

Navan Fort—Legendary Capital of Prehistoric Ulster

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Source: *Archaeology Ireland*, , Heritage Guide No. 40: Navan Fort—Legendary Capital of Prehistoric Ulster (Jun., 2008), pp. 1-6

Published by: [Wordwell Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20617894>

Accessed: 13/03/2014 19:52

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Navan Fort



—legendary capital
of prehistoric Ulster

Archaeology
IRELAND *Heritage Guide No. 40*



The site B mound from the north. (Photo: Ken Williams)

Introduction

Navan Fort, legendary capital of the prehistoric kingdom of Ulster, is one of the largest and most enigmatic monuments of the early Iron Age in Ireland. A flat-topped drumlin or glacial hill is encircled by a large ditch and an external bank. The views from the top are extensive and would have provided an appropriate open-air setting for communal ceremonies.

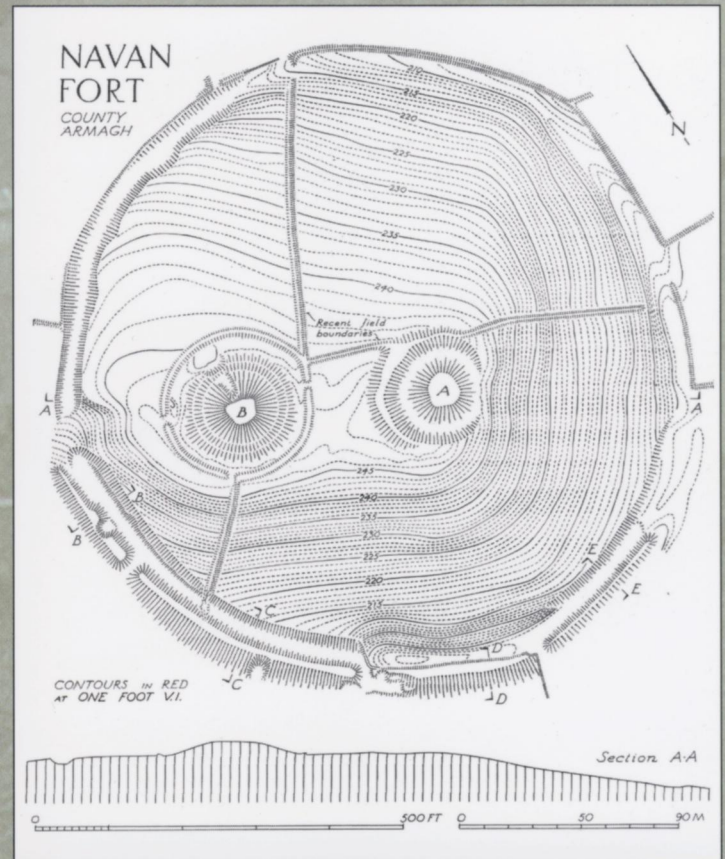
The site is known in early written sources as Emain Macha. *Emain* may mean 'twin' and *Macha* is the name of the goddess of the region. *Macha* is also an element of the name of the city of Armagh (*Ard Macha*) some 2.5km to the east. The site is portrayed in the early literature, chiefly the 'Ulster Cycle' of tales, as the headquarters and sacred place of a king, Conchobar, and his warriors who go out to defend the borders of the kingdom of the Uladh. The events of the tales are imagined to have happened in the last two centuries BC.

The central tale of the Ulster Cycle, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* or 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley', describes a raid by the army of Queen Medb of Connacht. Some scholars suggest that the tales contain a genuine memory of warfare that led to the downfall of the kingdom of Ulster and the abandonment of its capital at Emain Macha. Others assign the Ulster tales to myth or epic, no less significant in terms of prehistoric belief.

