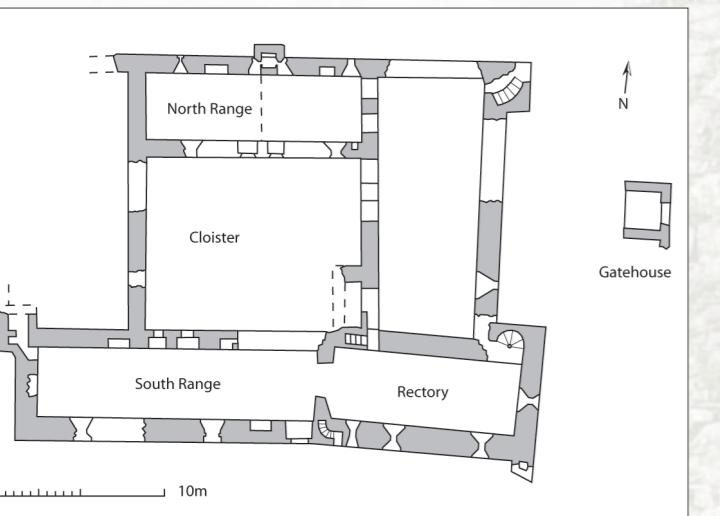


The college

To the north-east of the graveyard is the college, also misinterpreted as a friary. It is clear, however, that the Fleming family founded a friary at the hermitage by the river, rebuilding it in the fifteenth century, as a mark of private devotion. The earliest building in the college is a three-storey structure—the stonework of the western end of the south range abuts it with a straight joint. This building, referred to as the rectory in medieval sources, was the centre of parish business. The ground floor has wicker-centred vaulting and houses numerous architectural fragments. There are staircases at the north-east and south-west corners. The windows in the upper floors are large and may be later insertions.



Above: Plan of college (after Westropp 1901).
Below: View of the college.



High cross fragments

In a fanciful twelfth-century story the high cross of Slane was miraculously shattered into pieces. Harbison described the most recently found fragment, built into stonework in the church and subsequently removed to OPW headquarters in 1994. The fragment's interlace panel is compared by Harbison to crosses at Clonmacnoise and Kells, suggesting a date of c. 950–1000. The head of a high cross was found at the medieval church at Fennor, south of Slane Bridge, and is now housed in St Patrick's Church in Slane. Westropp noted other fragments within a house in the village whose location is no longer known.



The wider landscape

There are many antiquities in the environs of the Hill of Slane, attesting to a rich past. Archaeological evidence for early medieval settlement can be seen to the east of the hill, with known souterrains and stone enclosures on Gallows, Norris' and Stanley hills. The Brú na Bóinne LiDAR survey, as well as geophysical survey undertaken to the east of the village, has revealed a range of large enclosures and other features, some of which have been archaeologically dated to the seventh to eighth century AD.

Conclusion

The standing remains and historical evidence emphasise the importance of the hill as an ecclesiastical and legal centre in early–late medieval times. While prehistoric activity on the hill is poorly understood, its strategic landscape setting and the morphology of the mound and enclosure suggest that it was the site of prehistoric ritual which may have been incorporated into the construction of the early–later medieval identities of those controlling Slane. While the importance of Brú na Bóinne is rightly emphasised in the heritage of the Boyne Valley, the Hill of Slane became an important focus of

power with the decline of the Knowth dynasty. The hilltop remains a beautiful place to visit, and archaeology has a significant role to play in furthering our understanding and enjoyment of it.

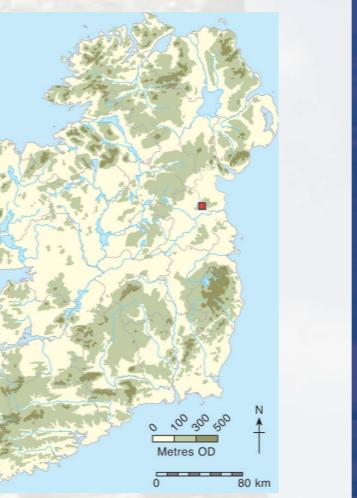
Acknowledgements

An action of the County Meath Heritage Plan 2007–2011 supported by Meath County Council. The authors acknowledge the kind support of the Mountcharles Estate.

