

Tara, Co. Meath: A Guide to the Ceremonial Complex

Author(s): Edel Bhreathnach and Conor Newman

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Tara, Co. Meath



A guide to the ceremonial complex

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LiDAR-generated topographic model of Tara from the south-west.

Introduction

Teamhair na Ríg, or Tara of the Kings, is located midway between Navan and Dunshaughlin in central County Meath. At a mere 155m above sea level, Tara commands a surprisingly panoramic view across the north central plain. The remains of 25 monuments are visible (some more easily than others), and twice as many again have been discovered by geophysical prospection and aerial photography.

Tara is a palimpsest of monuments—mostly graves, tombs and temples—built over many centuries, from the fourth millennium BC to the fifteenth century AD, spread across the Hill of Tara and into the surrounding landscape.

Tara was the premier pagan sanctuary of prehistoric and early medieval Ireland. The *caput* of an exceptional kingship, the sovereign lands of Tara, and the monuments constructed throughout this landscape, symbolised an ancient cosmology, with the king of Tara representing the king of the world and Tara its *axis mundi*. The signal importance of the kingship of Tara explains the obsession on the part of the Irish medieval learned class with the kingship of Tara and the hill's toponymy.

The name *Temair* 'Tara'

The Irish name *Temair* incorporates the Indo-European verbal root **tem-* 'to cut' and is cognate with Greek *temenos* 'sanctuary' and Latin *templum* 'temple'. It is a place cut off or demarcated for sacred purposes, 'a sanctuary'. In this is reflected the physical act of cutting a ditch around the crown of the Hill of Tara, literally cutting off this nexus between the human world and the world of the gods. The Anglicised version of the name, Tara,

came into use in the thirteenth century when the Anglo-Normans became landowners in the region.

Tara: the focus of kingship and exceptional ceremonies

The monuments on the hill and in the surrounding area reveal the true significance of the landscape of Tara. For 4,000 years before the birth of Christ successive generations set about constructing some of the most ambitious monuments known from prehistoric Ireland. Generations from the Neolithic through successive phases of the Bronze Age into the Iron Age and early medieval period consolidated the achievements of their predecessors and added their own imprints in an effort to develop and maintain an ordered ritual arena, one steeped in custom and traditional memory.

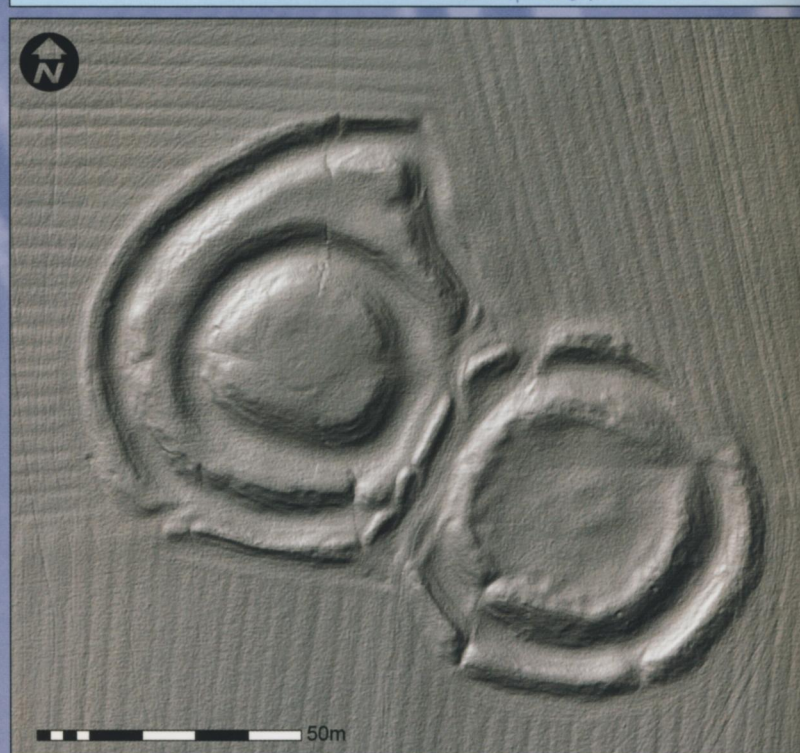
Perhaps the best way to appreciate this integration of old and new, natural and man-made, is to follow in the imaginary footsteps of a royal inaugural procession through this landscape, a ceremony that could last for many days before the royal party set foot on the hill itself. Documentary sources describe a royal ceremonial landscape leading to the Hill of Tara. Through this ran processional ways (hence the tradition of five ancient roads converging on Tara) linking significant places in this area, such as ancient burial-grounds (e.g. Collierstown, Blundelstown and Lismullen), settlements and standing stones, as well as more ephemeral locations such as sacred trees and pools. One can envisage ritual performances at each of these places, such as the lighting of fires, ritual stepping over ancestral graves and the use of water, ceremonies taking possession of land and of

