognisance needs to be taken of the fact that the act of enclosure is an act of boundary (Webster 1997, 459), and that for many societies boundaries can embody important religious beliefs associated with the concept of liminality.

THINKING ABOUT BOUNDARIES

Liminality—from the Latin *limen*, denoting ‘a position on the threshold’ or a place ‘betwixt and between’—is of major significance in the discussion of boundaries (Davidson 1993, 9). Ultimately, the formation of boundaries is dependent on ‘the exigencies of social interaction’ (Cohen 1985, 12), whereby humans deliberately impose artificial interruptions on space and time, concepts that are traditionally viewed as ‘naturally continuous’ (Leach 1977, 34). While some boundaries, such as cultural, ethnic and linguistic boundaries, are conceptual rather than physical in nature, they nevertheless exercise a powerful, if less tangible, influence on human behaviour. Social boundaries, for example, delimit and encapsulate the identity of individual communities and, in doing so, prescribe the criteria for membership of those communities. Because societies invest boundaries with potent symbolic meanings, the negotiation of boundaries often involves complex social action, i.e. ritual. It has long been recognised, for instance, that transitions within the human life cycle, such as birth, adolescence, marriage, parenthood and death, and temporal transitions, such as night/day, seasonal changes, etc., are imbued with rich symbolic resonance (van Gennep 1960; Rees and Rees 1961; Smith and Brookes 2001, 5–6). During the course of human life, changes in social status, for example from unmarried to married or from adolescence to adulthood, are commonly marked by some form of ritualised behaviour (Leach 1977). Equally, it is well known that the major calendrical boundaries in the ‘Celtic’ year, the so-called quarter days—*Imbolc* (1 February), *Bealtaine* (1 May), *Lughnasa* (1 August) and *Samhain* (1 November)—were divisions or interruptions in the annual cycle of the agricultural year (Rees and Rees 1961, 89–94; Danaher 1972; Davidson 1993, 9). Each seasonal boundary was defined by major assemblies and festivals, periods of ritualised

social interaction, such as the famous *Óenach Tailten* held at Teltown, Co. Meath, under the aegis of the Uí Neill kings of Tara (Charles-Edwards 2000; Swift 2000).

In his analysis of boundaries, van Gennep (1960, 11), who introduced the subject of liminality to modern scholarship, proposed that crossing important boundaries can involve three different stages or rites of passage: (i) pre-liminal rites of separation (e.g. cleansing rituals, funeral processions and pilgrimages); (ii) liminal transitional rites (pregnancy, the violent overthrow of customary order during a period of socio-political change, etc.); and (iii) post-liminal rites of incorporation (e.g. entry into a temple, the onset of married life, the period after birth). Transitional rites, defined as special activities undertaken during ceremonial or ritual occasions, enable individuals and communities to successfully navigate ambiguous and potentially dangerous boundaries (van Gennep 1960, 11; Leach 1977, 35). The need to properly negotiate boundaries stems from the belief that boundaries symbolise transitional periods or liminal zones, that is, marginal states between, outside of and not subject to the normal bounds of life (Turner 1980; Davidson 1993). Turner (1986, 41), who developed van Gennep's concept of liminality, described it as a 'fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities', where normal social standards and behaviours are suspended—'a world turned upside down'. In this context transitional rites, which, according to van Gennep (1960), were a means of regeneration and reintegration within society, take place in intervals of 'social timelessness' or periods of 'no man's time' (Leach 1977, 35). The carnivals of early modern Europe provide an interesting example of liminal periods when 'status, identity and the existing value system were inverted' (Bourke 2001, 134). Common activities during the carnival included the crowning of animals such as goats, the wearing of masks, the dressing of women as men and vice versa, and the encouragement of licentious behaviour (*ibid.*).

For many societies, ambiguity surrounding the definition of boundaries produces a constant source of anxiety and conflict (Leach 1977, 34). As a result, liminal/boundary situations and roles are almost everywhere 'attributed with magico-religious properties' (Turner 1969, 108, cited in Woodcock 2005, 15). Temporal and spatial boundaries are therefore times and places where the supernatural 'intrudes through the surface of existence' (Rees and Rees 1966, 94)—periods when 'ghosts return to the world of the living and witches can work magic' (*loc. cit.*). This intersection with the paranormal creates the conditions that lead societies to invest liminal states and places with sacred values. The connections between liminality and the supernatural may cause otherworld forces to seep out

into this reality, however; in this way, liminality can also introduce a potential source of pollution (Woodcock 2005). As Leach (1977, 35), in his discussion of boundaries, puts it:

'A boundary separates two zones of social space-time which are *normal, time-bound, clear-cut, central, secular*, but the spatial and temporal markers which actually serve as boundaries are themselves *abnormal, ambiguous, timeless, at the edge, sacred* . . . it is the boundaries that matter; we concentrate our attention on the differences not the similarities, and this makes us feel that the markers of such boundaries are of special value, "sacred", "taboo".'

In this context, the definition of sacredness, the placement of taboo and the performance of rituals permit societies to 'manipulate liminal situations in order to overcome the vulnerability of transition' (Hamilton 1995). As a result, adherence to religious tradition reasserts control and maintains social stability (*ibid.*).

TERRITORIAL/TOPOGRAPHICAL BOUNDARIES

In any discussion about the nature of boundaries, the presence of topographical and geomorphological boundaries such as rivers, lakes, bogs and mountains should not be overlooked. In Ireland (as elsewhere) there is abundant archaeological and historical evidence to indicate that certain landscape features, isolated from the world of daily life, were infused with a profound sense of sacredness (e.g. O'Lochlainn 1940; Ó Ríain 1972; Cooney and Grogan 1994; Bourke 2001; E. Kelly 2006). As Ó Ríain (1974, 67–8), in his discussion of the nature of territorial boundaries in the early medieval period, states:

'the sacredness of topographical boundaries is nowhere more aptly expressed than in the tendency to allocate lands on or near it to members of the professional classes [e.g. religious figures, the hospitaller (*brugaid*) and historian (*seanchaid*)], all of whom enjoyed, in early Ireland, a measure of otherworldliness'.

In the past, the sacredness of topographical boundaries may have been related to a conception of those boundaries as liminal places; in fact, the concept of liminality may, to some extent, explain why objects were frequently incorporated into certain marginal locations during prehistory. Indeed, van Gennep (1960) suggested that, like the transition of significant

conceptual boundaries, the safe crossing of important topographical/territorial borders is marked by rites of transition.

Topographical boundaries are in fact 'juncture points' on the landscape, places of potential 'socio-political friction' (Lefebvre 1991, 193). In the past, the symbolic significance of territorial boundaries and their transition points was often enhanced by the construction of monuments such as megalithic tombs, standing stones,¹ hillforts and linear earthworks (e.g. Bradley 1984; Parker-Pearson 1993). In employing natural features to demarcate the extent of social territories, prehistoric and early medieval communities imbued those topographical features with symbolic and religious significance, the cultural import of which is attested by the practice of deposition.

Whilst the liminal nature of large bodies of water such as lakes and rivers has been explored in a number of recent studies (see e.g. Bourke 2001; Fredengren 2002, 258–61), the deposition of various items at fording points (i.e. transition points) along river systems is of particular interest. During the Neolithic period, for example, the most common location for the discovery of stone axeheads is in wetland contexts (Cooney 2000, 208). Fordings points, especially those along major rivers such as the Shannon and the Bann, were frequently marked out for deposition (Simpson 1993; Sheridan *et al.* 1992; Cooney 2000, 208–10). By the early second millennium BC the practice of depositing objects in marginal locations once again emerges as a prominent aspect of the archaeological record, as large quantities of metalwork, in particular weapons such as rapiers, dirks and axeheads, were ceremonially placed into rivers, lakes and bogs (see Cooney and Grogan 1994; B. Raftery 1994a). Significantly, large concentrations of Bronze Age metalwork have been recorded at fording points along a number of river systems, for instance the River Shannon (Eogan 1983; Bourke 2001). Fordings points are also prominent in early Irish mythology, where the custom of armed combat at territorial boundaries, for example Cú Chulainn's battle with Ferdia at the ford on the River Dee (Rolleston 1911, 216–18), often achieves a special resonance. As Rees and Rees (1961, 94) note, the impact of legendary fights at topographical boundaries and natural transitional points is enhanced by the 'mysterious character of the boundary'. Van Gennep's (1960, 25) suggestion that river crossings are often accompanied by ceremonies to aid the transition of boundaries may be applied here to make some sense of the broad range of prehistoric material recorded at locations like fording points. Indeed, for prehistoric societies, who inhabited a world imbued with religious meaning (Tuan 1977; Sack 1980), the deposition of 'ritually charged' material into

natural boundaries may have served to 'ritually reinforce' that boundary, while focusing attention on the boundary deposition may also have highlighted the distinctions between the different communities who resided on either side of it.

