

# *Tara*

## *From the Past to the Future*

### **Symposium Programme**

23-26 October 2009

**University College Dublin  
Clinton Auditorium, Belfield**



# TARA 2009

[WWW.UCD.IE/ARCHAEOLOGY/TARASYMPOSIUM2009](http://WWW.UCD.IE/ARCHAEOLOGY/TARASYMPOSIUM2009)

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## Acknowledgements

Delivering this symposium in the current economic climate has been a challenge, and would never have been possible without the various partnerships and sponsorships listed in the programme. The principal conference partners are the UCD School of Archaeology and the John Hume Institute for Global Irish Studies. Crucial funding has been provided by UCD Research and the Humanities Institute of Ireland through seed funding schemes, as well as the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. The assistance of the National Monuments Service, The Heritage Council and Meath County Council is also gratefully acknowledged. A special word of thanks is due to the team of volunteers who are looking after the various practicalities this weekend, to the committee which has been planning for this symposium over the past six months, and especially to Kim Rice for her unstinting commitment and efficiency in the preparations for the event. Above all I would like to thank our speakers and all who have registered. Presenters from overseas have made an enormous commitment to be here, and everyone else has interrupted or forfeited their bank holiday weekend for the occasion.

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Maguires' Café, Hill of Tara

## Introduction

To many people, the Hill of Tara is an icon of Irish identity. Its story began at least 5,000 years ago and there have been many chapters in the meantime. The earliest of the visible earthworks on the hill appears to be the Mound of the Hostages but, underneath this monument, there is evidence of even earlier activity. By the later centuries of prehistory, approaching the middle of the first millennium AD, a variety of features had been constructed on the spine and flanks of the ridge, some remaining on the surface to be seen, others fading back into obscurity until revealed by modern technology and excavation. Poets and writers have been absorbed by the mystique of Tara; a thousand years ago, scholars tried to explain its mysteries in the context of their knowledge; at the end of the nineteenth century a group of British-Israelite became convinced that the Ark of the Covenant was buried there; and through the ages symbolic events of national importance have been located there. Much archaeological scholarship has been invested in Tara, beginning with the Ordnance Survey in the 1830s, but Tara does not belong to any specific interest or discipline, and the Discovery Programme has been instrumental in generating a multi-disciplinary approach to its study.

This symposium and the ensuing publication represent a project originally conceived as a collaborative discussion of the information contained in two publications, Muiris O'Sullivan's *Mound of the Hostages* (2005) and Eoin Grogan's *Rath of the Synods* (2008) which set out the results of the excavation programme conducted on the Hill of Tara in the 1950s. It has expanded into a more general discussion of the archaeology and meaning of Tara, bearing in mind the wider body of invaluable research conducted since the 1950s, notably under the auspices of the Discovery Programme since the early 1990s and in advance of the M3 motorway over the past few years. Following a colloquium of speakers in March 2009, the general goals of the project have been reduced to four broad themes, each expressed as a general question:

- ***The archaeology of Tara***  
Underlying question: *What more can be mined from the archaeological data?*
- ***Tara in its local and regional setting***  
Underlying question: *What was the settlement history of the landscape around the Hill of Tara?*
- ***Comparative perspectives on Tara***  
Underlying question: *What is the international perspective on Tara?*
- ***The significance of Tara through time***  
Underlying question: *What dynamics have influenced the emergence of the Tara phenomenon?*

We look forward to having these issues aired from various perspectives over the weekend, and it is to be hoped that the symposium will generate many fresh ideas for the future of research at Tara. The generosity of the speakers and chairs in giving their time and expertise is deeply appreciated. Further information on the speakers is available at <http://www.ucd.ie/archaeology/Tarasymposium2009/>.

## Session Chairs

- Friday**      **19.30**   **Gabriel Cooney,**  
Professor of Celtic Archaeology & Head of School, UCD School of Archaeology
- Saturday**    **09.00**   **Michael Ryan**  
Adjunct Professor of Archaeology, UCD School of Archaeology;  
Former President, Royal Irish Academy
- 11.30**   **Liam Downey**  
Adjunct Professor of Archaeology, UCD School of Archaeology
- 14.30**   **Brian Jackson**  
Director, John Hume Institute for Global Irish Studies, UCD
- 16.30**   **Marc Caball**  
Director, Humanities Institute of Ireland, UCD
- Sunday**      **09.00**   **UCD Ian Armit**  
Professor of Archaeology, University of Bradford
- 11.30**   **Lynda Mulvin**  
UCD School of Art History and Cultural Policy; author, *Roman and Byzantine Antiquities in the National Museum of Ireland*. Dublin: Wordwell (2006)
- 14.30**   **Ann Lynch**  
Senior Archaeologist, National Monuments Service,  
Dept. of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government
- 16.30**   **Ian Kuijt**  
Associate Professor of Archaeology,  
Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame
- Monday**     **09.00**   **Brian Lacey**  
Chief Executive, the Discovery Programme
- 11.30**   **Loreto Guinan**  
Heritage Officer, Meath County Council  
On secondment to Tara landscape management project
- 14.30**   **Charlie Doherty**  
President, Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland
- 16.30**   **Muiris O’Sullivan**  
Associate Professor of Archaeology, UCD School of Archaeology

## Programme

### Friday, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2009

7.30 pm Chair: Professor Gabriel Cooney, Head of UCD School of Archaeology

\* Presentation: *The Hill of Tara – ‘difficult of interpretation’* (Muiris O’Sullivan)

