

Navan Fort: Home of Gods and Goddesses?

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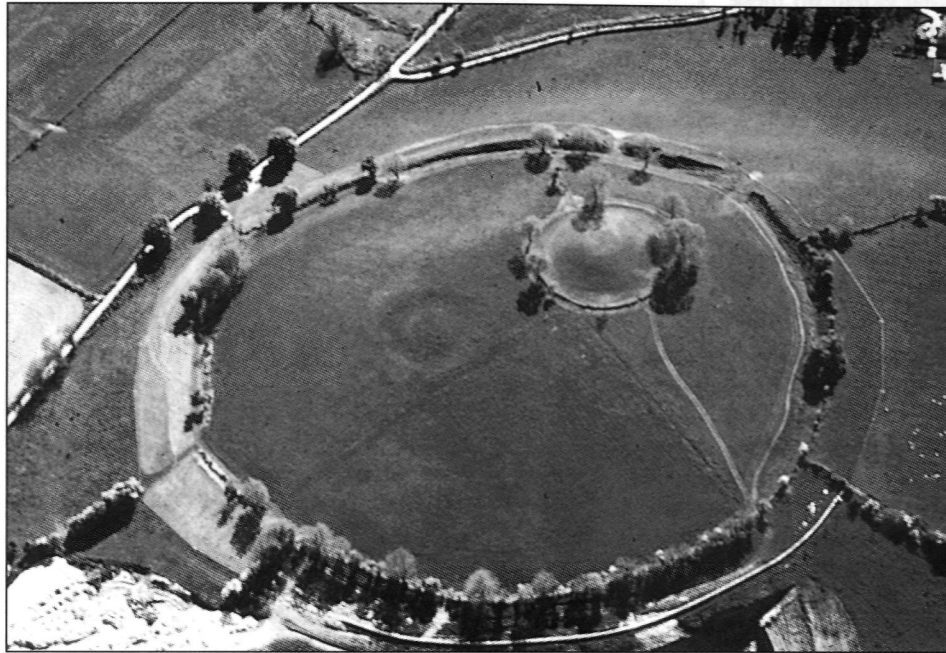
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Navan Fort — home of gods and goddesses?

Dr Chris Lynn of Historic Monuments and Buildings, DOE(NI) in a major interpretative article matches the archaeology of Navan Fort with contemporary accounts of religion and ritual associated at least in part with sacrificial or holocaust fertility rites.

Navan Fort is a large earthwork which encloses the summit of a drumlin some two miles west of the city of Armagh. The earthwork (circular in plan, 250m in diameter) consists of the remains of a large bank, best preserved on the west, immediately downslope from a ditch or hollow, the silted-up trench from which the bank material was obtained.

The summit of the hill encircled by the earthwork enclosure is dominated by a large grassy mound, 6m high and 50m in diameter. Almost the entire mound was excavated by D. M. Waterman from 1963 to 1971 on behalf of the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Department of Finance, Northern Ireland.

Sadly, the excavator did not live to see his report through to publication, but

summaries of the results of the excavation have appeared in print and it is hoped to publish a definitive report in 1993.

Modern archaeological opinion agrees that Navan Fort is a ceremonial or religious monument rather than a defensive 'fort'. There is no firm evidence, however, for the date of the earthwork enclosure. It could be as much as 4,000 years old and possibly contemporary with the Giant's Ring at Ballynahatty, near Belfast. On the other hand, it has been suggested that the Navan enclosure could date from the Early Iron Age because it was then that the site seems to have had its heyday. Whatever the date of the earthwork, which future excavation might quickly demonstrate, it is significant that other Irish hilltop sites of regional importance in later prehistory,

such as Tara, Co. Meath, and Knockaulin, Co. Kildare, are also surrounded by large circular or oval earthwork enclosures, apparently delimiting pagan sanctuaries.

Navan Fort is best known in literature and legend as *Emain Macha*, the prehistoric capital of the tribal territory of the Ulaidh. The meaning of *Emain* is obscure, but *Macha* is believed to be the name of the goddess of the territory. According to the 'Ulster Cycle' of ancient tales, Conchobar had his royal court in *Emain*, Cuchulainn was his champion and the heroes sallied forth to battle against those who would threaten the tribal territory. The regional pre-eminence of *Emain Macha* in the tales makes it a site of international significance because the tales centred on it form a part of the oldest European vernacular epic literature. A

major question is to what extent do these tales, which in their written forms date from the Early Christian period, reflect a true picture of life and outlook in the Early Iron Age?