In late prehistory, topographical boundaries apparently sustained their particular sacral or 'otherworldly' characteristics (Wait 1985; Ó hÓgáin 1999), and wetland contexts continued to attract votive offerings, such as weapons, personal ornaments and gold objects (e.g. B. Raftery 1983; Cooney and Grogan 1994, 195–9). Bogs in particular frequently served as repositories for ceremonial offerings (B. Raftery 1994a, 98; E. Kelly 2006), principally those items associated with horse-riding (see B. Raftery 1983). Furthermore, a large number of individuals, ritually sacrificed, have been discovered in bogs across northern Europe (Glob 1969). These so-called 'bog bodies' may have been deposited in bogs because of a belief that their 'life essence' would appease the gods and thus that, in return, those deities would guarantee the well-being of the living community (Green 1997, 80). Moreover, the 'liminal' or 'transitory' nature of the decomposing human corpse serves to reinforce the impression that bogs were regarded as liminal locations (Brück 1995, 260). Ritual practices associated with deposition at topographical and geomorphological boundaries underscore the cultural significance of those boundaries. Interestingly, the evidence from many sites of ceremonial significance in late prehistoric Europe also indicates that deposition, particularly in the enclosing ditch, formed an important aspect of religious behaviour. A major significance of this type of activity lies in the fact that it communicates how central physical boundaries were to the maintenance of sacred space.

CEREMONIAL BOUNDARIES IN LATE PREHISTORIC EUROPE

In conventional terms, 'sacred space' is regarded as fundamental to religious expression as it is often conceived of as 'the liminal setting reserved for the performance of religious ritual' (Smith 2001, 6). The definition of sacred space relies on the identification of a 'special place that is held to be manifestly different from the surrounding environment' (Eliade 1990, 107); it is a space that is 'singled out and detached within profane space' (*ibid.*). On the other hand, non-sacred or profane space may be understood as a 'non-real amorphous expanse surrounding sacred space' (Mac Giolla Easpaig 2005, 441) in which the day-to-day activities of the living community unfold. While some sacred sites require no human intervention to qualify as

‘sacred’—e.g. lakes, springs and mountains (Green 1986, 17)—other so-called ‘cult’ centres are often clearly demarcated through the use of physical boundaries. In enclosing ceremonial space, physical boundaries serve to define the sacred or liminal precinct. In this context, physical boundaries control access to, and prevent ritual pollution of, sacred space: in other words, physical boundaries are central to sustaining ritual purity (Green 1997, 120; Cole 2004, 47). So important is the boundary element to sacred space that ‘it is frequently among the first structural components to appear’ (Turner 1979, 15, cited in Smith 2001, 7).

A common aspect of ceremonial sites in late prehistoric Europe was the use of physical boundaries to enclose the sacred centre. In the Classical world, for instance, anxieties about the ritual pollution of a sacred area (Greek *hieron*; Latin *loca sancta*) led to the appearance of easily identifiable religious sanctuaries, often defined by physical boundaries and elaborate entrances (MacCormack 2003; Cole 2004, 40). In Greek, the word *temenos* describes a sacred place that was cut off or marked off from normal human settlement through the use of a special ditch, boundary stones (*horoi*), wooden signs or an enclosing wall (*peribolos*) (Cole 2004, 42).² The deliberate or inadvertent contamination of a sacred area meant that the enclosing boundary required routine ritual repair (*ibid.*, 47). In Greece the ritual restoration of temple boundaries involved, in its typical form, ‘cutting the throat of a new born piglet and walking around the perimeter letting the blood drip from the carcass’ (*peritemnein choirō* ‘to cut a circuit with a pig’) (*ibid.*). Thus, once the boundary was cleansed, the sacred status of the site was restored. Physical boundaries were also employed at many ceremonial centres used by late prehistoric communities in northern and central Europe, and when the boundary zones at these cult centres are examined it is apparent that they frequently formed the focus for ceremonial behaviour.

In north-west and central Europe there were many different types of cult sites, for example sacred groves or forest clearings (Greek *nemeton* ‘holy wood’; Old Irish *fidnemed*) (Green 1986, 21, 111–12; Webster 1997, 448–9), water sources such as lakes, bogs, rivers and wells, and so-called ‘ritual shafts’ (Ross 1967; Wait 1985; Green 1986, 155–7). In addition, a variety of ceremonial sites were visibly enhanced by the use of artificial boundaries to demarcate the spatial limits of the sacred zone. Some of the earliest types of enclosed ceremonial centres in late prehistoric Europe include large, elongated enclosures, defined by a ditch and bank, at places such as Libenice, near Köln in Bavaria, and Goloring, near Coblenz (Ross 1967, 104–12; Davidson 1988, 27–30). The so-called *Viereckschanzen*

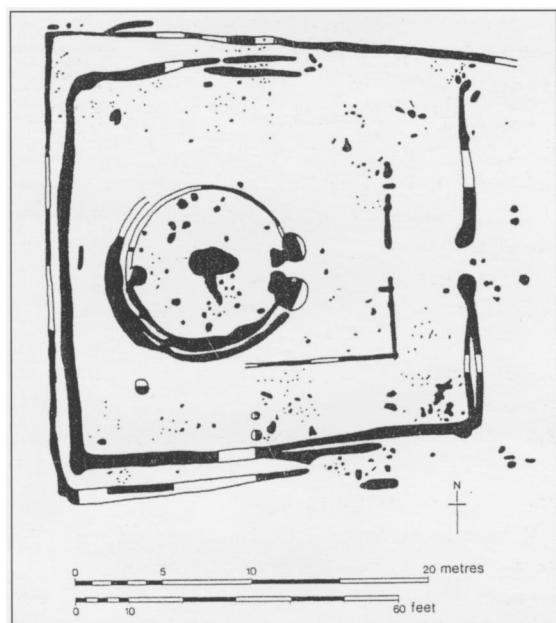


Fig. 1—Ground-plan of the late Iron Age circular timber shrine and other features set within a fenced enclosure at Hayling Island in Hampshire, southern Britain (after King and Soffe 1994, fig. 33.2).

of central Europe are typically defined by a large, internal earthen bank fronted by a wide ditch that enclosed an area about one hectare in size (Green 1986). At Holzhausen in Bavaria, southern Germany, for instance, the enclosing bank and ditch defined a number of deep shafts or wells, some of which were filled with votive offerings (James 1993, 94). Other sites across central Europe, such as Mšecké Zehrovice in Bohemia (Venclová 1993) and the enclosure at the *oppidum* of Manching in southern Germany (Sievers 1991), the enclosing ditch of which contained part of an Iron Age sword, have been related on morphological grounds to the phenomenon of the *Viereckschanzen*.³

While many Iron Age shrines in Britain appear to have been rebuilt in stone during the Romano-British period, most scholars (*pace* Lewis 1966) now accept that the concept of bounded sacred space was also a feature of pre-Roman societies, particularly in southern Britain (Drury 1980; Woodward 1992). Sites identified as Iron Age shrines are typically characterised by an internal circular or rectangular building (Latin *cella*), usually surrounded by an outer, rectangular or circular enclosure that created an ambulatory running around the outside of the shrine (Cunliffe 2004, 112) (see Fig. 1). The use of an outer boundary also served to isolate the central ‘sacred building’ from the external environment.

The most notable examples of enclosed ritual centres on the Continent are the so-called ‘Belgic

