Memory and Monuments at the Hill of Tara

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This article focuses on the prehistoric monuments located at the 'royal' site of Tara in Meath, Ireland, and their significance throughout Irish prehistory. Many of the monuments built during later prehistory respect and avoid earlier constructions, suggesting a cultural memory of the site that lasted from the Neolithic into the Early Medieval period. Understanding the chronology of the various monuments is necessary for deciphering the palimpsest that makes up the landscape of Tara. Based on the reuse, placement and types of monuments at the Hill of Tara, it may be possible to speculate on the motivations and intentions of the prehistoric peoples who lived in the area.

This article focuses on the prehistoric and early historic monuments located at the 'royal' site of the Hill of Tara in County Meath, Ireland, and the significance of the monuments throughout and after the main period of prehistoric activity at Tara. The Hill of Tara is one of the four 'royal' sites from the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age in Ireland, and appears to have played an important role in ritual and ceremonial activity, more so than the other 'royal' sites; medieval literature suggests that Tara had a crucial role in the inauguration of Irish kings.[1] Many of the monuments built on the Hill of Tara during the later prehistoric period respect or incorporate earlier monuments, suggesting a cultural memory of the importance of the Hill of Tara that lasted from the Neolithic to the Early Medieval Period. Cultural memory of Tara continues today, with its recent nomination as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.[2]

Space and Chronology

An understanding of the spatial and chronological relationship of the various monuments is key in order to decipher the palimpsest of the Tara landscape. As shown in Figure 1, the Hill of Tara is located on ridge approximately 150 m above sea level, and is composed of nearly 40 monuments spread over 900 m.[3] The monuments date from the Neolithic to the Iron Age and retained importance into the Early Medieval Period of Ireland. The monument types vary from passage tombs and linear earthworks to henges and multivallete enclosures, most of which appear to be more related to ritual, rather than domestic activity.[4]

Extensive survey work carried out by Conor Newman and the Discovery Programme in the late 1990s led to the discovery of several previously unknown features on the hill, and thus a better understanding of how the monuments relate to each other chronologically and spatially.[5] Before

the work of the Discovery Programme, relatively little was known about the archaeology of Tara. Seán Ó Ríordáin carried out excavations of Duma na nGiall and Ráith na Senad, but died before he could publish his findings.[6] In recent years, Ó Ríordáin's notes have been compiled into site reports and excavated material was utilized for radiocarbon dating.[7]
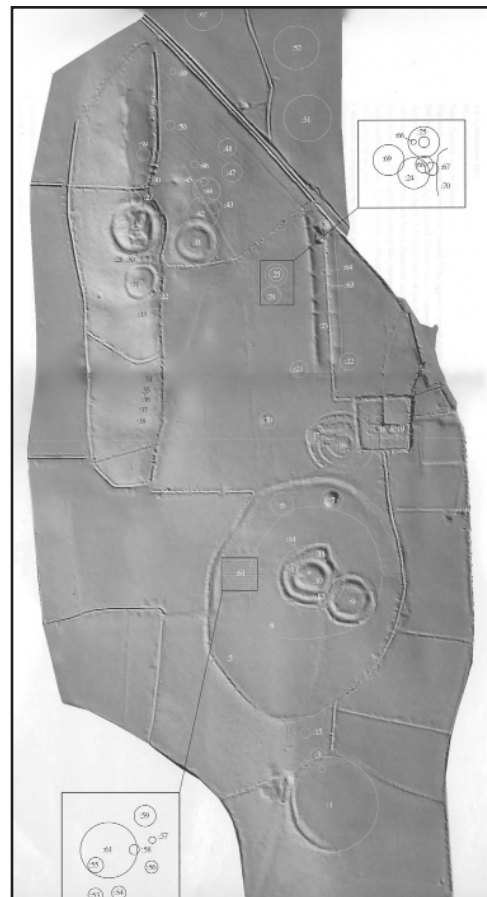

Figure 1: Monuments and features on the Hill of Tara. Features discussed: Ráith na Ríg (:5), Duma na nGiall (:7), Tech Cormaic (:9), The Forrad (:10), Ráith na Senad (:16), Tech Midchúarta (:23). Newman 1997, Fig. 109.