The mound

D. M. Waterman's meticulous excavation of the hilltop mound provided an independent insight into what really was happening in a part of Navan 'Fort' in the Iron Age. The mound may have been referred to in the most famous of the Ulster epics, *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), as 'the mound of the hostages in Emain' and in another tale as a *sidbruig* or 'fairy mound'. This suggests that it was regarded in the Early Christian period as similar to other ancient mounds such as the 'Mound of the Hostages' on the hilltop sanctuary of Tara or those in the Boyne Valley, like Newgrange, now known to be passage tombs dating from before 2000 BC. The excavation of the Navan mound revealed a unique set of Early Iron Age ceremonial constructions. It is arguably a complex religious construct loaded with deliberate symbolism from top to bottom and the question of the beliefs which it might represent must be confronted. Over more than 2,000 years in time, from very near the end of pagan prehistory, this unique mound and its builders challenge us to decipher it, to work out what it might have meant in a religious sense.

First, it is necessary to understand exactly what the excavation of the ritual mound tells us about the series of religious or ceremonial *activities* which took place around 95 BC. Secondly, if there are any parallels between what happened at Navan and prehistoric religious beliefs and rites recognised elsewhere, what then might have been the real significance of the Navan mound?

The excavation

Timber Building The ritual activities, culminating in the visible hilltop mound are best reviewed in order of the sequence in which they took place, that is, the reverse of the sequence of excavation. The mound was a composite structure, built in three distinct stages, probably parts of a single pre-planned sequence. It was erected over the remains of a prestigious



The axe-trimmed butt of the central post of the timber building. Did this symbolise a link between the earth, the surface and the sky at a sacred centre?
Diameter 55cm (photo: A.E.P. Collins. Crown Copyright)

Iron Age settlement of large round wooden or wicker houses which were identified from their filled-in wall-trenches.

The first element of the mound was an enormous round wooden building, 40 metres in diameter, formed of five rings of oak posts, arranged around a larger central post. The posts of the structure were aligned carefully from ring to ring, along radial lines, and an 'ambulatory' formed by four roughly parallel rows of posts ran in from the perimeter wall on the west up to and around the central post. Most of the post-positions survived in the form of the back-filled socket dug to receive the upright, with a soft dark core showing where the post itself had rotted away. But Waterman and his team found the axe-hewn butts of a number of the oak posts surviving deep in the damp clay, including the central post, sunk two metres deep in subsoil. From tree-ring studies of this post carried out in Queen's University, Belfast, we know that it was felled, and presumably the whole structure was built, in 95 BC.

