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Navan Fort

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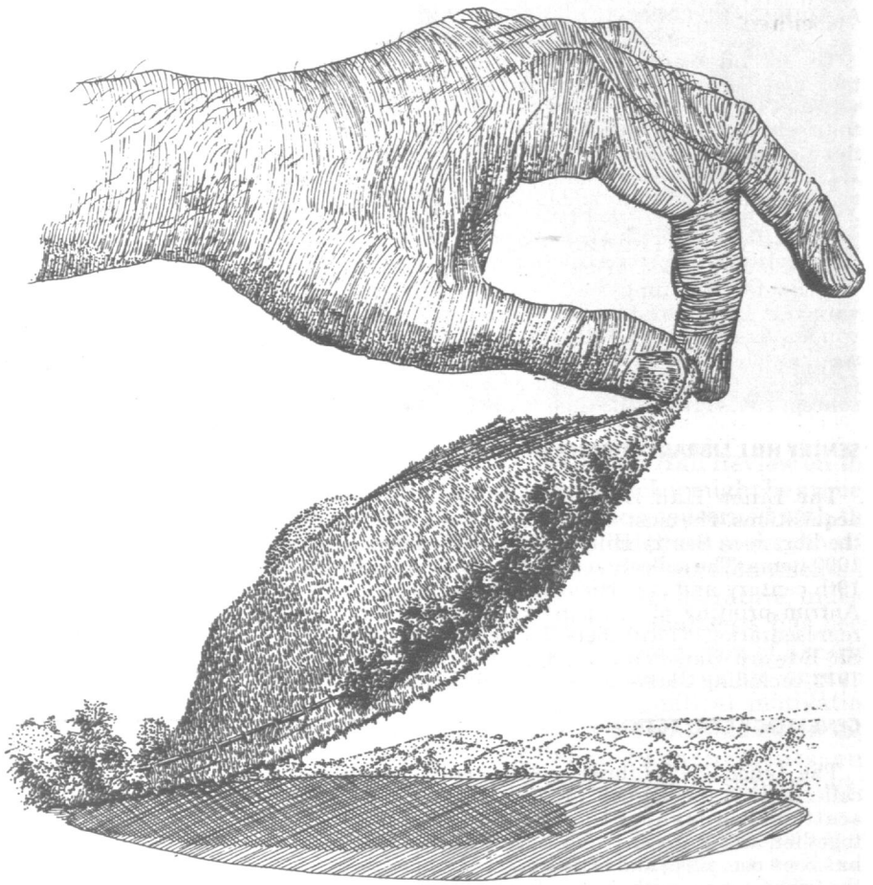
navan fort

A MONUMENT FOR ALL MYTHS

BY J. P. MALLORY

Artwork, including cover, by Stephen Conlin.



In 1374 Niall Mór, the Great O'Neill, summoned together the 'learned companies' of Ireland to be entertained in Ulster. We need not be so naive as to imagine that his motives were prompted by academic ardour; poets were the political propagandists of his age and Niall Mór was seeking their support to legitimize his claim to the kingship of Ulster. While the O'Neills are now inextricably associated with Ulster in popular memory (with their red hand emblem and the Ulster Rising of the Earl of Tyrone), no 14th century Irish writer would have credited their family with being of true Ulster stock or legitimate heirs to the kingship of Ulster. Since the fourth or fifth centuries the kingdom of Ulster had collapsed east of the Newry river and rested with competing dynasties of Antrim and Down. It was only after the kingship had passed from the native mac Dunleavys of Downpatrick to the Anglo-Normans that the political concept of Ulster again expanded to embrace the entire province. This was the prize sought by Niall Mór who aspired to substantiate his claim to be Ri Uladh 'King of Ulster' as the power of the Normans waned. And it was his choice of venue for the entertainment of the poets that shows his political stratagem most clearly. For it was 'with sacriligeous and diabolic presumption' that he erected his hall at Navan Fort, the great Emain Macha of Irish legend and the ancient seat of the traditional kings of Ulster.