	Monuments on the Hill of Tara	Irish Chronology
4000BCE		
3000BCE	Palisaded enclosure Duma na nGiall Tech Midchúarta*	Neolithic
2000BCE	Ring ditches	
1000BCE	Ráith Maeve, Forrad Reuse of Duma na nGiall Bowl-barrows	Bronze Age
0	Ráith na Ríg and Ring barrows	Iron Age
1000CE	Ráith na Senad Ráith Lóegaire Ring Forts and Tech Cormaic	Early Medieval

Table 1 Approximate chronology of monument construction on the Hill of Tara. Almost all of the dates of the monuments are based on typologies or contemporary, radiocarbon dated monuments. The chronology for the monuments on the Hill of Tara is based on Newman 1997 and the Irish chronology was compiled from Flanagan 1998 and Bradley 2005.
*In a later publication, Newman suggests that Tech Midchuarta could date to the later prehistoric period or Early Medieval Period (2005: 378).

When studying the monuments and the development of the Tara landscape it is crucial to consider the overall chronology of the site as well as the chronological relationship between each of the monuments. Most of the chronology assigned to the features at Tara is based on site typologies and radiocarbon dates from similar monuments in Ireland,[8] but unfortunately, this does not provide absolute dates for most of the features at Tara. However, for the purposes of this paper, it provides a relative chronology and general understanding of the development of the Tara complex over thousands of years. Duma na nGiall and Ráith na Senad were both excavated by Seán Ó Ríordáin in the 1950s and some radiocarbon dates have been extracted from the excavated material.[9] Table 1 illustrates the rough chronology of the main monuments at Tara and their placement within the chronology of prehistoric and Early Medieval Ireland.[10]

Table 1 clearly demonstrates that there is almost continuous activity on the Hill of Tara throughout prehistory, either as construction of new earthworks or reuse of older monuments. There is also a change in the types and number of earthworks erected over time, the significance of which will be addressed below.

It is crucial to recognize that each generation of people living in the Tara landscape was not starting with a landscape clear of previous peoples. Just like today, there were older constructions that required consideration before new monuments were built.[11] People living in the Bronze Age ascribed meaning to the monuments built during the Neolithic, as can be seen in their

reuse of Neolithic features such as Duma na nGiall, and continues today with the controversy surrounding the construction of M3 motorway 2km from Tara.[12]

Social Changes

The megalithic and large earthen monuments of prehistoric Europe have been variously interpreted over the decades. Some archaeologists suggest that monuments were simply the burials of the followers of a particular religion.[13] Others suggest they were used as territorial markers or markers of ownership of resources in the immediate vicinity of the monument.[14] Still others interpret the monuments as statements by ruling classes or leaders.[15] Because of its long duration and the variety of monuments constructed there, the Hill of Tara is a good example of the possibility that multiple reasons motivated the construction of the monuments and how they were used by contemporary and later generations. The monuments on Tara not only reflect the importance of Tara as a ritual site, but also the changing ritual practices and social structure of the communities of prehistoric Ireland.[16]

The Neolithic of Ireland, Britain, France, and Spain is characterized by the erection of megalithic monuments.[17] The organization and mobilization necessary for the construction of megalithic monuments such as Newgrange and others suggests the beginning of a hierarchical society and the emergence of leaders.[18] However, recent theories about power and social organization suggest that large communal burial monuments may have been the work of a corporate, heterarchical community, with a focus on communal ritual and shared power rather than personal prestige and individualized power.[19] It is during the Bronze Age, when individual interments and burial mounds become more numerous, that there may have been a shift in power structure to a more hierarchical society. It

is also during this time that prestige goods, such as gold torcs, begin appearing in burials.[20]

The sociopolitical changes over time are significant when considering the types of monuments at Tara and their intended use and meaning. For example, the incorporation of earlier monuments into new constructions or the reuse of older burial mounds may suggest the desire to legitimate power based on ancestry or ownership of land.[21] Examining the ways in which older monuments were reused can provide archaeologists with information about the more complex issues such as power, the role of ancestors, and individual versus communal ritual practices.

The Monuments

There are approximately 40 known constructions on the Hill of Tara that were built over a period of four millenia.[22] Most of the larger monuments appear to have been built with respect to the older monuments by avoiding them or by incorporating them into newer constructions.[23] However, the Tech Midchúarta earthwork has proven difficult to place within the chronology of Tara, and because it is a fairly unique construction there are no dated monuments with which to compare it.[24] Because of its particularly ambiguous dating, it is difficult to address Tech Midchúarta in the context of this paper, and so it will only play a minor role in the analysis of the monuments.

