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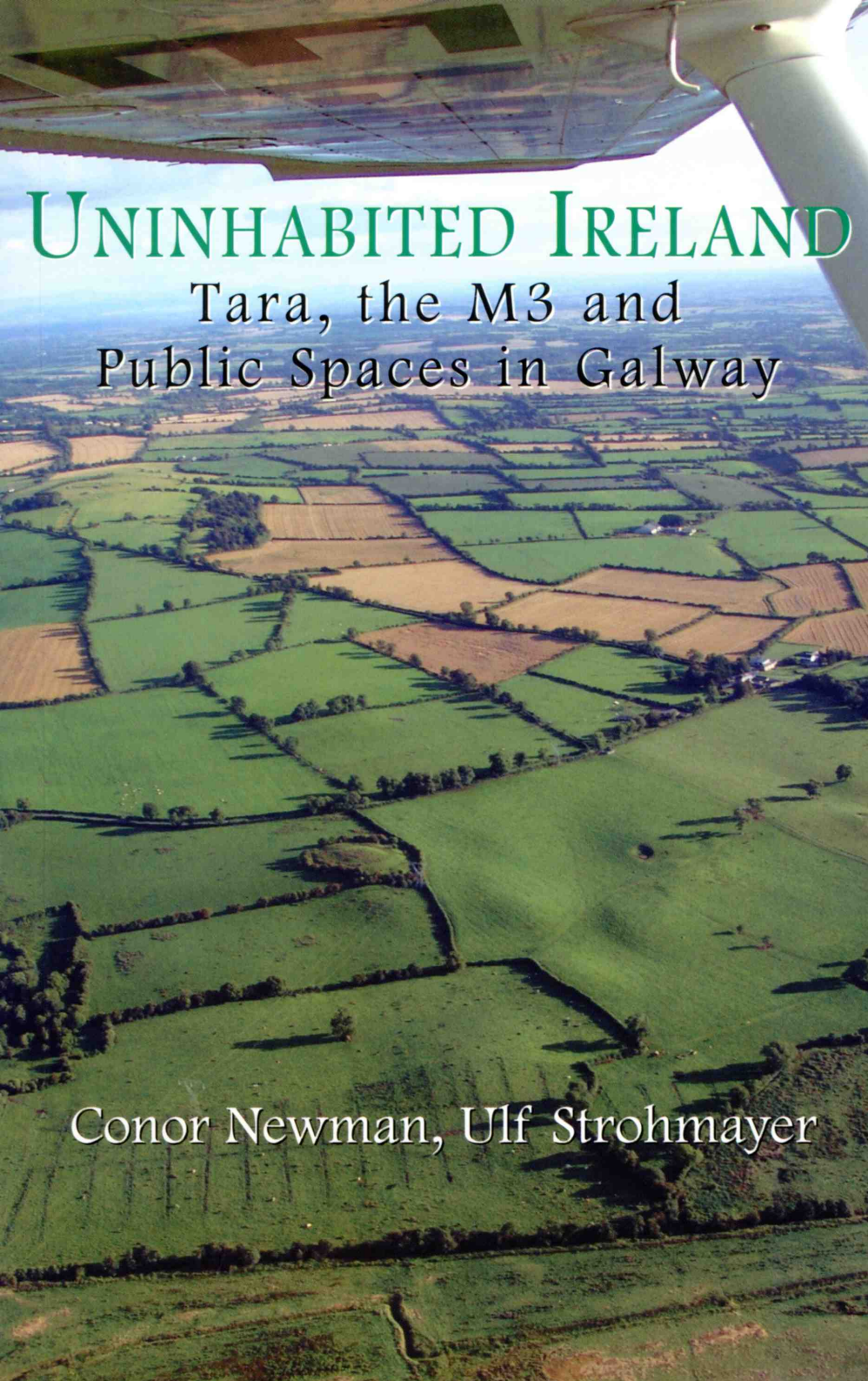
UNINHABITED IRELAND
Tara, the M3 and
Public Spaces in Galway
Conor Newman, Ulf Strohmayer

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Tara, the M3 and Public Spaces in Galway

Two essays by
Conor Newman *and* Ulf Strohmayer

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MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION AND DOWNRIGHT DISTORTION
the Battle to Save Tara 1999–2005

> Madam – In the David and Goliath struggle to protect the 5,000 year-old Tara landscape from a section of the M3 tolled motorway, it would seem that Goliath has won, at least for now.
>
> Given the vested interests that dominate 21st century Ireland was there ever any other possible outcome? For how could an education campaign conducted by unresourced voluntary groups, civic-minded individuals and courageous academics (albeit backed up by the weight of expert archaeological and historical opinion, national and worldwide) ever hope to succeed in persuading for the reconsideration of a fundamentally flawed and costly planning decision which had the might of political, business, developer and institutional interests (and a seemingly endless amount of taxpayer's money) behind it? [...]
>
> (Letter to *The Irish Times*, 18 May 2005, from Julitta Clancy, Assistant Secretary, Meath Archaeological and Historical Society)

Introduction

The last three years have witnessed a major international campaign against routing a new motorway, the M3, along the valley between the hills of Tara and Skreen. The case against running a motorway through this landscape is quite simple and has remained unchanged from the start (see Breathnach, Newman and Fenwick 2004). The reason is the same as that put forward by the two independent archaeological consultancies who also advised the National Roads Authority (NRA) and Meath County Council (MCC) against this course of action: this is that the Hill of Tara is

just one component in a uniquely important and sensitive cultural landscape that has been clearly defined in the distribution of extant monuments and in documentary sources and that to build a motorway through it would have a devastating effect on its physical, visual and historical integrity. If this motorway goes ahead as planned the monuments will have been unceremoniously slighted and the landscape surrounding them cleaved in two.

To the politicians of early medieval Ireland and their successors – including Daniel O'Connell, Eamonn de Valera and Charles Haughey – Tara was *the* national icon with which to be associated. Today, the icon our politicians choose to associate with is a four lane, tolled motorway. Our Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, joked that he was unaware that there were kings at Tara (Quotes of the Week, *Sunday Tribune* 27 February 2005). The Chief Archaeologist at the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Brian Duffy, advised his Minister, Dick Roche, that 'It could be argued that the M3 will be a monument of major significance in the future' (letter, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, to Dick Roche, 3 December 2004), and the Minister himself claimed that the campaign against this choice of route was fuelled by 'Misinformation, disinformation and downright distortion' (*Irish Times*, 21 May 2005).