A place built for ritual

The monument is an enclosed sacred space, delimited by a circular-plan earthwork, a bank with an internal ditch, 250m in diameter. On the north the ditch and bank run across the top of the hill, but on the south they descend almost to the base of the hill. The earthwork is best preserved on the south-west but has been almost completely levelled on the east. Here a large, squared oak timber found wedged in the bottom of the ditch in a test excavation in 1998 was dated by dendrochronology to the first decade of the first century BC (100–90 BC). Therefore the monument was probably built at the beginning of the first century BC. Today's approach to the hilltop follows the curving line of the earthwork up the hill on the west. The bottom of the ditch is perhaps some 3m beneath the present surface. Where best preserved, the bank, downslope to the west, is some 15m wide and 4m high.

Large earthworks of various types are characteristic of Irish sites identified in early literature as later prehistoric provincial centres, such



Contour plan of Navan Fort.

as Cruachan, the capital of Connacht, and Tara, the capital of Meath. Earthworks comparable with Navan Fort occur at Tara and at Knockaulin, Co. Kildare, identified as the legendary Dún Ailinne, chief site of the province of Leinster.

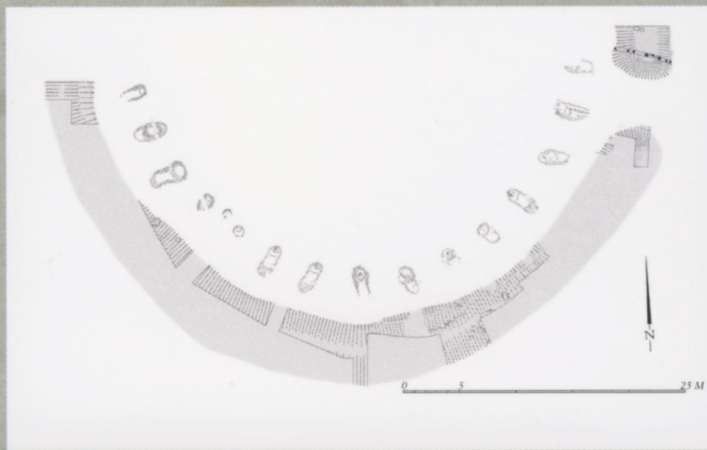
There are two other, smaller monuments on the hilltop. Both were excavated by D. M. Waterman in the 1960s. The first, called 'site A', is a large, ploughed-down ring-barrow. The second, 'site B', is a mound 50m in diameter. A large oak post found in the base of the mound was dated by dendrochronology to 95 BC, showing that the mound and the surrounding earthwork were built at the same time.

Excavating the mound

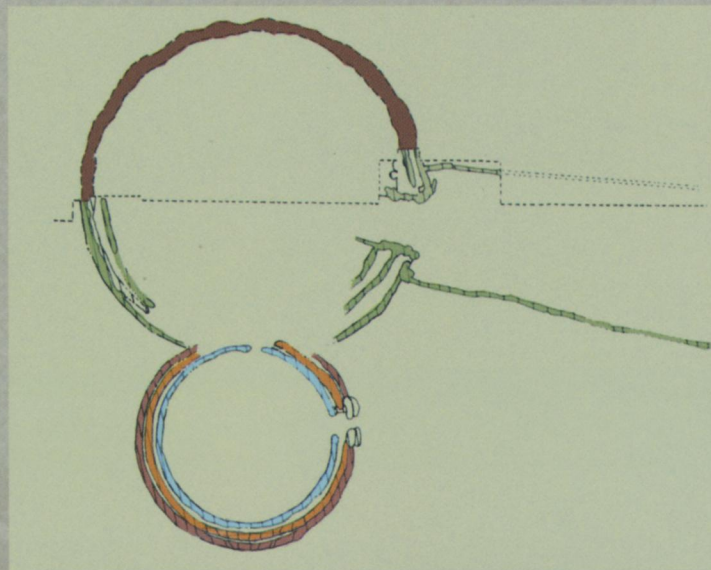
Before excavation, the site B mound was thought to be a Neolithic passage tomb, and it was compared with the 'Mound of the Hostages' at Tara. But the excavations revealed something completely unique and unexpected.