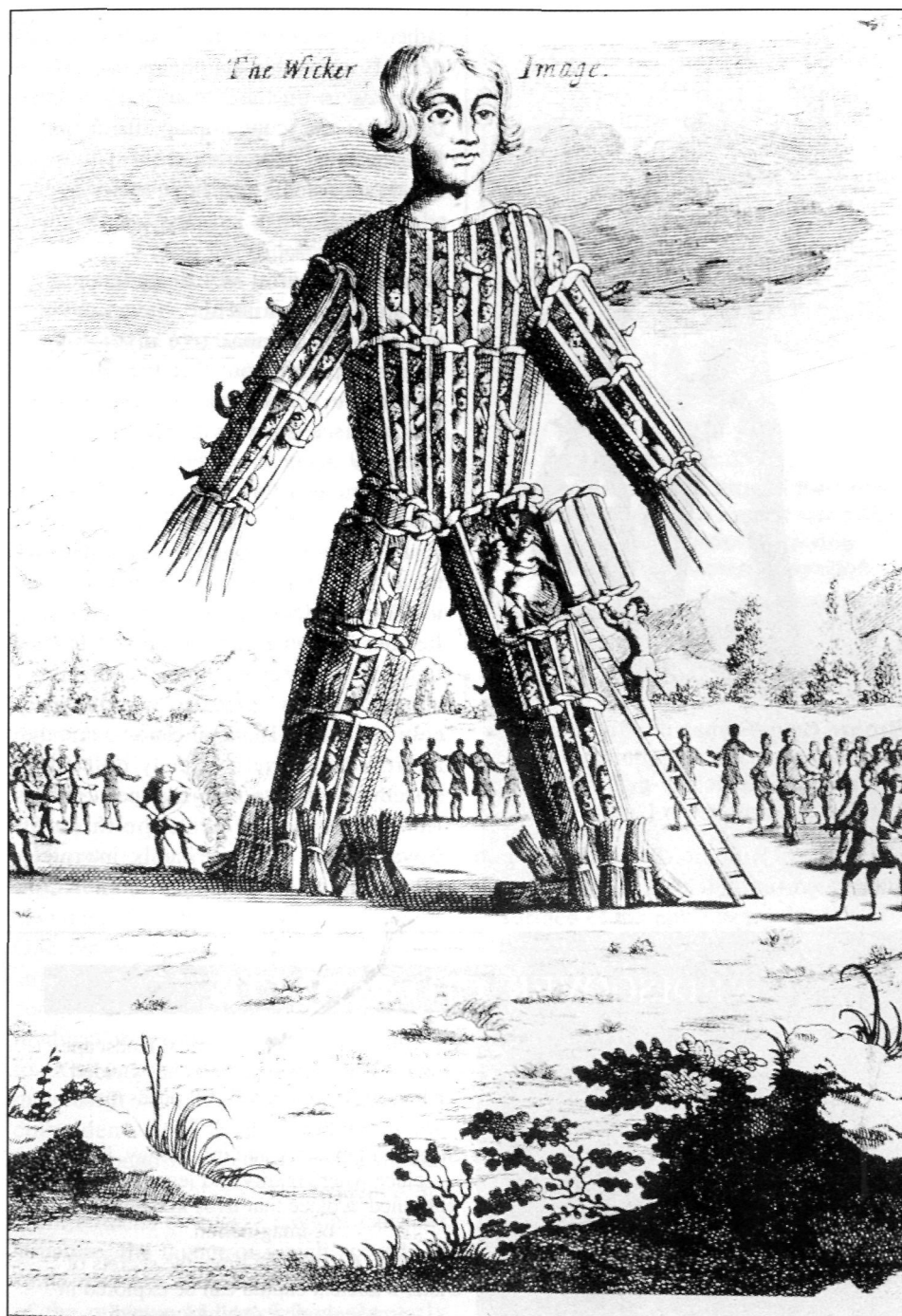
There is some evidence that the posts carried a superstructure, but this may not have been a 'roof' in the normal sense. The floor of the building was left rough and there was no sign of any activity having taken place on it before the cairn was inserted. Some of the posts appear to have begun to subside into subsoil, probably owing to the weight they carried, as soon as they were erected, and it seems that the building was a short-lived, even temporary structure.

Cairn The next stage in the sequence was the insertion of a flat-topped cairn, 3m high, of limestone blocks piled up in the timber structure *while it was still standing*. The outer edge of the cairn was contained by the inside of the timber structure's wooden wall. The vertical voids left by the rotted-out posts of the wooden building were first encountered after removal of a varying depth of stones from the top of the cairn. The holes continued down through the cairn and corresponded with the positions of post-sockets found in the underlying soil when the cairn was completely removed. The flattish surface of the cairn, every stone of which was individually measured and planned by Dudley Waterman, exhibited a pattern of lines radiating from the centre, formed by slight changes in level, linear hollows and rows of larger boulders. This surface treatment may have been deliberate or it could reflect the superstructure of the wooden building not far above its surface. The cairn's surface viewed from above looked like a large cake or wheel.

There is some evidence that the cairn stones were obtained from an older monument elsewhere in the Navan area, perhaps a passage tomb, which might have been conceived of in the Early Iron Age as the home of an ancestral deity.

Burning The timber structure was then deliberately burned around and over the cairn contained within it. Everywhere it was uncovered in excavation the wall of the wooden structure had burned away completely, leaving a zone of charcoal and red soil as testimony to its fate.

Charred remains of bundles of straw and twigs found in this zone of burnt soil were tentatively interpreted by Waterman as kindling deliberately piled against the



The wicker man, a 17th-century interpretation of the holocaust rite described by Caesar (photo courtesy of Thames and Hudson)

structure's wall to set it alight. Why did the Iron Age 'Ulsterfolk' build a huge wooden building, put a cairn of stones inside it and then set the whole edifice ablaze?