Many academics and civic-minded people from all over the world have joined in protest against the routing of the M3. The issue has been debated in both Houses of the Oireachtas and in newspapers across the globe. Tens of thousands of people worldwide have signed petitions. While this is by no means a local issue, much of the campaign has been fought in Co. Meath, where the controversy was a central theme of the by-election held in April 2005. Throughout the process, Joe Fenwick, Edel Bhreathnach and I have worked as an independent team of

experts in the history and archaeology of Tara. Scores of meetings were attended, documents were prepared, and letters were written (a selection of which are reproduced on www.nuigalway.ie/archaeology/Tara_M3.html). It also became clear from quite early on that the issue had to be brought directly to the floor of the Dáil, as a way of bringing the debate into the public domain.

There has, of course, been an equally strong defence of the decision. In addition to spending well over 100,000 euros on full-page advertisements in Irish and British broadsheet newspapers, the NRA has also spent public money printing, and distributing to 20,000 homes in Co. Meath, a 20-page, full-colour booklet setting out its views on archaeology and the M3. The Meath Chamber of Commerce became actively involved, arguing that the future of businesses in Meath depended on this motorway being built. The need for a motorway quietly shifted away from the Dublin-bound commuter (whose main problem is the log-jammed M50) towards local businesses and regional development. At an Oireachtas Committee for Transport meeting in early 2005, councillors from as far afield as Donegal attended to argue that this motorway (presumably in this configuration) was vital to the future of the north-west. All the while, another question simmered quietly away in the background: who were the landowners who stand to benefit from the Minister's decision (see *Irish Times* letters, 1 April 2005).

The essay that follows presents a personal and synopsised account, diary-style, of selected stages of the controversy. I focus on the early stages of the process because this is the part that is least known about. Yet it is central to understanding how we have arrived at the present situation.

TARA: FROM CAPUT SCOTTORUM TO *Blott on the Landscape*

My involvement with Tara began in 1992 when I was appointed director of the Discovery Programme's Archaeological Survey of Tara. Launched the previous year, it had been Charles Haughey's expressed desire to fund and promote archaeological work on Tara. From this was born a more ambitious plan to tackle simultaneously a variety of equally challenging archaeological issues. The theme of the first suite of projects was to investigate the celticisation of Ireland, *vis à vis* the transition from the later Bronze Age to the Iron Age. Tara had been the subject of excavation by Séan Ó Ríordáin and Rúaidhrí de Valera in the 1950s. Since the results of these had not yet been published it was felt that it would be appropriate to concentrate on non-invasive analyses, making use of advancements in geophysical and geochemical prospection techniques, electronic topographical survey and fieldwalking. Dr Edel Bhreathnach was appointed to trawl through the documentary sources relating to Tara. Edel and I both felt that the archaeological dimension of Tara, the analysis and interpretation of its monuments, many of which are prehistoric, had always been too heavily influenced by historical and legendary accounts of Tara. We therefore agreed to plough parallel furrows through archaeological and historical Tara respectively, knowing that eventually we would reunite the two bodies of information to create an integrated narrative of Tara. The first major instalment of this is a volume of essays edited by Edel entitled *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara*.

Archaeological monuments are primarily public architecture, and they fulfil a multiplicity of purposes over extended periods of time. Monuments performed, and continue to perform, in an integrated social landscape, and so their analysis draws as much on social history and landscape analysis as it does on archaeology. Social agendas and ideologies inform the placement and physical

disposition of public monuments. As a royal landscape *par excellence*, Tara is a unique example of how generations of people have contributed to the promotion, development and preservation of one human landscape over more than 4000 years. At the core of these endeavours is the sanctity of the intactness of this landscape, an organic fusion of topography, monuments, myth, history and legend, which blend together to define this as a religious sanctuary and royal estate.

Plate 1. The monuments on the summit of the Hill of Tara looking south-eastwards (photo: courtesy E. O'Donoghue)

How have we lost sight of this in recent years? How has the great Royal Estate – *ferann ríg* – of Tara been reduced to a collection of what appear defunct and irrelevant earthworks on the summit of a hill (Plate 1) in County Meath? In *The Way That I Went* (1937) the great landscape historian Robert Lloyd Praeger posed a similar question, and in some ways his answer predicated the official

approach to Tara for the next half-century or more and contributed much to how it is currently regarded by many:

> I wonder did anyone ever leave Tara without a sense of disappointment? Of the long and surpassing importance of this royal residence and city there is no doubt: it was the centre and pulse of Ireland for two thousand years; but very few sites of so great interest have so little to show – a low broad swelling hill, commanding a wide prospect: and about its summit a few raths and mounds and other earthworks, and an odd pillar-stone: that is all ... The best thing that Tara offers the present day pilgrim is the truly regal prospect that lies around that open windy hill-top. From this, indeed, it derives its name for Tara is a form of Teamhair, a viewpoint or Aussichtpunkt ... With that panorama before you, the mounds and earthen rings seem but an insignificant cenotaph. So you may – and should – go to Tara and dream of past glories ... but what you find there, except the view, will provide no stimulus to your dreaming.
>
> (Robert Lloyd Praeger *The Way that I Went*, 1937, 281–2)

There can be no doubt that Lloyd Praeger's is a sentiment shared by many. Far too many people have visited the Hill of Tara and departed from it unmoved. Anticipating the disappointment of the casual visitor, and aligning with Lloyd Praeger, the heritage services and tourism agencies have traditionally relied rather heavily on the panoramic vista from the Hill of Tara to compensate somehow for the uninspiring character of the earthworks. To do this they, like Lloyd Praeger, refer to the explanation of the word '*temhair*' contained in the 10th century glossary *Sanas Chormaic*, where it is reported that *temhair* means 'prospect', 'a height from which there is a fine prospect, or view'. And yet we now know that '*temhair*' means 'sanctuary', a word that suggests that Tara is sanctified ground (see Mac Giolla Easpaig in Bhreathnach 2005).

I would go so far as to say that there is a mild embarrassment, based on ignorance, that this most famous

of places, the seat of no less than the High Kings of Ireland, appears today to be nothing more than a collection of mute, grassy earthworks. There are no palaces, no petrified druids and the famous Banquet Hall is, for some, a tedium of inexplicable linear embankments: it certainly looks nothing like a great feasting hall. Moreover, given the dearth of archaeological insights into the monuments prior to the Discovery Programme's work, myth and legend, both important aspects of Tara to be sure, have come to dominate the narrative as far as the public is concerned. No earthwork, anywhere, could compete with this hyperbole of myth and legend.