A late Bronze Age enclosure and timber circle

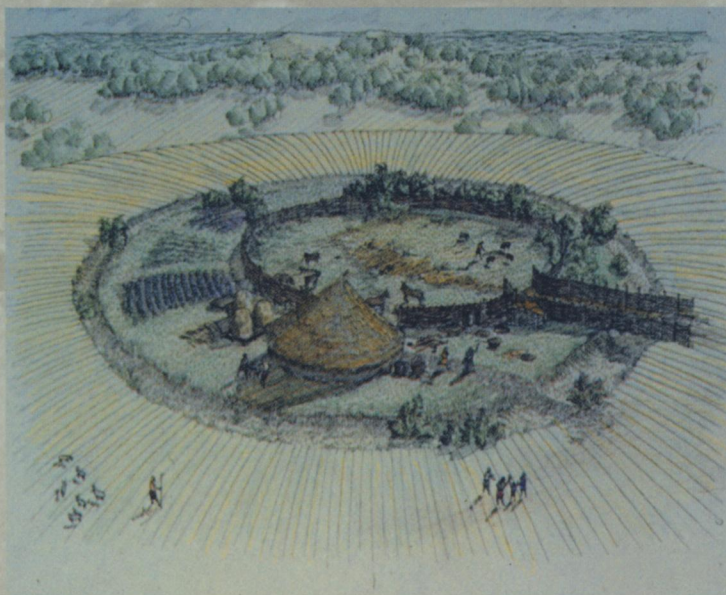
Around 500 BC a circular-plan, ditched enclosure was constructed on the level summit of the hill. The ditch was 5m wide and 45m in internal diameter. Four metres inside the line of the ditch a concentric circle of 28 substantial posts, 4m apart, was erected. No contemporary internal features were identified. In the absence of any clear utilitarian or defensive explanation for the shallow ditch and enclosed circle of isolated posts, there is a possibility that they were used for ceremonial purposes.



Southern half of the late Bronze Age ditched enclosure with the inner ring of post-pits.



Plan of Iron Age circular wooden buildings with attached open-air enclosures to the north (figure-of-eight structures).



Reconstruction of Iron Age circular house with attached open-air working area, set within the late Bronze Age ditched enclosure.

Iron Age figure-of-eight buildings

After an interval a series of large, circular-plan Iron Age wooden structures was built on the site of the timber circle. These structures were in use from about 250 BC until around 95 BC. The buildings averaged 14m in diameter and had entrances on the east. Attached to them on the north (forming an overall figure-of-eight on plan) were larger circular enclosures some 20m in diameter, thought to have been open-air working areas. The northern enclosures were approached and entered by an 'avenue' running up the hill from the east.

The southern wooden buildings of the Iron Age phase were constructed in groups of three concentric wall foundation trenches. The excavations revealed three successive groups of triple wall slots. The most remarkable find from the Iron Age occupation was the skull of a Barbary ape; the animal was presumably brought from North Africa in the second century BC.

It seems very likely that the occupants of the site at this time had a royal or priestly status. This is supported by the size and design of the wooden structures, their placement in an older (late Bronze Age) ditched enclosure with ceremonial significance and their replacement by another ceremonial monument.

Site A

The level area on the summit of the hill extends to the east, where the large ring-barrow of site A was built. This has a ditch some 40m in diameter, 2m deep and 5.5m wide, with an external embankment. Limited excavation of the ditch demonstrated that it had been cut through a set of three concentric foundation trenches for wooden-walled structures, similar to those found at site B. More recently, geophysical survey demonstrated the existence of a larger, circular-plan set of concentric trenches to the north of site A, known as 'site C', which join with the circles found under site A to form a large figure-of-eight plan structure. Excavations in 1999 demonstrated that site C dates from the Iron Age. Site C is, therefore, another large and intriguing ceremonial structure.