There could be no other place in the province so evocative of the concept of Ulster as Emain Macha (Navan Fort is the anglicized form of *An Eamhain*). Historically it has been identified with a place mentioned in Ptolemy's 2nd century A.D. world atlas, the earliest geographical record of this island. The atlas locates Isamnion, a linguistically earlier form of the name Emain, in the territory of the Volunti, the Ptolemaic corruption of Uluti, i.e., Ulstermen. It is in this atlas that both the Ulstermen and their capital Emain first enter history.

The mediaeval Irish were not content to leave the ancient Ulster capital with mundane origins. Various annals date the foundation of Emain Macha anywhere from the 7th to 4th centuries B.C. and explain its origin through two mythological tales. In both of these the Celtic war-goddess Macha plays the dominant role. In the first tale she assumes the rulership of all Ireland and forces her defeated opponents to 'erect the fort of Emain, that it might always be the chief city of the Ulstermen'. In the alternative version a pregnant Macha is forced to run a race against the chariot of the Ulster king. She wins and gives birth to twins (*emain* in old Irish) and dies cursing the Ulstermen.

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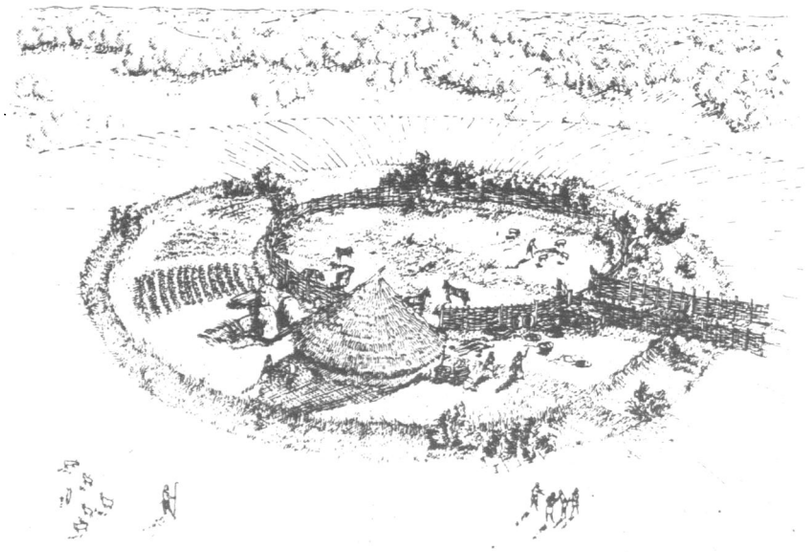
The fantastic origin of Emain was necessary to substantiate the fame of the great legendary capital of the Ulster Cycle of tales, Ireland's major contribution to mediaeval literature. These stories relate legendary events associated with Ulster's famous kings and warriors - Cuchullain, Conor mac Nessa, Conall Cernach, Fergus, their female counterparts such as Deirdre (of the Sorrows), Emer, and their great enemy Medb (Maeve), the warrior queen of Connaught. What is perhaps not so familiar is the extent to which the landscape of these tales is rooted in Navan Fort and its surroundings. Today one can stand on the mound where Cuchullain's father first raised the alarm that Ulster had been invaded in the great Irish epic, the *Táin*. It was on the ramparts that delimit the Navan enclosure that Deirdre first encountered her lover Noisi and it would have been beneath them to the northeast that she saw him and his brothers murdered in what is probably the most famous of all Irish tales (and the subject of plays by both Yeats and Synge). The surrounding green of Emain Macha, the playing fields, was where Cuchullain defeated the local 'boys brigade' at sport and where Cathbad the druid instructed his pupils. The great hall of King Conor, the Craeb Ruad or Red Branch, still carries on today in the name of the neighbouring townland of Creeveroe. All this was the legendary Ulster Camelot with which Niall Mór hoped to associate the O'Neills.