Earthen mound

The final stage in the building of the composite mound took place immediately after the burning of the wooden building.

Its remains and the surface of the cairn were covered with a mound of soil and turves, carefully constructed in thin extensive layers to a height of a further 2.5m, completing the green mound which we see today in reconstructed form. The mound was not a crude dump; its complexity shows that it was an important part of the religious construct. The varied nature of the soils in the mound suggests

that they represent a number of environments and some may have been brought to the site from a distance. It is unlikely that topsoil was stripped from the immediate vicinity to form the mound.

Interpretation

What religious purpose might lie behind this sequence of ritual constructions? Here we must appeal for contemporary information to the most famous figure of antiquity, Caesar himself, whose *Gallic Wars*, written in around 50 BC, less than 45 years after the Navan mound was built, is the chief source of contemporary information for the religious beliefs and practices of the pagan 'Celts' or Iron Age inhabitants of north-west Europe. These beliefs and practices are thought to have been widespread throughout 'Celtic' lands; for example, some of the information supplied by Caesar finds independent corroboration in the Irish tales.

Druids

Caesar informs us that sacrifices on behalf of the Gaulish tribes were organised and presided over by a class of religious specialists, the druids. The Navan mound meets all the tests which can be used to identify the activities of druids: it is a major religious construct at a tribal centre; the geometry of the plan of the timber building and the complexity of the whole construct indicate a complex code of belief; the ritual sequence in part constituted a sacrifice; the Ulster epics mention important druids in connection with *Emain* (Cathbad the druid was the father of Conchobar); and finally, the mound is of *exactly* the right date to have been an example of a religious movement or rite, knowledge of which could have reached Caesar or his main source, Posidonius.

The Navan mound is, arguably, a druidic *tour de force*. We can expect it, therefore, to reflect the religious beliefs of the druids expressed elsewhere because this priestly caste, whose name perhaps meant 'oak-wise', is said to have fostered a widespread religious orthodoxy expressed, for example, in veneration of sacred trees as representatives of deities.

Sacrifice

Caesar tells us that when the druids

carried out a sacrifice on 'behalf of the state' they made a huge wicker model, filled it with human victims and set the whole thing alight. Thankfully, this does not appear to have happened at Navan, but the ritual sequence there has analogies with that described by Caesar. They made a huge wooden structure, packed an 'offering' inside it (the cairn) and then burned both in a sacrificial rite. The Navan wooden building may, therefore, be the equivalent of Caesar's 'wicker image', but with a symbolic rather than a living sacrifice. The Navan wooden building also reflects the shape of its contents, an important implication of Caesar's use of the term '*simulacrum*'—model or image.

Continental early medieval commentators suggest that the holocaust rite described by Caesar was offered to a celestial deity which in Gallo-Roman times became assimilated with Jupiter, the classical god of sovereignty, the law-giver. In Gaulish statuary the wheel symbol of the Celtic sky-god, 'the thunderer', was taken over by Jupiter who is depicted carrying a wheel. Stone carvings of wheels and tiny 'votive' wheels of bronze found in British and Gaulish sites of late