\* Reception



Saturday, 24<sup>th</sup> October 2009

08:30	New data and new interpretations		Registration		
09:00			Introduction		
09:30		CHAIR: Michael Ryan	Alex Bayliss	<i>Interpreting chronologies for the Mound of the Hostages, Tara and its contemporary contexts</i>	
10:00					
10:30			Frank Prendergast	<i>A study of the morphology, metrology and archaeoastronomy of the Iron Age enclosure, Lismullin, Co Meath</i>	
		Anthony Corns & Rob Shaw	<i>The use of high resolution surface modelling to identify relict features in the micro-topography and the added value of integration with existing remote sensing data sets</i>		
			Coffee/Tea		
11:30	Making a special place		Graeme Warren & Thomas Kador	<i>What did the Hill of Tara mean in the Mesolithic</i>	
12:00		CHAIR: Liam Downey	Jessica Smyth	<i>Tara in pieces – deposition and the formation of place in the middle and late Neolithic</i>	
12:30				Gabriel Cooney & Kim Rice	<i>Stone usage at the Mound of the Hostages</i>
13:00				Alan Peatfield	<i>High places and royal shrines</i>
			Lunch		
14:30	Turning data into knowledge		Ian Kuijt & Colin Quinn	<i>Biography of the Neolithic body: tracing pathways, cist II, Mound of the Hostages, Tara</i>	
15:00		CHAIR: Brian Jackson	Helen Roche	<i>Prehistoric pottery from the Mound of the Hostages</i>	
15:30				Chris Scarre	<i>The burials behind the orthostats at the Mound of the Hostages – parallels and implications</i>
			Coffee/Tea		
16:30	Echoes of other places		Michael Shanks	<i>Reflections</i>	
17:00		CHAIR: Marc Caball	Alison Sheridan	<i>'Tara Boy' – Burial 4 in the Mound of the Hostages</i>	
17:30				Charles Mount	<i>The context of the Bronze Age cemetery in the Mound of the Hostages</i>

Sunday, 25<sup>th</sup> October 2009

09:00	Broader perspectives	CHAIR: Ian Armit	Colin Quinn & Ian Kuijt	<i>The tempo of life and death at the Early Bronze Age Mound of the Hostages, Tara</i>
09:30			Richard Bradley	<i>Enclosures, mounds and great houses</i>
10:00			John O'Neill	<i>Being prehistoric in the Iron Age</i>
10:30			Katharina Becker	<i>Iron Age Tara in context</i>
	Coffee/Tea			
11:30	The twilight of prehistory	CHAIR: Lynda Mulvin	Aidan O'Connell	<i>Excavations at the Lismullin archaeological complex</i>
12:00			Richard Warner	<i>Tara in the Roman centuries – The Navan/Tara axis</i>
12:30			Elizabeth O'Brien & Tiernan McGarry	<i>Review of Iron Age and Medieval burials at Tara</i>
13:00			Ian Armit	<i>Objects and identities: Indigenous and Roman material cultures at Tara and beyond</i>
	Lunch			
14:30	The local context	CHAIR: Ann Lynch	Donald Murphy & Vicky Ginn	<i>An overview of the archaeology of the M3 motorway scheme</i>
15:00			Eoin Grogan	<i>The development of the prehistoric landscape in the Tara region</i>
15:30			Aidan O'Sullivan & Jonathan Kinsella	<i>Living with a sacred landscape: interpreting the early medieval archaeology of the Hill of Tara and its environs, AD 400-1100</i>
	Coffee/Tea			
16:30	New directions	CHAIR: Ian Kuijt	Michael Potterton & Margaret Murphy	<i>Agriculture in the Tara region, AD 1200-1600</i>
17:00			Steve Davis	<i>Paleoenvironmental history of the Tara / Skryne Valley: problems and potential</i>
17:30			Ian Russell	<i>'Tara': Deep maps and psychogeographies</i>

Monday, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2009

09:00	Layers of significance  <b>CHAIR:</b> Brian Lacey	Charles Doherty	<i>International parallels for the kingship of Tara</i>
09:30		Tadhg O’Keeffe	<i>What did Tara mean to the Anglo-Normans</i>
10:00		Dáithí Ó hÓgáin	<i>Tara in myth and legend</i>
10:30		Nicholas Allen	<i>Literature and the landscape of the past</i>
Coffee/Tea			
11:30	Neolithic Tara in context  <b>CHAIR:</b> Loreto Guinan	George Eogan	<i>Tara viewed from the Boyne Valley</i>
12:00		Muiris O’Sullivan (& Blaze O’Connor)	<i>Megalithic art at Tara in context</i>
12:30		George Nash	<i>Waves of ideas and construction: comparing and contrasting the Mound of the Hostages, Tara with the passage grave tradition of North Wales</i>
13:00		Niels Andersen	<i>A view from Denmark</i>
Lunch			
14:30	International parallels  <b>CHAIR:</b> Charlie Doherty	Serge Cassen	<i>Continuity of tradition at Tara and Carnac</i>
15:00		Simon Stoddart	<i>Constructing ancient time: Tara and Tarxien (Malta)</i>
15:30		Gonçalo Velho (& Vitor & Susana Jorge)	<i>From Tara to Castanheiro do Vento (and back): monumental architectures and their gaze.</i>
Coffee/Tea			
16:30	Drawing to a close  <b>CHAIR:</b> Muiris O’Sullivan	Barry Cunliffe	<i>Conference review/discussion</i>
17:00		<b>Final remarks</b>	
17:30		<b>Closure</b>	
18:00			



## Tara

### ***From the Past to the Future***

### **Abstracts**

Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2009

**Chair: Gabriel Cooney** (Head of UCD School of Archaeology)

**Muiris O'Sullivan** (UCD School of Archaeology)

***The Hill of Tara – 'difficult of interpretation'***

This presentation sets out the context and aims of the symposium. It highlights the intense focus of research on the Hill of Tara, especially during the past two decades, including the innovative and cross-disciplinary work of the Discovery Programme and the publication of the reports on the 1950s excavations at the Mound of the Hostages and Rath of the Synods. The recent programme of archaeological survey and excavation associated with the M3 motorway project has revealed data that sheds considerable light on settlement history in the neighbourhood of Tara and the relationship between the Hill of Tara and the surrounding landscape through time. At the same time, lessons from research programmes associated with the Boyne Valley World Heritage site help to show gaps in the study of Tara. Finally, comparative information and the views of speakers from overseas will sharpen our understanding and deepen our appreciation of Tara. Although featuring a rich variety of papers, the symposium pursues a small number of key themes and sets out to address specific questions. This is the challenge for speakers.

Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> October 2009

***New data and new interpretations***

**Chair: Michael Ryan** (Director of the Chester Beatty Library Dublin)

**Alex Bayliss** (English Heritage)

***Interpreting chronologies for the Mound of the Hostages, Tara and its contemporary contexts***

This paper reassesses the chronology of the Mound of the Hostages by constructing a series of formal Bayesian statistical models for the site chronology. Further models are presented for the contemporary Irish contexts of the major periods of use of the site, in the later fourth millennium cal BC and in the early Bronze Age. A contrasting picture emerges. The Neolithic remains immersed in the uncertainties of fuzzy prehistory, but we present an initial attempt to build a generational narrative for the early Bronze Age in Ireland. This demands explanation.

**Frank Prendergast** (UCD School of Archaeology)

***A study of the morphology, metrology and archaeoastronomy of the Iron Age enclosure, Lismullin, Co. Meath***

The Iron Age enclosure at Lismullin, Co. Meath was discovered during development works for the M3 motorway and is located just 2.3 km from the archaeological complex on the Hill of Tara. Site excavation revealed the monument was constructed with a large number of precisely set timber posts. The dominant architectural form consisted of three concentric circular enclosures, an easterly facing avenue and other arrangements of postholes set out as arcs and in pairs. Of particular significance was the discovery of a pit set transversely to the axis of the avenue close to its termination and which contained unidentified cremated bone and hazel nut shells.

Following numerical, statistical and archaeoastronomical analysis of the geo-spatial data for the postholes and the pit, significant evidence has emerged to indicate that those who constructed the Lismullin enclosures did so using a unit of measurement which was based on the radius of the inner enclosure. Simple sub-division and positive scaling of this standard length would have enabled the builders to conceive, plan and realise such a monumental scheme that embodies the use of ratios, proportionality and symmetry and reflects high levels of cognitive thought and social organisation. These findings bring the pit into prominent focus and are consistent with the probable use of the site for ritual and ceremonial purposes at auspicious times of the year. This could suggest the expression of a dual desire to affirm and embody power and status into the design of the monument, thereby amplifying the symbolism and ritual significance of the site.

Key words: Iron Age, Lismullin, enclosure, postholes, morphology, metrology, archaeoastronomy, cosmology.

**Anthony Corns and Rob Shaw** (The Discovery Programme)

***The use of high resolution surface modelling to identify relict features in the micro-topography and the added value of integration with existing remote data sets***

This paper will show how recently developed airborne mapping systems enable the generation of digital surface models at a dramatically increased resolution. Working with data gathered by the FliMAP 400 LiDAR system and using readily available processing software a new digital elevation model (DEM) of the Hill of Tara has been generated revealing the fine detail the micro-topography of the landscape. The value of such a high resolution DEM becomes apparent when other remotely sensed data, particularly geophysical surveys, are integrated and viewed and analysed in their landscape context using GIS. With this in mind, efforts to enable the reuse of geospatial landscape data within the wider research community will be discussed.

### ***Making a special place***

**Chair: Liam Downey** (Fellow of the UCD School of Archaeology)

**Graeme Warren and Thomas Kador** (UCD School of Archaeology)

***What did the Hill of Tara mean in the Mesolithic?***

The Mound of the Hostages, in common with several other major passage tombs in Eastern Ireland, includes an enigmatic lithic of Later Mesolithic character. Several interpretations of this artefact are possible with major questions surrounding how it ended up on the Hill of Tara and what its presence might mean. This paper reviews these problems, setting Tara in its local and regional Mesolithic landscapes. This facilitates discussion of the oft-claimed significance of uplands to Mesolithic populations in general, and the meaning of the Hill of Tara in particular.

**Jessica Smyth** (UCD School of Archaeology)

***Tara in pieces – deposition and the formation of place in the middle and late Neolithic***

The decline in use of passage tombs, or more specifically, in the use of Carrowkeel Ware is frequently used as one of the book-ends propping up the Grooved Ware chronology in Ireland. While several sites yield evidence for both types of pottery, there is as yet no instance of a direct contextual or feature overlap between the two. The Mound of the Hostages is no exception in this regard. However, one of the outcomes of recent modelling of phases of activity at the mound has been a much tighter estimate of when the primary use of Irish passage tombs ceased. Does this change our perception of how, why and when Grooved Ware appeared in Ireland? What changes and what stays the same? Working out from the small yet stubborn strands of evidence at the Mound of the Hostages, this contribution will explore aspects of this middle Neolithic/late Neolithic transition or interface as revealed by those sites where traces of both cultural traditions occur.

**Gabriel Cooney and Kim Rice** (UCD School of Archaeology)

***Stone usage at the Mound of the Hostages***

At the Mound of the Hostages we can see the use of stone from before the passage tomb was built, during the passage tomb phase and throughout the Bronze Age cemetery phase. Most obviously this encompasses the utilisation of stone artefacts and at a larger scale the construction of the passage tomb structure, but also at an intermediate scale between objects and structural stone is what we might term the mundane use of stone, for example the stones of the cairn and the stones used in the pre-tomb settings and the Bronze Age cists. Indeed, one of the striking aspects of the photographic record from the excavation is the apparent similarity of the greywacke spalls used in these early and late stages in the history of the site. At both the object and structural level we have come to accept that the materiality of stone was significant, that stone could be seen as vital and alive and that different lithologies from different sources were redolent with symbolism. Acknowledging this we should look again at the way in which we have approached and assumed a mundane, thin meaning to the stones in between these scales and ends of the lithic spectrum at the Mound of the Hostages.

**Alan Peatfield** (UCD School of Archaeology)

***High places and royal shrines***

"High Places" is the traditional translation of the "bamoht", the hill-top shrines of Old Testament Israel. But as a cultic phenomenon, shrines set on mountains and hills of various sorts, are to be found in cultures all over the world and in many time-periods. Among these "high places" there are frequent overlaps of spiritual conceptualisations and elements of use, which are not explainable through cultural diffusionism - there is a commonality which needs to be explored and understood. In this paper I propose to examine some of these "high places" as case-studies and models, to establish what may be usefully learned from cross-cultural comparisons.