The earliest activity at Tara occurred during the Late Neolithic with the construction of a palisaded enclosure that may be related to the subsequent construction of the passage tomb Duma na nGiall, which dates to the second half of the fourth millennium B.C.E. and contains several Neolithic burials and the typical Neolithic grave goods: Carrowkeel Ware, bone pins, and pendants.[25] There was an intense phase of burial in Duma na

nGiall around 3000 B.C.E., and then what appears to be a dormancy period for a few centuries, during which time little to no archaeologically visible activity occurred.[26] As discussed earlier, Tech Midchúarta was perhaps built at this time as well.[27]

The following Bronze Age witnessed a significant increase in the amount of construction activity taking place at Tara. This may be indicative of a change in burial practices, with individual burial rites becoming more prominent than the earlier communal monuments.[28] Bowl-barrows and ring-ditches are the most common monuments during this period. A total of 19 ring-ditches and four bowl-barrows are constructed from the Late Neolithic to the Late Bronze Age. The considerable amount of overlapping or adjacent layout of the barrows may suggest an intention by the builders to associate their barrows with the older barrows. It is unclear how much time passed between the construction of the overlapping barrows, but a pattern emerges in which the later monument is constructed adjacent to the southwest quadrant of an earlier monument, creating a linear arrangement of barrows.[29]

The Forrad enclosure was constructed in a number of successive phases, the first of which began during the Bronze Age. Similarly to the Ráith na Ríg enclosure discussed below, the inner bank of the Forrad bulges to accommodate three earlier burial mounds. The second phase consisted of the construction of the inner mound, making the monument a bowl-barrow. The third phase may coincide with the construction of Tech Cormaic and consists of the construction of an outer bank and ditch.[30]

Also during this time, the passage tomb Duma na nGiall was reused and became one of the most heavily used cemetery mounds in Early Bronze Age Ireland.[31] Nearly 40 burials were placed in the mound as secondary urn burials and some of the original burials within the tomb itself were removed to make room for Bronze Age interments.[32]

The Iron Age also witnessed a considerable amount of construction activity at Tara. The largest monument on Tara, Ráith na Ríg, was constructed at this time and is significant not only as a monument, but also in its special relationship with other earlier monuments. It appears that Ráith na Ríg was constructed to avoid overlapping with earlier monuments and to incorporate them into its circumference (Fig. 2). Ráith na Ríg is a hengiform enclosure and is by far the largest of the monuments on the hill, enclosing approximately 54,721 m^2, with a bank between 2 and 2.5 m tall.[33]

At five locations around the circumference of the Ráith na Ríg enclosure, there are slight bulges that deviate from it's elliptical shape. At three of these bulges there are visible monuments, suggesting that the enclosure was built to accommodate and include the monuments within its circumference. There do not appear to be any monuments located at the two remaining bulges, but this may be due to destruction from later activity.[34] Ráith na Ríg encloses three major monuments: the Forrad and Tech Cormaic at the center, and Duma na nGiall at the perimeter. There is geophysical evidence of at least six more monuments, some of which, like Duma na nGiall and the Forrad, predate the construction of Ráith na Ríg and were deliberately incorporated into the enclosure. Five ring barrows and several ring ditches were also constructed during the Iron Age phase of activity on Tara. Tech Cormaic is also within Ráith na Ríg, but was probably a Late Iron Age or Early Medieval addition, and will be discussed below.[35]

Ráith na Senad (Fig. 3), a significant monument built during the Iron Age, appears to be an important monument

Figure 2: Hill-shaded model of Raith na Rig. The white arrows point to possible entrances. The black arrows indicate areas where the elliptical curve of the earthwork bulges, possibly to accommodate earlier monuments. Newman 1997, Fig. 22.

during the final phases of prehistoric activity at Tara. Unfortunately, the construction of a church in the twelfth century, and activity by British Israelites in search of the Ark of the Covenant at the beginning of the twentieth century, inflicted severe damage to the monument.[36]

As a quadrivallete enclosure, Ráith na Senad is one of the most complex monuments on the Hill of Tara. There is very good stratigraphy of the four phases of construction of the enclosure, but only the fourth phase yielded radiocarbon dates; dating to the second to fourth centuries C.E.[37] Based on the high quantity of imported goods, Grogan suggests that the residential enclosure may represent a "high-status homestead of a native Irish group with familial ties in the region of

Figure 3: Ráith na Senad. Newman 1997, 91.