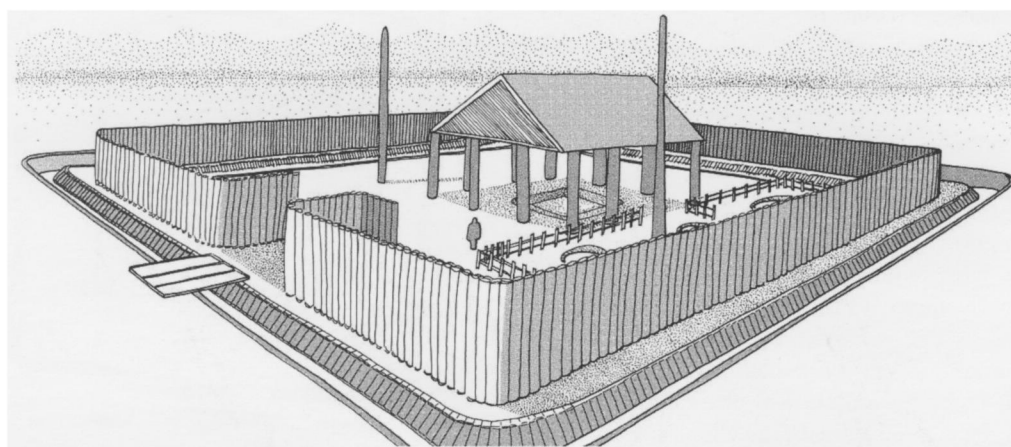


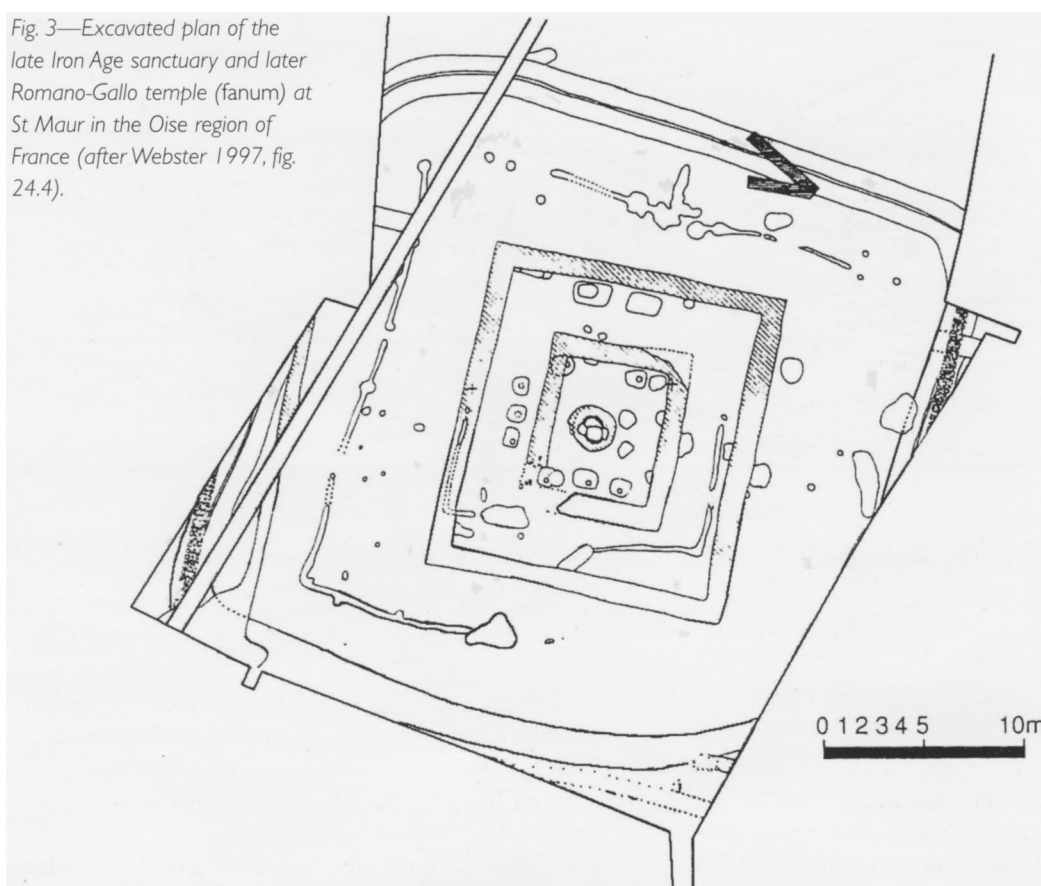
Fig. 2—Reconstruction of the 'Belgic sanctuary' at Gournay-sur-Aronde as it may have looked in the late third/early second century BC (after Green 1997, 121).

sanctuaries' of northern Gaul (e.g. Ribemont-sur-Ancre and Chilly on the Somme; Gournay-sur-Aronde and Saint Maur in Oise). These sites are primarily distinguished by the remarkable nature of the archaeological remains (votive offerings or sacrificial remains in the form of human and animal remains, broken weapons, etc.), the use of enclosure—generally a ditch and wooden palisade—to demarcate the sacred space of the interior, and the presence of a 'temple', a group of posts or a series of pits in the interior (Brunaux 1988, 12). Gournay-sur-Aronde, located at the edge of the Bellovacii *oppidum* in Oise (Brunaux 1988, 13–16; Derks 1998, 170–5) (see Fig. 2), was in use from at least the fourth to the mid-first century BC, when the internal wooden temples were burnt and the pits and ditches carefully backfilled.⁴ Excavations revealed a complex sequence of events in which a series of internal features⁵ were enclosed by a variety of boundary elements. In the fourth century BC the site consisted of a rectangular enclosure (45m by 38m), with an eastern entrance, defined by a ditch and a low, internal, earthen bank (Webster 1997, 455). By the mid-third century BC the original ditch, now lined with wood, was supplemented by an external wooden palisade, possibly erected to 'hide' internal activity (*ibid.*). By the late third/early second century BC the boundary—palisade and internal ditch—was enlarged by the addition of a second, outer ditch. A remarkable feature of the enclosing ditches, particularly the internal ditch, was the prodigious collection of broken weapons and animal bones gradually deposited in the ditches during the life-span of the sanctuary—more than 2,000 weapons and 3,000 animal bones (Brunaux 1988, 15). The eastern entrance was also singled out for special

attention: enormous heaps of cattle skulls and weapons were found in the ditch on either side of the entrance, and an immense portico was erected over the gate on which hung the skulls of both humans and animals (*ibid.*, 27).

At other sanctuaries the enclosing ditches were also the focus for intense ritual activity, which often took the form of acts of deposition of weapons, human remains, animal bones, etc. At Saint Maur in Oise (Brunaux and Lambot 1991; Brunaux 1988, 23–4), for instance, hundreds of weapons were placed into the enclosing ditch over several centuries (see Fig. 3). Animal bones, weapons, brooches and human skulls were also found in the ditch of the inner sanctuary at the promontory settlement of Montmartin in northern Gaul (Bradley 2005, 180–1). At Montmartin the human skulls found in the enclosing ditch may have originally hung on a perimeter wall (*ibid.*). Also, at the so-called 'ossuary' at Ribemont-sur-Ancre on the Somme (Brunaux 1988, 16–21) human remains and weapons were placed around the edge of the shrine's perimeter ditch. This intense focus on the enclosing ditch at many of the Belgic sanctuaries is especially noteworthy and deserves further comment. In their early stages (c. 500–c. 250 BC), many of the cult centres in northern Gaul had no internal features and were simply clear spaces demarcated by a ditch, sometimes with a wooden palisade (Webster 1997, 459). Thereafter, the boundaries became more elaborate. Webster (*loc. cit.*) has argued that the boundary did not simply serve to delimit sacred space but was itself 'a primary focus of cult activity'. In other words, and this is an extremely important point, the ditch itself was 'sacred space' (*ibid.*).

Fig. 3—Excavated plan of the late Iron Age sanctuary and later Romano-Gallo temple (fanum) at St Maur in the Oise region of France (after Webster 1997, fig. 24.4).



The ritual activity evidenced around the entrance to the ceremonial site at Gournay is indicative of its importance. The entrance forms an important element in the definition of sacred space and may be conceived of as a symbolically charged threshold or transitional zone. At sacred space the entrance, which symbolises the passage from one mode of existence to another (from one world to another), is inherently ambiguous as it belongs neither to the profane world of the exterior nor the sacred space of the interior (Gheorghiu 2001). Because of this ambiguity, entrances, which are often clearly demarcated, may be the locations of specific ritual activity (Smith 2001, 7). The performance of protective rites associated with this act of transition may explain the presence of various items deposited at entrances. For instance, after the early first century AD most of the objects (coins, brooches, horse-riding equipment, broken weapons, animal bones, etc.) deposited at the Celtic shrine at Hayling Island in southern England were placed at the eastern entrance to the main, outer enclosure (Bradley 2005, 182–4). Equally, the fragmentary human and animal skeletons, such as skulls or jaw bones, found at entrances to ceremonial sites such as Gournay may, as Bristow (1998, 209) suggests, have been ‘prophylactic symbols’ employed to prevent dangerous otherworldly powers from disrupting the transition across the

boundary. At late Bronze Age farmsteads in Britain, such as Pimperne Down in Dorset (Harding 1972) and South Hornchurch in Essex (Guttmann and Last 2000), entrances were sometimes marked out with human remains, which, as Brück (1995, 257–60) has suggested, may have served to ‘heighten the awareness of the moment of transition and the potential danger in crossing the boundary’.⁶

In Ireland, limited investigation of the inner ditch of the late Bronze Age multivallate hilltop enclosure at Haughey’s Fort, Co. Armagh (Mallory and Lynn 2002, 535–6; Lynn 2003, 65–70), revealed evidence of depositional practices associated with a potential entrance feature (see Fig. 4). The inner ditch, which yielded large quantities of animal bone, two dog skulls, pottery sherds, etc. (Lynn 2003, 67), appeared to terminate at a specific point in the eastern quadrant of the hill, where its projected line was taken up by two large and deep pits (Mallory and Lynn 2002, 535). These pits, each of which may once have held upright timbers, contained structured deposits in the form of animal bones (cattle, pig and red deer) and sherds of late Bronze Age coarse pottery (*ibid.*). Since both pits demarcated the line of the inner ditch it was proposed that they may have functioned as a ritual perimeter. Additionally, given their location and spacing, as well as the suspected presence of wooden posts, they may once