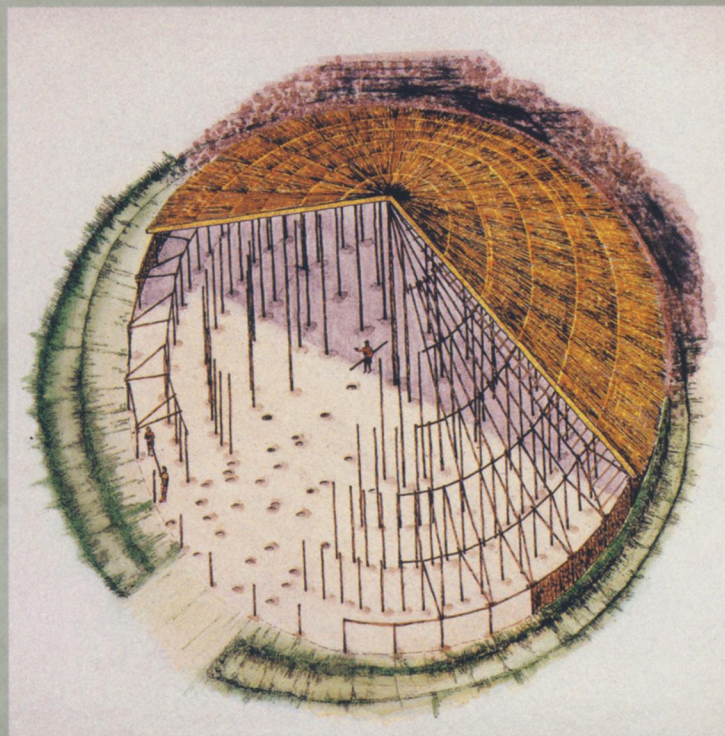
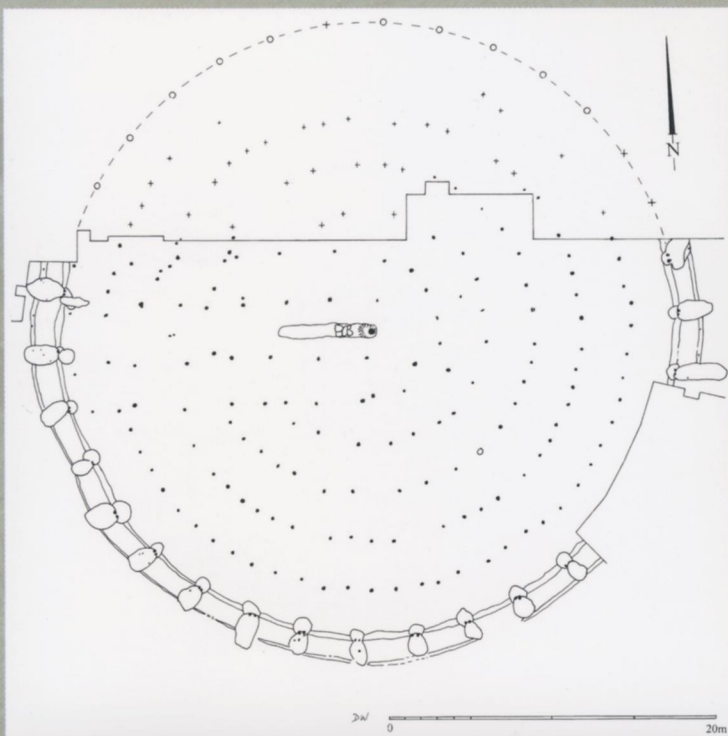
The site B mound: the temple in the cairn

The site B mound was a three-part structure built on the site of the Iron Age figure-of-eight structures and the Bronze Age timber circle.

Timber building

The first component was a large timber building, 40m in diameter, comprising five rings of large oak posts—some 280 altogether. On the west side three parallel rows of posts ran in from the entrance to form three 'aisles'. The aisles ran up to and around a large post placed at the exact centre of the building. The axe-hewn bases of a few of the posts survived deep in the ground, but the positions of most were marked by deep post-sockets and by vertical voids in a large pile of boulders which was heaped up inside the building (see below).

