

Haughey's Fort: Macha's Other Twin?

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ONE OF THE origin legends concerning the foundation of Emain Macha, the early capital of Ulster, derives the name of the site from a race between the King of Ulster's chariot team and the pregnant (goddess) Macha. Crossing the line first, Macha gave birth to twins whence the name of Ulster's capital since in Old Irish *emain* meant 'twin(s)'. Although this legend has all the appearances of an Indo-European foundation myth, the suggestion that Emain Macha, the modern Navan Fort, is 'twinning' with another site still attracts speculation. An obvious choice has always been Cathedral Hill in Armagh which, as Ardmacha 'the height of Macha', would surely provide a convenient lexical sibling to Emain. But research over the past nine years suggests an alternative candidate (if one were needed) in Haughey's Fort, a Late Bronze Age hillfort that lies only a kilometre west of Navan Fort.

The defences

Haughey's Fort is comprised of three

**Dr Jim Mallory,
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gives an overview of his
excavations and related
research at the Late
Bronze Age hillfort at
Haughey's Fort in the
Navan complex.**

concentric ditches (Fig. 1) surrounding the top of a hill overlooking Tray Bog to its immediate east and the ritual site of the King's Stables 300m downslope to its northeast. The ditches encircle a roughly oval or flattened circle whose maximum diameter is about 340m x 310m across. About 25m further upslope is the middle ditch and another 55m upslope is the top of the hill and the inner ditch which encloses an area measuring about 150m x 140m across. The ditches are fairly

uniform with respect to size and shape. They employ a V-cut profile (Fig. 2), the so-called 'ankle-breaker' designed to cause the maximum difficulty for an attacker (or excavator) and they measure between 2.2m and 3m in depth. The earthen banks that once accompanied them have completely eroded away. Some physical traces of the ditches probably survived into the nineteenth century since Haughey's Fort appears on the 1860 revised Ordnance Survey map as 'Site of Fort' and there is modern evidence for deliberately sealing the upper part of the innermost ditch with a thick layer of clay (as well as the ubiquitous evidence for drains). Excavations in 1992 uncovered traces of a palisade slot just within the perimeter of the innermost ditch.

The middle and outer ditches have yielded a modest amount of finds while the innermost ditch, waterlogged in the lower levels, has preserved a wide assortment of organic remains. Radiocarbon dates from all three ditches indicate construction and use in essentially the same period, i.e. c. 1250 - 1000 BC.



Fig. 2 —The innermost ditch under attack by unruly student volunteers demonstrating the difficulties of extricating themselves from a V-shaped ditch. The ditches probably filled with water within a period of a few weeks.

The interior

A total area of c. 500 square metres of the interior has been excavated to date. Against a background of apparent random stake holes, two main patterns of features have emerged. The first consists of a series of large pits, measuring about 1m across and 1m or more deep (Fig. 3). Their function is less than clear. It takes little imagination to see some of them in alignment, possibly of two rows, which may have formed the perimeter of an arc, all of which would predispose one to interpret them as large post pits forming a circular enclosure. On the other hand, there were no traces of post-pipes within them and the large pits were filled with occupation debris – pottery fragments, occasionally metal objects, glass beads, burnt bone, and a large quantity of carbonised grain and hazelnut shells. A possible explanation for the pits is that they were originally intended to hold posts but these had been subsequently dug up and the voids allowed to fill with settlement debris.

Another feature was a series of much smaller stake holes aligned in a series of three which marked out an arc, of which some 30m might be traced. The relationship between the larger pits and the stockade is unclear and may only be resolved by radiocarbon dates since the living surface of the site has been completely removed by the plough and, worse, lazy bedding for potatoes. In the case of the larger pits, both the objects recovered and a number of radiocarbon dates all indicate a Late Bronze Age date contemporary with the ditches, i.e. 1250–900 BC.

Fig. 1 Opposite — Haughey's Fort under excavation from the air. The innermost ditch is largely obliterated by the field boundary although a portion of it can be seen in the lower right corner of the field (under excavation). The middle and outer ditches are visible in the middle of the photograph.



Fig. 3 — A row of large pits which yielded remains of barley, burnt bone and artefacts of gold, bronze and glass as well as pot sherds.

In addition to the deep pits, a number of more irregular shallow pits were also uncovered, from these came glass beads and an occasional fragment of iron. These too have been dated by radiocarbon and here reveal a later phase of Iron Age occupation, c. 400 - 200 BC.

The evidence for settlement then is still fragmentary. On the one hand, there is ample evidence for use of the interior of the site and there are a number of architectural features. On the other hand, none of these have yet resolved themselves into the shape of a hut or house to match, for example, the somewhat later circular dwellings discovered at Navan Fort.

Economy

The concentration of activity in the Navan complex has been credited to its favourable situation on grey-brown podzolic soils which, although frequent enough in the rest of Ireland, cover only 1.5% of Ulster. To this is added a particularly favourable climatic aspect with a longer growing season than much of the surrounding territory. In the period of occupation, pollen analysis by Dave Weir has indicated large-scale clearance both for grasslands and for arable agriculture with the area around Navan showing some of the highest cereal pollen values in prehistoric Ireland. The pits in the interior of the site have yielded a large quantity of carbonised barley – the largest prehistoric carbonised assemblage in Ireland. The cereal remains have been boringly uniform in that they have comprised virtually pure barley, free of contaminants, and it is suggested that the barley may have been imported onto the site from processing areas distant from Haughey's Fort. Hazelnut shells also occur in abundance and one pit contained a large quantity of hazelnut shells, barley and a grinding stone, suggestive of Ireland's first muesli-processing station! From the innermost ditch came a large quantity of macro-botanical remains amongst which Dave Weir and Malachy Conway identified seeds of chickweed, thistle, plantain, buttercup, dock, elder, water dropwort, nettle and several other species. The crowning find was an intact apple, approximately 3000 years past its sell-by date. The pollen evidence suggests that by about 1000-900 BC, there was a period of forest regeneration and analysis of the ditch sediments from Haughey's Fort also supports the idea that the site was abandoned about this period.

