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Composing Tara, the Grand Opera of Irish Pre-History

Conor Newman*

Landscape is habitat perceived *and* composed.¹ In the case of Tara, one composed in the mind's eyes of a long and arguably unbroken succession of observers for whom this hill has variously been burial ground, *temenos*, *caput scottorum* (seat of the kings of Ireland), touchstone of Irish nationhood and heritage monument, but rarely, if ever, home, at least in a domestic sense. For about the last six thousand years, each generation has made its mark on Tara and has itself received something in return

1. Conor Newman, "Landscapes "Я" Us" In *The Irish Landscape 2009, proceedings of the Irish National Landscape Conference, October 2009*. Heritage Council, Kilkenny. (2009), 8-14.

*This short paper was read at a conference at the University of Minnesota in 2001. Like most conference papers it had a condensed life-cycle: created for one public outing, it was quickly filed away and eventually forgotten. Attendant on the kind invitation to publish it so many years later, however, is the temptation to dust it down, revise and update it, for much has happened in the meantime; so much has been learned and, regrettably, so much forgotten. In the end I have decided not to alter the paper and the reader will have to bear in mind that it was written as a public lecture, not an essay. Much has been irretrievably lost with the construction of a highly contested motorway through the Tara landscape, the M3. Colleagues across North America, many of whom were at the Minneapolis conference, answered the call to help stop this act of cultural vandalism. It is to you that this paper is dedicated. Already the M3 has become a symbol of how blinded Ireland had become by the dazzle of the fake jewellery worn by the Celtic Tiger; a decade of madness that has left us all so bankrupted. Tara has much to teach us, even as she is being so recklessly slighted.

Conor Newman, "Composing Tara, the Grand Opera of Irish Prehistory," *Eolas: The Journal of the American Society of Irish Medieval Studies* (2009), 6-18.

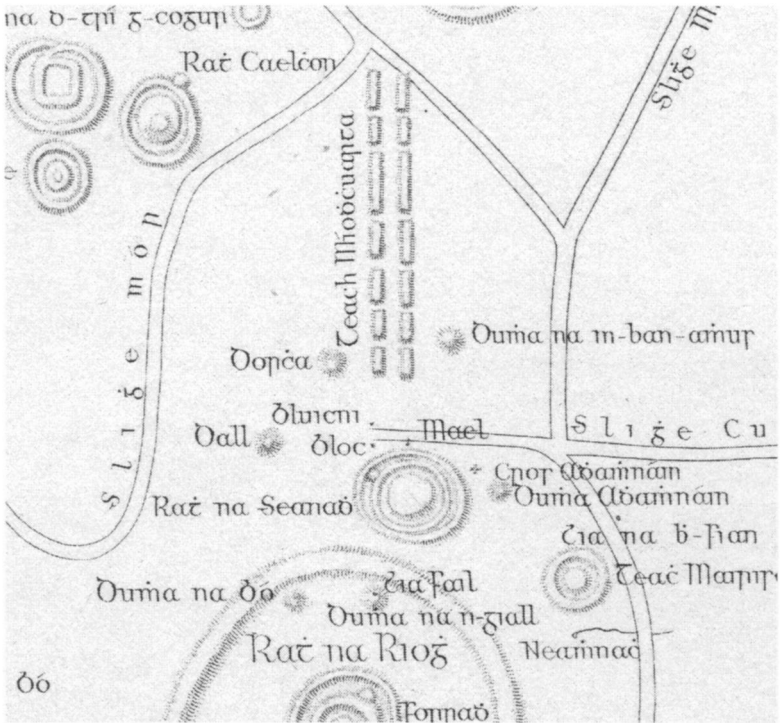


Plate 1. Detail of George Petrie's 1839 annotated map of the monuments on the Hill of Tara, based on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1837. Petrie has added monuments mentioned in Dindsenchas Érenn that were no longer visible but which subsequent archaeological survey has confirmed to exist. (from Petrie, G. 1839 On the history and antiquities of Tara Hill. Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy 18, 25-232.)

from the phenomenon that is Tara. Leaving aside recent developments of the last few hundred years, we can declare with some confidence that the construction and refurbishment of monuments on Tara was concentrated in the period between about 4000 BC and roughly about the 6th or 7th century AD. After this, energy was expended, pretty well exclusively, on the promotion of Tara as symbol, and not in developing its material or monumental aspect. Consequently, the symbolic dimension of Tara rapidly achieved monumental proportions, to the extent that it has for a long time overshadowed, one might say, the real monuments. The myths and legends about Tara have done this too. Being more colourful and attractive they are more

amenable than archaeological facts to being woven into the current belief systems of Neo-Celts. But this has probably always been the case: at the heart of religion is myth.

