

The Mound of the Hostages, Tara:: a pivotal monument in a ceremonial landscape

Source: *Archaeology Ireland*, Heritage Guide No. 34: The Mound of the Hostages, Tara: a pivotal monument in a ceremonial landscape (June 2006)

Published by: Wordwell Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/archirel.34.1>

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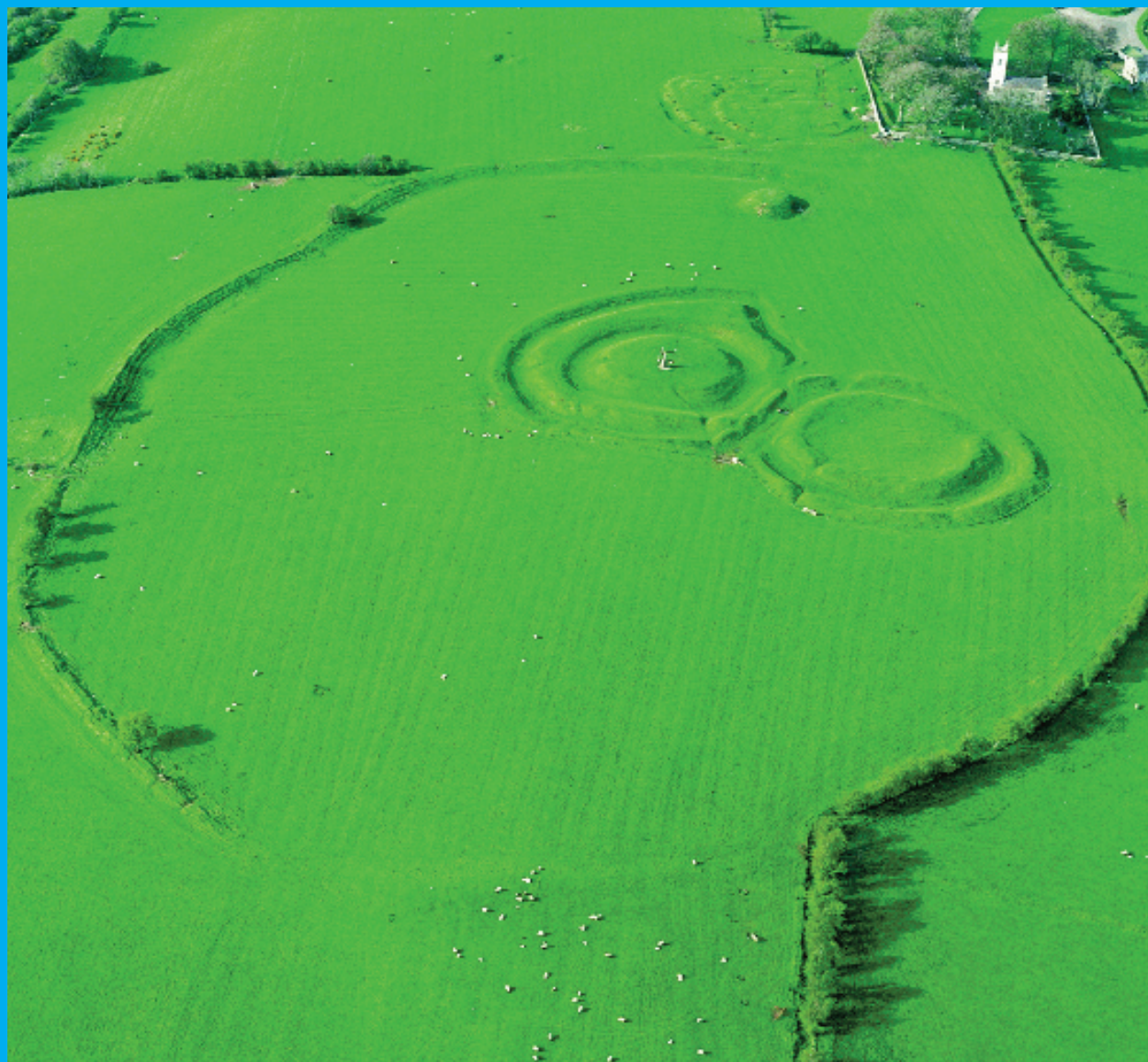
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The Mound of the Hostages, Tara:



a pivotal monument in a ceremonial landscape

Archaeology
IRELAND *Heritage Guide No. 34*

Introduction

The Mound of the Hostages (*Duma na nGiall*) is the oldest visible monument on the Hill of Tara, one of the most famous places in Ireland. The mound, which encases a megalithic tomb built before 3000 BC, was used as a place for the deposition of human remains for more than 1,500 years after its construction. By then, arguably, the mythical status of Tara had already begun to crystallise, and the extensive ritual landscape we see there today had begun to take shape.

