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INSIDE



THE "BATTLE" OVER TARA AND THE M3 MOTORWAY IS THE CORE THEME OF THIS ISSUE WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE DEBATE, INCLUDING THE MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT, MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL, TARAWATCH, NRA, THE IRISH TIMES, UCG AND OTHERS.



John F. Kennedy, Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

edited volume entitled *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* published in 2006, to name but two).

The significance of Tara's archaeological and historical landscape is undisputed amongst scholarly and academic circles; indeed it was recognised as such long before the current route for the M3 motorway was chosen as the "preferred route" option. It has been demonstrated conclusively, both archaeologically and historically, that the cluster of unusual earthworks on the hilltop of Tara is but the nucleus of a well-defined, integrated complex of archaeological monuments extending into the surrounding landscape, a place universally acknowledged as one of Europe's foremost cultural landscapes.

In an unbroken ritual continuum over the millennia, the Hill of Tara has served as a necropolis, ritual sanctuary and temple complex. This, in turn, served as the backdrop to ceremonial pageantry and royal inauguration which was to continue well into the Early Medieval period, long after its religious authority had been supplanted by Christianity.

From humble origins as a passage tomb cemetery (dating to the second half of the 4th millennium BC) its importance grew with each successive generation to reach its zenith during the Iron Age – at a time when most of Britain and Europe was under Roman domination.

In its immediate hinterland are the physical remains of related prehistoric barrows, cemeteries and ritual sites

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- such as the series of earthen mounds in the Gabhra valley, the barrow cemetery of Skryne, the unusual cemetery of mixed burial tradition at Collierstown (some 2000m to the southeast of the Hill), the vast embanked enclosures of Rath Maeve and Riverstown (situated 1600m and 1000m to the south and west of the hilltop summit respectively), or the post-built ceremonial enclosure with central temple at Lismullin (1600m to the northeast).

The common settlements and high-status royal residences of those who lived in its shadow, who worshipped and ruled over Tara, were kept remote from the hilltop sanctuary. It appears, therefore, that Tara is quite literally a necropolis, a “city of the dead”, and not a citadel as some had speculated. The complexity of conjoined enclosures noted from aerial photography at Belpere, for instance (situated approximately 800m to the southeast of the hilltop), or the extensive multi-period earthwork remains at Baronstown (lying midway between the Hills of Tara and Skryne) are likely to represent the remains of high-status settlements.

At some stage in late prehistory the western and northern limits of this broader surrounding hinterland were more clearly demarcated by a series of defensive earthworks and fortifications. The remains of a substantial double-banked linear earthwork, situated about 1000m to the

west of the Hill of Tara, can be traced for a distance of some 1600m. Reinforcing this defensive earthwork is a semi-circular array of equi-spaced fortifications (among them Ringestown Rath, Rathmiles and Rath Lugh) strategically placed to defend the western, northern and north eastern flanks of the Hill and control passage through the Gabhra valley.

Together these monuments define a buffer-zone defining what was, at this stage, a major political, religious and symbolic powerbase from potential military incursion from the north. By the Early Historic period (from around the 6th century AD) the limits of this zone had become more formally defined as the *ferenn ri*, or royal demesne, of the kings of Tara. As if proof were needed of the significance of the Gabhra valley and the connection between the Hill of Tara and its sister hill of Skryne, a charter dating to AD 1285 mentions the existence of a ‘royal roadway that goes from the manor of Skryne to Tara’ (*regalem viam qua iur de villa de Scryn versus Taueragh*).

Tara retained its pre-eminent political role as “caput Scotorum” (capital of the Irish) and centre of kingship in Ireland throughout the first millennium AD and beyond. For this reason it continued to serve as the backdrop to major political and military upheavals up until the present day. In AD 980, for instance, the battle of Tara witnessed a decisive defeat for the Vikings of Dublin at the hands of the Southern Uí Néill king, Máel Sechnaill II. As late as 1170 Roderick O’Conor was inaugurated here as high king of Ireland. In more recent centuries, Hugh (The Great) O’Neill was said to have rallied his troops on Tara before marching to engage in battle at Kinsale in 1601.

Again the hilltop was chosen – as much for symbolic as strategic reasons – as the location for a military engagement with crown forces during the 1798 rebellion. It was also the setting for one of Daniel O’Connell’s monster meetings in August 1843, said to have been attended by a million people. It is this fascinating convergence of tangible archaeological remains illuminated by a very significant corpus of historical documents and the extraordinary and pivotal national events which unfolded here that sets this landscape apart.

It is for this reason also, that it is entirely inappropriate to build a four-lane motorway and major floodlit interchange through it.

ROADSIDES DUBLIN TRANSPORT PLANS

A major public consultation on the transport needs of the Greater Dublin Area from the year 2010-30 is being undertaken by the Dublin Transportation Office. The new strategy will be the successor to the highly-praised Platform for Change 2000-2016.

“It is timely that we are now starting to visualize the type of city and region we want for the year 2030 and putting in place the plans that will meet those objectives and take us there”, stated DTO Chief Executive, John Henry.

Companies, agencies and groups involved in providing and using transport in the Dublin region, as well as the general public throughout Ireland, will be invited to submit views, suggestions and feedback on the DTO’s new transport strategy.

The new plan document will take account of all current plans and programmes, including those being provided under Transport 21, and will outline the phased implementation of the new proposals.

The four Dublin local authorities are to press the Government to move ahead with the development of the controversial Eastern By-pass. The long-debate route would link Dublin Port with the southern end of the M50 motorway.

The Dublin Regional Authority is calling on the Government to develop the new road by 2010 even though the project is not included in Transport 21. It made provision for a feasibility study of the Eastern By-pass but gave no commitment to build the road.