As a landscape, part-configured by human hand, Tara is a great and ambitious composition; a grand opera of Irish prehistory. There is a theatre, a cast and props, plot and sub-plots, tragedy, comedy and a grand finale. And like all great operas it is invariably in a language that few can understand and where the audience is asked to imagine the often rather portly tenors and sopranos to be lissome youths.

The theatre

The Hill of Tara, or *Teamhair na Rí*g, is the highest of an unremarkable and altogether rather diminutive spine of limestone hills of north-south axis located in south-central Co. Meath, about 25 miles north-northwest of Dublin. It is positioned centrally between Dunshaughlin to the south and Navan to the north. Dunshaughlin is a monastery town, the foundation of which is attributed to St. Sechnaill, or Secundinus to give him his Latin name, a pre-Patrician saint of the mid-fifth century. Later, on a bog to the east of the monastery, a royal crannog (Lagore²) was built and occupied by the *Sí*l nÁedo Sláine kings of Southern Brega, whose adoption of the erstwhile saint is testified to in their use of the personal name Máelsechlainn, ‘Servant of Sechnaill’. Some of this line held the title ‘king of Tara.’³ Even in the past, anyone travelling overland to Tara from Dublin would have had to veer left at Dunshaughlin and so the location of this church development is of some moment.⁴ Its juxtaposition with

2. O'Neill Hencken, H. ‘Lagore Crannóg: An Irish Royal Residence of the 7th to 10th Centuries A. D.’ *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*. 47C, (1950), 1-247.

3. Byrne, F. J. *Irish Kings and High-Kings*. (London. 1973).

4. Newman, C. “Re-composing the archaeological landscape of Tara.” In E. Bhreathnach (ed.) *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara*.

Tara is interpreted as a deliberate Christian counterpoint to pagan Tara; the equivalent of Patrick's Armagh to Emain Macha and of Iserninus's Old Kilcullen to Dún Ailinne; a Christian sandal in the door of the premier cult site of Iron Age Ireland.

Navan, on the other hand, is the thriving county town, hell-bent on erasing all vestiges of its historic past. The Irish for Navan, *An Uaimh*, meaning 'the Cave', may or may not refer to its most significant attribute, namely the engorged confluence in the centre of town of the rivers Boyne and Blackwater. Engorged in more senses than one, the turbulent waters here are overlooked from all sides by steep, high ground emphasising that this is a point of nexus in the landscape. Its unique position as the meeting point of three identifiable archaeo-political landscapes is referred to in the placename *Cnoic-* or *Gnoth-Blá*, meaning hill- or mound-boundary, today translated as Flower Hill. There is here also around the confluence a concentration of early Bronze Age burials, another early monastery, Donaghmore, and a very extensive settlement of early medieval date recently excavated by Carleton Jones (unpublished), on the Tara side of the confluence.

Fortuitous or otherwise, the location of Tara midway between these two important places might have been to its advantage. The lie of the land hereabouts is also conducive to agricultural success; gently undulating fields of deep grey-brown podzolics comprising some of the very best grassland in Ireland, a prize worth fighting for, particularly in an economy centred on the cow.

The cast and the plot

The first characters associated with Tara are entirely mythological and include the god Lug, *samildánach* or omniscient, the progenitor god of Tara, the goddesses Medb and Eithne and various *dramatis personae* from the *Lebor Gabála Éirinn* such as Nuada of the Tuatha Dé Danann, first king of Tara. Nuadu is one of the threads

(Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2005), 361–409.

that connect together a small army of other mythological and legendary characters associated with Tara. Nuadu was married to Boann, goddess of the River Boyne, and was tricked out of his wife, and indeed ultimately his home in Brúg na Boinne (Newgrange), by the Daghdha who fathered a son by Boann called Aonghus.⁵ Nuadu hosted the first *feis Temrach* during which he was forced to abdicate kingship in favour of Lug. Another version claims that he abdicated following the loss of his right hand during the battle of Mag Tuireadh against the equally mythological Fir Bolg, only to regain it after being fitted with a magical silver arm, the earliest recorded prosthetic limb in Irish history.