Symbol of an idealised past

An indication of the iconic status of Tara is evident in its cameo roles in Irish history down to the modern controversy over the construction of the nearby M3. The strong opposition to the digging activities of the British Israelites at Tara around 1900 was ignited by nationalist sentiments like those that prompted Daniel O'Connell to address a mass meeting there on 15 August 1843, demanding the repeal of the Act of Union. The estimated one million people drawn by O'Connell's magnetism would have been acutely aware that, only 45 years earlier, a group of 1798 rebels had made their last stand on the hill before reputedly being killed and buried on the spot. At the beginning of the seventeenth century Hugh O'Neill supposedly rallied his troops at Tara on their way to Kinsale. Was it someone amongst O'Neill's host who lost a coin, dated 1588, that was recovered during archaeological excavations in the 1950s? Four centuries earlier, in 1170, it was at Tara that Roderick O'Connor was crowned high king of Ireland. At that stage, as reflected in the topo-



Above—Megalithic art on orthostat L2, middle compartment of tomb, seen through tomb entrance.

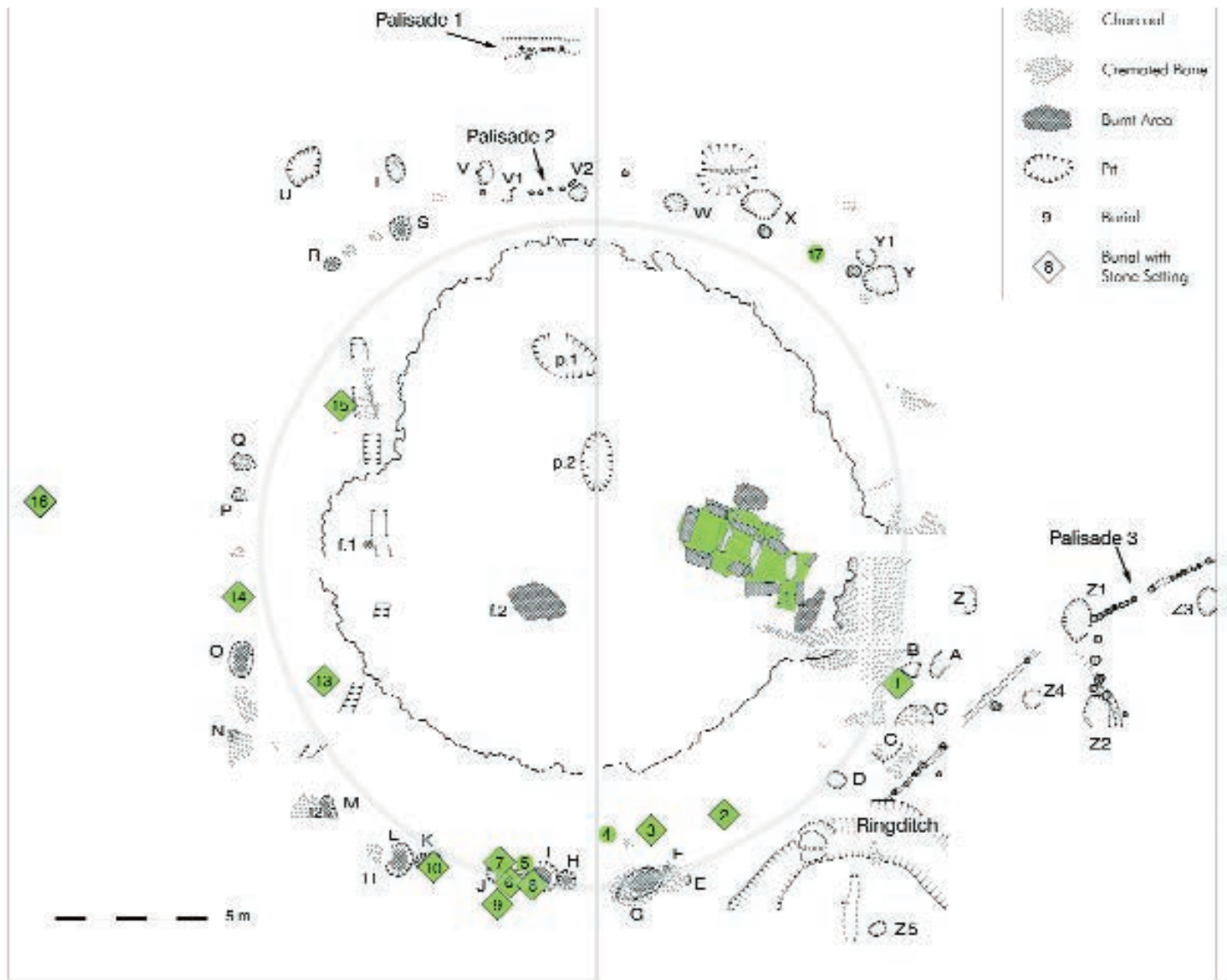
Below—The Mound of the Hostages under excavation in 1956, with a workman (nearest to camera) standing in front of the tomb entrance. To the right of his head, the stone cairn can be seen emerging as the overlying mound is removed.