The Bronze Age Chiefs House

What Niall was unlikely to have known was that equally fantastic archaeological remains lay beneath the overgrown ruins of Ulster's ancient capital. Excavations undertaken by the late Dudley Waterman of the Archaeological Survey revealed Navan Fort to be the premier archaeological site in Ulster. Beneath the deceptively simple mound that one sees today on top of the Navan enclosure Waterman successfully unravelled an incredibly complex story that extended over 3000 years. We can figuratively lift up the mound and examine the beginning of the main phase of occupation c. 700 B.C. (a date disturbingly close to that of the legendary founding of Emain). Here a series of Bronze Age structures joined to larger circular enclosures was erected in the same place over a period of generations. At least one of the occupants was of very special importance as indicated by the most exotic item ever found on an Irish prehistoric site. In one of the enclosures Mr. Waterman discovered the skull of a Barbary age! Since exotic animals have always made the most precious of gifts, archaeologists see this as a suitably royal present from someone in North Africa or Spain to an Ulster king or temple.

By c. 100 B.C. the area was cleared and the people of Ulster erected a great Celtic temple some 40 metres in diameter with a massive post, probably 12 metres high, in the very centre. At this time they were also making use of the neighbouring lake of Lough na Shade for Celtic rituals, since the lough has yielded four precious bronze trumpets and the remains of human skulls. One of the most curious aspects of the temple was its ritual demise. The inhabitants of the area filled it with cobbles to over a man's height. Then brushwood was placed on top and the whole thing set alight. Finally, they heaped sods on top to form the mound that is seen today.

There are only two other sites in Ireland truly comparable with Navan. One is Tara itself which shares Navan's odd arrangement of an outer bank and inner ditch, a structural reversal of what we normally find on a defensive site. Better still is Knockaulin, Co. Kildare, which not only has the bank and ditch arrangement of Navan but also its own large Celtic temple. Knockaulin is the site of the ancient capital of Leinster and helps bear out the thesis that the ancient spiritual centres of Ireland also served as provincial capitals. The evidence is strongest in Ulster where the only other major sites known to date to c. 100 B.C. are the great linear earthworks such as the Dorsey in South Armagh and the more famous Black Pig's Dyke. The latter is a series of banks and ditches which appears to have served as the southern defensive border of ancient Ulster in those places where natural defences such as rivers, lakes or bogs were absent. This line of defence, generally associated with endemic cattle-raiding between Ulster and its southern neighbours, appears to have been erected when Emain was the spiritual centre of the province. Some would argue that this justifies the thesis that Ulster had already emerged as a distinct political or cultural entity by the first century B.C. Its capital was Emain Macha.

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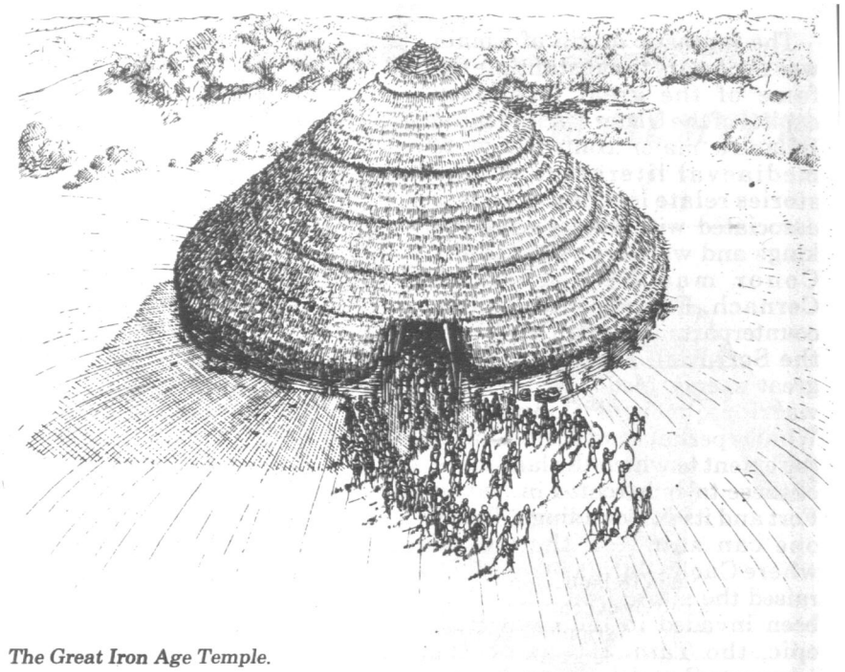
It is not difficult to understand that the importance of Navan and its locality to the archaeologist is immeasurable. With its succession of structures and finds it is the only site in Ireland that shows in detail a continuity of occupation across the period from c. 700 to 100 B.C., precisely the period when most scholars imagine that the first Irish-speaking Celts colonized Ireland. No one can discuss the origins of the Irish people without reference to Navan Fort. Secondly, the excavation has made it clear that Navan Fort was not a single site but the centre of a vast ritual complex. Lough na Shade to the east was a sacred lake for Celtic ritual, while to the northwest was the Kings Stables, an artificial pond used for sacrifice in the Bronze Age. Nearby is also Haughey's Fort which archaeologists believe to have been an Iron Age hill fort. The population who assembled at Navan are unlikely to have lived within its sacred precinct but rather in the surrounding area. From an archaeologist's viewpoint, Navan Fort is the centre of a vast ritual complex that has barely been investigated. It is the only archaeological site in Northern Ireland to be nominated to UNESCO as a site of international importance.