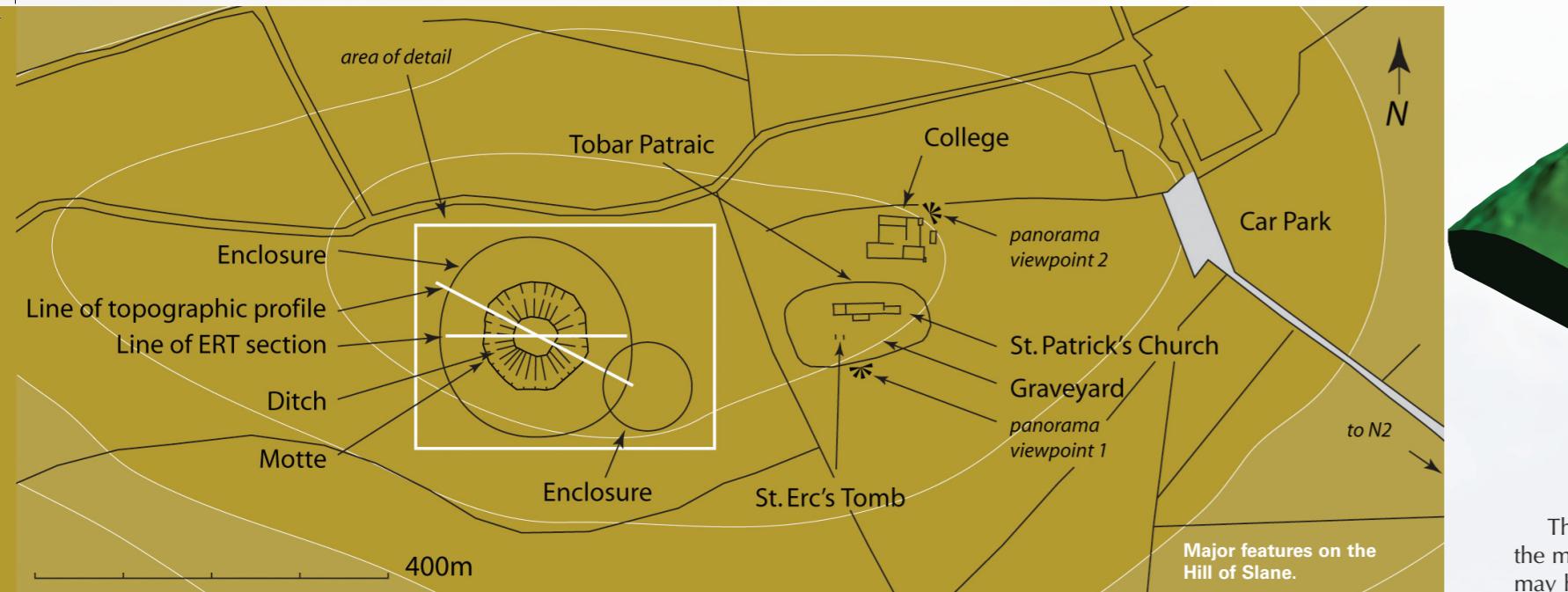
Geophysical survey was carried out by Kevin Barton, Igor Murin and Mark Nolan, Landscape and Geophysical Services.