The landscape through which this royal party moved was defined and protected by taboos as well as by physical monuments. From the great fort of Ringlestown Rath, along the Riverstown linear earthwork, to Rathmiles and beyond to the massive promontory fort of Rath Lugh there was a ring of defensible positions, built in the first few centuries AD. The key axis of communication through the landscape enclosed, as it were, by these monuments is the Gabhra Valley, the course of a minor river running north-south between the hills of Tara and Skreen and guarded at the northern end by Rathmiles and Rath Lugh. Skreen is the mirror image of Tara, its cosmogonic counterweight, and is central to the ritual of inauguration.

The Irish names given to each monument come from an eleventh-century topographical description of the hill, *Dindgnai Temrach* 'The remarkable places of Tara', which describes each visible monument and labels them with a name. Many of these names have mythological or historical origins. They were revived in the early nineteenth century when the Ordnance Survey prepared a map of Tara.

Dumha na nGiall is the most southerly of five very similar mounds stretching in a line north-eastwards towards the Boyne Valley. It is possible that these too are passage tombs and thus document the catchment area of Tara in early prehistory, which may have stretched down towards the confluence of the Boyne and the Blackwater at Navan.

During the earlier Bronze Age 40 burials were inserted into the soil mantle and further burials were placed in the passage itself. All but one of the 40 burials were cremations, many under inverted collared and encrusted urns. Some were in cists, but most were in pits. One burial contained two pots, a riveted bronze dagger and a stone 'battleaxe'. The inhumation was of a young man with a necklace of jet, amber, bronze and faience, and with a dagger and a bronze awl at his feet. Evidently he was a person of considerable social standing. The Bronze Age burials in



Right: LiDAR-generated topographic model of the Forradh and Tech Cormaic.



LiDAR-generated topographic model of Ráith na Senad and the Mound of the Hostages.

the passage were a mixture of inhumations and cremations and they disturbed considerably the original, Neolithic burials.

The **Lia Fáil**, a phallic-shaped white granite stone, stood somewhere near Dumha na nGiall until it was re-erected on the Forradh in 1824. In view of its likely contemporaneity with the passage tomb, it probably stood in front of the entrance.

Later in the third millennium things moved on to an altogether more ambitious plan. A great cursus-like enclosure/avenue, the **Tech Midchúarta** (Banqueting Hall), was built down the northern flank of the hill. Over 200m long, the banks curve westwards and are gapped at irregular intervals. There is slight evidence of a terminal bank at the southern end and a medieval reference to one at the northern end, where the earthwork terminated at the Sescind Teamrach or marsh of Tara (drained in the last century). Immediately south of this a huge pit or timber circle, 250m in diameter, was erected. A very slight dip in the ground to the south-west of the Tech Midchúarta is all that can be seen of its 4m-wide fosse, which was originally surrounded by at least 90 or so 2m-wide pits on each side. This monument probably dates from around 2500 BC. It was deliberately designed to incorporate Dumha na nGiall.

Not much later than this, two great henges were built just off the hill. **Rath Maeve**, 1.5km to the south, is named after the female deity of Tara. This henge is one of the largest in the country, measuring a massive 270m across its north-east/south-west axis. The entrance is in the western quadrant, at which point the bank towers 5.5m above the surrounding ground level. The footprint of a smaller circular monument is preserved in the S-shaped curvature of a field boundary running across the henge. There is an unnamed henge in **Riverstown**, 1km to the west. Only about a third of the earthwork survives, but originally it had a diameter in excess of 120m.

More than 25 barrows and ring-ditches of various forms occur on Tara. Most probably date from the Bronze Age, when Tara was effectively a cemetery. Many of them form linear strings across the hill. Stray finds of tools and weapons are further evidence of second-millennium activity around Tara. Two massive gold torcs of middle Bronze Age date were found on Tara in 1810. Some of the barrows were deliberately incorporated intact into the fabric of the large ring-barrows that were probably built during the

Iron Age. Bowl-barrows were incorporated into both the Northern and Southern **Clóenfherta** (Sloping Trenches) and into **Ráith Gráinne** (Gráinne's Fort) and the **Forradh** (the 'royal' seat). Between them these four ring-barrows are among the largest in the country—the Northern Clóenfherta is 80m in diameter—and it is no surprise that they have attracted their own folklore. Medieval tales tell how the Clóenfherta collapsed over the side of the hill as a result of calamity, in the case of the Northern Clóenfherta as a result of a false judgement meted out there by Lughaidh Mac Con. The Forradh is the inauguration mound of Tara.

