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Author(s): Ann Hamlin

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Emain Macha : Navan Fort

By

ANN HAMLIN

This article is a slightly shortened version of the proof of evidence presented to the Navan Fort Public Enquiry in June 1985 by Dr Hamlin, who is the Northern Ireland Department of the Environment's Principal Inspector of Historic Monuments.

THE SITE

Navan Fort is a circular earthwork enclosure two miles west of Armagh City. It occupies a low rounded hill of glacial boulder clay above limestone, and commands surprisingly extensive views, north to the Sperrin Mountains, east to the hills where the two cathedrals now stand, and south across lower land towards the mountains of south Armagh.

The earthwork takes the form of a massive outer bank with an inner ditch, well preserved only to west and south. The area enclosed by the ditch is about 12 acres, but if the bank did originally surround the site on the scale surviving on the west side the site would once have occupied about 15.5 acres. Within the enclosure is a much denuded circular earthwork and a prominent mound, in its present form reconstructed after excavation.

North-east of Navan Fort lies Loughnashade which the 1835 Ordnance Survey map showed as a large stretch of water but which by the 1860 map had been reduced to approximately its present size by drainage works.

THE NAME

I am indebted to the work of the late Mrs Deirdre Flanagan of the Department of Celtic at Queen's University, Belfast. The name Navan is derived from the word *Emain** with the definite article *An*, *An Emain* becoming Navan. Mrs Flanagan had no doubt that Navan Fort can safely be identified as *Emain Macha*, royal capital of the Kings of Ulster. Comparable heroic capitals like Troy and Camelot have still not been firmly located, but Ireland has never forgotten its ancient royal sites like Tara in Meath, Cruachain in Connacht and Navan in Ulster.

NAVAN IN LEGEND AND LITERATURE

Many of the great legends of the world have their origins in pre-literate days, when stories of distinguished forebears were passed on from mouth

* The Irish names used in this paper appear in their Old Irish forms. The reports by C. J. Lynn on the excavations at the King's Stables and Ballybroolly 'Abbey' appear in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 40 (1977), 42-62 and 46 (1983), 47-51. I am grateful to Mr Lynn for making available information from the excavation archive.

to mouth and generation to generation. The Irish sagas, like the Iliad and the Odyssey and the story of King Arthur and the knights of the round table, must have originated in this way. Constant repetition led to embellishment and up-dating, but the heart of the stories remained true and they lost none of their vigour in the retelling.

The important body of early Irish legend known as the Ulster Cycle centres round King Conchobor, who ruled his kingdom from *Emain Macha*. Here, we are told, were great halls, one for the kings, one for severed heads and the spoils of war, and another for the javelins, shields and swords. Conchobor's hall had 150 inner rooms and he never sat down to eat without three times 50 men around him. As well as the warriors at *Emain Macha* — the Red Branch Knights — there was a boy-troop of 150 who were fostered at the royal site and trained and exercised on the playing field east of *Emain*, and it was to *Emain Macha* that young Cú Chulainn came, to take on the whole boy-troop single-handed.

It is likely that these legends originated in the Iron Age. They were first written down in the Early Christian period and we know them mainly from versions written down in the 12th century and later. Over this long period of transmission the stories retain their vigour, excitement and colour: in recent times they inspired Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory, and they are studied throughout the world.

NAVAN IN HISTORY

The Ulster Cycle stories are not concerned with chronology and exact dates, and I turn now to *Emain Macha* in the written sources. According to the genealogies the last king of *Emain* was Fergus Foga, 'stout ruler of Emain', who was killed in warfare by the three Collas, and 'it was then that the kingship of Ulaid parted from *Emain*'. After this event the men of Ulster were forced east into present County Down. The *Annals of the Four Masters* date the fall of *Emain* to 331, but they are a 17th-century compilation, and for events as early as this the annals are not a reliable guide. A good case can be made for the abandonment of *Emain Macha* in the mid 5th century rather than the 4th.

The siting of an early (5th-century) church in Armagh was undoubtedly influenced by the nearness of the old royal capital. But by about 800 the contrast between the old site and the flourishing monastery was clear: in the prologue of the *Martyrology of Oengus* the writer points out how Tara has perished but Armagh abides with a multitude of venerable champions; *Emain's* burgh has vanished except for its stones, while the cemetery of the western world is multitudinous Glendalough.

But *Emain Macha* clearly remained a well-known place, a landmark and a symbol. I mention only a few of the many references to the site in the years after its traditional abandonment. An 8th-century Latin Life of St Brigit tells how the saint rested with her companions beside the fort of Macha, which sounds more like the royal site than the monastery. The annals record a battle at *Emain Macha* in 759, and the land was laid waste

as far as *Emain Macha* in 821. In 1005 Brian Boru 'went to *Ard Macha* and camped in *Emain Macha*'. It appears from the Archbishop of Armagh's Registers that the area including Navan and Loughnashade was see land in the Middle Ages, but in 1387 Niall Ua Neill built a house in *Emain Macha* to entertain 'the learned companies of Ireland' there.

When the gifted English map-maker, Richard Bartlett, drew the famous pictorial map of a sadly ruined Armagh city in 1602 he showed the earthworks of Navan Fort in the distance, and when John Colgan wrote of *Emain* in the mid 17th century he described wide ditches and rough high walls, still to be seen, reminders of former splendour.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF NAVAN

As an earthwork Navan is unusual in having its ditch inside the bank. For usual defensive purposes a ditch lies outside a bank. Even without excavation this was a pointer to Navan being an unusual site, not necessarily defensive.