Further reading

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- Byrne, F.J. and Francis, P. 1994 Two Lives of Saint Patrick: 'Vita Secunda' and 'Vita Quarta'. *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 124, 5–117.
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- See <http://hillofslane.wordpress.com/>
- See also: <http://www.francisledwidge.com> and <http://www.slanetourism.com/>



Hill of Slane



Introduction

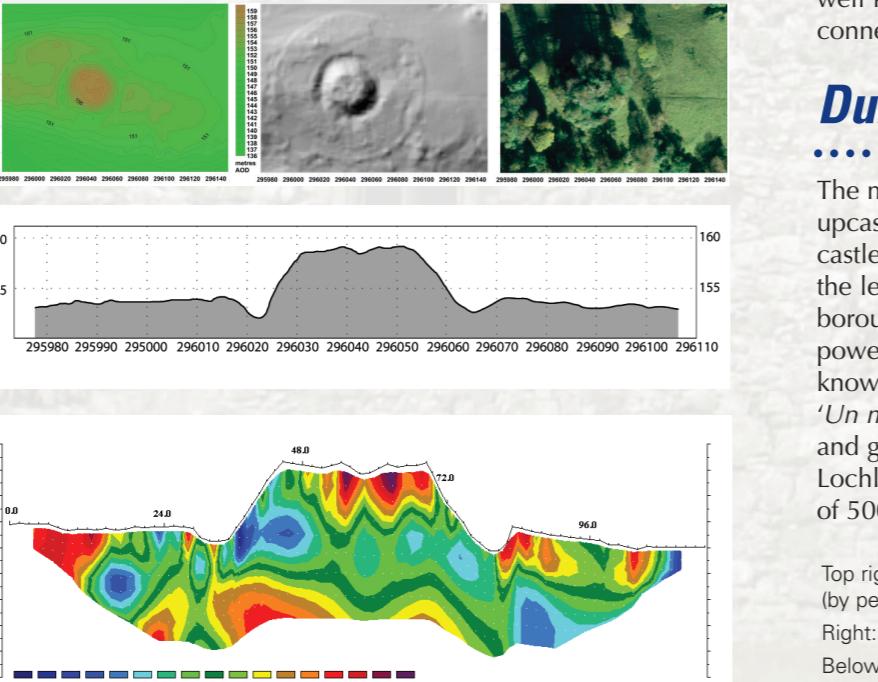
The Hill of Slane, in the townland of Slane, 500m north-west of the village, holds an important complex of prehistoric, early medieval and medieval monuments. The hilltop rises to 158m OD, 3km from the edge of the Brú na Bóinne World Heritage Site buffer zone, with Knowth and Newgrange visible from its eastern flank. This historic silhouette on the Meath skyline is partly situated on the estate lands of Slane Castle, once the residence of noted antiquarian William Burton Conyngham. It has inspired artists such as Beranger and Du Noyer, and antiquarians like Wilde and Orpen, and has attracted a small but steady stream of archaeologists. It remains important to local people, who maintain graves in the grounds of the impressive ruined medieval church—a funerary tradition stretching back 1,500 years. While research to date has focused on the standing buildings, and the site's heritage and tourism potential has been overshadowed by the Brú na Bóinne World Heritage Site, there are exciting prospects for archaeological exploration of this scenic location.

History

The Hill of Slane overlooks a key fording point of the River Boyne, with clear views of the Hill of Tara and Skryne to the south. Little is known of the hill's prehistory, although geological work suggests that some stone for the Brú na Bóinne tombs came from here. A large enclosed mound hidden in the wood on the hill's western edge is classified as an Anglo-Norman motte. The nature of its enclosure and its association with a possible ring-barrow suggest that it originated as a prehistoric monument. Herity has compared it to other large mounds, such as that at Rathcroghan, and has stressed its possible ritual significance.

The hill was first associated with a life of St Patrick written by the seventh-century hagiographer Muirchú, who described the saint's journey from the mouth of the River Boyne and the lighting of the paschal fire at *Fertae Fer Feic* ('grave-mound of the men of Feic'). A central figure in the story is Erc, first