***Turning data into knowledge***

**Chair: Brian Jackson** (Director of the UCD Global Irish Institute)

**Ian Kuijt<sup>1</sup> and Colin Quinn<sup>2</sup>** (University of Notre Dame<sup>1</sup> and University of Michigan<sup>2</sup>)

***Biography of the Neolithic body: tracing pathways, Cist II, Mound of the Hostages, Tara***

Mortuary practices are one of the most visible contexts for event-based construction, modification, and destruction of social identities. As culturally informed rituals, they provide insight into the variability of identities and social relationships in past societies. Variability or homogeneity in the display of identity can reflect interconnectivity, competition, shared conceptualizations of social memory, or emphases on different types of identity at the individual, household, and regional level. Patterning in the role of material culture in the negotiation of social relationships can reflect the production of memory and organization of past social and ritual lifeways. Using mortuary data from Tara, combined with studies of material culture variability within the larger social landscape, we explore the impact of stylistic and design choices on signs of identity in Neolithic and Bronze Age Ireland.

**Helen Roche**

***Prehistoric pottery from the Mound of the Hostages***

This paper will review the ceramic assemblage from the Mound of the Hostages and integrate a number of important new assemblages from the Tara area and the wider region. This work will also present a wider national assessment of the pottery. It is clear that early Neolithic material, probably derived from settlement activity, was incorporated into the construction and use phases of the

passage tomb: this hints at a sequence of activity that reflects the evidence from the Boyne Valley and suggests that Tara was already a prominent site in the pre-passage tomb period. The ceramic assemblage from the passage tomb deposits includes one exceptional vessel with a unique composition that reflects a special and complex intention by the potter. Later deposits in the tomb itself may include some Grooved Ware as well as Early Bronze Age material. While the Early Bronze Age Mound of the Hostages cemetery, imposed on the passage tomb cairn, is exceptional in the wealth of associated grave goods and the longevity of its use as a funerary centre it reflects the wider regional pattern which includes several other important cemeteries.

**Chris Scarre** (University of Durham)

***The burials behind the orthostats at the Mound of the Hostages – parallels and implications***

I've been intrigued by the evidence from Mound of the Hostages for burials in the cists behind the orthostats before the mound was added. That ties in exactly with my observations at Prissé-la-Charrière, in the sense that there too there appears to have been an initial phase of funerary activity which was sealed within later structures. Furthermore at three of the four chambered tombs I've excavated in the last three years (two in the Channel Islands, and one in Portugal) there is no evidence that a mound ever existed. This has led me in a number of directions – on the one hand back to the debates of the mid-19th century in Britain, France and northern Europe, tracing how the concept of the covering mound became the dominant model; and in another, decoupling mounds and chambers, with megalithic chambers (not just timber chambers) functioning sometimes as the settings for funerary ceremonial as simple free-standing structures. This observation has implications for some of the phenomenological readings which have been proposed over the last 15 years relating structures to landforms

***Echoes of other places***

**Chair: Marc Caball** (Director of the UCD Humanities Institute of Ireland)

**Michael Shanks** (Stanford University)

***Reflections***

Abstract to be confirmed

**Alison Sheridan** (National Museums of Scotland)

***'Tara Boy' – Burial 4 in the Mound of the Hostages***

This presentation will explore 'Tara Boy' and his remarkable grave goods, covering the analytical work undertaken by the presenter and colleagues on his necklace, and also the isotopic work undertaken by Janet Montgomery (Bradford University) and Mandy Jay (Durham & Leipzig Universities) to examine his diet and place of origin. The background of this research, in terms of the presenter's long-term research into Early Bronze Age jewellery in Britain and Ireland and Montgomery and Jay's involvement within the wide-ranging 'Beaker People Project', will be explained. The significance of this remarkable individual will be assessed in terms of his position within the Tara cemetery; his identity as a high-status individual within Early Bronze Age Ireland, and as one with far-ranging links; his personal identity, with the elements of cross-gender attribution of his grave goods; and his likely origin.

**Charles Mount** (Irish Concrete Federation)

***The context of the Bronze Age cemetery in the Mound of the Hostages***

The aim of the contribution is to place the Bronze Age cemetery in the Mound of the Hostages into the overall context of contemporary burial in Ireland

**Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

**Broader perspectives**

**Chair: Ian Armit** (Professor of Archaeology, University of Bradford)

**Colin Quinn<sup>1</sup> and Ian Kuijt<sup>2</sup>** (University of Michigan<sup>1</sup> and University of Notre Dame<sup>2</sup>)

***The Tempo of life and death at the Early Bronze Age Mound of the Hostages, Tara***

The early Bronze Age mortuary record at the Mound of the Hostages is complex and nuanced. People in the past not only buried the dead at Mound of the Hostages in such a way to materialize identities and relationships of the living as well as the deceased, but they also used these mortuary events to negotiate complex social, economic, and political relationships. This paper explores variation and patterns in the mortuary record, each of which has important ramifications for information exchanges using material culture in the past. The different rates and tempos of burial, along with the fact that burial was likely restricted to a subset of the entire population, suggest that people actively engaged in strategies that created venues for ritual performance, communal action, and competition, and that these strategies were not always the same throughout the early Bronze Age. This perspective allows us to reframe our understanding of the Mound of the Hostages into a detailed and time sensitive consideration of the actions of human communities with multiple interrelated, and at times co-existing, mortuary practices during the early Bronze Age.

**Richard Bradley** (University of Reading)

***Enclosures, mounds and Great Houses***

This paper discusses two groups of monuments: the 'royal sites' of the Irish Iron Age, and the Neolithic henges of southern England. Both include the same elements: circular enclosures with internal ditches, mounds, and enormous timber buildings. Why do these sites resemble one another? They do not belong to one unbroken tradition. Rather, their distinctive architecture draws on similar elements from the natural world and combines them with the forms of domestic buildings. Perhaps they were the 'Great Houses' of entire communities.

