

Recent excavations and speculations on the Navan complex.

Title Annotation: archaeology in Ireland

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Article Type: Statistical Data Included

Geographic Code: 4EUIR

Date: Jun 1, 2002

Words:4273

Publication: Antiquity

ISSN: 0003-598X

Emain Macha, the legendary seat of the kings of Ulster, has long been identified with the Navan complex, 2.6 km west of Armagh. This complex comprises more than a dozen proximate, in some cases presumably associated, prehistoric monuments (Warner 1994). Excepting a number of outlying monuments, the major portion of the Navan complex is anchored between two large enclosures, each with adjacent sites associated with votive depositions in water. On the east is Navan Fort defined by a hengiform bank-and-ditch enclosure some 230 m across and containing two field monuments: Site A, a ring-work c. 50 m across with a low rise in the centre, and Site B, a 6-7-m high mound (FIGURE 1). At the eastern base of the drumlin on which the enclosure sits is Loughnashade, a small lake from whose marshy edge four large Iron Age horns, at least one of which bore La Tene decoration, were recovered in the late 18th century (Raftery 1987). The western monument is Haughey's Fort, a trivallate hillfort whose elliptical shape has a maximum diameter of c. 340 m (Mallory 1995). At the northeastern base of the drumlin on which the fort is sited is the King's Stables, a Late Bronze Age artificial pool from which both animal and human remains have been recovered (Lynn 1977).

A chronological sketch of the development of the complex begins with the Neolithic which is attested by pits containing both Modified Carinated bowls and flints (Navan, Site B, phase 1) and two destroyed passage-tombs to the north of Navan. Subsequent activity is indicated by plough marks in the soil overlying the Neolithic pits (Navan, Site B, phase 2). The main indication of Bronze Age occupation is to be found at Haughey's Fort where high-precision radiocarbon dates from the three ditches and the interior of the site suggest occupation c. 1100 BC with probable abandonment by c. 900 BC (Mallory 1995: 85). Radiocarbon dates place the adjacent King's Stables in the same period. Also about this time (there is ambiguity in the radiocarbon dates) Navan (Site B) saw the erection of a ditched enclosure (c. 39 m diameter) with an internal ring of large post uprights (phase 3(i)). This area was subsequently filled with a series of figure-of-eight structures (c. 400-100 BC; phase 3(ii)); Dudley Waterman also uncovered a portion of a triple-walled circular structure of possibly the same date under the low mound at Navan, Site A (phase A). At Haughey's Fort there was some evidence (several irregular pits containing iron objects/scraps and glass beads) for minor occupation in the period c. 400-200 BC. In the 1st century BC the figure-of-eight structures were cleared at Navan (Site B) and the area was filled with a circular timber structure, 40 m in diameter, and constructed from c. 269 oak uprights (phase 4). This structure was subsequently encased in limestone boulders, its outer timbers fired, and then the stone cairn was covered with sods to form an earthen mound (phase 5). More recent excavations of Navan's outer enclosing ditch have revealed that this too dates to the 1st century BC (Mallory et al. 1999). The four Loughnashade horns from the adjacent lake should also date from broadly the same period. Subsequent activity within the Navan complex is dated to the Early Mediaeval period.

The publication of Dudley Waterman's excavations at Navan Fort (Waterman 1997) has served as a watershed in Navan research and the purpose of this paper is to highlight very briefly 10 of the more interesting or

enigmatic discoveries and problems of interpretation that have emerged since Waterman's book went to press.

1 Ditch stakes (Haughey's Fort)

Four seasons were devoted to excavating the eastern periphery of Haughey's Fort where trenches cut the outer, middle and what was presumed to be a terminal of the innermost ditch (Mallory et al. 1996). The latter comprised a small portion, c. 2 m long and 2.3 m deep. Protruding out of the relatively flat base were three series of upright stakes or rods, apparently arranged in pairs (FIGURE 2); lying near but not attached to each pair of stakes was a thicker rod or tree branch, including a substantial birch branch buried in section. The purpose of these stakes remains enigmatic. The uprights were far too thin to be load-bearing, e.g. serve as a base for wooden causeways or a platform from which the ditch might be dug, and the only functional conjecture so far advanced is that they may have served in some way to assist in getting in and out of a presumably waterlogged ditch.