graphical lore (*dindshenchas*) recorded in twelfth-century manuscripts, Tara was already established in the medieval mind as a place of mythical status. Seventh-century hagiographers had been at pains to link St Patrick with Tara, by then identified as a symbol of pagan obscurity but also a forceful validation of the new belief system.

Earthworks on the Hill of Tara

The palimpsest landscape at Tara incorporates monuments from many periods in the past, going back to the Stone Age. Situated in a commanding position and surrounded





by steep ditches, the central platform of the *Forrad* provides an attractive vantage point for visitors. The domed standing stone situated there is not in its original position and is popularly identified as the legendary *Lia Fáil*. This stone may be an Iron Age relic but the *Forrad* itself is probably a multi-period site, with elements going back into prehistory and a current appearance owing something to a final refurbishment in medieval times. *Tech Cormaic*, adjoining and linked with the *Forrad*, may also date from medieval times. Yet the subsurface traces of other structures in the vicinity of the *Forrad*/*Tech Cormaic* complex suggest that the story of these monuments is a complex one, holding many secrets.

Although excavated, *Ráith na Senad* (Rath of the Synods) has also retained many of its mysteries. At various times in the early centuries AD it functioned as a burial place and a multi-banked enclosure of unknown function. Earlier and later activity also occurred on the site. Today, *Ráith na Senad* is partly obliterated by the churchyard and other later disturbance.

Tech Mídhchuarta, the so-called Banqueting Hall, has long engaged the imagination of historians, archaeologists and the general public. The medieval image of a banqueting hall has been dismissed by archaeologists in favour of a ceremonial routeway, but there the disciplinary consensus collapses and the structure has been speculatively dated variously to the Stone Age, the Iron Age and the medieval period.

Excavation plan of the Mound of the Hostages, showing the Neolithic bone deposits (green). Note the various Neolithic features under the cairn and the mostly Bronze Age traces around the edge of the mound. (ALL IMAGES USED APPEAR IN *DUMA NA nGIALl, THE MOUND OF THE HOSTAGES, TARA* BY MUIRIS O'SULLIVAN, PUBLISHED BY WORDSWELL LTD.)

To the west of *Tech Mídhchuarta* a number of prehistoric barrows can be seen, of which the most easily distinguishable are *Ráith Gráinne* and the *Clóenfhera*, the so-called sloping trenches, which seem to hang over the edge of a steep slope. This appears to be a barrow cemetery from prehistoric times, in which lie the remains of unknown but presumably once eminent people.

The annals speak of an ancient fair at Tara, focused on the wedding of the king and the goddess of sovereignty, which was reputedly held for the last time in the sixth century AD before being abandoned as a relic of paganism. If ancient tribal gatherings took place on the Hill of Tara, it is possible that *Ráith na Ríg* (Rath of the Kings) was an important hub. Archaeological excavation has shown that this large enclosure was constructed c. 100 BC. The Mound of the Hostages lies near the northern edge of this enclosure, and the line of the enclosure appears to have been designed along here in such



Collection of Neolithic artefacts found amongst the cremated human bone in the megalithic tomb, Mound of the Hostages.

a way as to encompass the ancient mound. This was not the only large enclosure on the Hill of Tara in ancient times. Another, centred on Ráith na Senad and also enclosing the Mound of the Hostages, is visible only as a geophysical anomaly today.