As for stockbreeding, the principal livestock was cattle (64%), followed by

pig (30.4%) and traces of sheep/goat (6.5%). There were also the remains of horse and dog and among the wild species, red deer and fox. Finbar McCormick's analysis indicates that the cattle include specimens that were quite large while the dog skulls from Haughey's Fort are the largest known from prehistoric Ireland. To cap off this serendipitous recovery of the 'Hound(s) of Ulster', the only bird remains discovered belong to the raven, giving the site the Bodb as well.

Artefacts

Artefacts were recovered from both the pits in the interior of the site and from the water-logged innermost ditch. Metal artefacts were few and ranged from small fragments of gold such as a small stud, gold wire, and almost microscopic fragments of sheet gold (Fig. 4). Among the fragments of bronze was a portion of a possible bracelet. A number of glass beads (Fig. 5) were also recovered and could be divided, both according to type and context, into those dating from the Late Bronze Age and those deriving from the Iron Age. Other ornaments included a boar's tooth pendant and a fragment of a lignite bracelet. The most frequent find on the site were sherds from large flowerpot-shaped vessels. Several querns and rubbers were recovered and most interestingly among the stone finds was a cup-and-ring marked stone that had been partially buried in a pit.

It is the organic remains recovered from the lower sections of the ditch that are of greatest interest. These have included several long wooden handles apparently for metal tools, a bung, and pieces from a small alder bowl or platter. A considerable quantity of sharpened stakes, generally of hazel, were also found.

Haughey's Fort and the Navan complex

As a major component of the Navan complex of sites (Fig. 6), how does Haughey's Fort relate to the other monuments? Here there is more than ample room for speculation. Its most obvious relationship is probably with the King's Stables, the artificial pool that lies at the base of the hill on which Haughey's Fort stands. Chris Lynn's excavations of



Fig. 4 — Fragments of gold from the large pits at Haughey's Fort.



Fig. 5 — An assortment of glass beads from Haughey's Fort.

the pool recovered animal remains and a portion of a human skull, all suggestive of deliberate ritual depositions and radiocarbon dates from the lowermost sediments of the pool are virtually the same as those from the ditches and other Late Bronze Age features of Haughey's

Fort. More problematic is the relationship between Haughey's Fort and neighbouring Navan Fort. An obvious possibility is that Haughey's Fort was the original tribal centre, probably occupied in the twelfth and eleventh centuries but then abandoned when the centre was shifted eastwards to Navan. But this only remains a possibility and it is difficult to produce dates for Navan that are as precise as those for Haughey's Fort in the transition period between the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age.

And is Haughey's Fort, Navan's twin? Again we have only speculation. The name of the site is no clue as it is modern and derives from the landowner at the turn of the century. Otherwise, Haughey's Fort would appear to be anonymous in early Irish literature although one might suggest that it was the occasionally mentioned Rath Cimbaeth, the fort of the Ulster king who was married to the name-giving Macha who, according to another legend, drew out the precinct of Navan Fort itself with her brooch. Hopefully, we will not have to flee back into the mist of early Irish tradition for too many more answers as Haughey's Fort will again be the subject of further excavation in 1995 as a contribution to the 'Year of the Bronze Age' campaign from both the Department of Archaeology at Queen's University and the Environment Service DoE(NI).

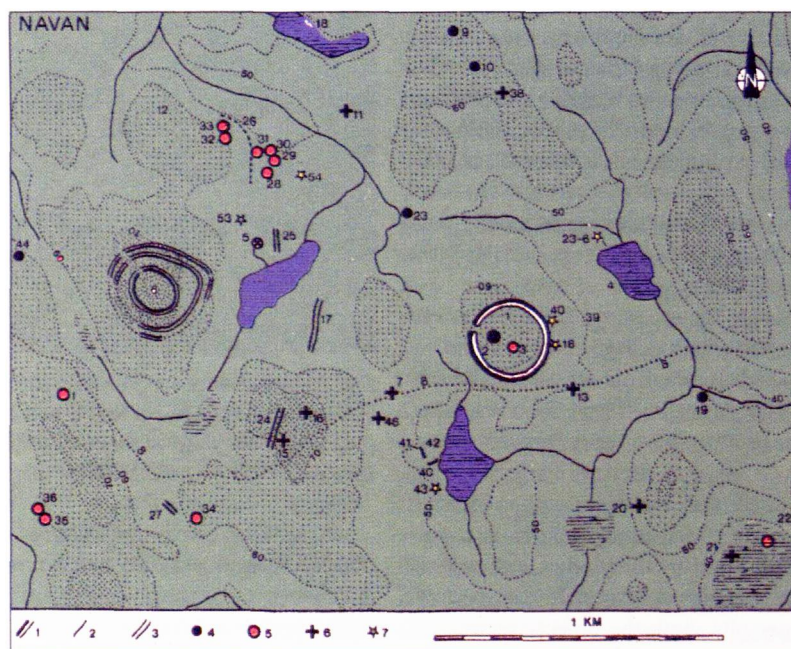


Fig. 6 — The Navan complex (after Richard Warner). Navan Fort is marked as sites 1, 2 and 3; Haughey's Fort is site 6 while the adjacent King's Stables is site 5