**John Ó Néill**

***Being prehistoric in the Iron Age***

The results of the archaeological investigations at the Mound of the Hostages at Tara have wide implications for our understanding of the use and re-use of monuments during the Iron Age. The Irish Iron Age is typically perceived and presented as lacking in significant monumental expression, with a distinctive (if limited) body of artefactual material and a small number of intensively researched foci of ritual and high status settlement. Taking Tara as an exemplar, it is clear that the status accorded to the Mound of the Hostages in the Iron Age is not archaeologically visible in the physical fabric of the monument but rather in its wider context. The disconnect between the status of particular places and the presence of a tangible contemporary presence is quite striking in early medieval Ireland, a concept that can be shown to have Iron Age precedents. Other monuments were physically re-invented in the Iron Age and it is possible to achieve at least a partial monumental archaeology for the period.

**Katharina Becker**

***Iron Age Tara in context***

Both the excavations at the Rath na Riogh as well as of the Rath the Synods have produced Iron Age evidence. I will attempt to set Tara's Iron Age phases in their contemporary cultural context, moving beyond the previously available comparanda in form of the other 'Royal Sites' by using the new evidence that has emerged in the *IRON AGE IRELAND – Finding an Invisible People* project. Touching upon the question of the character of the Iron Age activity at Tara, this assessment will provide opportunity to embed Iron Age Tara in a supra-regional narrative that is based on the overall evidence for life in the Iron Age.

## ***The twilight of prehistory***

**Chair: Lynda Mulvin** (UCD School of Art History and Cultural Policy)

**Aidan O'Connell** (Archer Heritage Planning)

### ***Excavations at the Lismullin archaeological complex***

Excavations undertaken in advance of the M3 motorway have revealed an archaeological complex located 2km from the Hill of Tara in the townland of Lismullin. The recorded features at the site point to a series of episodic ritual events occurring between the Neolithic and early Iron Age followed by a change in the land use pattern to settlement and agricultural practices in the late Iron Age and medieval periods. The proposed paper will describe the excavation results and provide a comparison between the chronological development of the archaeological complexes at Lismullin and the Hill of Tara.

**Richard Warner**

### ***Tara in the 'Roman' centuries – the Navan/Tara axis***

I will explore the 'Roman' and native elements of Tara in the period from the beginning of the first to the end of the fifth century AD. I will obviously dwell on the Rath of the Synods excavation results but will include discussion resulting from the work at Raith na Rig. I will place Tara into the contemporary context of Roman influences, as I see them, and sites such as Drumanagh and Clogher will figure. I would also like to say something about recent views on the ritual aspects of Tara in the Iron Age, and the date of its floruit as a royal/ritual site. I will include Mound of the Hostages only insofar as it points to an important (physical) link with Navan (the details I shall not put down at this time).

**Tiernan McGarry** (UCD School of Archaeology)

### ***The Late prehistoric burials at Tara c. 900BC – AD400***

Two features close to the summit of the Hill of Tara have produced burials that date from during the period of approximately 900 cal BC to 200 cal AD. These are the burial ringditch located at the south-east of the Mound of the Hostages (O'Sullivan 2005) and the excavated portion of the ditch of Rath na Riogh (Roche 2002). Probable Iron Age burials were produced by the 'flat cemetery' towards the centre of nearby Rath of the Synods (Grogan 2008), and it is possible that at least one of the burials in the 'barrow' in the north-west of that monument also dates from that time. This paper will outline what appear to be the most significant characteristics of these burials and the sites that produced them, compare these to norms in late prehistoric Ireland, and briefly explore some possible explanations for unusual funerary treatment.

**Elizabeth O'Brien** (UCD Mícheál Ó Cléirigh Institute)

### ***Early Medieval burial on Tara – fact or fiction***

The only evidence at the present time for the presence of Early Medieval burials on the Hill of Tara is the reference to a purported fifth century burial included in seventh century literature. This short paper will describe this event and endeavour to place it into a wider context.

**Ian Armit** (University of Bradford)

### ***Objects and identities: indigenous and Roman material culture at Tara and beyond***

Excavations at the Rath of the Synods yielded an unusually large assemblage of Roman or Romano-British material. This included finds of pottery, glass and a range of metal object spanning several centuries and representing a highly selective pattern of acquisition from the range of objects potentially available over that time. This paper will assess the role of these imported objects at Tara, focusing on the material from the Rath of the Synods. Comparisons will be made with Roman material elsewhere in Ireland as well as from important Roman Iron Age centres in neighbouring regions, such as Traprain Law in south-east Scotland.

## ***The local context***

**Chair: Ann Lynch** (Chief Archaeologist, National Monuments Service)

**Donald Murphy and Vicky Ginn** (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

### ***An overview of the archaeology of the M3 motorway scheme***

This paper will outline the principal results of the excavations carried out in advance of the construction of the M3 Motorway Scheme between Dunshaughlin and Navan, dealing more specifically with those sites in the immediate hinterland of the Hill and Gabhra Valley. The excavations carried out in the area deal with archaeological sites ranging in date from the Mesolithic to the Medieval period, with a larger focus on the early medieval period and the large settlement sites in the valley such as Baronstown and Dowdstown.

**Eoin Grogan**

### ***The development of the prehistoric landscape in the Tara region***

This region has seen some of the most intense recent development including infrastructural projects and residential schemes. This has produced a considerable array of new sites as well as highlighting new concentrations of prehistoric activity. Due to the rapid expansion of archaeological data there has been little opportunity to study and digest new material or to evaluate its impact on the wider context of prehistoric activity in the region. This paper will review the patterning and development of Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement within an integrated landscape assessment and provide a context for the emerging ceremonial and ritual complex at Tara. The focus will be on the region encompassing the Boyne Valley and the coastal area of east Meath and north county Dublin but with a wider reference to north Leinster. It is evident that three principal factors – access, communication and resources – shaped the formation and development of settlement in the area. Some nodes established in the Neolithic, such as the area around Kells and the core of the Tara Landscape, show continuity of activity, if not importance, throughout the period while others, such as the Boyne Valley appear to have faded from significance during the Bronze Age.