Such is the status of the view that for many visitors to Tara the monuments are nothing more than viewing platforms. Management of the Hill of Tara is nowadays seen largely as an exercise in landscaping, as if it were a public park, where the bumps in the ground are potential hazards in the path of an increasingly litigious and urbanised public. The surface of one of the monuments, known as the Forrad, was 'landscaped', adding another layer of soil to the stratigraphy of this prehistoric monument and smoothing over the creases and folds of its antique face, hiding the wrinkled patina that told part of the story of its structure and of its enormous antiquity. Likewise, a load of hardcore was laid down to create a causeway across an old field boundary at the south end of the Banquet Hall to ease the passage of the ambulances that come to claim those who have been injured tumbling off these 'viewing platforms'. The dumping of this load of hardcore is an ugly, inappropriate and ultimately lazy solution to a problem that could have been tackled using a little bit of lateral thinking and a lot more sensitivity to this unique landscape (for instance, by reminding visitors to Tara that this is a sacred place and that it is unsafe – not to mention irreverent – to scramble up the side of a tomb like the Mound of the Hostages).

Planning For A Road

Priced out of the Dublin house market by massive property inflation, thousands of young workers now find themselves living in huge housing estates in towns throughout the Midlands, commuting to Dublin on a daily basis. While this has resulted in a housing boom in these towns and villages, it has placed an unbearable burden on the roads and rail networks as people struggle to get to and from work in the capital. 'Only an hour from Dublin', as the saying goes, Navan is one of the fastest-growing dormitory towns in Ireland. The increase in population and traffic has been exponential. Built in the 1980s, the M3 from Blanchardstown northwards, ends at Clonee on the Meath border. From here to Navan, the N3 is a good, wide, single carriage road. Between Clonee and Navan, commuters pass through one town, Dunshaughlin. Since the mid-80s, Dunshaughlin has been jammed with traffic in alternate directions at each end of the day. It is a major bottleneck and quality of life in the town has been seriously affected. There are no traffic lights or roundabouts on the N3 between Dunshaughlin and Navan. The result is that with the increase in traffic it has become very difficult and dangerous to cross this road or indeed to enter the traffic flow during peak commuter times. Something needed to be done.

In 1999 Meath County Council signed-off on a much awaited and long overdue by-pass around Dunshaughlin, a measure that would have been immediately beneficial to both the town and the beleaguered commuter. In the end, this remedial measure was overtaken by a more ambitious plan, that is to up-grade the entire N3, from Clonee to Kells to dual carriageway standard. This did not, as the phraseology might imply, involve up-grading the existing road, instead it allowed for the possibility of building, *de novo*, a new road across undeveloped land. The company

Valerie J. Keeley Ltd was appointed to carry out a paper survey of archaeological sites and monuments along the route corridor between Dunshaughlin and Navan. Their report was received by Meath County Council on 23 July 1999, and it opens with a fairly stark assessment of the archaeological importance of Tara. Referring to the broad distribution of sites that constitutes Tara it explains to the reader that an 'archaeological landscape is not constructed of isolated monuments and occasional finds. Rather, it is an interactive landscape that stretches beyond the standing remains' (para. 2.3.1). The report recommends avoiding all archaeological sites and their environs and this is 'most strongly urged for the area of and surrounding the Hill of Tara, where current archaeological research is continuing to discover more and more sites' (para. 4.1). 'Based on the paper survey information to hand, it is not possible to suggest a preferred route from an archaeological perspective in the Dunshaughlin North to Navan South section' (para. 4.3).

A second report, *Archaeological Constraints Study: N3 Dunshaughlin-Navan* compiled by Lisa Courtney and Margaret Gowen of Margaret Gowen and Co. Ltd. issued on 8 October 1999 had this to say:

> Recent Discovery Programme investigations reveal territorial and ecclesiastical landscapes beyond the individual sites, highlighting an archaeological landscape that extends further than the isolated standing remains. (para. 2.4)

> Intact historic landscapes such as Tara and Skreen will certainly have to be avoided altogether and this may pose problems for routing in these locations. (para. 3.2)

The Environmental Impact Assessment

Halcrow Barry and Partners Consulting Engineers were retained by Meath County Council, also in 1999, to examine actual route options. They came up with four main route options: one to the west of the Hill of Tara, two between Tara and Skreen and one to the east of Skreen (these are coded A-Orange, B-Green East or West, D-Blue East or West and F-Pink respectively; see Plate 2). The plan was put out to public consultation in December 1999 and January 2000. Following this, a full environmental impact assessment was commissioned and Halcrow Barry appointed Margaret Gowen and Co. Ltd to carry out detailed archaeological assessment of the route options. This report was compiled by Dr Kilfeather and submitted on 14 August 2000.

Part of the assessment involved consulting with Dúchas (the Heritage Service) who were represented by Mr Brian Duffy. A meeting took place on 11 April 2000. Margaret Gowen and Co. was represented by Dr Kilfeather and there were three representatives from Halcrow Barry: Liam Pendiville, Alan Gutherie and Monica Cahalane.

The minutes of this meeting record Brian Duffy's categorical rejection of alignment between the existing N3 and the summit of the Hill of Tara. He observed that all corridors between Tara and Skreen were likely to encounter more archaeology than to the east of Skreen but conceded that this could be mitigated against by prudent design of the final alignment to avoid known sites. He concluded that the so-called F-Pink route was his 'favourite in relation to archaeology [because] the corridor passes to the east of the existing N3 and east of Skreen' (minutes of meeting obtained under Freedom of Information Act).

