

**R**OYAL. The term conjures images of vast territories under the control of one monarch. And “royal site” implies a place where one might find a castle or some other form of royal residence. Early Irish manuscripts, in fact, mention four sites, each one referred to as the royal center for a province—the Hill of Tara in Meath, Dún Ailinne in Leinster in the southeast, Crúachan (referred to also as Rathcroghan) in Connacht in the west, and Emain Macha in Ulster to the north. What we actually find at each of these places is a complex of monuments that bear no resemblance to a royal residence, but that can tell us much about pre-Christian Ireland.

The monuments in each complex belong to a range of time, from the Neolithic, which began in Ireland about 4000 B.C., to the Iron Age, around 600 B.C. to A.D. 500. In each case, the focus of the complex is a very large, roughly circular earthen bank with an internal ditch, constructed on a high point of land or surrounding a hilltop. Each has a wide view in all directions. Crúachan, Dún Ailinne, and Emain Macha form an almost equilateral triangle some 80 miles on a side, with

## The Sacred Landscape of ANCIENT IRELAND

**Evidence from both excavations and rare manuscripts reveal much about early Ireland’s cosmology and its people’s deep connection to the land**

by RONALD HICKS

An aerial view of the royal site of Tara (looking southeast). Referred to in medieval manuscripts, its largest enclosure, Fort of Kings, encircles three others: A possible ring barrow (left) called King’s Seat sits alongside a ring fort (right) called Cormac’s House, and the small mound (below them) is a passage tumulus called Mound of the Hostages. A later churchyard wall (bottom) borders an early double enclosure known as Ráth of the Synods.

Tara near the midpoint of the north-south line connecting Emain Macha and Dún Ailinne. The significance of this arrangement is still unknown, but it is notable. Archaeological work shows that early activity at these sites may have had to do with burials, and that these enclosures were constructed during the Iron Age. Surprisingly, none of them are suitable for defense. Instead, each seems to mark off an area that only makes sense if viewed as sacred.

One of the compelling things about doing archaeological work in Ireland is that the early medieval manuscripts preserve so many tales surrounding these sites. Some stories are clearly mythological, others are pseudohistory—medieval invention—and it isn’t always easy to tell them apart. Even so, they are essential in developing a full understanding of the sites. And, in turn, by studying the sites archaeologically, we can begin to understand some of the meaning behind the myths. Collections of Old and Middle Irish stories called *dindsenchas*, literally “histories of places,” were compiled between the tenth and twelfth centuries A.D. and imply a sacred geography for the pre-Christian sites in Ireland. All the places listed in these stories are connected with the old gods.

The study of Irish mythology and ancient manuscripts has been limited by a number of circumstances, beginning with a prohibition against owning Old Irish manuscripts during the Reformation in the early seventeenth century. Book burnings were common and nearly all of the early Irish material was lost. There was no scholarship conducted until the 1830s, when some

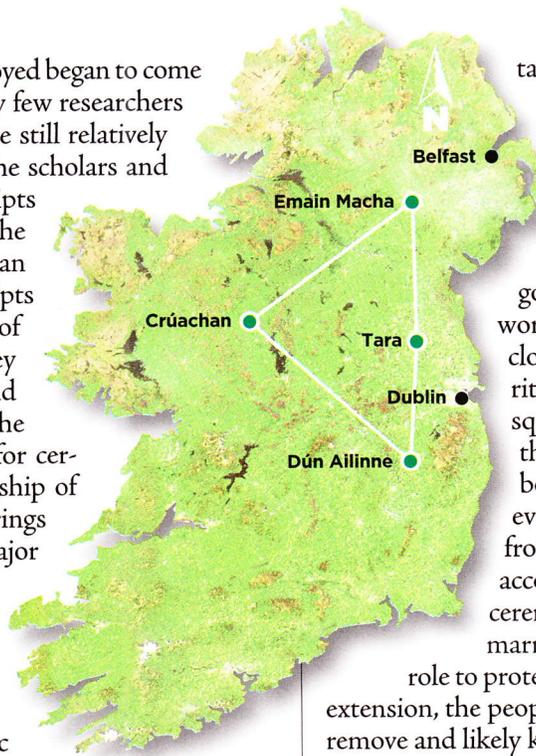


manuscripts that hadn't been destroyed began to come to light. Over the years, only a very few researchers could read Old Irish, and there are still relatively few today who can. In addition, the scholars and scribes who wrote the manuscripts often used an even earlier form of the Irish language, so translations can differ. Nonetheless, the manuscripts are crucial to any understanding of pre-Christian sites in Ireland. They make it clear that in ancient Ireland the landscape itself was sacred. The royal sites were meant primarily for ceremonies connected with the kingship of each region, and for great gatherings at the time of one of the four major festivals in the agricultural and calendrical cycle of the time.