Indeed, prosthesis was the order of the day because these and many other stories were surgically attached (albeit loosely) to dynastic histories in the medieval period. Artificial limbs on family trees, they conferred pedigree and a claim on ancestral rights. The homeless Nuadu was variously grafted onto the family trees of the Laigin for whom he manifests as Nuadu Find (Nuadu the White), taking up residence at Almhu on the Hill of Allen, Co. Kildare. Likewise, he was grafted onto the genealogy of the Eóganachta of Munster as Nuadu Find Feimhin (Feimhin being a plain in Tipperary), residing in a burial ground on Slievenamon. Eoghan Mór, the eponymous ancestor of the Eóganachta, is given the pseudonym Mugh Nuadu (Servant of Nuadu). It has been argued that the Laigin and Eóganachta's shared interest in Nuadu was connected to their common opposition to the Connachta who may have wrested the land north of the Boyne from the Leinstermen in late prehistory, and with it Tara. I say may have because the ragged fabric of protohistory in Ireland is patched together with threads of mythology. Some of it is mere parable wherein both historians and archaeologists tread exceedingly cautiously. However, as we shall see later, there is archaeological evidence to bear some of this out.

5. Ní Bhrolcháin, M. *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature*. (Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2009).

The mythological ancestor of the Connachta is Conn Céchathach (Conn of the One Hundred Battles) whom legend dates to the 2nd century AD. Nemesis of Mugh Nuadu, with whom he divided the island (Conn's half and Mugh's half) Conn's seizure of the kingship of Tara from Cathaoir Mór of the Laigin forecasts the near total expropriation of the cultic lore of the Boyne Valley-Tara region by the Connachta, who proto-history tells us conquered the area to the north of the Boyne around the 4th or 5th century AD. The story of Conn's struggle to retain the kingship of Tara is a parable pertaining to the aggrandisement of the Connachta dynasty. Kingship passed from Conn Céchathach through his son-in-law Conaire mac Mogha Lámhha to his blood son Art, father of Cormac MacAirt most famous of all of the kings of Tara. Cormaic's reign is placed between AD 227 and 266 in early Irish genealogy.

Ó hÓgáin has argued that the name Cormaic derives from *Corbmac* meaning 'son of Corb' which was a name or title associated not with the Connachta but with the Laigin. Meas Corb, for example, was claimed as the progenitor of the Uí Garrachon who boast among their ranks the earliest historically-verified Leinster king.⁶ According to Ó hÓgáin, behind Cormac mac Airt lies a genuine, and indeed highly successful 3rd or 4th century *Leinster* king of Tara, whose historical persona was grafted, reputation and all, onto the Connachta family tree.

Whatever the truth may be, with Cormac we may be in the presence of a real man, silhouetted against the dawn of Irish history. And it is Cormac who is accredited with not just the major constructions on Tara, the set of our grand opera to which we shall presently turn our attention, but with unprecedented fecundity. During his reign Irish rivers overflowed with fish, branches sagged under the weight of fruits, the plains clogged up with honey and milk yields were, well, monumental.

6. Ó hÓgáin, D. 1991 *Myth, Legend and Romance: an encyclopaedia of Irish folk tradition*. (Prentice Hall, London, 1991).

Appropriating early ancestors or not, it is the Connachta who ultimately came to dominate the glittering cast of royal Tara. The branches of this family that concern us most are the Uí Néill, 'descendants of Niall'. Niall, great-grandson of Cormac MacAirt, has a good claim on corporeality around the first half of the 5th century AD, even if in his case legend dominates at the expense of historical biography. Like his father Eochu Mughmedón, who is said to have been the first Connachta king of Tara, Niall may have been one of the warlords or slave-traders who plundered Britain after the withdrawal of Roman troops at the beginning of the 5th-century. It is perhaps not inconsequential that his mother is said to have been a Briton, Carina, brought back to Ireland as a slave by Eochu. Proving that it is the winners that write the history, it was Uí Néill propagandist historians who fabricated from the kingship of Tara the national doctrine of high-kingship of Ireland, an institution that did not enjoy any political reality until the ninth century. In so doing, however, they appear to have been building on genuine national superiority enjoyed by the ancient druids of Tara.

The dominant Southern Uí Néill dynasties were the Síl nÁedo Sláine (the seed of Áed of Slane) in Brega; which is basically eastern Meath and some surrounding areas; and the Chlann Cholmáin Máir, who held lands further to the west in Westmeath and as far as the Shannon. Both claimed ancestry from Diarmait mac Cerbaill, who was king of Tara from about 544 to 565. Between them these two dynasties contributed many of the early medieval kings of Tara. It is worth stressing, however, that these people did not live at Tara but at places like Rath Airthir in Teltown, Lagore crannog, near Dunshaughlin, and at Cnogba or Knowth in the Boyne Valley. The question of whether some of them were buried at Tara, however intriguing, is another day's work.