Archaeological excavations

In the early summer of 1952 the then taoiseach, Éamon de Valera, turned the first sod of the Tara excavation project in a ceremony witnessed by a large crowd of spectators. The excavations were directed by Seán P. Ó Ríordáin, Professor of Celtic Archaeology at University College Dublin, who had previously conducted large-scale excavations at Lough Gur in County Limerick, amongst other important sites. Initially he focused on Ráith na Senad, which had previously been investigated by the British Israelites. He also explored the northern boundary of Ráith na Ríg, and in 1955 he turned his attention to the Mound of the Hostages. After his second season, in 1956, Ó Ríordáin fell ill. He died in 1957, and it was his successor in UCD, Professor Ruaidhrí de Valera, who completed the excavation of the Mound of the Hostages in 1959. Finally, as part of the Discovery Programme investigation of Tara in the 1990s, Helen Roche re-excavated Ó Ríordáin's cuttings across the ditch of Ráith na Ríg.

The Mound of the Hostages

When Ó Ríordáin began exploring the Mound of the Hostages, his priority as an archaeologist was to adopt a clinical approach, impervious to prevailing ideas about the site. He soon discovered that the earthen mound had served as a

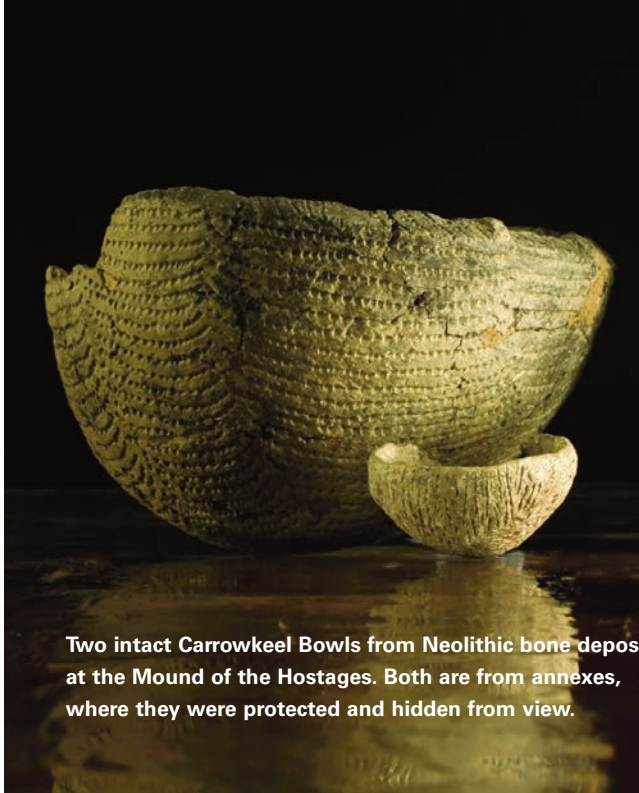
cemetery during the early Bronze Age. Continuing his investigations, he revealed the entrance to a megalithic tomb on the eastern side of the mound. This tomb contained a rich and complex assemblage of human bone, pottery and a variety of stone and bone objects, mainly personal ornaments.

The earliest features recorded underneath the Mound of the Hostages date from about the mid-fourth millennium (cal.) BC and include the remains of individual fires, spreads of charcoal and a ditch running partially underneath the cairn. The pits and fires could plausibly be interpreted as part of the preparatory ritual for the construction of the tomb, but the ditch is less easy to explain in this way. It arcs under the western part of the cairn and may mark the eastern edge of an enclosure focused to the west of the Mound of the Hostages. If there was a pre-cairn enclosure, what was its purpose? Early Neolithic hilltop enclosures are known in Ireland (there may have been one at Knowth, for example) and it is possible that their function was to host ceremonial occasions.