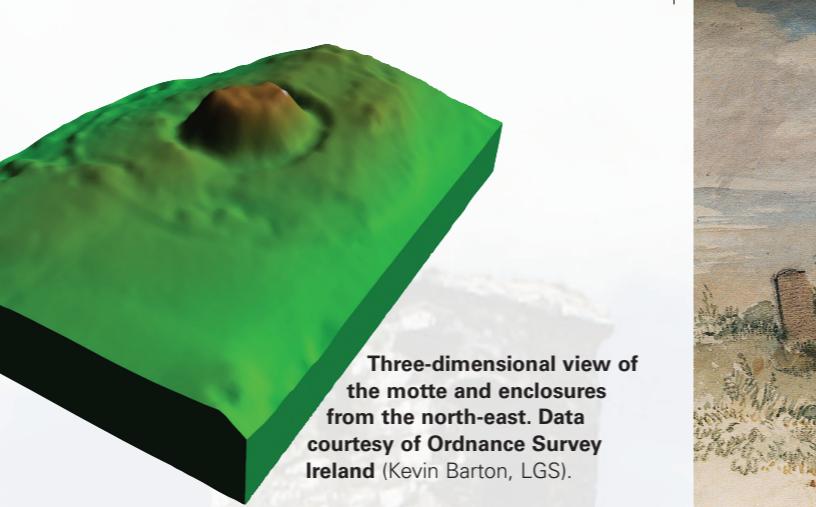
bishop of Slane, who was linked with an area containing *Fertae Fer Feic* and Slane. Cathy Swift has shown that the antiquarian James Ware linked *Fertae Fer Feic* with the hilltop, although sources suggest that this place may have been elsewhere along the Boyne Valley. Swift stresses, however, that early medieval mounds, churches and forts were often connected with legal centres. The Hill of Slane contains both an enclosed mound and an important church site documented as an important legal centre from the eighth century AD, with links to French monastic sites. Therefore, while Slane is unlikely to have been the site of the legendary paschal fire, it has important links to the Patrician story.



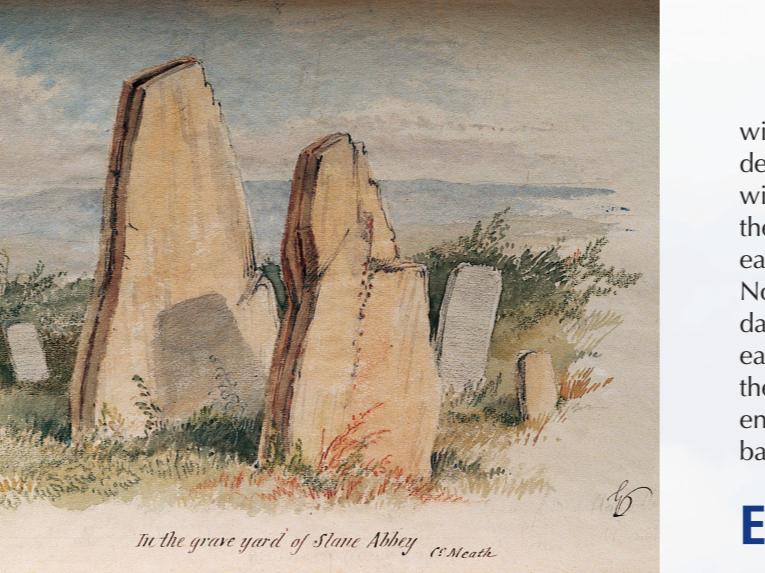
Above, from top: **Area of detailed fieldwork in 2010** (images: Kevin Barton, LGS; data courtesy of Ordnance Survey Ireland).

Topographic profile of motte and enclosure (Kevin Barton, LGS).

Electrical resistivity tomography profile of the motte (Kevin Barton, LGS).



Three-dimensional view of the motte and enclosures from the north-east. Data courtesy of Ordnance Survey Ireland (Kevin Barton, LGS).



In the grave yard of Slane Abbey © Meath

within a circular enclosure c. 163m in diameter. This is well defined along the southern and south-western sides as a bank with an outer ditch but gives way to a simple terrace from the north-west to the north-east, while to the east and south-east it is a low bank. This is not a feature of a classic Anglo-Norman motte-and-bailey and is likely to significantly predate it. Low earthworks lie within the enclosure on the eastern side of the motte. The 2010 geophysical survey on the motte suggests a buried stone structure, and the circular enclosure surrounding it has similarities to a prehistoric barrow and enclosure at Mountfortesue, 5km to the north.