The central post was erected with the aid of a 6m-long ramp, sloping down into a socket some 2m deep, where the stump of the post was



Covering mound of turves

As soon as the fire had died down, the cairn was covered with a mound of carefully layered turves, soils and other deposits evidently collected from a variety of environments. The mound extended to a height of 2.5m above the flat top of the cairn and, like the timber building and cairn, contained no finds or bones that might give a clue as to its purpose.

This mound in Navan Fort is one of the most intriguing monuments of the Iron Age. It is clear that the builders of the mound wished to create a lasting monument that had a symbolic or ceremonial purpose. Some authorities have suggested that the timber building was a temple and that when it began to show signs of decay its existence was commemorated by encasing its remains in a mound. The excavator concluded, however, that the construction of the timber building, the insertion of the cairn, the burning and the covering mound of turves were planned from the outset as a coordinated series of ceremonial activities.

The Navan mound could have been a form of 'mesocosm', a halfway house between man and the universe, a resource that could be used by future generations of the Uladh to inaugurate their kings in accordance with appropriate ritual observances.

The archaeological landscape

Navan Fort is the best known and best preserved of a number of prehistoric monuments in the area, forming a distinctive landscape.

The Dorsey

Some 25km to the south of Navan, a series of defensive earthworks in Dorsey townland appear to straddle a routeway leading into Ulster. To judge from the date of an associated palisade trench, the earthworks, known as 'the Dorsey', were built at exactly the same time as Navan Fort. Closer to Emain Macha, in the townlands of Killyfaddy and Lisnadill, linear earthworks transect the same route corridor. These may well also date from the Iron Age.



Top left: Plan of the 40m-diameter timber building.

Top right: Reconstruction of the 40m structure, showing the 'aisles' running from the west to the central post.

Above: Cairn surface from the west, showing radial divisions. (Photo: Crown Copyright)

preserved. The post may have towered above the rest of the structure. Dendrochronological study of the post showed that it was felled in 95 BC.

Cairn of boulders

While the timber building was still standing it was filled with limestone boulders. The posts were encased in the cairn and when they rotted they left vertical voids. The cairn was 2.8m high and its outer edge had been retained by the plank wall of the timber structure. The parts of the timber building that were still exposed, its outer wall and superstructure or roof, were deliberately burned. There was evidence that bundles of twigs were placed against the outside of the timber wall to set it alight.



Vertical aerial photograph of the core of the Navan landscape. (Photo: Crown Copyright)

Haughey's Fort

In Tray townland, 1 km west of Navan, is a large Bronze Age hillfort, some 350m in diameter, known as 'Haughey's Fort'. It has three widely separated rings of defensive works. Excavations by Jim Mallory demonstrated the scale and date of the ditches. The site appears to have been constructed around 1100 BC. In the interior there were pits containing Bronze Age finds and concentric curving arcs of post- and stake-holes. A few features dated from the Iron Age, showing that activity in Haughey's Fort also took place at the same time as Navan Fort was in its heyday.

The King's Stables

At the north-eastern foot of the hill dominated by Haughey's Fort and of similar date is a small and unusual monument known as 'the King's Stables'. This is an artificial pond some 25m in diameter and 2.5m deep, surrounded by a broad irregular bank. Trial excavations revealed that the monument might have been used for sacrificial purposes. Fragments of moulds for casting leaf-shaped bronze swords, part of a human skull and numerous red deer antlers were found in the thick mud at the bottom of

the pool. Recent investigations of parallel ditches running to the south of the King's Stables and east of Haughey's Fort in Creeveroe have demonstrated that they are also of Bronze Age date.

Loughnashade

This small lake, immediately east of Navan, was a significant feature of the ancient ritual landscape. Its existence may have been one of the reasons why the site for Navan Fort was chosen. In 1798 four large bronze horns or trumpets were found while digging a drain; nearby were several human skulls. Only one of the horns, decorated in La Tène style, survived; it is now in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin. Loughnashade may have been used for ceremonies at broadly the same time as Navan Fort. There can be little doubt that the sites were closely connected ideologically and functionally.