These festivals occur around the midpoints between the solstices and equinoxes, called cross-quarter days. They include Imbolc or Oimelg at the beginning of February, marking the beginning of the agricultural year and the lambing season; Beltaine in early May, when herds and flocks were driven to summer pastures; Lughnasa in August, marking the beginning of the harvest; and Samhain at the beginning of November, when the harvest ended, the herds and flocks returned, and feasting was the order of the day. Tara was associated primarily with Samhain. The other three sites were associated with Lughnasa, when a week was devoted to a festival of storytelling, trading, and games, mostly involving horse races. In the case of Tara, the Lughnasa assembly was held at a sister site not far north, Tailtiu. Crúachan is linked in the mythology with both Lughnasa and Samhain.

Each of the royal sites, and Tailtiu as well, was named for a woman, apparently a goddess who, according to myths or tales, died or was carried off. We are told that the festival of Lughnasa, or the games of Lugh, was founded to honor the god's foster mother, Tailtiu, who died after having the forests cleared for farming. These goddesses almost certainly represent the grain that is about to be harvested in much the same way that Persephone does in Greek and Roman stories. In those

**A geophysical survey of Tara (looking northwest), undertaken between 1992 and 2002, revealed a large ditch and pit circle, not visible on the ground, completely surrounding Ráth of the Synods and Mound of the Hostages. It predates Fort of Kings.**

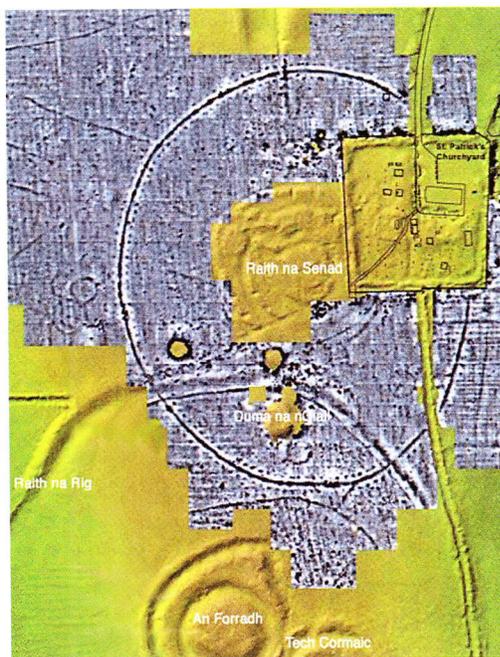


role to protect the landscape and the harvest, and, by extension, the people. If he displeased his tribe, they would remove and likely kill him. There were kings and overkings, with these relationships sorted out by way of conquest. After about A.D. 800, the concept of high king was introduced, and a word that could be likened to the modern conception of "royal" entered ancient Old Irish manuscripts.

**T**HE PLACE KNOWN AS Tech Midchuarta at the Hill of Tara is referred to in early Irish manuscripts as the House of the Women or the Great House of a Thousand Soldiers. Medieval historians tell us its long, parallel earthen banks were once part of a banquet hall where the Feast of Tara, marking Samhain, was held. Modern archaeology tells us otherwise, that these earthworks were never the walls of a building, but rather the boundaries of a ceremonial

roadway. To trudge up this wide avenue is to follow the path of countless forgotten ritual processions.

According to the ancient stories, Tara was named for Tea, daughter of Lugaid or wife of King Eremon. The hill's namesake, according to one tale, once saw a rampart in Spain, and wanted one like it built on every hill she chose—but only the one at Tara is considered a royal site. The dindshenchas tell of over 40 places of note within the Tara complex: wells, mounds, standing stones, and gravesites of characters from legend. The monuments include three great earthen enclosures, including Ráth na Ríogh, the enclosure (or fort) of kings, within which is the Mound of the Hostages, an older earthwork dating





Archaeologists excavating an Iron Age temple, at the eastern foot of the Hill of Tara, in summer 2007. The site, in Lismullin Townland, dates to between 520 and 370 b.c.