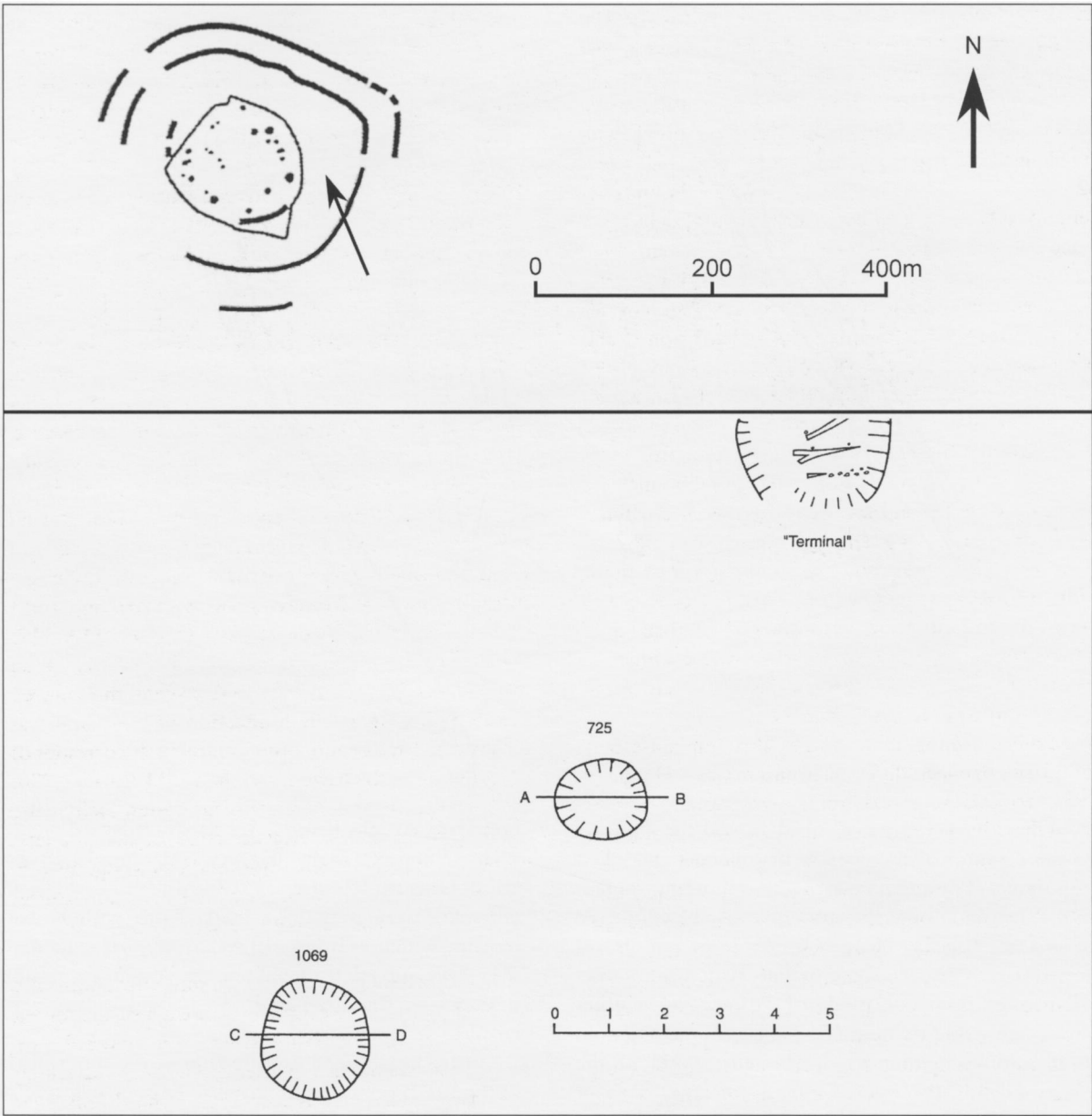


Fig. 4—Top: Ground-plan of Haughey's Fort, Co. Armagh, showing approximate location of inner ditch terminal (arrowed) (after Mallory and Lynn 2002, fig. 1). Bottom: Post-excavation plan of the inner ditch 'terminal' and two large pits, i.e. features labelled 725 and 1069 (after Mallory and Lynn 2002, fig. 3).

have demarcated an entrance gap. The inclusion of deposits at the base of these pits may have served to augment the symbolic power of the threshold and related features (i.e. the wooden uprights), and thus individuals who were routinely required to cross the boundary zone were afforded some form of ritual protection. A similar hypothesis may be suggested for the role of two pits that flanked the entrance gap to the Phase I (late Iron Age?) penannular ditched enclosure at Rathnew, on the summit of the Hill of Uisneach, Co. Westmeath (see Schot, this volume). At Rathnew the two entrance pits also contained deposits, recently

reinterpreted as being structured/formal in nature: an iron knife at the base of one and, in both, a thick layer of ashes covered by a deposit of unburnt animal bones.⁷

NEW APPROACHES TO 'ENCLOSURE'

Many archaeologists, especially those working within a post-processual theoretical framework, now understand that architectural boundaries are 'concretisations of existential space' in that they are the way in which undifferentiated space is transformed, delimited and

made intelligible (Parker-Pearson and Richards 1994a, 4). As Smith and Brookes (2001, 5) suggest, the construction of artificial boundaries defines space in order 'to create order out of chaos'. By classifying the world into meaningful units, physical boundaries enable it to be understood and acted upon (Hill 1995, 82). Moreover, the creation of physical boundaries cements collective identity by creating and delimiting space (i.e. they define and control 'place'), channelling movement, creating distinctions (interior versus exterior), marking out social oppositions (e.g. 'insider' versus 'outsider'; 'inclusion' versus 'exclusion'), and encapsulating the independence and autonomy of the resident group (i.e. sustaining 'social isolation') (Hingley 1990a, 96, 100; Tilley 1994, 16–17; Thomas 1997, 211; Whittle *et al.* 1999). Therefore, once constructed, the physicality of architectural boundaries affects how people and communities live by clarifying social roles and relations. As Brück (1995, 257–9) observes, architectural boundaries are 'good to think with', in that they metaphorically express some of the anxieties surrounding social distinctions and states of being—that is, enclosure boundaries provide a physical manifestation of ideas about 'residents' versus 'non-residents', 'nature' versus 'culture', etc.

Modern ethnographic studies also emphasise that boundaries between different communities—Hingley's (1984) 'zones of social exclusion'—are strongly stressed even when those boundaries are not physically marked on the ground. The example provided by the phenomenon known as 'beating the bounds' (Davidson 1993, 8) illustrates how some communities demarcate and maintain boundaries that bear no surface trace. This activity, carried out annually on every Rogationtide Day, involved a procession around a number of English parish boundaries, and thus the status and power of the boundaries were symbolically reaffirmed (see also Hole 1978, 252). In her discussion of modern Gypsy culture in Britain, Okely (1983) suggested that many Gypsies sustain their identity in the face of non-Gypsy or 'settled communities' by extending their spatial limits to the edges of their encampment and throwing rubbish over the boundary edge (Parker-Pearson and Richards 1994a, 25). In this way some Gypsy groups, through the disposal of waste material, create a symbolic boundary between the 'minority and majority' (Okely 1983, 78, cited in Donnan and Wilson 1999, 22). In this context, domestic waste should perhaps not simply be categorised as casually dumped rubbish, for, as Pollard (1995, 142) notes, it 'holds other values or associations which were being manipulated through deposition'. In prehistoric enclosure ditches, for example, domestic debris could have embodied conceptions of harvest and fertility (Brück 1999c), whereby waste, a potential source of manure, may have

represented 'a symbolic means of fertility and regeneration' (Brück 1995, 255). Moreover, as domestic waste may also have been considered 'polluted' or 'hazardous', its deposition in settlement ditches probably served to focus attention on that boundary—i.e. 'the edge of the safe and familiar world' (Brück 1999b, 153). Thus waste material in a feature routinely encountered during everyday life may have reinforced the identity of residents or insiders by stressing the differences to non-residents or outsiders (Hill 1995, 83).

Cultural anthropologists also stress that the act of delimiting space was, in many respects, a sacred action. Indeed, in the past ritual practice and religious belief were not separated from the world of everyday life (e.g. see Pollard 1995; Brück 1999; Fulford 2001; Bradley 2005). According to Sack (1980), traditional societies occupy a world very different to our own, in which conceptions of space are redolent with sacral and mystical qualities. This way of being creates a 'mythical-magical' mode of perceiving the universe and one's place in it (*ibid.*). Eliade (1954, 18; 1990, 110, 112) argued that many non-western societies believe that all aspects of creation originally took place in the 'centre', i.e. the point where the foundation of the world was believed to have begun—the 'centre' itself corresponds to a 'rupture of the Sacred into the world' (Eliade 1990, 112). Therefore all architectural structures, such as the building of an enclosure or the construction of a city, represent 'a symbolic repetition of the cosmogony' (i.e. all structures are an imitation of the original creation myth—an *imago mundi*) (*ibid.*). Eliade further states:

'The repetition of the cosmogony and the symbolism of the centre are not exclusive to sacred architecture: the same rituals and symbols are present when it is a matter of building a dwelling which to our eyes is "profane". [The dwelling] is consecrated by its very architectonic structure exactly like a temple' (Eliade 1990, 113).

The sacral significance of construction is reiterated by Tuan, who suggested that among illiterate societies architecture forms 'a key to comprehending reality' (1977, 102); a planned city or a simple dwelling can be a 'symbol of the cosmos', where 'to build is a religious act, the establishment of a world in the midst of primeval disorder' (*op. cit.*, 104). Ethnographic studies also provide many illustrations of how buildings or settlements can incorporate powerful symbolic narratives in architectural forms that people in modern society often classify as 'profane'. For example, the pattern of tepees erected by the nomadic Pawnee Indians of the North American plains was apparently designed to represent the stars in the heavens (an *imago*

mundi), and the construction of cities in India is designed according to a mandala—a square divided into 32 quarters—so that the city replicates a ‘cosmic image of the laws governing the universe’ (Sack 1980, 155–6).