2 'Ritual pits' (Haughey's Fort)

The discovery of the presumed terminal encouraged future excavations to be directed at exploring an 'entrance' to Haughey's Fort. Despite three more seasons' excavation, no resumption of the ditch was discovered in the 15 m beyond the suspected 'terminal' thus suggesting that either it was not in reality a terminal or that the interior ditch had been left incomplete. However, on the expected line of the ditch there were uncovered two exceptionally large pits (FIGURE 3). The first, F 725, measured c. 1.75 m across and 1.3 m deep (1.8 m below present surface level; FIGURE 4). It had silted naturally and at its base were recovered 27 sherds of Late Bronze Age pottery. Even larger was an oval pit (F 1069) that was c. 2 m in diameter and 2.5 m deep (FIGURE 4). The basal deposits of the pit were waterlogged and included a layer of peat, 55 identifiable mammal bones (MNI = 4 cattle, 1 pig, 2 fragments of red deer antler), and 143 sherds from what would appear to be the same Late Bronze Age vessel. Set against the base and north side of the pit were two large (c. 1 m long) thick timber posts; attenuated at the top, they had clearly been longer but had only survived in the lower waterlogged section of the pit. Pits excavated in the interior of the site were approximately a metre in depth and their location suggests that they may have once served as post-pits for two large double-ringed structures; it was suggested that the posts were removed deliberately and the pits allowed to silt up naturally, accumulating various surface refuse, e.g. animal bones, pottery, fragments of metal (Mallory 1995: 78). A similar explanation may serve for Fs 725 and especially 1069. Although these pits lacked any trace of a post-pipe their depth and shape suggest that they could well have held large posts that were subsequently removed.

One is reminded here of the 'ritual pits' ascribed to the pre-Iron Age occupation at Danebury (Cunliffe 1984: 12). These were of comparable depth and the presence of dog burials and other animal remains in one suggested the possibility of a ritual deposit; two retained traces of post-pipes and it was speculated that these may have served as a ritual perimeter on the contour of the fort. In this light the so-called terminal at Haughey's Fort may have been merely an elongated pit, and it too may have constituted but another link of 'ritual pits' along the inner perimeter of Haughey's Fort.

3 Linear ditches

An aerial photographic survey of the Navan complex revealed the presence of a series of interrupted linear cropmarks that could be followed for approximately 1.7 km (Hartwell 1991) and suggested the existence of a double row of ditches (FIGURE 1); there was no solid evidence for a surviving bank. A visit by the Time Team in 1995 stimulated test excavations to ground proof these cropmarks (Conway in press) which intercepted the

two ditches. Both were V-shaped in section, with a deeper eastern ditch some 4.8 m wide and 1.24 m deep, descending into a lower fill of charcoal-rich soil mixed with stones of limestone and basalt. The shallower western ditch measured 3.2 m across and 0.9 m deep and its base revealed several distinctive flat rim sherds, typical of Late Bronze Age coarse wares in Ireland.

Interpretation of such linear earthworks runs to the extremely speculative--mediaeval trackways, ceremonial approaches, defences, boundaries of ceremonial precincts--since potential parallels often remain undated. Double linear features have long been known both at Tara (Newman 1997) and Rathcroghan (Waddell 1988: 15) and an association between hillforts and linear earthworks has also been observed for Kilkenny, e.g. Grevine West linear earthwork and Cotterellsrath (Gibbons 1990: 17-21). The discovery of a set of parallel ditches at Tara between the (undated) Riverstown embanked enclosure and the main monuments of Tara (Condit 1993) provides an obvious topographical parallel to those of the Navan complex (Warner 1994). The state of current conjecture sees the linear earthworks at Navan serving as some form of separation between the two main sites of the complex or, given the Iron Age date of the Navan enclosure (below), as an eastern boundary to the Late Bronze Age complex centred on Haughey's Fort.

4 The Navan ditch

On the publication of Waterman's excavations it was concluded that the mound, site B, was built in the first decade of the 1st century BC as a ceremonial monument, perhaps (from subsequent literary portrayals of the place) as a site for royal inaugurations. As a result of the dating evidence recovered from the ditch in 1998 (Mallory et al. 1999), the surrounding earthwork enclosure, the sanctuary, Navan Fort itself, can be added to this interpretation--enclosure and mound were contemporary parts of the same design, a sacred place for public ceremonials. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid making a connection between the large charred oak timbers found in the bottom of the ditch and the burned oak-post structure encased in the site B mound which apparently supported a form of wooden superstructure and had timber walling, not completely burned. One of the problems raised by the excavation of the ditch, some 4.6 m below current ground surface, was the fact that it was V-shaped, a morphological feature that was perhaps more indicative of a defensive site than a purely ceremonial enclosure despite the fact that the earthen rampart mimicked a henge--outer bank and inner ditch--rather than a hillfort. The ditch at Raith na Rig, the comparable hengiform monument at Tara, is also V-shaped (Roche 1999: 20). It has been recently suggested that one way of accommodating these mixed signals (defensive earthwork or ceremonial enclosure?) is by combining both interpretations together: the interior of the site may be seen as a limnal monument, a portal to the Otherworld (through the mound), and while Otherworld forces might have played a critical part in Iron Age religion, they also needed to be contained (Warner 2000; Mallory 2000). In this theory, the Navan enclosure not only marks out a ceremonial precinct but also defends the outside world from the potentially dangerous spiritual forces contained within.