Moves to organise excavations at the site by distinguished scholars in the 1920s and 1930s were discouraged by the Ancient Monuments Advisory Council, but in 1961 as part of the archaeological survey of County Armagh an excavation was mounted on the low circular earthwork (Site A) by the late Mr D. M. Waterman, Principal Inspector of Ancient Monuments with the Department of Finance. Further work was done in collaboration with Queen's University and the University of Pennsylvania in 1963, and Mr Waterman continued to work on the mound (Site B) until 1971.

Mr Waterman's brilliant excavation showed a long sequence of occupation on the hilltop. There was material from the Neolithic period, 4000 to 5000 years ago, and evidence of cultivation in the form of plough-marks from the Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age.

In the Late Bronze Age (about 700 BC) a circular ditch and palisade were made in the area later occupied by the mound. Inside was a round structure with a larger, attached structure to the north, also round, approached by a fenced driveway from the east. These can be interpreted as a large house with an attached yard or pound, and Mr Waterman showed that the 'houses' were replaced nine times and the 'yards' six times between about 700 and 100 BC. This is a remarkable demonstration of continuity of settlement from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age, a poorly understood period of Irish prehistory. The scale of the structures and the nature of the finds (including the skull of a Barbary ape) are consistent with royal or aristocratic occupation.

In about 100 BC this area was levelled and apparently very soon transformed by the building of a huge circular wooden structure, 40 metres in diameter. It had an outer wall of upright posts with horizontal timbering between, and inside were five concentric rings of substantial posts, some 275 posts in all. At the centre was the well-preserved stump of a huge post which could have stood 13 metres or more high. There is no sign that the structure was occupied, and, apparently soon after its erec-



Courtesy Arch. Survey, N. Ireland.

Eamhain Macha.

tion, it was filled with limestone boulders to form a cairn. The outer wall was then burned, and the cairn was covered with turves and topsoil to form a great mound. We can only speculate about what this structure was. It could have been a temple, or perhaps both the building and the destruction were ritual acts, but whatever its purpose it is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable structures yet known in the 'Celtic' world.

It must be emphasised that no excavation has been done on the surrounding earthwork enclosure and that the bulk of the interior is unexcavated. We do not know whether or how the excavated features relate to the ditch and bank.

By the time of Mr Waterman's untimely death in 1979 he had finished all the structural drawings for the excavation report and drafted part of the text. My colleague, Christopher Lynn, who worked with Mr Waterman on the excavation, has undertaken the difficult task of finishing the report, using the mass of written and drawn records left by Mr Waterman. The report will be a volume in the Northern Ireland Archaeological Monograph series. The time-scale is not firm but a 1986 or 1987 completion date is possible.

In addition to finds from the excavation, Iron Age objects have been found by chance in the area round the fort, presumably during cultivation, drainage or similar operations. These include examples of the type of brooch called the 'Navan fibula' (named from the site) and the four bronze trumpets or horns from Loughnashade, found during drainage work in the 19th century. Only one survives, the famous decorated Loughnashade trumpet, now in the National Museum in Dublin, which recently travelled round the world in the 'Treasures of Ireland' exhibition.

STATUTORY PROTECTION OF NAVAN

Navan Fort was one of only three northern sites listed in the schedule of the first Ancient Monuments Protection Act in 1882 (together with the Giant's Ring near Belfast and the Mound at Downpatrick). From 1916-7 the fort was in state guardianship, still privately owned and grazed but open to the public. The south-west segment of the earthworks was made accessible with paths and steps and a caretaker was appointed to oversee the site and control the growth. The monument remained in guardianship until 1978, when it was purchased by the Department of the Environment.

Since 1978 the Department has put in hand a series of amenity works: the making of a small carpark, the removal of modern field boundaries, the building of a limestone wall on the east side, above the quarry, and the erection of a new fence. During 1983, 1984 and 1985 a groundsman/guide has been employed for the main visitor season, and new site notices were put up in 1985.

PRESENTATION OF NAVAN FORT

The Department is acutely aware of the need for the presentation of

Navan. The sagas, the history, the excavated features and finds all need to be expounded to give life to the grassy hill with its earthworks. We are keen to do the job well, and since 1982 have been planning an interpretation centre. This would, we hope, be a purpose-built structure including varied displays, models, copies of finds, an audio-visual presentation, a school/lecture room, a shop and perhaps a café — a more ambitious facility than has yet been planned for any other monument in the Department's care.

One element in the planned display will be to set Navan Fort in its local and wider context. The fort is an element in an archaeological landscape which includes Loughnashade, a group of Neolithic burial monuments on the hills to the north (now sadly largely destroyed), the King's Stables, a Bronze Age ceremonial site excavated in the context of a threat in 1975, Haughey's Fort, probably an Iron Age hillfort, and an enigmatic site known as the Abbey, reprieved from destruction after excavation in 1978 established its Early Christian period date. Further south in the county the Dorsey enclosure has recently been shown to date to the same period as the Navan 40 metre structure, as has the Black Pig's Dyke in County Monaghan.

CONCLUSION

In Ulster Navan is the ancient royal capital, and in Ireland *Emain Macha* is one of a small group of royal sites including Tara in Meath, Cruachain in Connacht and Dún Ailinne in Leinster. And though Ireland was at the very edge of the Celtic world, at Navan it has produced one of that world's most remarkable excavated structures. So, from the points of view of literature and legend, prehistory and history, Navan Fort is important not only in an Ulster context but also in the wider context of Ireland and Britain, and wider still in Europe as a whole. The staff responsible for ancient and historic monuments, formerly within the Department of Finance and now within the Department of the Environment, have worked hard over the last twenty-five years to investigate, protect and care for this outstanding monument.