The concept of architecture as a symbolic representation of the cosmic order is in fact exemplified in the layout of Roman cities and towns (Tuan 1977; Sack 1980). As Thorpe (1995) argues, new Roman towns were designed as miniature copies of Rome itself. Ceremonial and religious rites, carried out by a group of officials known as the *tresviri coloniae deducendae* (‘commission of three to found a colony’; Guest 2002, 80), were integral to the process of founding a new town. Once the most auspicious location for the future town had been decided, an *augur* (a veiled diviner) used a *lituus* (a curved staff/wand) to establish the orientation of the urban grid and fix the boundaries of the new town, usually in a square or rectangular plan (Guest 2002, 80; Woodward and Woodward 2004, 82). When the limits of the urban boundary had been set by the *augur*, the sacred furrow (the *sulcus primigenius*) was cut by the town’s founder, who covered his head and ploughed the furrow in an anti-clockwise direction using a bronze ploughshare (*portare*) yoked to a white ox and cow (Guest 2002, 80). During the cutting, any earth that fell outside the furrow was ceremoniously thrown inside the boundary and the position of the entrance was marked by the founder, who lifted the plough over the place where the gate (*porta*) would later be located (*ibid.*). According to Roman writers, the first furrow was sacred and, once scored, could not be violated without the risk of religious sanction; in Roman legend, Remus was killed after he jumped over the sacred ridge and furrow created by his brother Romulus (*ibid.*, 80). The gateway, although protected by the two-faced god Janus, did not have the same degree of sanctity, so everyday traffic across the boundary was permitted (Parker-Pearson and Richards 1994b, 39).

THE ‘SACRED BOUNDARY’ IN LATE PREHISTORY

The sacral or liminal character of physical boundaries may derive from the fact that the elements that define the boundary are by their very nature artificial markers that ‘take up’ space but are themselves ‘no space’ (Leach 1977); in that way, artificial boundaries impose a ‘discontinuity in social space’ (Hingley 1984, 24). The liminal nature of enclosure boundaries could be further emphasised by the incorporation of human remains into those boundaries, whereby the liminal status of the decomposing corpse stands as ‘a metaphor of social and

moral transition’ (Metcalf and Huntington 1991, 72, after Turner 1969, 98). Indeed, as Brück (1995, 255) notes, human remains were ‘very often placed in locations that were liminal in character’.

It has been argued that attempts to symbolically reinforce the protective strength of boundary zones involved the incorporation of human remains and select metal objects into enclosure ditches, for instance the burial of adult male inhumations (sacrificial victims or casualties of war) and hoards of iron ingots (so-called currency bars) in Iron Age hillfort boundaries in Britain (Wait 1985; Hingley 1990c; Green 2001, 146). Cunliffe (2005, 576) has also suggested that the regular recutting of ditches and the heightening of counterscarp banks at hillforts—maintenance acts that did little to enhance the defensive potential of the boundary—may have represented attempts to renew or revitalise the symbolic significance of the enclosing elements. Similarly, the lighting of fires in or around enclosure ditches may have been designed to cleanse the boundary of malignant influences and revitalise the protective strength of the perimeter zone. Evidence for *in situ* burning along the bottom of the ditches enclosing prehistoric funerary monuments in Ireland, such as the phase II (Bronze Age) ring-barrow ditch at Kilmahuddrick, Co. Dublin (Doyle 2005, 46–9), or the ditch enclosing the large Iron Age ring-ditch (site no. 1) at Ballydavis, Co. Offaly (Keeley 1999), could therefore indicate a belief in the purificatory effects of fire and its link with fertility and rebirth (e.g. see Frazer 1922, 647–50; Lévi-Strauss 1970; Bristow 1998, 223). A large fire was also lit along the south-western line of the enclosing ditch of the phase I (late Iron Age?) penannular ditched enclosure on the summit of the Hill of Uisneach (Macalister and Praeger 1928; see Schot, this volume). An extensive ash bed containing the disarticulated remains of burnt animals was interpreted by the excavators as the remains of sacrificial offerings (Macalister and Praeger 1928, 92–4). This material appeared to have accumulated over the ditch at Rathnew after it had silted halfway up (*ibid.*). Fires were also lit in the silted ditches of two funerary monuments (tumulus 6 and tumulus 7) at Carrowjames II, Co. Mayo (J. Raftery 1940–1). The lighting of fires in the silting ditches of some sites may therefore have been intended to reinstate the purity of the enclosing boundary and to restore the sacred status of the space within.

What may be referred to as the ‘burial’ of the boundary enclosing the late Bronze Age cemetery at Gransha, Co. Derry, recalls the closure of the ceremonial centre at Gourney in the mid-first century BC, when that site was levelled and the deposit-rich ditches filled in (Brunaux 1988, 14) (see above). At Gransha (Chapple 2004) a circular, segmented ditch

enclosing a 'cist cemetery' of late second-millennium BC date produced large quantities of pottery and pieces of flint (worked and unworked). The presence of this material, which was found at the base of the ditch under a layer of soil and stones, led the excavator (*op. cit.*, 33) to conclude that the ditch had been ritually backfilled. Both the cist cemetery and its backfilled perimeter ditch were subsequently enclosed by a large, oval timber palisade, which at a later date was removed and thereafter the exposed cut of the ditch backfilled with soil, shale, pottery and flint (*ibid.*, 35). The activity at Gransha underscores the significance attached to the boundary zone by the community who utilised the site. Interestingly, in this case it appears that the visible, subsurface ditch cuts were 'ritually augmented' with the inclusion of certain objects and then sealed and preserved as the site went out of use.

THE DITCH: A PENETRATION INTO THE UNDERWORLD?

In late prehistoric 'Celtic' societies the sacral significance of artificial boundaries—particularly the enclosing ditch at ceremonial sites—may, in part, have derived from religious beliefs that connected subterranean contexts with chthonic or underground forces. While this particular association is perhaps tentative, it is nonetheless reasonable to suggest that the performance of complex rites and the location of taboo at artificial boundaries served to protect individuals and the wider community from the potentially dangerous and ambiguous magico-religious properties of the boundary. It may therefore have been understood that in boundary places individuals risked exposure to the ambivalent temperament of the supernatural. Equally, it may also have been held that potentially dangerous forces, profanities, could emanate from boundary spaces and pollute the temporal sphere of everyday life as well as the hallowed space of the interior. As suggested above, ditches may have been perceived as special cuts that penetrated the life-giving earth, and it has been suggested that the importance of the earth to agricultural communities may have developed from the belief that the earth was the abode of underground or chthonic deities who controlled the annual cycle of fertility (Wait 1985; Green 2001, 129–35; Brunaux 1988; Cunliffe 2005, 570–2; Fitzpatrick 1997, 80). Ceremonial acts or practices associated with formal deposition were frequently focused on the perimeter ditch and may have been intended to appease those into whose space the ditch had intruded. Openings into the earth, whether in the form of deep pits or ditches, may therefore have been conceived of as a 'threshold [space] between the earth and underworld'

(Green 2001, 134). The cutting of ditches may have, in effect, opened 'conduits' to the underworld, thus enabling communication with, and facilitating transmission from, those all-important chthonic deities. Indeed, as Cunliffe (1992, 78) suggests, it would be surprising if 'a community, whose survival was based on the success of its crops, did not have a system of placating the deities who controlled fertility'.

A specific example of this type of religious belief in late prehistoric Europe is provided by ritual activity recorded at the settlement of Acy-Romance in the Ardennes region of northern France (Green 2001, 130–2). There, during the second and first centuries BC, a large D-shaped ditched enclosure, centrally placed within the settlement, was gradually filled with the remains of ritual feasting in the form of large quantities of cattle and horse bones. The remains of five rectangular structures, interpreted as temples by the excavator, were discovered along the western edge of the enclosure ditch, in front of which stood a terrace containing the skeletal remains of nineteen individuals who appeared to have been sacrificed and placed in a life-like sitting position. Green suggested that the religious ceremonies at Acy-Romance were related to fertility rites in which the life-essence of the decomposing sacrificial victims and the remains of the ritual feasts were given to chthonic forces. Additionally, Brunaux (1988, 28–30) has related the use of pits found inside Gallic sanctuaries and other Celtic cult centres on the Continent, such as Libenice, to the worship of chthonic deities who were appeased with the decomposing carcasses of butchered animals. Moreover, the fact that broken or 'decommissioned' weapons were placed in the ditches enclosing Belgic sanctuaries could reflect the belief that sacrifices had to be destroyed in order to enter the Otherworld (Green 1992, 94). In discussing the large numbers of pits, originally used to store grain, found inside the perimeter of Iron Age hillforts in southern Britain, Cunliffe (1992) noted that they were later backfilled with special deposits—burials (human and animal), domestic 'rubbish' (pottery, quernstones, chalk weights and grain) and metalwork (horse gear and vehicle fittings). Suggesting that each pit represented 'a single intervention into the realms of the underworld', Cunliffe (*op. cit.*, 79) proposed that at liminal periods between harvest and germination the pits were used to store propitiatory gifts destined for 'the supernatural guardians and producers of the crop'.