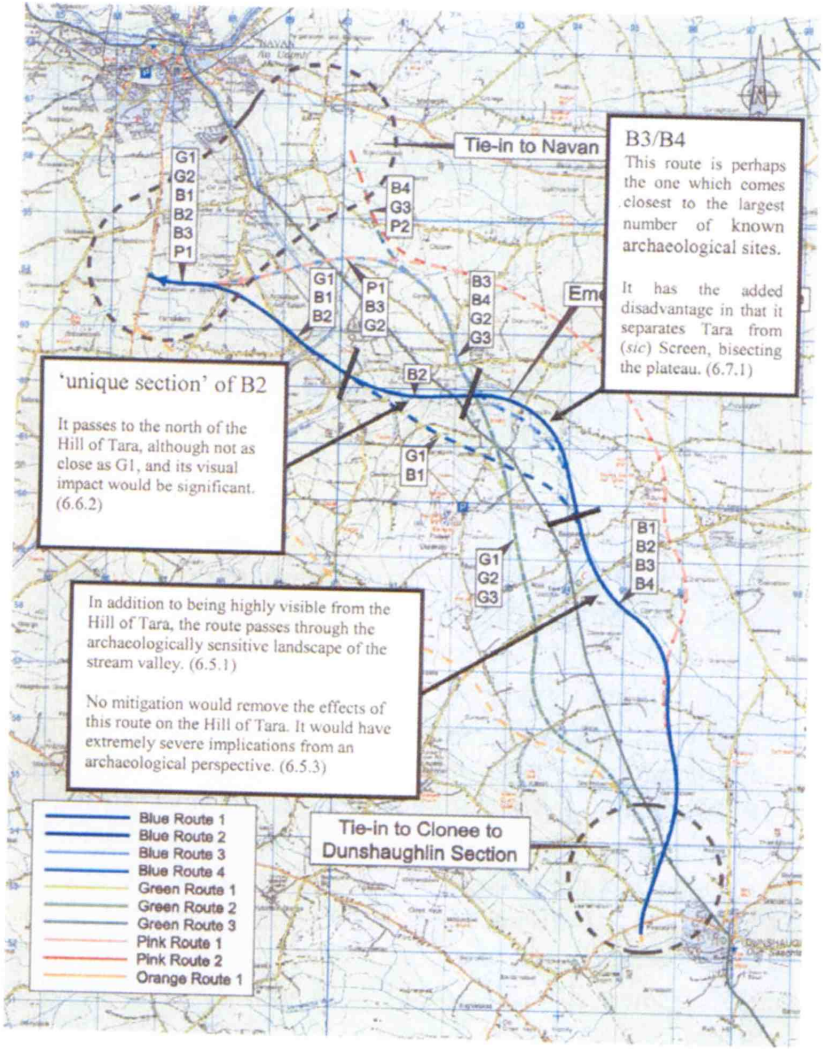

Plate 2. The M3 Route Options with the Emerging Preferred Route indicated. (from *M3 Clonee-North of Kells Environmental Impact Statement: General Information Clonee-North of Kells*, Vol. 2, Fig. 4.12, compiled by ARUP, Halcrow Barry and MCOS, Feb. 2002). The captions are extracts from Margaret Gowen and Co.'s report of August 2000 pertinent to the three offending sections of the chosen route.

Duffy's refusal to countenance the B-Green route between the existing N3 and the Hill of Tara is commendable and correct. However, his failure to comment specifically and in detail about D-Blue West (which is effectively the same as B-Green West) is baffling given that at this point both options come between the Hill of Tara and the existing N3 and *both* would necessitate interchanges close to the hill itself.

It is unclear whether or not Dúchas compiled or supplied any dedicated dossier critiquing or providing commentary on the various route options. Nor is it clear whether Dúchas compiled a dedicated dossier outlining its overall assessment of the impact of a motorway on this landscape. Given the importance and sensitivity of Tara and its landscape, this would have been the very minimum expected. Indeed, apart from the preliminary analyses preparatory to the Environmental Impact Statement (and of course the testimonies of those opposed to the route), no document explaining how these archaeological sites are components of one, integrated cultural landscape was published. On the contrary, the Environmental Impact Statement amounts to nothing other than a list/inventory of the sites and monuments standing directly in the way of the motorway. Individualised, and abstracted from their context, such places are robbed of much of their significance. It is far easier to dismiss a couple of anonymous graves in a field in Co. Meath if you do not know that they probably represent a royal burial ground of the kings of Tara, placed not on the hill itself, but on the boundary of the sanctuary as a way of marking it and sanctifying it.

Whatever about the apparent shortcomings of the intervention by Dúchas, the report by Margaret Gowen and Co. is unequivocal in its assessment of the cultural significance and sensitivity of this landscape, even though,

as we shall see, it is somewhat contradictory in places. The concluding section of this report states:

> In summary, the sensitivity of this area cannot be underestimated. Any development, particularly on the scale of the proposed roads, will have an immense impact on the landscape. The monuments around Tara cannot be viewed in isolation, or as individual sites, but must be seen in the context of an intact archaeological landscape, which should not under any circumstances be disturbed, in terms of visual or direct impact on the monuments themselves. As all the routes cross the archaeologically rich plateau around Tara and Skreen, it is highly probable that new archaeological monuments will be discovered during the course of construction.
>
> (Gowen and Co.; par. 7.3)

It is an enduring tragedy that these warnings fell on deaf ears.

The report by Margaret Gowen and Co. provides a route-by-route assessment. One of the more confusing aspects, however, is the changes which occurred in the nomenclature of the various route options sometime after the consultation with Dúchas; two new sections were added, some routes were slightly modified requiring new names and the concordance is as follows:

A	Orange	O1
B	Green West	G1
C	Green East	G2/G3
D	Blue West	B1
E	Blue East	B3/B4
F	Pink	P

It would be all too easy to get bogged down in a quagmire of nomenclature and the nuanced differences between various route options, but this would be to lose sight of the substantive issue which is that the Green and Blue routes

(and any combinations thereof) run through the Gabhra valley between the Hill of Tara from Skreen and therefore impact directly on the archaeological landscape, and *ferann rig*, of Tara, in much the same way.

To chart what archaeological advice attaches to which route option we first need a layman's explanation of how the route options are differentiated and labelled. About 10 different route options were considered, 7 of which run along the Gabhra Valley, *i.e.* 3 Green routes (G1-3) and 4 Blue (B1-4). The 4 Blue routes are distinguished by the fact that they all follow precisely the same alignment to the *east* of the existing N3, from Dunshaughlin to Baronstown, which is pretty well exactly between the summits of hills of Tara and Skreen. Likewise, the 3 Green routes are grouped together because they all share an identical line to the *west* of the N3 along the eastern slopes of the Hill of Tara. Emerging from the north end of the Gabhra Valley, however, the Green and Blue routes then divide into a multitude of different route options, all snaking their way towards Navan. Even at this point there is significant overlap between the different options, to the extent that the chosen route (B2) has only a very short 'unique' section, the rest of it being made up of parts of B1, B3, B4 and G1. In the Gowen report, the commentaries on the shared sections of each route are cross-referenced but not repeated, so for example one reads that 'the northern section of B1 is the same as that of G1, and carries with it the same implications and effects' (Gowen par. 6.5.1.). In Plate 2 I have extracted the comments applying to each section of the chosen route.