Romano-Britain on the fringes of the empire…"[38] The fourth phase of Ráith na Senad appears to be the only residential enclosure at Tara, but further excavation of numerous other circular enclosures at Tara may change this assumption.

Tech Cormaic, a bivallete ring-fort, seems to be the last monument constructed at Tara and was attached to the earlier Forrad, perhaps to establish prestige by being associated with what appears to be a rather important burial complex. The outer bank and ditch of the Forrad may have been constructed at this time in an attempt to incorporate Tech Cormaic into the larger, older monument.[39]

Also during the last phases of activity at Tara around the first few centuries C.E., a palisade was constructed following the perimeter of Ráith na Ríg. Newman suggests that the palisade is defensive and may indicate a increase in social tensions and conflict.[40] This argument has been made for many prehistoric sites in the British Isles, namely the hillforts of Iron Age Ireland and Britain[41], but later interpretations favor ritual over defense.[42] Until excavation work is carried out on Ráith na Ríg, there is no reason to assume that it became a defensive enclosure during the Late Iron Age.

Ritual and Memory at Tara

Each new construction changed the layout of Tara and altered the landscape. The reuse of older monuments during the various phases of prehistory is not uncommon,[43] but Tara is especially unique because of the long duration of activity that took place there. Over a period of approximately four millennia, communities returned again and again to Tara either to use the older monuments or to construct new ones. Because of its relatively continuous use throughout Irish Prehistory, Tara provides the means to study the changing ritual activity and the evident cultural memory of prehistoric Irish peoples.[44]

Katina Lillios suggests that there were four types of mnemonic practices performed during prehistory: reuse and/or transformation of burial monuments, curation of artifacts and human remains, inscriptive recording, and mimesis.[45] The reuse and/or transformation of burial monuments is seen all over the Neolithic of Western Europe and was carried out in a number of ways, such as Bronze Age burials placed in the mounds of Neolithic tombs or the incorporation of Neolithic burial mounds incorporated into later monuments, as seen at Tara.[46] The curation of artifacts and human remains refers to portable objects that were used over multiple generations. Curation is difficult to establish from the archaeological record, but may be demonstrated in objects that show signs of multiple repairs, such as Neolithic Grooved Ware pots that were frequently placed in henges.[47] Inscriptive recording refers to the chaîn opératoire of artifact manufacture, formal structure or style of artifact types and associations of particular artifacts with specific contexts.[48] Lastly, mimesis refers to the imitation and incorporation of the natural and cultural landscapes in architecture and material culture. Mimesis is particularly evident at Tara, where earlier monuments are incorporated into later monuments. Lillios suggests that the "long histories" of monuments helped to define and dictate the identities and actions of the people who were building the monuments and those who used the monuments long after their initial purpose had been lost.[49]

The reuse or transformation of burial monuments is the mnemonic practice most evident at Tara. The incorporation of older monuments such as the Forrad and Duma na nGiall, into later constructions, such as Ráith na Ríg and Tech Cormaic, suggests a desire to incorporate old traditions into new traditions,[50] or perhaps an intention to legitimize the authority or prestige of the person or group constructing the monument.[51] If ancestry played an important role in Bronze Age or Iron Age Irish society, then utilizing earlier monuments may have been a way of claiming a particular ancestry.

A slightly different interpretation by Cornelius Holtorf stresses the importance of prospective memory and, perhaps, the message that the builders wanted to preserve for and convey to future generations.[52] It is not possible to know exactly what the builders of the monuments at Tara wanted to convey, but it is clear that succeeding generations, including our own, have extracted meaning from the monuments at Tara.

Although we may never know how the monuments were perceived by the ancient peoples building them, it is important to consider the changes that each new monument created in the landscape and how those changes affected the views to and from the hill.[53] Bradley points out that Stonehenge, another monumental site used and changed over a long period of time, "…remained a pivotal point of a landscape in which the distribution of human activity was constantly changing."[54] This statement is true of many prehistoric monuments,

especially Tara.

The activity at Tara was not confined to the erection of monuments,[55] but rather, it is very probable that ritual activity occurred regularly in between the construction of each monument and that not every generation added to the landscape we see today.