The rites associated with votive pits at Iron Age hillforts in Britain have been related to the religious practices expressed in the so-called 'ritual shafts' and 'ritual wells' distributed across certain regions of pre-Roman Europe (Germany, France and Britain) and Roman Britain (Ross 1967; Wait 1985; Webster 1997, 451–2). In Britain the use of such shafts appears to have

originated in the Bronze Age, as evidenced at the circular shaft at Wilsford in Wiltshire (Wait 1985, 260; Green 1986, 133). During the Iron Age and Roman period, however, a wide variety of deep shafts, sometimes up to 76m in depth, as at Findon in West Sussex (Ross 1967), were dug and filled with votive offerings, often in the form of human and animal remains, wooden figurines and pottery, etc. These pits may have provided a location for the placement of gifts to deities who were believed to control fertility (Green 1986, 135; Webster 1986). Religious activities associated with underground shafts in Britain may have related to similar practices connected to pits and wells found inside *Viereckschanzen*, such as Holzhausen and Fellbach Schmiden, in central Europe (Brunaux 1988). In Britain the vast majority of 'ritual pits/shafts' date from the late pre-Roman Iron Age (c. first century BC–first century AD) and Romano-British periods (Fulford 2001, 215). For instance, at Deal in Kent during the first/second century AD a deep shaft, which was filled with various objects, was found to contain a chalk figurine that Green (1986, 135) tentatively interpreted as representing the image of a chthonic deity. Similarly, according to Roman custom the centre of each new town was marked by the digging of a large pit, ditch or chamber (*mundus*) into which 'offerings of first fruits were cast' by the settlers (Woodward and Woodward 2004, 69).⁸ Thereafter the *mundus* was covered, an altar was erected, a fire was lit and the protecting deity of the new town invoked (Guest 2002, 80). Structured deposits have also been noted in pits at the Roman legionary fort at Newstead in northern Britain (Clarke 1997), and votive offerings, including the addition of deliberately perforated pottery, were apparently consigned to pits and wells in the Roman city of Silchester in southern Britain (Fulford and Timby 2001).

Given the clear importance attached to fertility by agricultural communities in late prehistoric Europe, contemporary communities in Ireland may also have placed special emphasis on the sacral significance of the earth. This significance may, as MacCana (1970, 124) notes, account for the fact that one location for the Otherworld was thought to be 'under the ground'. Indeed, in early medieval literature, the major ceremonial centres of late prehistoric Ireland are associated with legendary queens who, like Medb Lethderg at Tara, may have been personifications of pre-Christian goddesses of land and sovereignty (Carey 2005, 44–8). Therefore at Tara the ritual surrounding the cutting of the deep internal ditch at Ráith na Ríg could have been informed by a perception that this incision represented an intrusion into the body of an earth deity.

CIRCUMSCRIBING THE CENTRE: THE CASE OF RÁITH NA RÍG

The Iron Age was a period during which the large ceremonial earthworks, so-called hengiform enclosures, were constructed at some of the 'royal sites' of ancient Ireland, namely Tara, Co. Meath, Navan, Co. Armagh, and Dún Ailinne, Co. Kildare (Wailes 1982). It has been suggested that these monumental enclosures, defined by a non-defensive form of external earthen bank and internal ditch, were constructed to physically demarcate the precincts of major ceremonial centres, and isolate the internal sacred space from the surrounding environment (e.g. Newman 1997, 176; Warner 2000, 39; Mallory and Lynn 2002, 537–9; Lynn 2003, 106, 108–10). Apart from limited investigations at Ráith na Ríg on the Hill of Tara (Roche 2002) and the hengiform enclosure at Navan Fort (Mallory *et al.* 1999), these large boundary earthworks have not witnessed any substantive excavations. Nevertheless, the role of such enclosures ought now to be re-evaluated in light of current approaches to artificial boundaries. Such an analysis may support a framework for understanding why the ditch at Ráith na Ríg, or at least that portion of the ditch subjected to excavation (Roche 2002), was for a considerable period of its Iron Age history the focus for deliberate depositional practices.

At Tara, the deep internal ditch and large external bank which together define the upstanding remains of Ráith na Ríg serve to enclose a considerable proportion of the hill and its monumental remains; the roughly oval form of Ráith na Ríg (318m north–south by 264m east–west) encompasses an area of about five hectares in total (Newman 1997, 53) (see Fig. 5). The excavation at Ráith na Ríg (Roche 2002) enabled a clearer understanding of the structural sequence—ditch and bank closely followed by internal timber palisade—and permitted that sequence to be dated to the first century BC (*ibid.*, 76). Following this work, a small excavation was undertaken at the ditch of the hengiform enclosure known as 'The Sanctuary' at Navan Fort, Co. Armagh (Mallory *et al.* 1999). This investigation revealed that, like Ráith na Ríg, the Navan enclosure was constructed in the first century BC (Mallory and Lynn 2002, 533). During the course of the Navan excavations the remains of a 'lathe-turned wooden bowl' and sections of a large, partly burnt, wooden beam—possibly part of a larger wooden structure—were found on the base of the ditch (Lynn 2003, 97, 105). At Ráith na Ríg the excavated evidence from two small trenches (cuttings 1 and 2) (Roche 2002) demonstrated that numerous deposits were associated with the ditch, although it was suggested that some of the material from the upper fills of the ditch—



Fig. 5—Aerial view of Ráith na Ríg on the Hill of Tara, Co. Meath, from the north-east (photo: E. O'Donoghue).

i.e. human remains and animal bones—may have originated from activity associated with the nearby multivallate enclosure known as Ráith na Senad (*ibid.*, 74). Material recorded in the first ditch cutting at Ráith na Ríg included fragments of human bone—skull and facial bones—possibly belonging to an adolescent male, found close to the base of the ditch; the articulated skeleton of a six-month-old child deliberately deposited with dog bones under sod-like material about a metre above the base of the ditch; two portions of human mandible and a human hip bone (possibly representing one disturbed burial); and, throughout many of the fills, large quantities of burnt and unburnt animal bones (*ibid.*, 45–8). In cutting 2 the deposits included two large animal bones (one bovine, one pig) found close to the base of the ditch, and in most of the remaining fills considerable quantities of disarticulated animal bone were recorded (*ibid.*, 50–4). Artefactual evidence included a portion of a purple glass bangle of possible first-century BC date and the pin and coil of a bronze fibula dated to between the first century BC and the first century AD (*ibid.*, 57–8). Ó Ríordáin's earlier excavation of Ráith na Ríg (cited in Roche 2002, 23–4) revealed skull fragments (possibly human), an unidentified animal skull, scatters of disarticulated animal bone, and fragments of human bone identified as belonging to two separate burials—Roche (*op. cit.*, 23, 59) suggested that the latter may have represented

one disturbed burial. Moreover, a large metalworking area was revealed under the excavated section of the external earth bank by both Ó Ríordáin (cited in Roche 2002, 21–2) and Roche (2002, 29–41), and material associated with this industrial activity—which originally spread over the area into which the later ditch was cut—was found in the basal layers of the accompanying earthen bank (*ibid.*, 44). The considerable quantity of material recovered during the small-scale excavations revealed a complex and protracted sequence of activity, which on the basis of radiocarbon dating spanned the period from the early second century BC to the beginning of the fifth century AD (*ibid.*, 57).

While the early prehistoric origin of hengiform enclosures has attracted speculation in the recent past (e.g. Simpson 1989), a more convincing hypothesis (Newman 1997, 177) proposes that they owe their immediate ancestry to late prehistoric funerary monuments such as ring-barrows, which share a similar morphology (internal ditch with external earthen bank). It is therefore of some interest to note that it is mostly the ditches of ring-barrows, ring-ditches and embanked enclosures that contain archaeological deposits. At the ring-barrow at Grannagh, Co. Galway (Rynne, unpublished, cited in B. Raftery 1994b, 180; Newman 1997, 165), the enclosing ditch contained a number of cremation burials, one of which was



Fig. 6—Excavated section of the internal ditch at Ráith na Ríg (photo: C. Brogan, DoEHLG; in Roche 2002).

accompanied by various artefacts, including four fragmentary bronze fibulae, glass beads, bone beads and pins. In the townland of Rath, just north of Ashbourne, Co. Meath (Schweitzer 2005), the crouched inhumation burial of an adult female—whom the excavator regarded as having had royal status in life—was recently discovered in a pit cut into the southern quadrant of the ditch. The northern half of the ditch had been recut at least three times, and after the final recut cremated bone had been placed on the base of the ditch (*ibid.*, 96). Ring-ditches such as those at Ballydavis, Co. Offaly (Keeley 1999), Claureen, outside Ennis, Co. Clare (Hull 2005, 5–6), and Ballybronoge, Co. Limerick (Eogan and Finn 2000), also contain ditch deposits, as do embanked enclosures such as Oran Beg, Co. Galway (Rynne 1972), and Carbury Hill, Co. Kildare (Wilmot 1938).