Thereafter she refused to share, and forced another of the defeated king's sons to dig the enclosure at Emain Macha. The third story says she was the wife of Crund, who bragged of her horse-racing prowess. Forced by King Conchobar to race while pregnant, she won and then cursed the men of Ulster so that they would suffer the pangs of labor whenever faced with a crisis. Then she gave birth to twins, died, and was buried on Ard Macha. This version also identifies her as Grian Banchure, "the Sun of the Women," suggesting she was equated with the moon and was daughter of the god Midir.

Midir also figures in the story of the next royal site, Crúachan to the southwest. It was named for Cruachu, or Cróchan Croderg, handmaiden to Étaín, second wife of Midir. Midir is said to have carried Étaín off from Tara—at a gathering he turned them both into swans, and they flew away through a hole in the roof. There is good reason to believe that Étaín was a personification of the moon, like Macha. Another source says that Cruachu was the mother of Medb, who, as queen at Crúachan, is a central character in the Irish epic *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*. *Tána*, or cattle raids, form a separate class of early Irish tale, and all that survive revolve around Crúachan and Samhain.

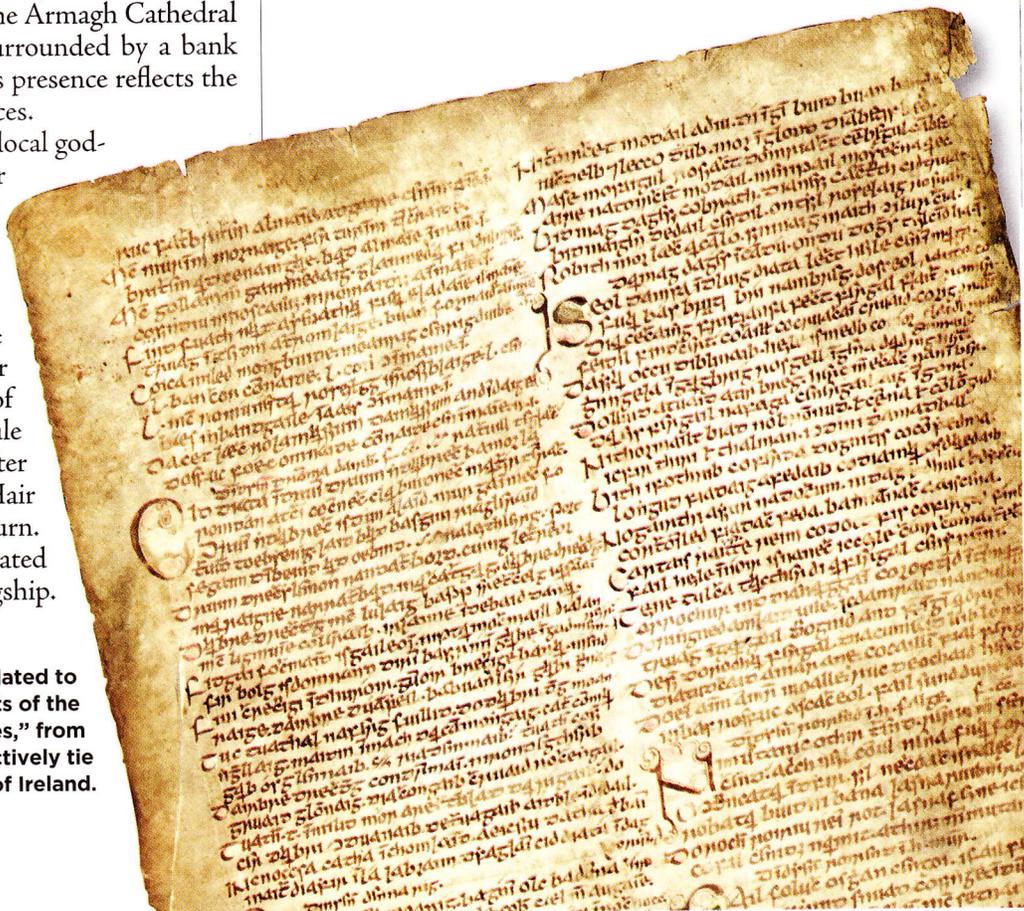
Like the other royal sites, Crúachan is a complex of earthworks and standing stones covering several square miles. The central monument is called Rathcroghan. Another is Relig na Rí, a low hill surrounded by a circular earthwork

to the Neolithic. Just to the north, adjacent to St. Patrick's churchyard, where Patrick is said to have established the first church in Ireland, is the Ráth of the Synods, which has been thoroughly disturbed. A little over a century ago a group calling themselves the British Israelites became convinced that the Lost Ark of the Covenant was buried there, so they dug up the whole enclosure in search of it. Not surprisingly, they had no luck.