The Iron Age saw a revival in monumental religious architecture at Tara and elsewhere, and this is nowhere better exemplified than in the case of **Ráith na Ríg** (the Fort of the Kings), a huge hengiform enclosure (1000m in circumference) encircling the crown of the hill and radiocarbon-dated to around the first century BC. The internal ditch is V-sectioned and 3m deep. The bank seals the remains of a metal workshop. There is a palisade trench 2m inside the ditch, but there are reasons to suspect that it and the three entrances to Ráith na Ríg are all later modifications.

Ráith Lóegaire, immediately to the south of Ráith na Ríg, is a bivallate circular enclosure, around 125m in diameter. It has a more militaristic character and is comparable to sites such as **Ringlestown Rath** (to the south-west) and **Rath Lugh** (to the north-east), both strategically sited bivallate earthworks. A few fields due north of Ringlestown Rath are the remains of a bivallate linear earthwork, stretching for at least 1.5km (much of it is now destroyed), which defends Tara's western flank. It is tempting to see these earthworks as a defensive ring around Iron Age Tara.

Later in the Iron Age **Ráith na Senad** (the Rath of the Synods) was constructed. The earthwork, which is quadrivallate, represents the fourth use of this site, twice a burial-ground and once a series of wooden enclosures. Excavations in the 1950s revealed quantities of Romano-British material and conventional domestic refuse, suggesting possible occupation sometime between the later first and fourth centuries AD. The site had been quite badly mutilated at the end of the nineteenth century during a misguided search for the Ark of the Covenant.

It seems that by the sixth century AD Tara was in decline. Paganism had given way to Christianity and a new political order, and the title 'king of Tara' became a symbolic prize for ambitious kings seeking to become the most powerful ruler on the island. **Tech Cormaic** (Cormac's House), a



LiDAR-generated topographic model of Ráith Gráinne and the Clóenfherta.

bivallate ringfort, is probably the latest earthwork on Tara, and the fact that it is conjoined with the Forradh, the inauguration mound of Tara, speaks volumes about the aspirations of the person who had it built. The fact that it appears never to have seen large-scale settlement reveals as much again. A few kilometres to the south, a new royal residence had been established on the shores of Loch Gabhair (Lagore) beside the important monastery of Dunshaughlin, founded by Secundinus in the fifth century.

The present church on Tara, now serving as the Visitor Centre, dates from 1822 and incorporates a number of features from the original fifteenth-century church (of which only a stump of wall survives), including the fine west window. Inside is a late sixteenth-century memorial plaque to Robert Dillon and his wife Katherina Sarsfeld.

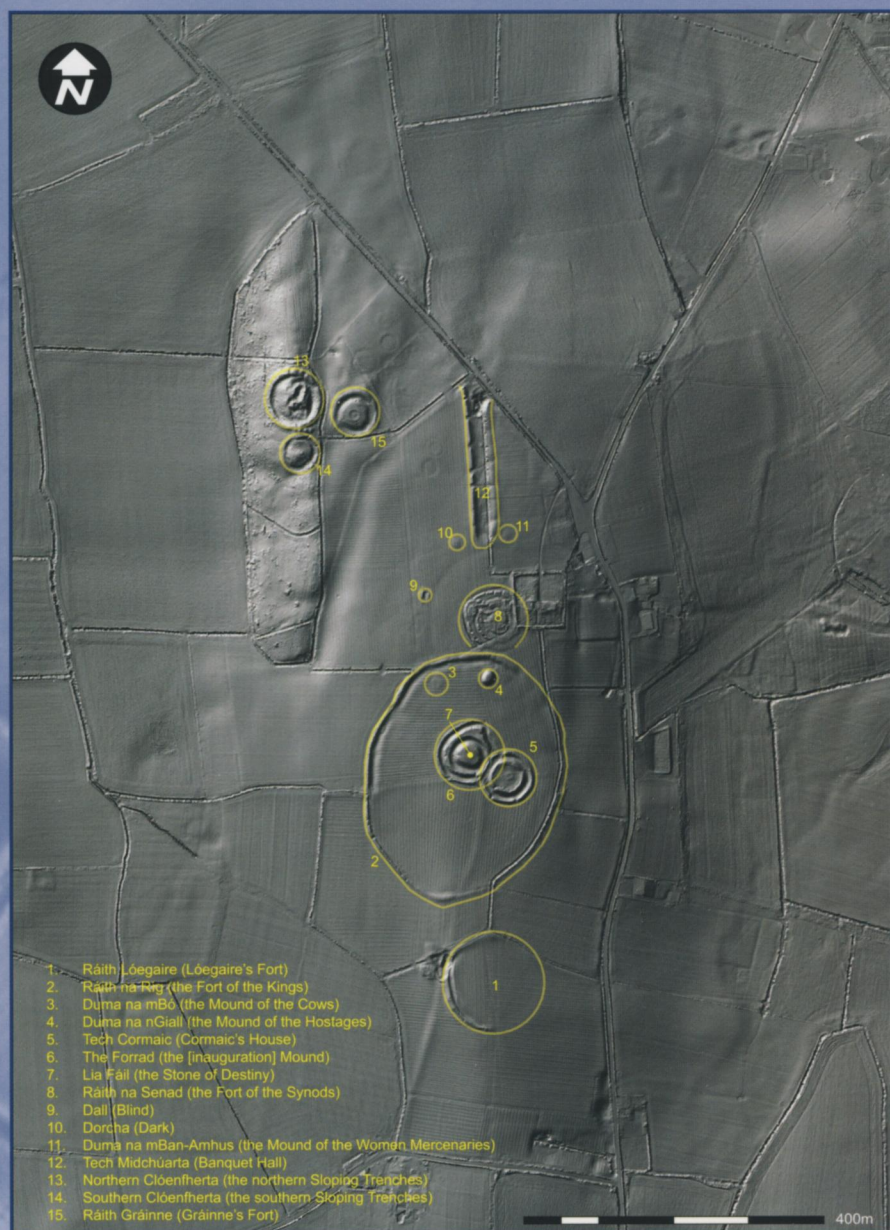
There are two standing stones in the churchyard; one has a sheelagh-na-gig carved on one side and may originally have been part of the fifteenth-century church. The other, squatter, rounded stone has potentially far greater antiquity. Neither is likely to be in its original position.