The traditional interpretation is that outlined by Richard Warner (2000): that hengiform enclosures functioned as symbolic barriers, designed to protect the outside world from the Otherworld forces emanating from the large earthen mounds enclosed within their orbit, such as the Mound of the Hostages on the Hill of Tara. According to early Irish mythology, earthen mounds are the domain of the ancestors, later the *Síd*-folk or fairy-folk. Developing Warner's hypothesis, Mallory and Lynn (2002, 537–8) argued that the

enclosure at Navan served to demarcate the precinct of the sacred summit, within which the large internal mound—encasing the so-called 'forty-metre structure'—may have been perceived as a portal to the Otherworld. In this way, the Navan enclosure served to contain the spiritual forces found within the sacred space of the interior and the central earthen mound (Lynn 2003, 114–15). Whilst these hypotheses are intriguing and have much to recommend them, the formal deposits in the ditches of both Ráith na Ríg and Navan suggest that the boundary elements, particularly the ditches, were regarded as sacred space in their own right. Significantly, the material recorded in the ditch at Ráith na Ríg resembles the range of ritually charged deposits found in the perimeter ditches of late prehistoric sites in Britain and on the Continent. Thus to appreciate the potential meaning of a hengiform enclosure we must move beyond seeing it simply as a delineator of sacred space and instead look at the structural elements—i.e. the ditch and bank—as a specific locus of religious significance. Indeed, that the ditch at Ráith na Ríg embodied a profound sacral importance is implied by the very meaning of the place-name *Témar*. Is it then possible that the ditch and bank of Ráith na Ríg were designed and executed as part of a religious plan intended to secure the spatial limits and sacral purity of sacred space and, at the same

time, to symbolically *intensify* the sacral significance of the boundary zone, the enclosed centre, and the people and activities therein?

During the construction of Ráith na Ríg, the first event was the digging of the ditch. The ditch, which was carved into the underlying shale bedrock to a depth of about 2.7m (Roche 2002, 53, fig. 16), represents a determined and laborious undertaking in its own right (see Fig. 6). At Tara, the creation of such a deep cut into the earth in order to establish physically the spatial limits of the sanctuary was probably, as suggested earlier, an act of profound religious significance. Indeed, once dug, the physical orbit of that ditch may have literally become the liminal space between the most sacred interior (*sanctissimus*) and the world beyond. Moreover, given the connection between the subterranean and chthonic forces, the significance of the ditch may, in part, relate to the fact that it was perceived as a conduit or threshold between this world and the Underworld. Thus the large open ditch may have manifested itself as a special or sacred cut that intensified the sacral potency of both the boundary zone and the sanctuary within.

If the ditch was thus endowed, however, then it also represented a place from which potentially devastating forces could emanate. Ritual offerings and the accompanying ceremonies may have been enacted to placate the supernatural and paranormal, and to prevent the corruption of the sacred space itself. The earthen bank, built along the outer edge of the ditch, may likewise have played a protective role, i.e. as a symbolically charged barrier. In this way, the bank, which curtailed access to the ditch and the enclosed summit beyond, may have protected the outside world from potentially dangerous forces emanating from both the internal ditch and the consecrated space of the enclosed centre. The earthen bank, created out of material that once lay under the earth, would have represented the deliberate inversion of the natural order—what once lay underground now lay over it, an inversion of the earth's fabric that may have imbued the bank with a powerful sacral dimension.

Of equal import in this regard was the erection of a substantial timber palisade just inside the inner edge of the ditch, an arrangement that recalls the use of timber palisades and ditches at ceremonial centres in northern Gaul (see above). Like the bank and ditch at Ráith na Ríg, the palisade, which appears to be broadly contemporary with the digging of the ditch (Roche 2002, 68, 76), might also have performed an important religious role. Once created, the palisade would have concealed what was happening in the interior from the view of those on the outside—perhaps people forbidden to cross the sacred boundary. In this way the palisade would have reinforced the religious potency of

the boundary zone. Moreover, for those standing inside the enclosed centre, the palisade may have obstructed access to, and sight of, the boundary ditch; indeed, unrestricted access to the ditch, positioned between bank and palisade, might have been taboo. The employment of multiple boundary elements at sites like Ráith na Ríg and Ráith na Senad may have represented an intensification of the liminality of the boundary zone. Understanding Ráith na Ríg as a liminal boundary zone also provides a context for understanding why both Ó Ríordáin (1953, cited in Roche 2002) and Roche (2002) found material that was deliberately deposited in the ditch. To quote Brück, who discusses how depositional practices may have been designed to augment the character of the receiving context generally, the material deposited into the ditch at Ráith na Ríg may have provided a 'means of creating or adding significance' to that location (Brück 1999a, 331).

The presence of human remains in the ditch at Ráith na Ríg again reinforces the idea that it is liminal space. Here, burials included the disarticulated remains of an adult (found by Ó Ríordáin), the complete skeleton of an infant, the right hip bone of an adult male, fragments of skull and facial bone, and various small pieces of burnt and unburnt bone (Ó Donnabháin 2002). Many of the remains range in date from the first century BC (e.g. the skull fragments at the base of the ditch in cutting 1) to the first century AD (e.g. the infant burial in cutting 1) (Roche 2002, 57, 74). Interestingly, the unburnt remains (both articulated and disarticulated) recovered from the ditch represent a noteworthy departure from the dominant burial rite of cremation recorded during this period (see e.g. O'Brien 1990).⁹ Moreover, the nature and context of those burials clearly differ from the crouched and extended inhumations found within the more formal, flat cemetery of first- to second-century AD date (*ibid.*, 38) at Ráith na Senad. Thus the burial rites peculiar to Ráith na Ríg are indicative of a multifaceted and multivalent code of belief surrounding both the significance of the dead and the role prescribed for them by the living. While these considerations comprise a complex study in themselves—beyond the scope of this paper—it is apparent that the ditch may have manifested itself as a sacred space imbued with specific and unique transformative properties. Moreover, deliberate consignment to the ditch distinguishes these burials religiously and symbolically from the rest of the buried community. In fact, one wonders whether sacrifice was involved. These burials, and other offerings, may therefore have facilitated the emergence of a new reality, one in which the meaning originally ascribed to that material was transmuted to the extent that a new



Fig. 7—Infant burial in the ditch at Ráith na Ríg (photo: H. Roche; reproduced from Roche 2002, pl. 11).

iconography was created. For example, Brück (1995) has suggested that the placement of human remains in boundary contexts may reflect a desire to emphasise concepts of 'liminality, continuity, identity and renewal'; furthermore, human remains may have strengthened links with the ancestors (*ibid.*; Pollard 1995, 153; Whittle *et al.* 1999, 385). During late prehistory, boundary deposition at Tara may, to some extent, have been related to the fundamental concerns of the fertility of both the land and the tribe.

The only articulated human remains in the ditch at Ráith na Ríg were those of a six-month-old infant placed with a number of dog bones close to the base of the ditch (Roche 2002, 45) (see Fig. 7). In Britain, infant and juvenile burials are relatively common in Iron Age boundary contexts (see Bristow 1998, 190–2), for example the child burials in hillfort ditches at Rotherley and Yarnbury (Whimster 1981, 25). Because of their youth, infants may not have been thought of as full persons (Hill 1995), and this age liminality, coupled with other liminal factors such as disability, social position or manner of death (Bristow 1998, 227; Green 2001, 156), may have determined why they were buried in liminal locations. Bradley (2005, 175), in commenting upon the connection between death and fertility in late prehistoric society, noted that death may have been thought to release 'the fertility that allows human existence to pass from one generation to

another'. In this way, the early, or deliberate, death of children may have led communities to renew the link with fertility/rebirth in order to ensure future fecundity of both land and people (Whittle *et al.* 1999, 385; Green 2001, 155; Cleary 2006, 34). Scott (1991, cited in Green 2001, 167), for example, connected child burials in Romano-British corn-drying buildings to a revitalising ritual concerned with fertility, the possession of land and the growth of crops. The child burial in the ditch at Ráith na Ríg should perhaps be understood in this exceptional sense. The deliberate burial of dog bones with this infant (Roche 2002, 45) is also interesting. The special relationship between humans and dogs, by virtue of the dog's role as companion, guardian, hunter, etc., appears to have bestowed a privileged status on dogs in late prehistoric society (Green 1992, 55–8; Bhreathnach 2002, 118–19). In later prehistory, particularly during the late Iron Age, dogs played an important role in religious practices across Europe (see Green 1992, 111–13; Cunliffe 1991). On occasion, dogs have been discovered accompanying human burials (their owners?), including the body of a young dog interred with an adult human at Tartigny, in the Oise region of France, and the three dogs associated with a burial at Acy in Champagne, France (Green 1992, 113). At this time dogs were apparently closely associated with death and the supernatural, in particular chthonic beliefs



Fig. 8—Scatter of disarticulated animal bones in the ditch at Ráith na Ríg (photo: H. Roche; reproduced from Roche 2002, pl. 14).

(*ibid.*); as Bhreathnach (2002, 118) notes, the role of the dog in life extended to include similar responsibilities in the realm of the supernatural, that is, ‘from guardian of the doorway or threshold to a role as guardian against chthonic or Otherworldly forces, often malevolent ones’. At Ráith na Ríg the burial of a dog (a sacrifice?) and infant together in the ditch may have represented an effort to provide a spiritual guardian for the deceased child, whose spirit was exposed to extraordinarily potent supernatural influences in this threshold space of the ditch.