Conclusions

Tara is considered to be one of four 'royal' sites in Ireland, the others being Emain Macha in County Armagh, Dun Ailinne in County Kildare, and Cruachain in County Roscommon.[56] Although all four sites are important ritual sites with roles in Early Medieval literature, only Tara and Dun Ailinne are considered complexes: Emain Macha and Cruachain each consisting of only one enclosure. Tara, however, stands out as the only 'royal' site that had considerable activity before the Iron Age.[57] This early activity has considerable implications for the significance of Tara during prehistory and can help us understand whether or not it had a more prominent role than the other three royal sites.

It is certainly clear that more precise dating is required in order to make any significant conclusions about the monuments on the Hill of Tara, namely their relationship to one another, and their reflection of sociopolitical changes. However, the evidence discussed here provides a starting point for understanding past perceptions of Tara.

The palimpsest of monuments on the Hill of Tara provides archaeologists with an insight into the changing ritual and, perhaps, political changes that occurred during the prehistory of Ireland. The density of monuments at Tara is a testament to the importance of the site through time and the meaning ancient peoples ascribed to monuments within their landscape. Just as we ascribe meaning to monuments such as Tara, Stonehenge and Newgrange, so too did ancient societies of the monuments that were built by the people before them. This tradition has continued into modern times, and even though modern monuments are not constructed at Tara, the site still retains its significance in modern society. There are many ancient sites that have meaning to modern society, even if that meaning differs from the original meaning.

Popular memory has played an important role in the preservation of prehistoric monuments around the world. Despite not knowing the original intention of the prehistoric peoples who built these monuments, today's societies continue to extract from or ascribe meaning to the monuments and recognize them as important elements of history and culture of modern peoples.

Endnotes:

1 Newman 1998, 129.
2 UNESCO World Heritage Center. (2010, 4, August. http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5528)
3 Newman 1997.
4 Newman 1997.
5 Newman 1997.
6 Newman 1997.
7 O'Sullivan 2005; see also Grogan 2008.
8 Newman 1997.
9 O'Sullivan 2005; see also Grogan 2008.
10 In the Discovery Programme Reports, Newman (1997) suggests that Tech Midchúarta was built fairly early in the development of the Tara complex, during the Late Neolithic. However, in a later publication (2005), Newman suggests that Tech Midchúarta dates to the Early Medieval period; the postulation is partially based on the regular appearance of Tech Midchúarta in Early Medieval Irish literature. For the earlier dating, it is suggested that Tech Midchúarta is a cursus, based on its similar form to other cursus monuments built during the Neolithic.
11 Newman 2007, 418.
12 M3 Motorway Archaeology Website (www. m3motorway.ie)
13 Daniel 1962.
14 Renfrew 1973; see also Chapman 1981.
15 Fleming 1973; see also Shanks & Tilley 1982.
16 Bradley 1998.
17 Bradley 2005.
18 Sheridan 1994, 51.
19 Lillios 2008, 231; see also Parkinson & Galaty 2007; Sheridan 1994, 51.
20 Newman 1997; see also Bradley 2005.
21 Lillios 2008, 231.
22 Newman 1995; see also Raftery 1994.
23 Newman 1997.
24 Newman 1997; 2005.
25 Newman 1997; see also O'Sullivan 2005.
26 O'Sullivan 2005.
27 Newman 1997.
28 Lillios 2008.
29 Newman 1997.
30 Newman 1997.
31 Newman 1997; see also O'Sullivan 2005.
32 Newman 1997; see also O'Kelly 2005, 106, 108; O'Sullivan 2005.
33 Newman 1997.
34 Newman 1997.
35 Newman 1997.
36 Newman 1997; see also Grogan 2008.
37 Grogan 2008.
38 Grogan 2008, 97.
39 Newman 1997.
40 Newman 1997; 2005, 378–9.
41 see Cunliffe 1984.
42 see Hill 1995.
43 Lillios 2008, 236.

44 Newman 1997; 2007, 417–8.
45 Lillios 2008, 235.
46 Lillios 2008, 236
47 Lillios 2008, 239.
48 Lillios 2008, 242.
49 Lillios 2008, 228.
50 Newman 1998, 138.
51 Lillios 2008.
52 Holtorf 1996, 121.
53 Newman 2007; see also Bradley 1998.
54 Bradley 1998, 92.
55 Bradley 1998.
56 Raftery 1994.
57 Raftery 1994.

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