In summary, the social and political development of Tara in later prehistory is characterised by greed and ambition, where the *personae dramatis* are Gatsby-esque; they are emulators and appropriators. And this dynamic is

manifest in the monuments themselves, not just those of later prehistoric date but in fact throughout its history, even if in later times they assume a rather more militaristic air.

The props

In accordance with our theatrical metaphor, it is appropriate that the the monuments at Tara are considered to be the props because some of them were literally commandeered as symbols to prop up dynastic claims over Tara and all that it came to stand for. Others were commandeered long before such dynasties existed. This will become apparent by looking at just a few of them.

However, before focusing-in on these specimens there is merit in having a more general reconnoitre of the complex in order to familiarise ourselves with this magnificent archaeological complex. There are in excess of eighty monuments recorded on the Hill of Tara itself and I would daresay at least as many again await discovery since aerial photography and geophysical survey has been applied to less than one-quarter of the State-owned part of the hill. Over thirty prehistoric monuments occur within a radius of about 2km of the hill and probably more than twenty medieval ones. The oldest-known survey of the complex is found in a series of topographical texts known as *Dinnshenchas Éirenn* (the Lore of the Placenames of Ireland). Awarding pre-eminence to Tara, they are believed to have been commissioned from the court poet Cúan Úa Lothcháin by Máel Sechnaill II, in an attempt to re-establish the importance of Tara and, *ipso facto*, its Uí Néill kings. All for nought, as Máel Sechnaill's death in 1022 marked the collapse of the southern Uí Néill dynasty and the seconding of Tara by Dublin.⁷ Indeed, Úa Lothcháin was not the only such poet-historian thus employed. The Uí Briain, the northern Uí Néill and the Uí Chonchobair all promoted the concept of the high-kingship, centered at Tara, for their own political ends. Leaving these issues

7. Bhreathnach, E. "The Topography of Tara: The Documentary Evidence," *Discovery Programme Reports* 2 (1995), 68-76, at 72-3.

to one side, *Dindshenchas* is relevant to an audience this distance from Tara because the names that I will be using for the monuments on Tara derive from these texts, though clearly their historical pedigree is uncertain.

Progressing, as *Dindshenchas* does, from south to north we have Ráith Lóegaire, Ráith na Ríg, the Forradh, Tech Cormaic, Duma na nGiall, Ráith na Senad, Tech Midhchúarta, Ráith Gráinne and the Clóenfhearta (Fig. 1). These are the main, visible monuments but there are others besides, ones of very low profile which are really only visible from the air. Every one of these tells its own story and could easily occupy a whole paper. For the remainder of this paper, however, I want to concentrate on just five monuments which reveal important instances of appropriation, rare moments when prop reveals plot. The first two cases refer to the double appropriation of Duma na nGiall, the second to the appropriation of a new henge-like monument, the third to the appropriation of the Forradh.

The new henge-like monument (Figure 2), one of the richest passage graves so far identified, was discovered in gradiometry and corroborated by aerial photography.⁸ It is oval with a long axis of about 270m, and consists of a big fosse, flanked on either side by regularly-spaced pits, which we suspect once held timber poles, about three hundred of them. This genre of religious monument dates from the second-half of the third millenium BC and fills a bit of the prehistoric chronological gap on the hilltop. What I want to concentrate on are the two visible monuments inside it, namely Ráith na Senad and Duma na nGiall.

Duma na nGiall is a passage tomb. At the smaller end of the range, it is, paradoxically, the richest of them in terms of grave goods and sheer volume of cremated bone.⁹ It falls within the orbit of the new henge whose builders,

8. Fenwick, J. and Newman, C. "Geomagnetic survey on the Hill of Tara, County Meath." *Discovery Programme Reports* 6 (2002), 1-18.

9. O'Sullivan, M. *Duma na nGiall: the Mound of the Hostages, Tara*. (Wordwell & UCD School of Archaeology, Dublin, 2005).