By September 2000, and based on recommendations such as these from a variety of consultants dealing with archaeology, hydrology, air and noise pollution, natural habitats, etc, an Emerging Preferred Route was chosen. The Emerging Preferred Route arises from a sort of aggregate based on a ranking of the routes under each heading. There

is considerable dispute about the ranking of the Emerging Preferred Route in this instance. The failure of the NRA to provide even a summary account of the process, their failure to settle on the numbers of criteria involved, and their widely varying claims for the number of firsts or joint firsts achieved by the Emerging Preferred Route suggests to me that the process lacks scientific objectivity. It certainly lacks transparency. When pressed at a meeting in the County Council Offices in Dunshaughlin on 5 April 2004, to provide just *one* compelling reason why the motorway had to pass along the Tara-Skreen valley the response was 'cost benefit returns', meaning it was considered that this route configuration would attract the most vehicles on to the motorway. In the context of a public-private partnership that guarantees the private partner tolling rights for around 30 years, this is the bottom line, and a potential investor would quickly become wedded to the most profitable route. Given that it was admitted during an RTÉ *Prime Time* debate that the NRA is not entitled to give special weighting to archaeology, irrespective of the monument or monuments in question, it begs the question: is there ever an occasion when the advice of just one group of experts is sufficient to stop a proposal at planning stage?

Full Environmental Impact Assessment of the Blue-East/Blue-West combination described above was then initiated by Halcrow Barry, ARUP and M.C. O'Sullivan consultant engineers. Margaret Gowen and Co. commissioned Bradford-based GSB Prospection to carry out geophysical survey of the route from just west of Dunshaughlin, across the Boyne at Bellinter Bridge, to Kennanstown. This geophysical report was submitted in late January 2001. The geophysical survey involved 'scanning' with a gradiometer each field along the road corridor, at roughly 10m intervals.

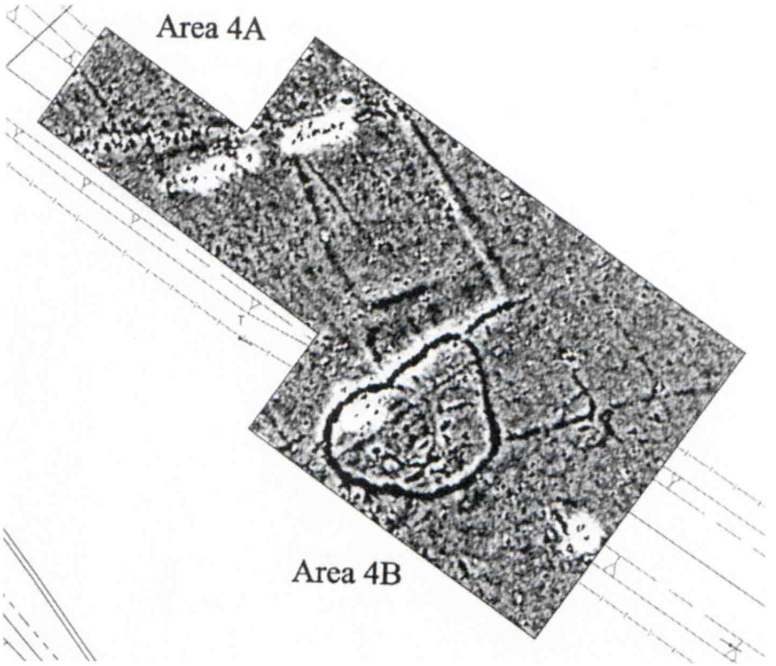

Fig. 1. An enclosure and field system in the grounds of Dalgan Park (Dowdstown) revealed through geophysical survey (gradiometry). (From: N3 Navan to Dunshaughlin Road, Co. Meath: Geophysical Survey Report. GSB Prospection 2000)

Scanning is entirely experience-dependent and does not involve recording the data. The operator simply observes the changing readings on the LCD and makes a quick mental map of the highs and lows. If they suspect that there are meaningful configurations or alignments of high or low readings, they will probably scan at a tighter interval before deciding whether or not to advance to full survey mode. In full survey mode, a formal grid is set out and the entire site is surveyed and recorded at an interval appropriate to yielding high-resolution images. The pros and cons of the process have been described by my colleague Joe Fenwick, who also provides an assessment of what was found (see Fenwick 2005). In no fewer than 26 of the 30 areas fully

surveyed the geophysicists identified unequivocal or suspected archaeological sites, monuments or complexes. Some of the sites and complexes revealed along the road corridor are truly remarkable in terms of their size, complexity and archaeological potential (Figs 1 & 2).

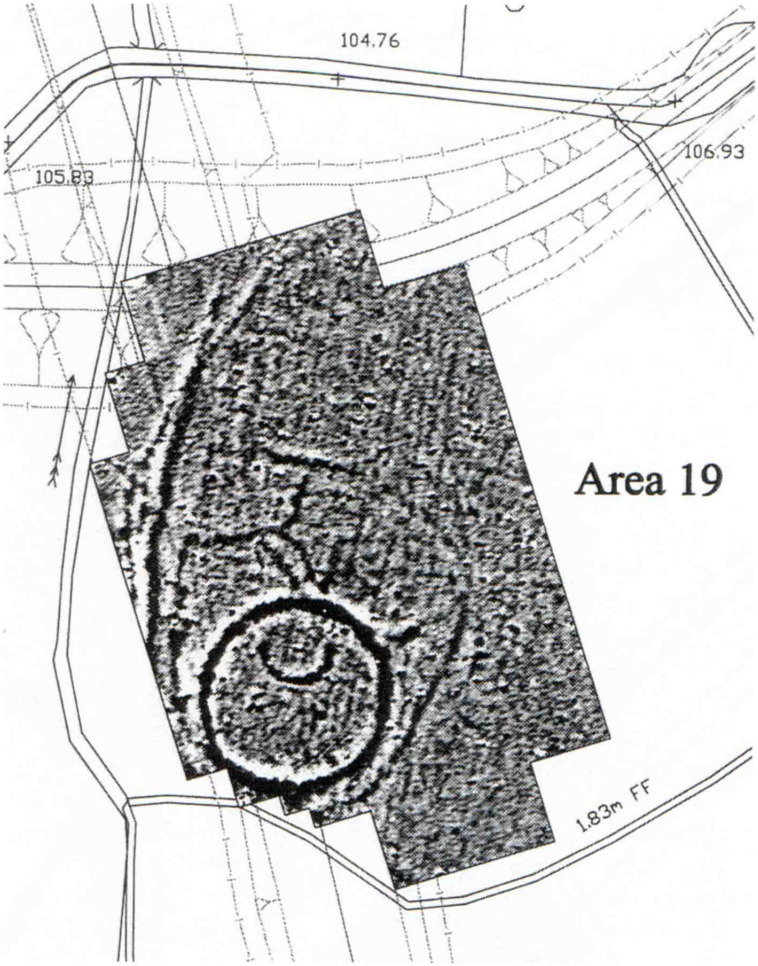

Fig 2. An enclosure (about 45m in diameter), associated field system and possible roads revealed by geophysical survey (Gradiometry) at Collierstown. (From: N3 Navan to Dunshaughlin Road, Co. Meath: Geophysical Survey Report. GSB Prospection 2000)

At some point in 2001, and for reasons unknown to me, the road scheme was up-graded from a dual carriageway to a tolled motorway (the M3) that would be financed through public-private partnership.