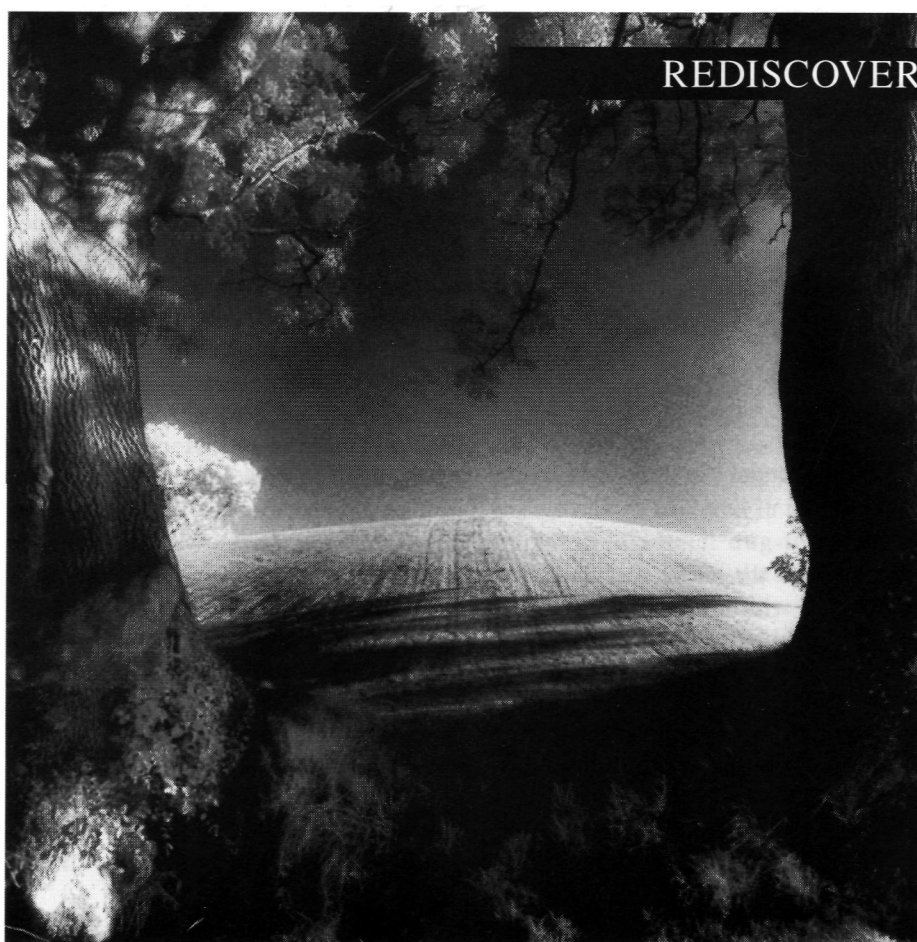
Bronze Gallo-Roman Jupiter holding a thunderbolt in his right hand and the wheel of the Celtic sky-god in his left. (Musée St Germain-en-Laye)

Celtic and Roman times have been interpreted on their own as symbolising

either this 'meteorological' deity or a solar deity. Is it possible that the radiate, wheel-like pattern on the Navan cairn surface constitutes an iconographic affirmation of the suggested dedication of this part of the ritual process to a sky- or solar-god?

Mythology

Another potential key to understanding the thinking behind the Navan ritual is provided by comparative mythology. It has been pointed out that the deity after whom the Navan sanctuary is named, Macha, is a good example of a Celtic territorial goddess exhibiting three classic Indo-European functions or attributes, as sovereign, warrior and fertiliser. A French scholar, George Dumézil, suggested that these three functions can be traced in the ideology of Indo-European peoples from Ireland through Rome to India. The three functions represented are in the three main social classes (priests, warriors and cultivators) and Dumézil claimed that they are reflected correspondingly in the deity system of separate Indo-European groups. Looked at in this light, the threefold Navan mound sequence can be interpreted as a symbolic evocation of this threefold



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ideology: wooden building = druids (magico-religious sovereignty), cairn = warriors (warfare), and earthen mound = farmers (fertility of the tribe and tribal area). If this suggestion is correct, other interesting implications stem from it. For example, the warriors symbolised by the cairn remind us of the widespread legends of magical armies in hills and mounds, ready to emerge and do battle when tribal sovereignty is threatened (the Hosting of Sidhe). It is also possible that the mound builders were symbolically re-enacting myths for religious purposes, perhaps as a foundation sacrifice or in response to military or environmental pressures.

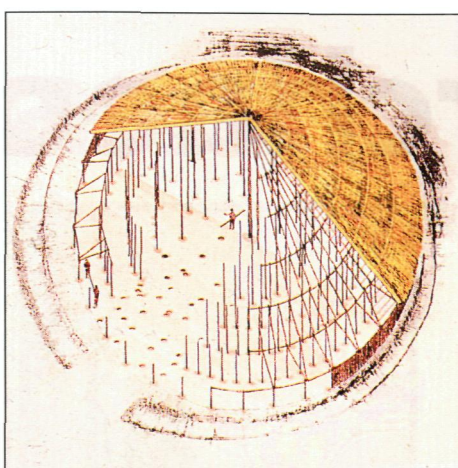
The otherworld hostel

Analogies have been drawn between the Celtic holocaust rite described by Caesar and the incidents in the tales where heroes are lured by magic to otherworld hostels. In this light it is possible that the stones in the timber building represent the heroes in their Celtic equivalent of Valhalla, perhaps symbolising the price paid for the tribal territory and its sovereignty.