In the centuries after 3500 (cal.) BC, as the process of building the megalithic tomb began, any unevenness in the ground was submerged beneath a layer of soil and the orthostats defining the passage tomb were erected in a specially prepared slot-trench. The tomb consists of three successive compartments separated by low sill stones, the roof stones surviving over the two inner compartments. Megalithic art was applied to two of the orthostats. Uniquely, three cist-like structures were built against the outer faces of the orthostats and filled with cremated human bone. Here, and in the tomb, the excavators in the 1950s recovered a remarkable collection of burnt and unburnt human bone, representing hundreds of individuals, accompanied by a rich array of artefacts, some of which are decorated.

The ancient rituals give us an uneasy glimpse of the prehistoric subconscious. We may wonder, for example, why so many unburnt human skulls lay buried together in the cremated bone in the middle part of the tomb, with no corresponding torsos or limbs. Without allowing our imaginations to lead us to dark places, we might ask why infant long-bones, always unburnt long-bones, turned up occasionally but consistently amongst the cremated adult bone. This suggests that human bone deposition at Tara may not simply have been a final service to an individual, a formal leave-taking in the manner of today, but rather an element of ceremonies focused on the place itself.

Foundation rituals, for example, appear to have played an important role at the Mound of the Hostages. Collections of human bone were found in the foundation trench of the tomb, banked against the backs of orthostats and knowingly deposited rather than accidentally lost from the tomb. Traces of human and animal bones, as well as a mass of soft organic material, were located beneath the centre of the covering cairn. Furthermore, a series of small bone cremation deposits, many in specially arranged stone settings, were placed in the ground around the perimeter of the area covered by the cairn and have produced radiocarbon determinations centring around 3200 (cal.) BC. At least one of these cremations was found c. 10m west of the cairn, in a narrow extension of the excavation beyond the immediate environs of the mound. This raises the possibility of undiscovered Neolithic deposits elsewhere on the hill, especially to the west of the Mound of



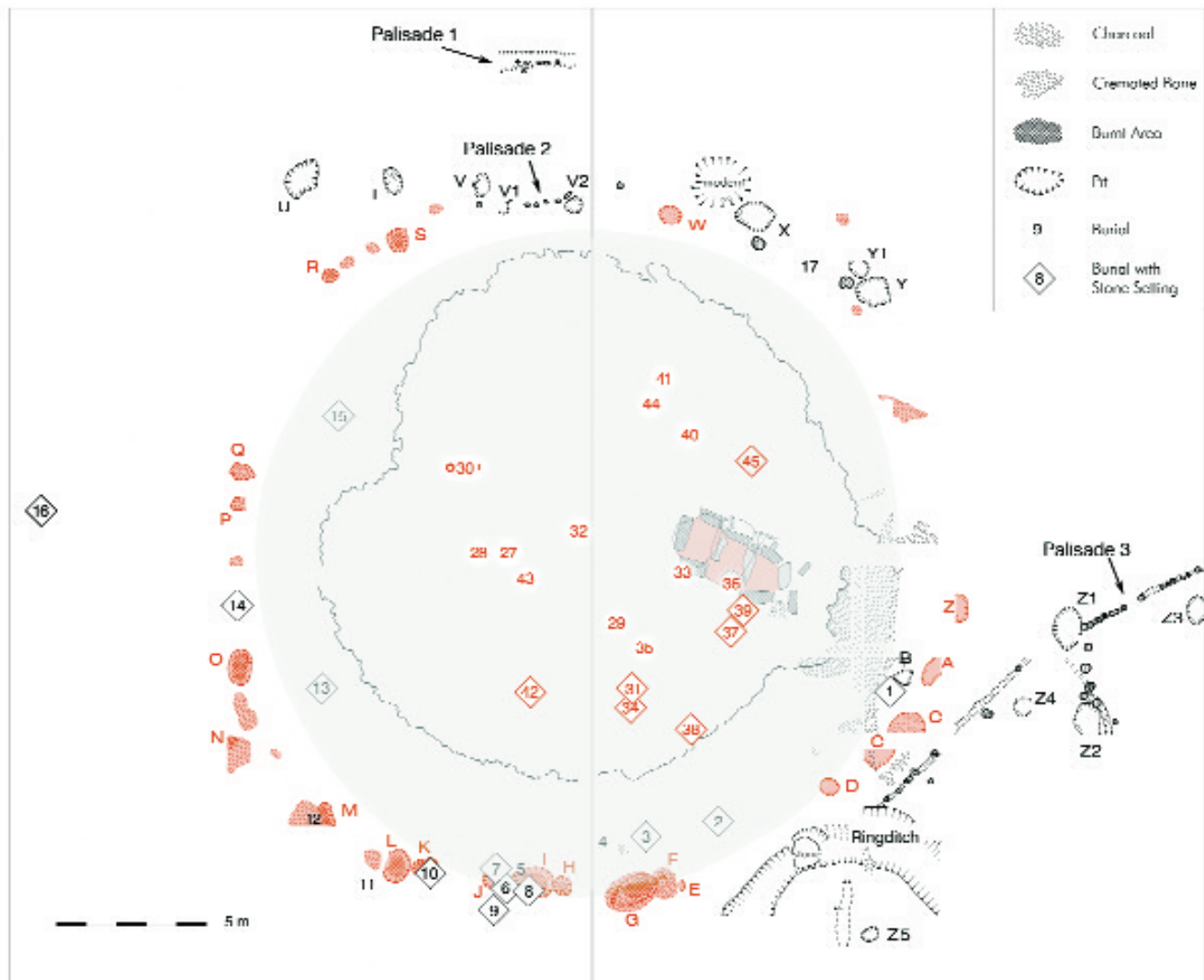
Two intact Carrowkeel Bowls from Neolithic bone deposits at the Mound of the Hostages. Both are from annexes, where they were protected and hidden from view.