The Objections

The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the M3 tolled motorway, all 15+ volumes, was published in February 2002 at a cost of 680 euros. In April 2002 I lodged a letter of objection to the planning application for the M3, stating:

> The international significance of the Tara archaeological landscape is universally acknowledged, and reference is made to this in the published Environmental Impact Statement (vols 4a-c). After the Hill of Tara itself, the valley between it and the Hill of Skreen boasts the densest concentration of known monuments in the immediate hinterland of Tara and for this reason alone should be avoided as a matter of principle. Indeed, substantially more recorded monuments are affected by this choice of route than any of the others proposed in the initial stage of the development. This is apparently corroborated in the geophysical data recorded during compilation of the archaeological component of the Environmental Impact Statement. I say apparently because the images of the geophysical survey are inexplicably omitted from the Environmental Impact Statement. In a publication containing so many images already, the omission of the geophysical images is inexcusable. Since the results of geophysical survey are always presented graphically, the absence of images severely compromises the reader's ability to assess the data independently and, therefore, renders this aspect of the Environmental Impact Statement fundamentally flawed. I am obliged, however, to record that both the NRA archaeologist for Co. Meath and the company responsible for the archaeological component of the Environmental Impact Statement invited me to examine the images at their respective offices. This is a privilege arising from my profession and I look forward to

taking up the offer when time permits, but insofar as the published Environmental Impact Statement should supply all of the data necessary for anyone to assess the merits and demerits of the proposed development, it has to be concluded that an extremely important part of this Environmental Impact Statement is incomplete.

Infrastructural development of this type and scale need not be so injurious to the monumental and cultural heritage. Planners should take note, for example, of the collaborative efforts that have been made to integrate protection of the archaeological context of Stonehenge with road development requirements. Make no mistake, Tara is no less important and how this case is dealt with will declare on an international stage the value that we as a nation place in our cultural heritage.

The Discovery Programme also lodged a letter of objection to An Bórd Pleanála, in which it is stated:

This area has been significant for the culture of this country for at least six thousand years. It is unimaginable that, with the resources available to us at this point in our history, we would destroy such a vital part of our (and the world's) heritage.

In June 2002, the Government moved responsibility for heritage from its own dedicated department to the Department of the Environment and Local Government. This department has the dual mandate of promoting development and protecting heritage and environment. The roles have been described as contradictory and it is hard to read this as anything other than a move to neutralise the heritage and environment lobby as an obstacle to development.

At the end of September 2002 I received a letter from the National Roads Design Office, Meath County Council, containing a formal response to my letter of objection. On the question of the omission of the geophysical images the response, prepared by Margaret Gowen and Co. was as follows:

> The analysis and all information concerning the sites that were revealed as a result of the geophysical survey are detailed in the Environmental Impact Statement section 13.3.3, all areas are highlighted on Figure 13.1 (13.1.1 to 13.1.4). The geophysical imagery was available for viewing for any interested party at Meath County Council with the project archaeologist and at our offices in Dublin. Indeed the project archaeologist showed the geophysical data to concerned landowners. As all the information is presented in the Environmental Impact Statement and all research data, and raw data was available for viewing, the report is therefore complete. (letter from National Roads Design Office, Meath County Council, September 2002)

To my concern that the motorway would cleave in two a landscape that has existed for at least six thousand years, the reply was:

> The landscape has already been divided by the existing N3 and the site of Rath Lugh (32:25) described in the letter is under dense mature woodland and is presently cut off from all other sites in the area. This site will also remain unaffected, as it is located 100m upslope from the proposed road. (letter from National Roads Design Office, Meath County Council, September 2002)

Leaving aside the novel but ridiculous contention in the context of landscape archaeology, that sites under woodland are thus 'cut off' from their neighbours, the response continues in this vein, eventually rehearsing my idea that Rath Lugh is part of a defensive ring around Tara, and thereby contradicting itself.

Of more interest, however, is the way in which my assertion that more recorded monuments are affected by this choice of route than any other is addressed. The statement begins with 'The chosen route avoids all recorded monuments with the exception of two cropmark sites ...' No reference is made to the 26 confirmed or suspected archaeological sites identified in the geophysics. In this instance, the phrase 'recorded monuments' seems to be

applied only to archaeological sites and monuments *listed* in the Register of Monuments and Places. The Register of Monuments and Places is updated from time to time. Even though the new monuments had been identified almost two years earlier through geophysical survey, they had not yet been added to the Register of Monuments and Places for Co. Meath. It takes a peculiar brand of pedantry to maintain that these sites are not recorded unless they appear in the Register of Monuments and Places, which is updated only every couple of years. Nevertheless it became the mantra of those defending the route selection. In late February 2004 Mr Brian Cullinane of the NRA wrote to the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent* declaring:

> For the record, two recorded sites are impacted along the entire 60km length of the route. Geophysical survey has found three further sites. (Letters to the Editor, *Irish Independent*, 28th Feb 2004)

Joe Fenwick and I responded to this statement in a letter to the *Irish Times*:

> Madam - As the leading authorities on the archaeology of the Tara complex, we refute unequivocally the assessment of impact of the proposed M3 motorway on Tara as outlined in Mr Brian Cullinane's (National Roads Authority) letter (letters 28.02.04). His letter represents yet another attempt by the NRA to play-down the impact of this development on Tara and the number of sites and monuments that will be destroyed if this development goes ahead as planned. His claim that the entire 60km of toll road will directly impact, i.e. destroy, just five archaeological sites (two recorded on the ground, three revealed through geophysical survey and fifteen possible sites identified through fieldwalking) is manifestly wrong and is also contradicted in the Environmental Impact Statement. Geophysical survey alone along the comparatively short stretch between Dunshaughlin and Kilcarn Bridge (about 14.5km) identified no fewer than twenty-six areas of archaeological significance. Seven of these are described in the Environmental

> Impact Statement as of 'major archaeological interest' and a further nineteen contain features described, sometimes rather euphemistically, as 'circular features', 'linear patterns', 'pits' and 'possible pits'. All of the surveyed areas are peppered with 'ferrous' material, meaning iron objects of indeterminate date and context. And this along a route specifically designed to avoid monuments! All of these sites and monuments are part of the royal estate and archaeological complex of Tara; together they define it. Therefore, this motorway will inflict irreparable damage on the historical integrity of this landscape. [...]
>
> (Letters to the Editor, *Irish Times*, 4 March 2004)

The Bórd Pleanála hearing began on 21 August 2002 in the Boyne Valley Hotel, Drogheda. The oral hearing lasted about 28 days, one of the longest in the history of the State, a fact that has been used by apologists for the M3 (including Minister Dick Roche) to demonstrate how carefully the issue was assessed. Not only is this is a *non sequitur*, but it also ignores the fact that the hearing concerned not just this disputed section running through the Tara/Skreen valley, but the entire 60km+ of the proposed motorway. In addition to my own testimony, I was formally nominated to represent the Discovery Programme at the hearing, and in closing out I urged the inspector to consider the fact that in this decision he had reached that point of convergence between moral and cultural imperatives that requires him to preserve and understand Tara in recognition of the central role it has played, and continues to play, in forging this nation's cultural identity.