Almost straight north of Tara is the next royal site, Emain Macha, now called Navan Fort. Because of nearby quarrying, the full extent of the complex isn't clear. At its southern limit, it includes Mag Macha, or the Plain of Macha, where the ancient Lughnasa assembly was held. A neighboring hill to the east is Ard Macha, or Macha's High Place, now the town of Armagh. In the grounds of the Armagh Cathedral is evidence suggesting it, too, was surrounded by a bank and ditch. Like the church at Tara, its presence reflects the Christianization of the old sacred places.

The name Macha comes from the local goddess, though there are several other explanations for its source. First, we are told that it was named for the wife of Nemed, leader of the third group to settle in Ireland. In a second version of the story, Macha was the daughter of Aed the Red. In a longer version of this story, Aed was one of three kings, each of whom was to rule Ireland for seven years at a time. After Aed's death, Macha of the Ruddy Hair demanded to be allowed to take his turn. When the other two refused, she defeated them in battle and took the kingship.

**A folio from the Book of Leinster, dated to A.D. 1160, contains medieval accounts of the *dindsenchas*, or "histories of places," from Old and Middle Irish stories. They effectively tie specific locations to the old gods of Ireland.**





Within the enclosure of the royal site of Emain Macha, now known as Navan Fort, archaeologists excavated a large mound covering a timber building that had been filled with stones and burned shortly after its construction.

that is said to be the burial place of the kings of Connacht. A natural limestone cave nearby called Owenygart is thought to be the entrance to the underworld and the source of various otherworldly beasts. This is Síð Crúachan, one of the dwelling places of the old gods, who, according to the tales, agreed to live underground when the Gaels came to Ireland from Iberia. Dáthi's Monument, a nearby circular embankment similar to those at Tara and Emain Macha but much smaller, is said to be the burial place of the last pagan king of Ireland.

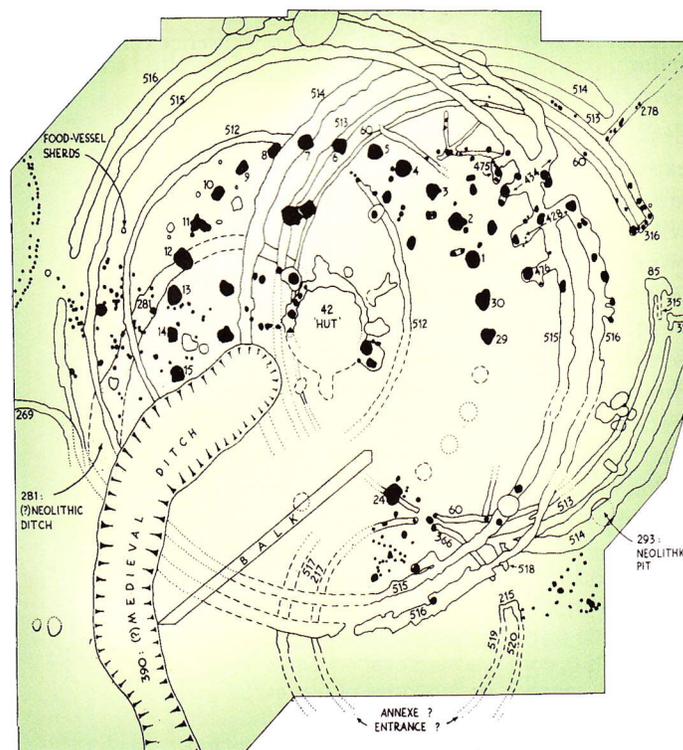
Dún Ailinne, last of the royal sites, is some 40 miles due south of Tara. From the air, it could be a twin of Emain Macha. Dún Ailinne is identified in the dindshenchas as an assembly place of warriors or young men. It received its name when Aillenn, a daughter of Lugaid, king of Leinster and (in one version) also father of Tea, was abducted and died of shame at her captivity. Through her grave grew an apple tree, and through the grave of her lapdog, Báile, grew a yew. In another version of the story, Báile was not a dog but her lover. Hearing that she had died on the way to a liaison, he dropped dead. The same sinister messenger tells Aillenn the same thing, leading to her death. Again, it ended with an apple tree and a yew tree growing from their graves, only this time the tops of the trees were shaped like their heads. After seven years, the trees were cut down and made into "poet's tablets," upon which were written the visions, espousals, loves, and courtships of Leinster and of Ulster. Much later, the tablets were brought together at Tara at Samhain. According to legend, they sprang together and could not be pulled apart.