**Aidan O'Sullivan & Jonathan Kinsella** (UCD School of Archaeology)

### ***Living with a sacred landscape: interpreting the early medieval archaeology of the Hill of Tara and its environs AD 400-1100***

The Hill of Tara was a place of great significance in the early medieval period, associated with ancestry, political power and identity. Early Irish historical sources suggest that the hill in particular was a numinous space, rich in symbolic meanings. Archaeological evidence suggest that there were less monumental or material interventions on the hill compared to prehistory, and also that the surrounding landscape was a place where people lived, worked the land and buried their dead. The early medieval settlement sites of Dowdstown, Baronstown and Roestown, excavated in advance of the M3, amongst others reveal a range of evidence for settlement, enclosure, crafts and technology and agricultural practices. Several early medieval raths can be shown to have had a particular function. There are particularly distinctive patterns in agriculture and economic practices, with cereal cultivation unusually strongly represented with large numbers of corn-drying kilns from the baronies of Skreen and nearby Ratoath. There are also local/regional and chronological patterns in settlement and agriculture that imply some interesting differences in land-use between the early medieval mensal lands of Tara and elsewhere in the heartlands of southern Brega. This is not to say that Tara did not impinge on local people's perceptions of place, space and the past, but the hill did reside within a landscape of dwelling and practice.

## ***New directions***

**Chair: Ian Kuijt** (Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame)

**Michael Potterton and Margaret Murphy** (The Discovery Programme)

### ***Agriculture in the Tara region, AD 1200–1600***

Tara sits within one of the more intensively farmed parts of Ireland, both now and in the medieval period. Following the arrival of the Anglo Normans, the area formed part of the barony of Skreen in the lordship of Meath. The region was particularly suitable for arable agriculture which became the dominant land-use. A network of manorial centres facilitated the exploitation of the land and the processing of cereal products, while commercial opportunities were provided by boroughs, markets and towns. Landholding patterns resulted in the region developing strong links with Dublin and it can be regarded as forming part of the capital's hinterland. This paper considers the archaeological and documentary evidence for agriculture and the agrarian economy in the region from the beginning of Anglo-Norman settlement up to the early seventeenth century.

**Steve Davis** (UCD School of Archaeology)

### ***Palaeoenvironmental history of the Tara/ Skryne Valley: problems and potential***

In common with much of lowland eastern Ireland, the palaeoenvironment of Tara is poorly understood. This has largely been a question of site availability, viz the lack of obvious sampling locations in the immediate area suited to conventional environmental approaches (e.g. pollen, plant macrofossils and insects). However, recent research at Brú na Bóinne in addition to findings from infrastructural excavations have increasingly demonstrated that this apparent lack of sampling sites is somewhat misleading, and that cryptic sites with significant palaeoenvironmental potential are sometimes available. This has been most clearly demonstrated at Clowanstown, Co. Meath which has yielded stunning archaeology alongside a long palaeoenvironmental sequence in an apparently unpromising area (Gearey in prep.). As has been recognised in the recent Brú na Bóinne Research Framework (Smyth 2009) and Skellig Michael Management Plan documents (DoEHLG/OPW 2008), an informed palaeoenvironmental strategy is a key requirement in terms of placing the site in a defined landscape context and assessing site-landscape interactions, and should be seen as a research priority for the Tara area. This paper aims to briefly review the current state of palaeoenvironmental research for the Tara region, to explore a range of potential proximal sampling localities identified both on the ground, through literature review and through subsoil maps and ultimately to suggest a possible way forward in addressing the significant knowledge gap that exists in our understanding of past environments at Tara. Following the approach of the Brú na Bóinne Research Framework document, a (by no means definitive) set of questions which might be addressed using specific palaeoenvironmental methodologies are proposed.

**Ian Russell** (UCD School of Archaeology)

### ***'Tara': Deep maps and psychogeographies***

The Hill of Tara is one of the most famous historical and archaeological sites in Ireland. Although the archaeological surveys and excavations have provided significant knowledge about the sites and features on the hill, this paper argues that the significance of 'Tara' is not found directly in data or in the tangible qualities of the landscape but in the deep, shifting and dynamic relations between people and the many places and stories which are bundled within the name 'Tara'. Applying theories of deep mapping and psychogeographic study, the paper will explore the consonances and dissonances within the heritages of 'Tara' and suggest new ways of engaging with its ongoing narrative.



Monday 26<sup>th</sup> October 2009

### ***Layers of significance***

**Chair: Brian Lacey** (Chief Executive Officer of the Discovery Programme)

**Charles Doherty** (UCD School of History and Archives)

#### ***International parallels for the kingship of Tara***

This theme will consist of an examination of the role of royal sites such as Tara, Navan Fort and Cruachan. What may be learned about these sites from the early literature? What is the nature of the comparative evidence and how far is it applicable to Irish sites.

**Tadhg O’Keeffe** (UCD School of Archaeology)

#### ***What did Tara mean to the Anglo-Normans?***

As one travels across modern county Meath one is struck always by the contribution of the high medieval English - the so-called Anglo-Normans - to its landscape. Their pattern of settlement in the county reveals their knowledge of its preceding Christian landscape and suggests they had an actual strategy of occupying sites of importance to indigenous communities. How, then, did Tara, of all places, get off so lightly? Why was the Mound of the Hostages *not* converted into a motte? Why was there no substantial settlement at the foot of the hill? And, moving on in time from the high medieval period, I want to reflect in my contribution on the role of this Anglo-Norman absence in maintaining Tara's rurality into the modern period.