An Bórd Pleanála Greenlights Yet Another Motorway

On 25 August 2003 the decision of the Planning Inspector, Mr Brendan Devlin, in favour of the proposed motorway was published. Clearly unmoved and unconvinced by the arguments put forward by those of us

opposed to it, his lengthy report and recommendations were summarised down to a dozen or so key points, not one of which make any reference to Tara. Oblique though it may be, the only condition mentioning anything remotely resembling 'heritage' was his request that a local culture, placename and folklore survey be carried out. This concession reflects very poorly on his understanding of what is at stake; all the more so because the completion of the road would have no bearing on the successful outcome of such a survey. It was at this point that the campaign began in earnest.

The twelve months or so from July 2003 to August 2004 were highly significant from the point of view of the future direction of archaeology and heritage protection in Ireland. In July 2003, in the face of considerable opposition from the universities, Brian Duffy (Heritage Services, Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government) announced that the question of academic qualifications was to be dropped from the excavation licence interview process. The academic qualifications of licence applicants is now evaluated prior to their appearing for interview. We do not know who makes the assessment, nor do we know what is deemed an appropriate level of academic qualification in archaeology before somebody is considered qualified to go forward for interview to hold an excavation licence. Later that summer Brian Duffy was appointed to replace David Sweetman as chief archaeologist at the Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government. In April 2004, Dúchas was dismembered in what Martin Cullen, then Minister for Heritage described as a 'rationalisation', and the first serious indications of what changes Cullen had in mind in the way of amendments to the National Monuments Act emerged. *Irish Times* Environment Editor Frank McDonald reported that Cullen 'had personally vetoed the sending of 9 planning appeals to An Bord Pleanála out of the 28 which had been

recommended by heritage officials exercising their professional judgement' (*Irish Times* 10 January 2004). McDonald went on to say that 'During 2003, professional advice from heritage officials on the need to make appeals to An Bord Pleanála against local authority planning decisions was rejected by Cullen as often as it was accepted. In 2002, when he started taking an active interest in this area, four out of five appeal recommendations were rejected'. When it was finally published in 2004, the National Monuments Amendment Bill had the fingerprints of the NRA all over it. This came as no surprise; as Joe Fenwick observed:

> The NRA has made no secret of its position regarding archaeological heritage. In their annual report (2004, 4), and more explicitly in their presentation to the Oireachtas Committee on the Environment (1st June 2004), they called for a 'one stop shop' approval mechanism to overcome various 'shortcomings' in the procedural and regulatory environment' of the planning process within which they are obliged to operate. Part of the solution, as they see it is a need for less public consultation, a grading system for archaeological sites and monuments (based on a table of perceived value and significance) and 'reform' of the 'outdated' National Monuments legislation.
>
> The amendments proposed [will] give the Minister new discretionary powers with regard to archaeological matters relating to road developments. (Fenwick 2005, 19)

The amendments represent nothing short of an evisceration of heritage protection legislation. They mean that even if a national monument is discovered during the course of development the Minister can, at his own discretion, order its destruction if he deems it to be 'in the public interest'. Of crucial importance is that the impetus for these amendments came not from the ranks of the archaeological or heritage profession, but from the roads authority. It is hard not to avoid the conclusion that

archaeological monuments were getting in the way of road developments, as demonstrated particularly by the case of Carrickmines Castle, and the roads authority wanted something done about it. The Minister duly obliged.

An enduring irony of the situation as it unfolds is that in the wake of the Tara campaign, which highlighted a systemic failure on the part of the agencies of heritage protection in Ireland, the National Roads Authority has been busy re-inventing itself as a leader in archaeological research. It will fund research at the School of Archaeology, University College Dublin, where the 'findings' [*sic*] along the M3 'will be integrated into a wider archaeological landscape study due to be undertaken by the National Roads Authority and the School of Archaeology, UCD, through a Newman Post Doctoral Fellowship in Landscape Archaeology'. In addition, a study of the general historical background of the entire route will be undertaken, as well as 'a detailed historical analysis of specific areas where archaeological sites of historic date are identified along the route' (*The M3 Clonee to North of Kells Road Scheme; Archaeological Research Framework*. NRA and Meath County Council 2005). The National Roads Authority is also funding research studentships at the Department of Archaeology in Queen's University Belfast, and at Sligo Institute of Technology (*Irish Times*, 02.03.06). The M3 may have been the road to Damascus for the NRA and with a shortage of investment in archaeological research such initiatives are always welcome. However, it would be naïve to ignore the fact that these collaborations also enable the excavation of archaeological sites ahead of roads developments to be packaged as mainstream archaeological research, bearing the imprimatur of the archaeological establishment. It would be a sorry day indeed if such investments had the net effect of silencing the independent, critical voices of the university departments. In reality, it would be far better if the NRA simply concentrated on

building roads and the State's Heritage Services seriously policed the impact of roads on archaeological heritage and robustly defended our heritage when necessary. This, however, it appears unable to do without ministerial support and this has been sadly wanting in the last three TDs who have held this portfolio, Noel Dempsey, Martin Cullen and Dick Roche.