Some tales appear to locate large mythical circular oak buildings, for example, 'Conchobar's house' in *Emain*. One eminent scholar, T. F. O'Rahilly, suggested that in the Early Christian period (and by implication before), these mythical otherworld hostels were believed to exist *underneath* pre-existing ancient mounds. It is unlikely, therefore, to be a coincidence that the excavation of the Navan mound revealed *under* the mound and at the start of a ritual sequence the burnt remains of a large circular oak-post structure, the layout of which accords in some respects with the stock description of the otherworld hostel from the early literature. It may be that the religious specialists or druids responsible for the Navan construct were deliberately recreating a composite structure from their mythology, a structure which, it was believed, existed in ancient mounds, the homes of ancestral deities.

Comparative religion

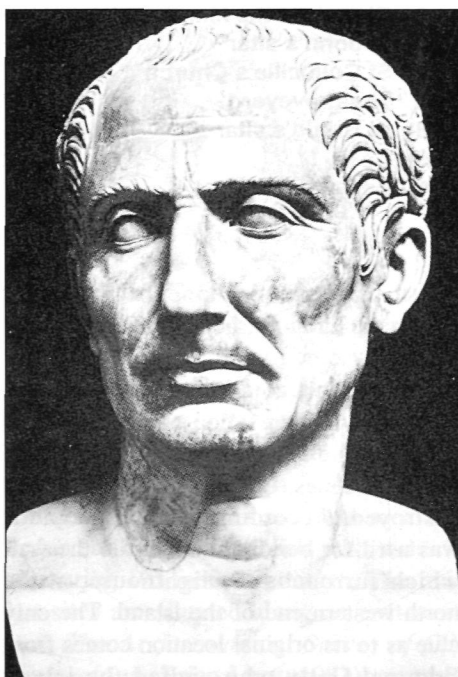
Investigation of the religious outlook of other traditional societies suggests that the structure of the timber building could have a significance beyond that of a simple containing pyre for the cairn of



Isometric reconstruction of the timber building, showing a roof of low pitch, during construction (drawing: D. Wilkinson, *Crown Copyright*)



Surface of the cairn from NE showing radial grooves (photo: A.E.P. Collins, *Crown Copyright*)



Do Caesar's comments on Celtic sacrifices hold a vital key to the interpretation of the Navan mound?

limestone boulders. The layout of the structure could reflect a cosmology, as the structure of an early temple was sometimes thought of as a sacred replica of transcendental heavenly architecture. By sharing in the sacrality of the sky the temple structure sanctified the surrounding tribal territory. Similarly, the large post at the centre of the Navan structure might represent the world tree or *axis mundi*, a symbol of the link established between the infernal regions, the surface of the earth and the sky at a sacred centre. The sacred tree was a widespread symbol of universality and tribal integrity. The concept of territorial sovereignty, arguably enshrined in the mound, may also be emphasised by the contemporary construction of earthworks (the Dorsey and Black Pig's Dyke) at points which may have formed parts of the frontier of Ulaidh territory.

Whether or not the suggestions and hypotheses proposed here are admitted as viable, it is at least clear from Dudley Waterman's exemplary excavation of the Navan mound that the philosophy underlying religious practices in Iron Age Ireland was more complex and organised than some have supposed. The evidence from Navan shows large-scale ritual architecture and a codified belief system. While acknowledging the contribution of the Irish tales to evidence for the nature of Celtic religion, some scholars have assumed that archaeological evidence from Ireland would be less useful because its interpretation could hardly be aided by contemporary texts, at the time originating only from within the Graeco-Roman world. If, however, the analogy between the Navan mound sequence and Caesar's description of druidic sacrifices carried out on behalf of Celtic tribes is accepted as meaningful, then the analogy may constitute the earliest possible example of text-aided archaeological interpretation of an excavation in these islands.

It seems reasonable to suggest that, in the beginning of the first century BC, Navan was an otherworld place, the home of the gods and goddesses. It was a Celtic tribe's sanctuary, its Capitol, its sacred symbol of sovereignty and cohesion, and not simply the physical site of a royal court or military headquarters.