On a low hill immediately to the east of Dún Ailinne lie the ruins of another church said to have been founded by St. Patrick. To the west is an open range known as the Curragh, sacred to St. Brigid and thought to have been the site of a

Lughnasa. Even today the Curragh is the site of one of Ireland's primary racetracks. In an uneven line northwest across the Curragh are a series of small enclosures with external banks and internal ditches, just as at the royal sites.

The namesakes of the four royal sites play very minor roles in Irish myth (except Macha), but their stories relate a great deal about early Irish kingship. For example, two are said to be named for daughters of Lugaid, a variant of Lugh, the Irish god associated with the Lughnasa festival. And all except Tara have traditions of great assemblies at that time. Another clue to the relationship between the old religion and kingship is found in the tale of Macha's race, which suggests she was a horse goddess. Horses, specifically white mares, were a symbol of kingship among the Celts. A twelfth-century account tells of an inauguration ceremony that involved the new king mating with a white mare, which was then sacrificed. The River Gabhra, at the eastern foot of the Hill of Tara, means "white mare." This association is also reflected far away in southern England, in the famous horse-shaped chalk hill figure at Uffington, which was said to have been the headquarters of the local king. The white mare even appears in an ongoing post-Christmas tradition in southwest Ireland in which a dancer dressed as a white mare tries to bite onlookers—connecting the white mare with the renewal of the year at the winter solstice.

**Excavations at the site of Dún Ailinne have revealed structures dating from the Neolithic and Bronze Age, and a series of at least three reconstructed buildings dating to the Early Iron Age.**



The Book of Ballymote, written in the late 14th century, contains a number of dindshenchas, a life of St. Patrick, the “Book of Rights,” and the *bansenchas*, or “histories of women,” which comment on the lives of women from Irish myth. It also holds a key to deciphering ancient Irish writing.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK at the royal sites over the past few decades has provided further evidence for their sacred or ceremonial nature. At Tara, geophysical surveys under the direction of Conor Newman, now at National University of Ireland (NUI), Galway, revealed that there are many other features on the hilltop and surrounding land that can no longer be seen, including a large post circle surrounding the Ráth of the Synods and overlapping Ráth na Riogh.

In April 2007, another major monument was found during highway construction in Lismullin, in the valley east of the hilltop adjacent to the River Gabhra. It appears to be the site of a large temple, with a surrounding post enclosure 90 yards in diameter. A funnel-shaped alignment of posts leads to the entrance of the inner structure. This site lies in a basin, forming a natural amphitheater.

During excavations at Emain Macha, a large circular mound within the enclosure was found to cover a building that had been completely filled with stones and burned shortly after its construction. This was unquestionably part of some ritual. Dendrochronology has shown that the timbers, the lower parts of which survived, dated to approximately 95 B.C. Those excavations produced another surprising find—the skeleton of a Barbary ape, a type of macaque from southern Iberia, on the Gibraltar peninsula. It was probably brought as a gift by a trader.

Geophysical surveys at Crúachan show not only that it was once surrounded by a very large circular earthwork, but also that the central mound has a more complex structure than previously believed. Little excavation has yet been done there, though the work of John Waddell of NUI Galway at Dathi’s Monument indicates that it dates to about the same period as the enclosures at Tara, Emain Macha, and Dún Ailinne—the Iron Age.

Atop the hill within the Dún Ailinne enclosure, excavations carried out under the direction of Bernard Wailes of the University of Pennsylvania found a series of large circular structures with their entrances to the northeast, toward the direction of sunrise at Beltaine and Lughnasa. And as at Lismullin, there was a funnel-shaped alignment leading up to the entrance of the structures. In the center of one of the small enclosures on the Curragh, excavators found the burial of a young woman. However, it did not appear to be a typical burial. Her skeleton was lying with her hands pressed against the sides of the grave and her head ducked



down. Both the excavator and a medical doctor who reexamined the records of the find some years later came to the same conclusion—she appeared to have been a dedicatory sacrifice who was buried alive. This irregular line of enclosures lies along the alignment between Dún Ailinne and Crúachan, which coincides with sunset at the summer solstice. Exactly midway between these two royal sites lies Uisneach, the traditional meeting place of the five provinces said to be the home of the Dagda, chief of the old gods, and the burial place of Lugh.

The royal sites were clearly part of a sacred landscape that we are only beginning to apprehend. By combining archaeological work with careful study of both ancient manuscripts and the spatial relationships among the monuments, we may yet come to a fuller understanding of ancient Ireland and its pre-Christian religion. ■

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