Other human remains found close to the base of the ditch include skull fragments found by Ó Ríordáin (cited in Roche 2002, 59; an animal skull was also discovered nearby) and fourteen cranial and facial bones belonging to an adolescent male (Roche 2002, 45). Roche (*loc. cit.*) suggested that the latter fragments (i.e. the adolescent male), found with various cattle and sheep/goat bones on top of a thin layer of decomposing shale, had probably been deliberately deposited in the ditch. The suggestion has often been made that in late prehistoric Celtic society the head was held to be the centre of the human soul (see e.g. Green 1986; 2001; Ó hÓgáin 1999, 49–54) and consequently human skulls may have been conferred with powerful magical attributes. Separating the head from the body and placing it in the ditch at Ráith na Ríg could therefore have been an act designed to send

the owner’s soul to the ancestors by a different route and/or to encourage the soul not to return to the body after death but to continue on its journey into the afterlife (Bristow 1998, 209). On the other hand, human and animal skulls may have originally hung on the outer face of the large wooden palisade around the inner edge of the ditch. If so, the skulls may have dropped off the palisade and fallen into the ditch, or, possibly after their totemic or talismanic effect had lost some of its potency, they may have been removed and placed in the ditch. Indeed, in this context, the skulls (trophies?) may have originally belonged to people who were not members of the community that controlled Tara in late prehistory, people who were outsiders. As mentioned earlier, human and animal skulls were sometimes employed to adorn gateways and palisades at ceremonial centres in northern Gaul, and excavation at those sites has, on occasion, recovered skulls from the silted external ditches. It was also noted that human skulls may have been thought of as prophylactic symbols that served to ward off malign influences, and when placed on timber palisades they may have been designed to augment the symbolic power of that boundary. If skulls, human and/or animal, decorated the palisade inside Ráith na Ríg, they would undoubtedly have exaggerated the visual impact of that boundary, reinforcing its mysterious, ominous and otherworldly character.

Large quantities of animal bone—mostly from mature cattle, pig, sheep/goat, horse and dog—were also found in many of the ditch fills excavated at Ráith na Ríg (see Fig. 8). It was suggested that these bones, some of which were shattered and scratched with cut-marks, represent the discarded remains of food debris (McCormick 2002). The consumption of animals, in particular horses and dogs, at prehistoric ceremonial sites possibly relates to ritual feasting; eating dogs, for example, may, as Roche (2002, 74) suggests, have been associated with ‘the promotion of healing, fertility and prosperity’. The lack of evidence for the formal or structured deposition of dog and horse remains in the ditch at Ráith na Ríg, however, coupled with their advanced age at death, was used in support of the rather more prosaic explanation that they may have been simply eaten with no underlying ritual intent (*ibid.*, 76; McCormick 2002, 108). Nonetheless, Bhreathnach (2002), who cautioned against making prescriptive assumptions about how these remains entered the archaeological record (*ibid.*, 117, 118), noted that at Tara feasting may have been associated with ceremonial occasions. This view, reinforced by the widely acknowledged ceremonial/funerary status of Tara in late prehistory, is supported by the occurrence of horse and dog bones at other ritual sites in Iron Age Europe (*ibid.*, 118). Ceremonial feasting, possibly undertaken at auspicious times to satisfy a variety of religious and/or socio-political motivations (Green 1992, 97–100), formed an important aspect of behaviour at many cult loci in Britain and Gaul, for example at Gournay (Oise) and Mirebeau (Côte d’Or) (*ibid.*). At those sites, the placing of either whole carcasses or certain uneaten portions of butchered animals into pits or ditches—possibly as gifts for infernal deities (Cunliffe 1992; Brunaux 1988)—was a relatively widespread occurrence (see Green 1992). Whilst no evidence for comparable practices was found during the excavation at Ráith na Ríg, the repeated deposition of used animal bones in the ditch is nonetheless noteworthy. The fact that the ditch was considered to be an appropriate location for the remains of feasting perhaps reflects—as suggested in this paper—its sacral and transformative character. The implication then arises that the deposition of animal remains in the ditch was anything but casual. Perhaps, as Green (2001, 130) suggested in relation to activity at cult centres such as Acy-Romance in Gaul (see above), the remains of feasting were placed in the ditch as gifts for (chthonic?) forces who were believed to reside below ground. Thus, in a sense, discarding the ‘used’ faunal remains in the ditch may have served to complete the cycle of fertility, regenerating the sequence upon which life, death and rebirth depends. Additionally, the presence of personal objects (e.g. the glass bangle and bronze fibula) in the

ditch may also reflect the idea of sacrifice, by which the donors entered into an arrangement with the supernatural that they understood to be reciprocal.

CONSIDERATIONS

The ideas put forward in this paper draw upon a broader corpus of research that emphasises the potential ‘non-utilitarian’ significance of some artificial boundaries. Implicit in this approach is the recognition that human activity is sometimes guided by what may appear, to modern eyes, to be irrational behaviours and systems of belief, and therefore, in this context, artificial boundaries, which play a central role in ordering space, embody resonances that extend beyond the merely practical or utilitarian. Owing to their inherently abstract nature, the cognitive processes that drive intention are not readily detectable in the archaeological record; nonetheless, the example of Ráith na Ríg illustrates that the act of enclosure did not simply end with the construction of a neutral, value-free barrier erected to demarcate socially significant space. Indeed, the morphology of Ráith na Ríg, coupled with the presence of deliberately placed material in its ditch, perhaps epitomises best how artificial boundaries may have been imbued with other significant values and associations by the communities involved in their construction and use. Moreover, the deposits in the ditch at Ráith na Ríg reveal that Iron Age religious practice in Ireland can be compared to contemporary religious practice on the Continent. The hypothesis that Ráith na Ríg was perceived as a liminal space, imbued with magico-religious and transformative properties, may supply a framework for understanding why it was repeatedly marked out with various deposits, formal or otherwise. Indeed, the fact that Ráith na Ríg is located on the Hill of Tara, a place of paramount ritual significance throughout prehistory and into the early medieval period (Newman 1997; Bhreathnach 1995; 2005), suggests that Ráith na Ríg itself may have been perceived of as the *temenos*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is based on PhD research, currently being undertaken in the Department of Archaeology, National University of Ireland, Galway, which was supported by a scholarship from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.* I would especially like to thank Conor Newman, research supervisor, for assistance and encouragement during the writing of this paper. I am also grateful to Roseanne Schot for commenting upon a draft of this

work, and to the anonymous referee who read a copy of this paper prior to publication. Thanks are also due to Eamonn O'Donoghue for kindly supplying an aerial photograph of Ráith na Ríg, to Con Brogan (DoE, HLG, and the Discovery Programme).

*The writer is currently carrying out a comprehensive study of closely spaced multivallation for a PhD degree at the Department of Archaeology, NUI, Galway.

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NOTES

- 1 In the Roman world, for instance, standing stones, which were used as boundary markers, were protected ‘by a special god called “boundary” (*Terminus*)’ (Burkert 1996, 166).
- 2 For the ancient Greeks, the navel of the earth (or *omphalos*) was believed to be located in every temple or sanctuary (Parker-Pearson 1994, 12), and in both Greek and Roman religion the temple was ‘the metaphorical house of the god who resided through the medium of the cult statue’ (Dowden 2000, 128).
- 3 It must be noted that Schwarz’s (1962) original suggestion about the ‘cultic’ status of the *Viereckschanzen* has since been questioned (e.g. see Webster 1997, 453; Bradley 2003, 9–11).
- 4 In the fourth century AD, ritual continuity at the site of Gournay is attested by the foundation of a small, rural Gallo-Roman *porticus* temple (Latin *fanum*) at the centre of the earlier Gallic Iron Age enclosure (Derks 1998, 174).
- 5 Internal activity at Gournay included the digging of a number of large pits and their filling with structured deposits in the mid-third century BC. At the start of the second century BC these pits were covered by an oval wooden ‘temple’, which was in turn replaced by a square wooden ‘temple’ in the first century BC (Brunaux 1988, 15–16). Brunaux (*op. cit.*, 30) has suggested that the deposition of human and animal remains at Belgic sanctuaries like Gournay may have involved religious beliefs that sought to ensure fertility of the land and tribe. Additionally, Green (1986, 106) suggested that the presence of broken or ‘decommissioned’ weapons at Gournay and other ceremonial sites in the region may represent spoils of war that were dedicated to tribal war gods by victorious soldiers.
- 6 Entrances continued to be marked out by the remains of the dead during the late Iron

Age/Romano-British periods; for example, at Maiden Castle in Dorset a sacrificed(?) infant was placed under the doorway leading into the shrine in the interior of the hillfort (Green 1986, 28; 2001, 155).

- 7 In Britain, many scholars now suggest that the eastern and south-eastern orientation of many late prehistoric entrances reflected significant cosmological and ritual considerations (see e.g. Parker-Pearson 1996; Oswald 1997). At Iron Age roundhouses, for example, Oswald (1997) observed that entrances may have marked out time as they were orientated either on the midwinter sunrise (south-east) or on the sunrise on the equinoxes (east). This celestial alignment may therefore have been considered sacred and propitious (Wait 1985, 177; Cunliffe 2005, 577).
- 8 Inside urban boundaries in the Greek world large pits (*bothroi*) were also dug and filled with various offerings (Green 1997, 121).
- 9 Cremation was the dominant burial rite in Leinster until the first century AD, when crouched inhumation burials in unmarked graves began to appear (O'Brien 1990). After the second century AD both the rite of cremation and the rite of flexed burial were gradually supplanted by extended inhumation in unmarked graves (*ibid.*)