5 Site C

In 1994 magnetometer surveys were carried out within the Navan enclosure between sites A and B (Kvamme 1996; Ambos & Larson 2002). The reasons for choosing this area were the possibility of finding 'new' features relating to the Iron Age activity at sites A and B and the likelihood that linear palisade features emanating from the excavated Iron Age 'northern enclosures' under Site B ran across it. The hope was that these features could point to an original entrance in the Navan enclosure as do analogous features in the ceremonial enclosure at Knockaulin, Co. Kildare (Wailes 1990: figure 2, 'Rose' phase). Unexpectedly, the geophysical survey revealed a large circular anomaly, some 30 m in diameter (FIGURE 5). On plan the anomaly, designated 'Site C', appeared to touch the (unexcavated) north side of the circular feature found underneath site A by Waterman in 1961, which he designated site A (phase A) (Lynn 1997: 128-32, figure 52). The main feature of this Site A phase was a set of three deep concentric slots, the outermost 20 m in diameter.

Three seasons of excavations have revealed that Site C is a triple ring-slot enclosure with the same sequence and infilling of slots as Site A (phase A) (middle>outer>inner). Radiocarbon dates and the intersection of a palisade slot coming from Site B phase 3(ii) indicates a date for Site C probably between 150 BC and 1 BC. The features of Site C and Site A (phase A) join to form a single contemporaneous figure-of-eight structure 50 m long on its main axis (FIGURE 5). On either side of an access gap (postulated) the two ring-sets converged from the west, outer to outer and middle-to-middle forming a series of two 'nesting' V-terminals (FIGURE 6), presumably mirrored on the east side of the gap. The two inner slots, embracing the V-terminals, appear to have terminated separately on the west of the gap without fully converging. This arrangement of two circles of different sizes, each circle formed of three concentric ring slots, forming an overall figure-of-eight plan, compares with the series of similar structures found under the site B mound (Waterman 1997: 13-33, phase 3 (ii)), the figure-of-eight 'Rose' phase at Knockaulin (Wailles 1990) and a somewhat similar arrangement is suspected for Tara (Cooney & Grogan 1991: 39).

6 Function of the 'figure-of-eight' structures

Although there are differences in sequence and character, the 'figure-of-eight plan triple ring-slot structures' appear to be a type-fossil unique to the Irish late prehistoric 'provincial ceremonial' sites. During the excavations at Navan Site B, Waterman initially interpreted the double structures as houses with larger attached yards on the north, on the basis that the smaller southern elements had central fireplaces, but in the light of evidence emerging from Knockaulin in the 1970s Waterman began to consider the possibility that they had a ceremonial function. Surely a simple explanation of houses and yards cannot be applied to the larger figure-of-eight at Site A/C only a few metres to the east of Site B. It is possible, however, that the smaller figures-of-eight under the mound represented roofed structures, perhaps ceremonial, and that the larger examples at Knockaulin 'Rose' phase and Navan A/C were larger analogues built for short-term, purely ceremonial purposes? A current working hypothesis is that Site A/C is broadly contemporary with the mound and enclosure and may be part of the foundation ceremony of the monument. The east side of the sod mound contained two thin but extensive dumps of burnt material which could have come from the remains of Site A/C (Lynn 1997: 58 & figure 21). At present it seems best to interpret this large figure-of-eight as an unroofed ceremonial timber enclosure which was deliberately destroyed by fire. The ceremonial aspect of the Site C ring is emphasized by the discovery at intervals of fragments of burnt, even cremated, animal bones in the mixed burnt deposit running down the inner edge of the outer slot (Murphy 2000).

7 The Navan entrance

Both the Knockaulin and the Navan Site B figures-of-eight had 'entrance' gaps on the east side of the smaller circles. They also had gaps on the east sides of the larger northern elements from which pairs of palisade slots ran off eastwards, apparently delimiting formal approach avenues. At Knockaulin the avenue ran towards the original entrance through the main earthwork, apparently constituting a ceremonial way from the entrance up to the timber structure on the hilltop. The recent Navan excavations have also revealed a gap in the circle in the expected place, on the north side of which the slots have a similar layout to those at Knockaulin 'Rose' phase where the outer slot terminated several metres in advance of the gap in the other two. A narrow trench with post-sockets appeared to be the beginning of a palisade slot running off at right angles from the end of the outer slot of Site C towards the east (FIGURE 7). An eastern entrance to Navan Fort thus indicated would be congruent with both the topography, i.e. the eastern approach provides the longest and easiest approach to the top of the site, and the location of the adjacent Loughnashade. Future excavations will be directed towards determining whether indeed the entrance to the Navan enclosure was on the east where the earthworks have been much levelled.