Plate 2. Isometric view (looking roughly southwestwards) of recent geophysical survey at Tara superimposed on a hill-shaded model. In the foreground are the church grounds and the Rath of the Synods (Ráith na senad; unsurveyed) encircled by the Ditched Pit Circle. Beyond this, survey of the interior of Ráith na Rí reveals a complex sequence of enclosures surrounding or intersecting with the figure-of-eight plan of the conjoined earthworks of Tech Chormaic and the Forrad. (Image: Joe Fenwick)

I believe, deliberately incorporated the earlier mound into their ambitious construction as an act of appropriation. The juxtaposition of henges and passage tombs is a well-recognised behavioural phenomenon and either belies a spontaneous development of existing religious beliefs or a new departure that acquired some legitimacy through association with passage tombs. Both explanations are equally plausible. Archaeological evidence of this moment of appropriation is to be found among the assemblage of the thirty-plus Bronze Age burials inserted into Duma na nGiall, in particular those accompanied by bowls which may date from as early as the last few centuries of the third

millenium BC.¹⁰ In other words, the passage tomb was not just annexed it was *used*.

There is an interval of perhaps a thousand years or more between the Bronze Age burials in Duma na nGiall and the second occasion of its appropriation around the Birth of Christ when it was included within the orbit of Ráith na Ríg and now found itself the pupil in an occular-shaped 'island' formed by the intersecting, competing fosses of Ráith na Ríg and the newly-discovered henge. It must still have been a highly-regarded monument and I have no doubt that the Lia Fáil, which stood beside it, or maybe even on top of it if Pococke is to be trusted, contributed in no small measure to this. The Lia Fáil is, according to tradition, the inaugural stone of the kings of Tara.

The other monument found within the new henge is Ráith na Senad. It assumes pole position, right in the centre. However, Ráith na Senad is considerably later than the henge, it dates from probably around the 4th or 5th century AD, the date of the Romano-British material found there.¹¹ So, in saying that it *assumes* pole position I mean that its construction was an act of appropriation, and a very deliberate one at that, whereby the builders of the smaller monument laid claim on the larger, more ancient one and, no doubt, all it stood for. There is a highly interesting thesis arising from this pertaining to the position of such monuments in the genesis of early medieval dynastic kingship in Ireland given their form, location, date and the occurrence at this one of Roman material. But that too is another day's work.

The earthwork that is Ráith na Senad today represents the last of four phases of construction or activity on this place. The first is evidenced as a shallow, annular

10. John Waddel, Pers. Comm.

11. Grogan, E. (with contributions from Caroline Velzian and Seamus Caulfield) *Rath of the Synods: Tara, Co. Meath, excavations by Séan Ó Ríordáin*. (Wordwell and School of Archaeology, UCD, Dublin, 2009).

fosse of unknown date but probably funerary which is not only coincidental with the centre of Ráith na Senad, but, more importantly marks the de facto centre-point of the new henge. And so one wonders was this the real focus of the henge-builder's attentions or was it too built afterwards to capitalise on the far larger monument?

Ráith na Ríg is said to enclose the three wonders of Tara: the Forradh, Duma na nGiall and Duma na mBó. The Forradh is, for a potential king, the most important. It is the inauguration mound and the symbolic seat of kingship. I have argued elsewhere that the builders of Tech Cormaic constructed the outer bank around the Forradh and in so-doing literally attached it to a royal ringfort. The new geophysics suggests (Fig. 2) that there may have been more to it than this, for appearing to encircle the now-twinning monuments is a palisade trench.¹² This is the one, if you recall, that we previously thought might be of Neolithic date on the basis of a single reference to a pre-mound enclosure at Duma na nGiall.¹³ We now know that it is not that one. It seems to follow faithfully the ground plan of Ráith na Ríg and, most importantly, the ground plan of the palisade that runs around its internal perimeter. So, the question is are these two palisades contemporary and, if so, were they built at the same time as Tech Chormaic. Indeed, are they the same sort of thing as the concentric enclosures of the leading Irish monasteries? Is this a royal compound of the very early medieval period?

In this short paper I have set out to demonstrate that the placement of monuments on Tara was not a series of random acts driven purely by aesthetic considerations, pussy-footing around pre-existing earthworks. On the contrary, the placement of monuments became increasingly politically-charged. Like any grand opera, it was

12. Newman, C., Fenwick, J., Schot, R. and Dowling, G. forthcoming. "Tara: re-appraisal in the light of recent survey."

13. Newman, C. 1997 *Tara: An Archaeological Survey*. (Discovery Programme and Royal Irish Academy. Dublin, 1997), 146-7.

choreographed (further analysis of this consideration may be found in Newman 2007 where the role of architecture in choreographing the processional approach to Tara is analysed).

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