Even after Emain Macha had fallen to invaders in the fourth or fifth centuries A.D., it still remained a potent symbol of a greater Ulster. Many agree that St. Patrick located the centre of his Christian mission in Ireland at Armagh either because Emain was still the political capital of the province or because of its authority as the pagan centre of Ulster. Throughout the Middle Ages it was a place of pilgrimage and assembly, frequently mentioned in poems, especially those that stand as elegies to Ireland's pagan past. We have seen how the O'Neills associated themselves with the earlier historical and mythical world of Emain in the 14th century and two centuries later we read in one poem how Turlough O'Neill rallied his forces at Emain before attacking the English. The importance of the site was certainly not lost on that most competent of English commanders, Mountjoy, who ravaged the territory of the O'Neills. His cartographer, Richard Bartlett (later beheaded by irate Ulstermen for attempting to illuminate 'darkest' Donegal), included Navan Fort on several of his maps, labelling it 'the ancient seat of the kings of Ulster'.



The Great Iron Age Temple.

Although Mountjoy would go on to desecrate Tulaghoge, the traditional crowning place of the O'Neills, he did not destroy it. The total destruction of ancient historical and archaeological monuments of Ireland is a much more recent phenomenon. Our earliest records of the antiquities of Ireland are to be found in the maps prepared by the Ordnance Survey of the 1830's. When we compare them with current surveys we discover that from 40 to 50% of all major monuments have been destroyed in the past century and a half, many of them quite recently. Megalithic tombs or Early Christian ringforts once protected by local respect or even superstition have no effective myth to protect them today against the bulldozer. We can only hope that the symbolism associated with Emain Macha may be more effective. The expansion of the massive quarry which has already devastated much of the area to the east of the main enclosure has been opposed by leaders of both major traditions in Ulster. No less than twelve local councils have condemned any further expansion of the quarry including major politicians such as Harold McCusker, Peter Robinson, Jim Kilfedder, Seamus Mallon and Gordon Mawhinney. That Navan has brought such a response is not too difficult to explain. Ulster lives by its symbols and myths and Navan is a very special one. Most prehistoric monuments such as megalithic tombs or stone circles evoke an aura of mystery but have no historical content. Later monuments suffer all too often from ethnic or sectarian categorization. We encounter the incongruous identification of Carrickfergus Castle as 'Protestant' though it was built by a Catholic Norman while many an Early Christian church site, labelled 'Catholic', was erected by people with no great concern for Rome. Out of this mire of conflicting identities and conflicting monuments, only Emain Macha, a site both at the core of Irish culture, and also the capital of a distinctly Ulster ethos, is shared by both traditions. As the O'Neills well recognized, the site has meant nothing but Ulster. As a myth that draws people together, it is a monument worth preserving.

A booklet ***Navan Fort: The Ancient Capital of Ulster*** *by J. P. Mallory and illustrated by Stephen Conlin is available at the Linen Hall Library, most local museums and selected booksellers throughout Ulster. It has been published on behalf of the Friends of Navan to assist them in preparing their case for the preservation of the area about Navan Fort and the proper presentation of Ulster's premier archaeological and historical monument.*

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