These monuments form an unusual concentration that would be regarded as very significant archaeologically even if the early literature was completely silent about the ancient prestige of Emain Macha. It appears that the 'ritual landscape' of earthworks was mainly created in the Bronze Age and that the construction of Navan Fort was the culmination of a long history of ceremonial activity.



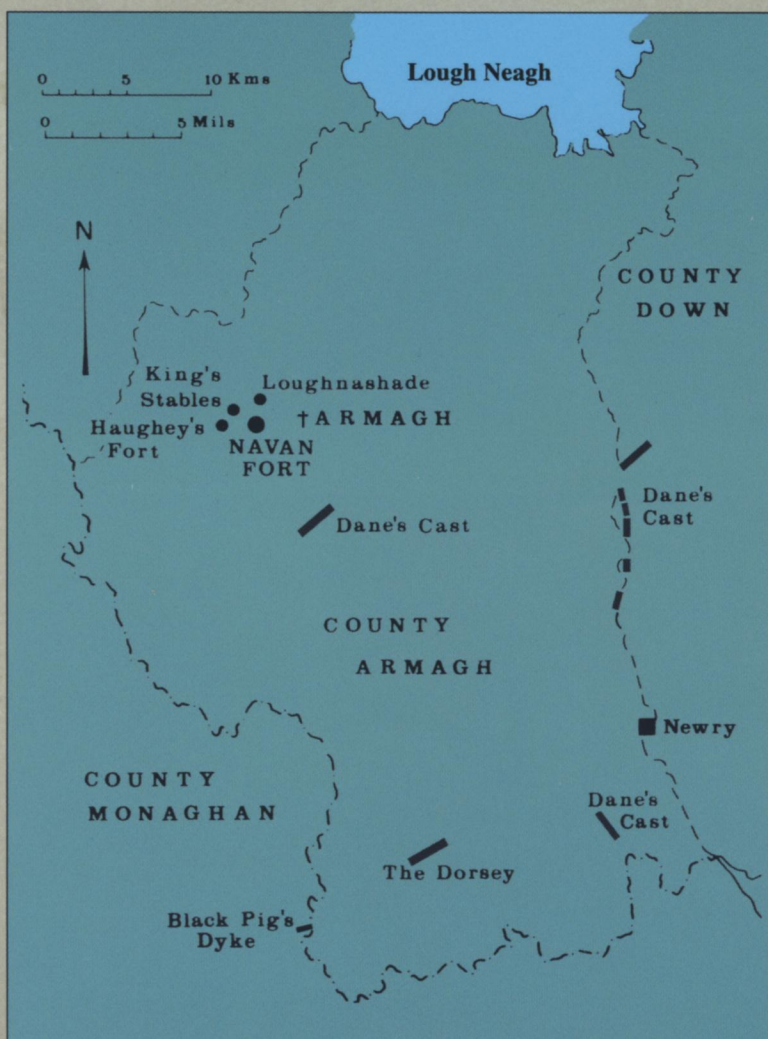
Further reading

- Emania*: Bulletin of the Navan Research Group. Back and current issues available from the School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen's University, Belfast, and from Wordwell Books.
- Lynn, C. 2003 *Navan Fort: archaeology and myth*. Bray. Wordwell.
- Waterman, D.M. 1997 *Excavations at Navan Fort, 1961-71* (ed. C. J. Lynn). Belfast. HMSO.

The site B mound from the south-east.



Navan Fort and nearby sites: Haughey's Fort, the King's Stables and Loughnashade.



The wider setting
and location of
Navan Fort (left and
right).

Front cover—Navan
Fort from the north-
east. (Photo: Crown
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CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Guide series editors—Tom Condit and Gabriel Cooney
Text—Chris Lynn (©)
Maps and plans—Environment and Heritage Service, DOENI
Layout © Archaeology Ireland
To order this guide contact:
Archaeology Ireland,
Media House, South County Business Park, Dublin 18,
telephone: 01 2947860.
email: helen@wordwellbooks.com
Date of publication: June 2008.
ISSN 0790-982X



This guide has been generously
supported by the Environment and
Heritage Service, Department of the
Environment, Northern Ireland.