**Dáithí Ó hÓgáin** (UCD School of Irish, Celtic Studies, Folklore and Linguistics)

#### ***Tara in myth and legend***

Abstract to be confirmed

**Nicholas Allen** (National University of Ireland Galway)

#### ***Literature and landscape of the past***

Literature has informed our view of the landscape since the beginning of the written record. Within this long timeframe, particular organizations of human interaction with nature have acquired symbolic importance in a series of locations. To begin here, I want to look at how Tara took emerging shape in the twentieth century through the prism of a literature that was constructed in part critique of Ireland's position within the world system of the British Empire. For all its material foundations, this empire was arranged culturally around images of a classical past, London host to the glories of Athens in the form of the expatriate Parthenon. Ireland had a double relationship to this formation. Its early history suggested an existing culture parallel in age and expression to the Greeks. This culture had specific traditions suggestive of a divergent perspective on the world. Such divergence was lynchpin to a nationalist project that gathered in force as it became dedicated to separation. In this context, Tara became one focus of this alternate past, its historical landscape significant of a Celtic dreamtime alive and beyond the demands of an imperial present. George Moore parodied this diffuse dissidence in his account of a walking tour with George Russell to the Boyne Valley in his memoir, *Hail and Farewell*. Starstruck, Russell wondered local hollows searching for reincarnated Gaelic divinities. With independence, minds turned to other signs of progress. After a long period of cultural neglect, Tara returned to the wider consciousness with the current controversy over access and development. Many of the earlier twentieth century motifs are familiar to this current problem: access, preservation, authenticity and economy are all touchstones of previous engagement with an ancient landscape. Debate converged on Seamus Heaney's intervention in defence of an area that he compared to Delphi, Nara and Stonehenge in symbolic terms. Heaney named Tara as a place of beginning. If this is so, I want to trace some ways in which recent literature has engaged with images of Tara as a landscape that bears the pressure of the ancient and modern equally and at once.

## **Neolithic Tara in context**

**Chair: Loreto Guinan** (Heritage Officer, Meath County Council)

**George Eogan** (Knowth Project)

### ***Tara viewed from the Boyne Valley***

Brugh na Bóinne and Tara constitute extensive archaeological areas, situated quite close to each other, only about 26km (c. 10 miles) apart in the Boyne Valley of County Meath. Both are prominent multi-period and multi-purpose sites with a long period of usage that, at least at Tara, extends back to Mesolithic times and continues, with interruptions for millennia, down to the end of the Early Historic period at Tara and to the present day at Brugh na Bóinne. During those millennia active and creative societies emerged in both areas, these in their own way made important contributions to then contemporary society. The contrasts at these sites are as important as their similarities, with both areas dominant at different times throughout prehistory and historic times. Why was the intense Neolithic activity at Brugh na Bóinne not continued into the Bronze and Early Iron Ages, while Tara grew from strength to strength? Why, from the eighth century AD, did Brugh na Bóinne, particularly Knowth, emerge as a prominent place, while Tara was declining in importance?

**Muiris O'Sullivan and Blaze O'Connor** (UCD School of Archaeology)

### ***Megalithic art at Tara in context***

Although situated within view of Fourknocks and Loughcrew, and associated with the catchment of the River Boyne, the passage tomb on the Hill of Tara is not especially noted for its megalithic art. Apart from the bold motifs carved on Orthostat L2 and visible from the entrance, only two other possible examples of structural art are known at the Mound of the Hostages, neither of which is visible today. The small but significant collection of decorated artefacts from the site needs to be borne in mind, but overall this is not a typical assemblage of megalithic art. In the circumstances, the discovery of a decorated stone in the souterrain structure at Lismullin in the valley to the east of Tara is an important addition to our knowledge in this area. The paper, (which was in joint preparation prior to Blaze O'Connor's death) discusses the significance of the stone and its discovery.

**George Nash** (University of Bristol)

### ***Waves of ideas and construction: Comparing and contrasting the Mound of the Hostages, Tara with the passage grave tradition of North Wales***

In the recent past the Mound of the Hostages has, following excavations during the 1950s by Professors Séan P. Ó Ríordáin and Ruaidhrí de Valera, been reassessed and the scientific results duly published (O'Sullivan 2005). In contrast, the passage graves of Bryn Celli Ddu and Barclodiad y Gawres in Anglesey North Wales were excavated using the archaeological techniques of the day and until recently each have received specific and superficial interest. Despite Barclodiad y Gawres being excavated in modern times with the potential of chronometric dating at the disposal of the excavators, no dates were forthcoming. Recently though chronometric dates for Bryn Celli Ddu on securely sourced material have revealed dates of c. 3000 BC. One can assume that Barclodiad y Gawres was in use at around the same time as Bryn Celli Ddu. Both these monuments and the Mound of the Hostages are similar in size, morphology and ritual deposition but are significantly different to the passage graves of, say, the Boyne Valley. In this paper I suggest that there are a number of blue-prints existing around the Irish Sea province that determine the size and morphology of particular groups of passage graves. I also suggest that there are several waves of passage grave building that promote certain idiosyncratic architectural grammar of each monument.

O'Sullivan, M. 2005. *Duma Na Ngiall: The Mound Of The Hostages, Tara*. Wordwell: Bray.

**Niels H. Andersen** (Moesgaard Museum, Denmark)

***A view from Denmark***

In Western Europe we find megalithic tombs of different form depending on the megalithic stones which have been available to the erection of the features. But between the megalithic dolmens at Carrowmore and the dolmens found in Denmark we see a lot of likeness which make one think of a close contact between these two areas in the Neolithic time more than 5,000 years ago.

By the younger megalithic passage grave we at first do not find many points of resemblances between Ireland and Denmark, but by excavations of some tombs we have found features which give reason to believe that we here again have some likeness in construction and use of the tombs.

Since 1988 Moesgaard Museum has, as part of the Sarup Project, conducted excavations of a lot of now destroyed megalithic tombs in the area around the causewayed enclosures at Sarup. By the last excavation at Damsbo, two km southeast of Sarup, the rest of nine tombs have been uncovered. Within 1.6 ha we excavated three long barrows with dolmens, four single standing dolmens and two passage graves. Two of the long barrows and one of the passage graves were hiding the rest of longhouses, which have been burnt down and then plough with the ard before the erection of the megalithic features.