the Hostages. In a further erosion of individuality after death, the human bone from these perimeter deposits was frequently found to have been crushed into pieces no bigger than grains of rice and to represent considerably less than one skeleton.

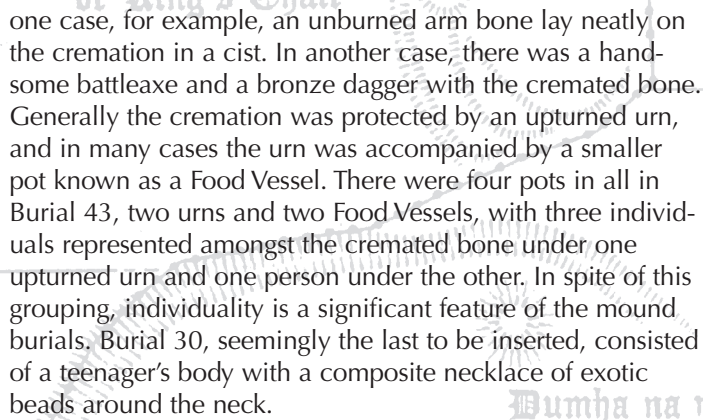
Within the tomb, suggesting that the remains of the ancestors were not necessarily sacrosanct, the Neolithic deposits were disturbed after a few hundred years as successive early Bronze Age burials were incorporated. In due course, when the tomb became too full, the burial activity was extended out into the overlying mound, so that approximately nineteen separate interments occurred in the earthen mantle, some of them double burials and many involving richly decorated pottery and other artefacts.

It was during this time that a remarkable ceremony took place. A ring of fires was set ablaze at the edge of the mound, coinciding spatially with the ring of burials inserted more than a thousand years earlier. The effect would have been spectacular, especially if the fires were burned at night, and the ceremony obviously marked a special moment in the life of the site, possibly the extension of burial activity into the mound or some such occasion.

A number of the burials in the mound were unusual. In



Excavation plan showing the early Bronze Age features (orange) at the Mound of the Hostages. Burials occurred in the tomb and mound during this phase, and encircling fires were burned at the edge of the mound.



Further reading

-
- Rath Cairnne
- Rath Carlehan
- Teach Míodhbhuarta
or Old Hall
- H i l l
- o f*
- Rath na hAnnabh
or King's Chair
- T
- St. Patrick's Church
- Teach Míodhbhuarta
- Dumha na nGail
- Rath Riogh
Torradh
- Teach Cormaic
- or Cathair Croinn
- CASTLEBOY
- (E.D.Tara)
- Rath Langheice

Above — The monuments on the Hill of Tara (Mound of the Hostages circled) as depicted on the Ordnance Survey six-inch map, with site names identified by 19th-century scholars.



Credits and Acknowledgements

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Layout © *Archaeology Ireland*.
Date of publication: June 2006.
Archaeology Ireland gratefully
acknowledges the assistance of the
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of this guide 



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