The iconic nature of Tara in Irish history

The exceptional nature of the kingship of Tara in prehistory and the early medieval period was so profoundly ingrained in society that learned medieval Irish historians and authors constantly elaborated on its kings, its kingship and sovereignty, its religious aspect, its ceremonies, its topographic features and the name Temair itself. Although other sites in Ireland, such as Cashel (Caisel), Navan Fort (Emain Macha), Rathcroghan (Cruachu), Teltown (Tailtiu) and Knockaulin (Dún Ailinne), had many similar attributes and are also often mentioned in the early sources, Tara is always accorded a pre-eminent position among them. Of a number of important kingships in Ireland, Tara was the most exceptional.

Many Irish historical and mythical figures are associated with Tara. An early medieval text describes the inauguration of the heroic and mythical king Conaire Mór. While wearing a cloak that should normally have been too big for him, he had to steer a chariot harnessed to two unbroken horses between the supernatural stones Blocc and Blaigne. Though one could normally only slide a hand sideways between them, these stones parted before the king's chariot, allowing him to pass over the Lia Fáil, which then screeched out against his axle, declaring him king of Tara. In the seventh-century Life of St Patrick, Tara is described as the centre of idolatry in Ireland and the saint is brought into conflict with the king of Tara, Lóegaire (hence the name Ráith Lóegaire), and his druids. Many medieval Irish kings and lords came to Tara prior to launching military campaigns, a potent symbolic show of strength against their enemies.

On the basis of the sheer number of references to Tara alone, this site and its associated landscape appear central to the creation of an Irish identity. When national histories of Ireland were written in the seventeenth century, the kingship of Tara was represented as a national kingship and a symbol of unity of the Irish nation. This status lasted until the modern period. For



Above: Location of sites on Tara.

Right: General location map.

Back page: Location map of Tara with associated monuments and showing the extent of the LiDAR survey.

Cover photograph: The Forradh and Tech Cormaic. (Con Brogan)



example, in 1953 the then taoiseach (prime minister), Éamon de Valera, turned the first sod on Professor Seán Ó Ríordáin's formal excavations at the Rath of the Synods and the Mound of the Hostages. When in 1957 Ó Ríordáin died before completing the excavation of the Mound of the Hostages, the task was taken on by his successor, Ruairí de Valera, the son of the said taoiseach. In 1991 Taoiseach Charles J. Haughey launched a new research initiative, funded through the Heritage Council, called the **Discovery Programme** with the specific intention of furthering research into Tara (among other projects). In 1992 the Tara Project was launched, and since then a detailed analysis of the topography and history of Tara and its hinterland has been carried out.

Further reading

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Credits

Guide series editors—Tom Condit and Gabriel Cooney
 Text—Edel Bhreathnach and Conor Newman
 Maps—Anthony Corns and Robert Shaw
 Design—Nicole McKenna
 Layout—Nick Maxwell
 Text editor—Emer Condit
 Typesetting—Wordwell Ltd
 Circulation and distribution manager—Una MacConville

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