8 Religious continuity or New Age?

The Navan complex provides a number of examples, drawn from different periods of its existence, of where the past has been either integrated, re-enacted or re-interpreted as part of a contemporary system of ritual behaviour. For example, the inclusion of a presumably Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age cup-and-ring marked stone in the Late Bronze Age occupation of Haughey's Fort provides one example where an item of the past may have served as a votive deposit (Aitchison 1998). The use of a hengiform (typically Late Neolithic) enclosure to surround Iron Age Navan (as well as similarly dated Knockaulin and Tara) is another. The encasement of the Iron Age 40-m structure in stone and then sods has been seen as an attempt to mimic a Neolithic passage-tomb, and it has even been suggested that the weathered limestone boulders that constituted the Site B cairn may have been brought from one of the two neighbouring passage-tombs (Lynn 1992: 37-9). This reincorporation or reinvention has emerged as a recurrent theme in Iron Age studies (Lynn 1993; Hingley 1999; Gibson 2000) and has been viewed as some form of continuity prompted perhaps by oral tradition (Gibson 2000: 14). Rather, we prefer to see monuments such as the Navan Site B mound as the formal recreation of an earlier ritual monument, where an earlier architectural target (passage-tomb) was reinvented to serve later ideological needs (and could only be executed with contemporary Iron Age building techniques). We might liken the structures at Navan to the products of a quasi New Age religion whose genetic ties with its past are no closer than those of modern druids who seek to worship at Stonehenge (Mallory 2000: 34-5).

Most problematic, of course, is the combination of a large circular timber structure within a hengiform enclosure: one is struck by a combination which is natural to Later Neolithic Britain appearing some 2500 years later in Ireland. Of course, Ireland also has its Neolithic hengiform monuments (Condit & Simpson 1998) and its own Later Neolithic (Grooved Ware) timber complexes (Hartwell 1998) but 2500 years of distantly remembered native traditions is difficult to countenance. Of the 78 Irish Bronze Age houses surveyed (Doody 2000) none come anywhere in scale to those found at Navan and Knockaulin, nor is there any hint of figure-of-eight structures; the recurrent tripartite walling at Navan and Knockaulin also finds no parallels in the Irish Bronze Age where, at best, only three examples of double walled structures can be found. Forces other than continuity appear to be at work.

9 New religion?

However we wish to interpret this remarkable behaviour, one element that is certainly striking is that Navan is best considered within the context of other major Iron Age ritual centres (Knockaulin, Tara and Rathcroghan) where certain parallel developments were also exhibited. The similarity of ritual sequence of figure-of-eight structures followed by circular timber structure at Knockaulin and Navan (and the probable existence of some form of figure-of-eight at Tara), the incorporation of a mound at Tara, Navan, possibly Knockaulin (Wailes 1990: 10) and Rathcroghan mound (Waddell 1988: 5-6; Waddell 1996), suggest a sequence of architectural similarities that are likely to reflect similar ritual impulses. But unlike earlier expressions of ceremonialism such as megalithic tombs, we are so far dealing with a very restricted number of Iron Age structures that at least have a claim to be considered as major regional ceremonial centres (admittedly, archaeological research has been targeted at these regional centres) irrespective of whether one wishes to also credit them as the 'royal sites' known in early Irish historical tradition (Aitchison 1994). The replication of similar architectural forms, presumably reflecting similar beliefs, across Ireland at sites distant from one another, is at least suggestive of the spread of a new religion or religious expression at the highest levels of society. Future excavations at many of the other larger bank-and-ditch enclosures, e.g. Ballymount, Co. Dublin with a hengiform enclosure and mound (Stout 1998), may reveal that this phenomenon was more widespread.

10 New language?

If we credit archaeology as having any relevance to the spread of prehistoric languages, then one of its most likely contributions is in identifying those social changes that might be associated with the spread of new social, and by extension, linguistic domains, the vectors which initially entice populations into bilingualism and then, in some cases, secure the conditions for total language shift (Mallory 1999). In Ireland, there are at least two horizons in the late prehistoric period that might help account for the spread of a Celtic language: the emergence of hillforts over much of the island c. 1200-900 BC and the subsequent phase of similar ritual constructions at the major Iron Age ceremonial sites in the first centuries BC. The Navan complex appears to offer evidence of both horizons with its two major ceremonial centres, and it may well have been new religions and new expressions of social organization associated with these centres that served as major unifying forces within a landscape of presumably dispersed settlement, if not largely mobile pastoralists. The paucity of evidence for secular Irish Iron Age settlement is striking and the relationship between the so-called ritual centres and the populations that they served remains one of the great problems of Irish Iron Age studies.