Enclosure

On the south-eastern side of the enclosure there is a smaller enclosed barrow, c. 25m in diameter, defined by a low bank without an accompanying ditch. The line of this smaller enclosure is clearly cut by the larger enclosure surrounding the motte and is thus earlier.

Medieval church

The motte is on private land owned by the Slane estate, while the college and church are publicly accessible from the carpark signposted from the N2 exiting to the north of Slane.

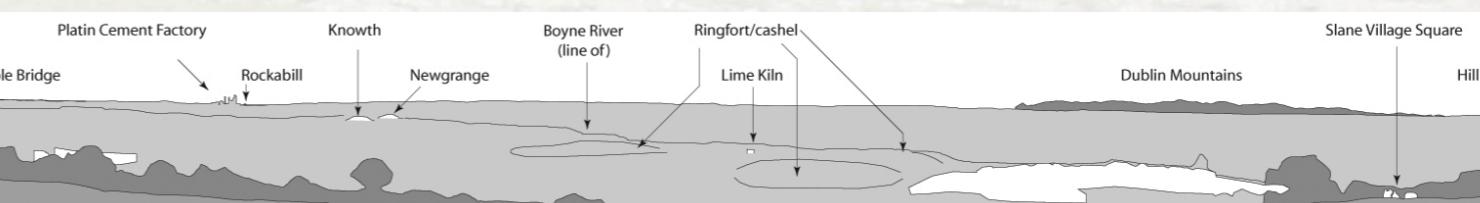
Motte

Dumhach Sláine

Topographic profile of motte and enclosure

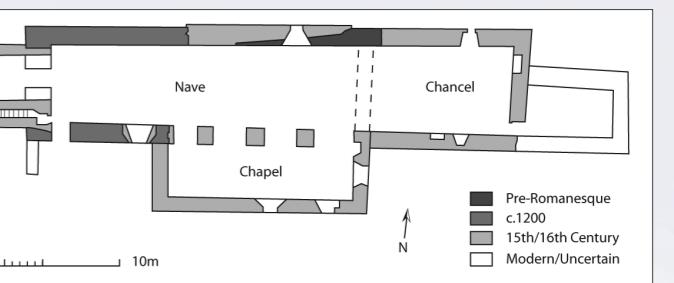
Electrical resistivity tomography profile of the motte

The mound is classified as a motte, an earthen hill created by upcast soil from a large ditch, part of an Anglo-Norman castle. Slane was the heart of a medieval barony granted to the le Fleming family and contained a castle, a church and a borough settlement. Richard le Fleming built castles at the power centres of Knowth (*Cnogba*) and *Dumhach Sláine*. We know from the 'Song of Dermot and the Earl' that this was '*Un mote*'—a motte castle—at Slane. The castle, dwelling and garrison were destroyed in 1176 by Maol Sheachlainn Ó Lochlainn, king of Cinéal Éoghain, with the reported deaths of 500 people. The word *Dumhach* itself usually refers to a



The Bishop's or St Erc's Tomb

Standing several metres from the church's south doorway, this feature is regarded as being the burial place of St Erc. It is comprised of two triangular stones, each c. 1.5m high, set c. 2m apart. The grooves cut into the edges of the stones may have accommodated large closing slabs. Such shrines, known on monastic sites predominantly in the west of



Above: **Plan of St Patrick's Church** (after Manning 2008).

Below: **St Patrick's Church, tower and south aisle.**



Ireland, contained the disarticulated remains of a saint, and St Erc's Tomb would have been a focus for devotion at a very early stage of the church's development. According to tradition, coffins were carried around the graveyard enclosure three times before being set down at this tomb before burial. Other ancient graveslabs found in the graveyard include a medieval slab illustrated by Westropp, which has since disappeared.