The passage tomb at Damsbo which also has covered the rest of a house was hiding a lot of other features of interest when looking against Ireland (see fig. 1). Regrettably the ploughing in modern time has damaged the tombs, by which the chamber and the western part now has disappeared but still leaving the traces for the original placing of the megalithic stones. Placed at the original layer of mould and around the chamber of this passage grave we found concentric to the chamber, perhaps in the form of spiral, rows of boulders. At some spots these boulders were hiding deliberately destroyed ceramics. At the megalithic tombs at Townleyhall, Co. Louth, boulders placed in four concentric rows around the chamber were also found. The purpose with these rows of boulders has not been as part of the construction of the barrows, but must have to be seen as the rest of features from activities going on in connection with the building of the tombs. Here we have a very first phase of activities in connection the erection of the tombs.

About 1.5 meters ahead of the boulders at the Damsbo site a row of bigger stones, a kerb, were placed. In the area between the kerb and the boulders, in the alleyway?, deliberately destroyed ceramics were found also. The passage to the chamber was not build onto the kerb, but only to the boulders, just as we see at Carrowmore 3, and in front of the entrance two kerbstones have closed the entrance area. It looks as if we here has had a barrow which in the first phase only were hiding the chamber and the area framed by the boulders. When looking at Sliabh na Caillighe (Loughcrew) site L, we perhaps found a passage tombs of the same type as the one at Damsbo with an open space, an alleyway, between the kerb and the barrow. It could be of interest once to have a look at this area on site L! When looking at the profiles from the excavations at Newgrange we also could find an open space between an inner cairn held by a roughly build line of boulders and the row of often fine ornamented kerbstone five meters in front of it. Later all of it was then covered by a big barrow.

In front of the eastern side of the passage tomb at Damsbo concentric to the kerb a circle of bigger stones was found. One of the stones was placed directed in front of the passage, the other were placed with intervals of a couple of twenty degrees between each other. At Newgrange we also have such a circle of big stones – the Great Circle. At other places they have been found too, for example in Scotland.

A small pit was found by the one stone in the circle placed in front of the passage at Damsbo. At Knowth site 4 such a pit was found at the same spot, also with a big, D-shape, stone placed up to it. We see here the rest from activities which must have been of the same kind.

At Duma na nGiall, Tara (The Mound of the Hostages) a row of burials with cremated human bones were found at the food of the barrow on its southern part. The burials here and in the chamber are contemporary and give information of a special transformation of the human bones before the placement of them in/or by the chamber and by the food of the barrow. This type of transformations of the human bones we find at the causewayed enclosures too. These type of monument were spread on a great part of Western and North-western Europe at the same time as the building and original use of the megalithic tombs. Here we, mingle with a lot of other activities, also see the same type of transformations with human bones. In the future it must be very import to look more at the

handling with the human bones found in the causewayed enclosures and from the original “funeral” in and at the megalithic tombs

Of special interest is the find at Duma na nGiall of a pre-cairn ditch, which must have framed an area of activities west of the area for the later erected barrow and cairn. This find, and nearly the same from Knowth, and under the barrows at Damsbo, shows us a number of activities at the sites before the building of the megalithic monuments. The placement of a megalithic tomb was not a random activity; in the future we have to look much more at the activities which can have taken place at the sites before the erection of the tombs. The ditch at Duma na nGiall can be a feature important for the later placement of the tombs and we must hope for the possibility to make some further excavations looking for the form and purpose of this enclosure, and later to study why it was replaced by a megalithic tomb.

### *International parallels*

**Chair: Charles Doherty** (Senior Lecturer, UCD School of History and Archives)

**Serge Cassen** (CNRS and University of Nantes)

#### ***Continuity of tradition at Tara and Carnac***

What is especially interesting in the case of Tara is the continuity of tradition on the site. At this level, it is quite similar to the Carnac region with a long sequence around an incredible site. In this way, I could open a window on this part of Brittany to show that we are sharing maybe common interests, values, legends, myths, which are reactive with the Irish monks arriving in Brittany (Colomban). In summary, I could expose a digest of the Locmariaquer excavations in terms of chronology and origin of materials and the link with the local legends (Irish saints coming with stone slabs in their boat). This could be linked with the fact that, during the Neolithic, the stone of the big menhirs - orthogneiss – came from the Vannes area, 10 km distant, and especially with the exploit of reaching the island of Belle-Ile, 60 km away, with a large stretch of sea to cross, to erect the stele in a place named Bangor!

**Simon Stoddart** (Magdalene College, Cambridge University)

#### ***Constructing ancient time: Tara and the Tarxien (Malta)***

A prominent feature of both Irish and Maltese monumental landscapes is the intentional, materialised layering of time. The paper will explore the common and distinctive features that emerge from the recent re-examination and publication of monumental landscapes in both countries, taking the sequence from the foundation of monuments to their employment as pivots in wider landscapes and in the construction of myth. In each case, there is an interplay between cosmologies of life and death, working with the local (building materials and human bone) and the exotic (stone) to produce temporal landscapes of different scales.

**Gonçalo Leite Velho<sup>1</sup> and Vitor and Susana Jorge<sup>2</sup>** (University of Tomar<sup>1</sup> and University of Porto<sup>2</sup>)

#### ***From Tara to Castanheiro do Vento (and back): Monumental Architectures and their gaze***

Tara and Castanheiro do Vento share the fact of being Monumental Architectures. They are also part of a broader “picture” which we might call as Monumental Landscapes. In this paper we explore the relations of such monumentality with the element of the gaze. In relation with the gaze, we take particular reference with the ideas developed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, as well as their development by thinkers of the so called Slovenian Lacanian school (namely Joan Copjec, Slavoj Žižek and Renata Salecl). Through this exploration we consider the relation between power, presence, and the triad Imaginary, Symbolic and Real.

*Drawing to a close*

**Chair: Muiris O’Sullivan** (Associate Professor, UCD School of Archaeology)

**Barry Cunliffe** (University of Oxford)

***Conference review/discussion***



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