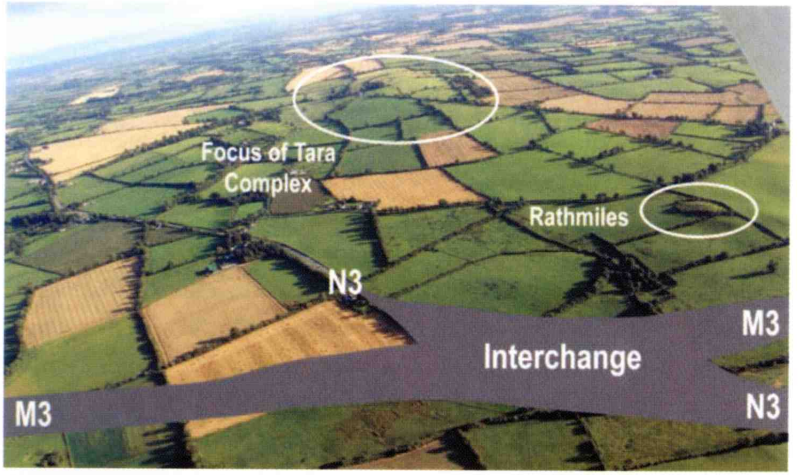

Plate 3: The motorway as superimposed, to scale, on the landscape. The Blundelstown/Castletowntara interchange is a mere field and a half away from Rathmiles. It will literally alter the contours of the Hill of Tara (Photo: E. O'Donoghue; artwork by A. Gallagher).

Throughout this long saga the Meath Archaeological and Historical Society has remained focused, committed and thorough in its campaign against the routing of the motorway. On 13 March 2004, along with the Save the Tara-Skreen Valley Group, the Meath Archaeological and Historical Society organised a one-day seminar in Dalgan Park (through whose grounds the M3 will pass) to discuss the motorway. Joe Fenwick made a detailed presentation explaining that the geophysicists had already found 26 *de*

facto or probable archaeological sites equivalent in area to 40 international standard soccer pitches. As we have seen, this is considerably more than the public suspected. Edel Bhreathnach made a presentation outlining how the Tara landscape is described and defined in documentary sources, demonstrating, once and for all, that Tara is not simply a complex of prehistoric monuments. This was very important for two reasons. First, because in classifying the sites found during the geophysical survey as Early Medieval and Medieval, advocates for the motorway had attempted to dissociate themselves from the 'great prehistoric complex on Tara'. Notwithstanding the fact that there are both Early Medieval and Medieval monuments on the Hill of Tara anyway, Edel Bhreathnach outlined the integrated nature of the *Ferann Ríg* (Royal Estate) of Tara, and its later history as part of the Anglo-Norman Barony of Skreen, proving that Early Medieval and Medieval monuments within the *Ferann Ríg* were just as much part of the Tara complex as prehistoric monuments. The integration of old and new monuments is a basic axiom of landscape archaeology. The second reason why her contribution has been so important is because it demonstrates categorically that the curatorship and future of Tara is not simply an archaeological issue: it is of concern to a very broad field of scholars. Furthermore, the protection and preservation of Tara is the legitimate concern of all Irish citizens. The notion that turning these green fields and monuments into tarmacadam is an unrivalled opportunity to find out more about Tara does not represent the views of Irish archaeologists generally. As a *Sunday Tribune* editorial observed, it is 'to attempt to make a virtue out of philistinism' (*Sunday Tribune* 28 November 2004).

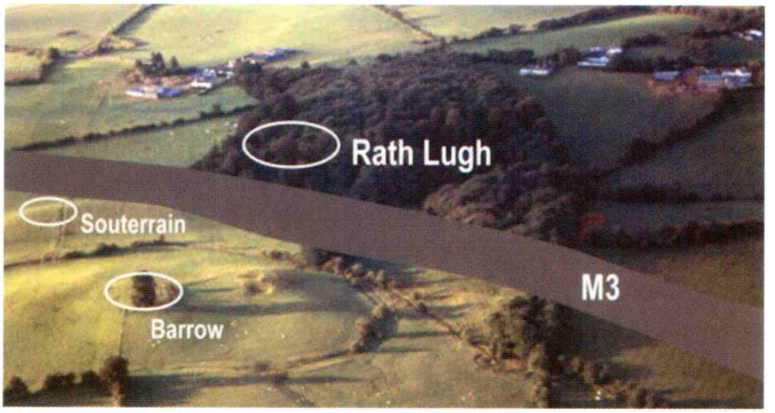

Plate 4: Raised on an embankment at this point, the M3 will sever Rath Lugh from its traditional role which is to guard the mouth of the Gabhra Valley against unwelcome intrusion (Photo: J. Fenwick; artwork by A. Gallagher)

It is noteworthy that historians of Early Ireland the world over have been united and unequivocal in their support for this campaign. Dr Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin of NUI, Maynooth worked tirelessly to alert scholars to the crisis facing the Tara landscape and compiled a declaration of opposition to the motorway signed by well over 300 academics worldwide. However, while international archaeologists, including the American Association of Archaeologists and the European Association of Archaeologists, were quick to rally support, Irish archaeologists were generally more cautious; some because they work in the contract sector and were reluctant to openly criticise the NRA, others because they are overwhelmed by the rate of destruction of archaeological sites and governmental indifference and, as a result, have become fatally pessimistic.

At the beginning of May 2004 a delegation comprising the Meath Roads Action Group, Meath Archaeological and

Historical Society, the Save the Tara/Skreen Valley Group, Professor George Eogan, and Joe Fenwick, Edel Bhreathnach and I, presented to the Oireachtas Committee on the Environment. At this meeting we re-stated the fact that at least 26 archaeological sites were already known to lie in the path of the motorway, all the while reminding the Committee that the numbers of sites were, to an extent, irrelevant in the context of the damage that a motorway would inflict in this cultural landscape as a whole (Plates 3 & 4). When asked by John Bruton of Fine Gael how much the 'resolution' of the archaeology might cost, Joe suggested about 30 Million Euros. Test trenching began a few weeks later and in May MCC/NRA released an interim report stating that 'To date approximately 28 archaeological sites have been confirmed or identified by the archaeological testing'. They put a price tag of 30 million euros on the archaeology bill. On 1 June the NRA told the same Oireachtas Committee that 6 new sites were found during the EIA. They calculated that 2 sites already recorded in the *Register of Monuments and Places* would be affected by the motorway, a further 15 possible archaeological sites had been identified through desktop and field survey, and 6 new archaeological sites and 23 areas of archaeological potential had been identified through geophysical survey.

Plate 5: Archaeological sites along the proposed route of the M3 through the Gabhra Valley. The yellow rings represent sites recorded (including sites located through geophysical survey) before the test-trenching of 2004 and blue rings represent additional sites found during the test-trenching. The white dots mark other recorded sites. (Artwork by R. Legg)

In the final analysis, 38 of the 46 archaeological sites discovered were earmarked for excavation (Plate 5), 4 were deemed to be 'modern' (even though 2 of these may well be medieval); yet they failed to find the 2 previously recorded, registered sites. In describing what they had found, the NRA made a great deal of the fact that one of the sites was an old Post Office, and that they had even met people who remembered using it. Interesting though this may be, it distracted from the real archaeological sites that had been found, and in so doing confirmed for some the suspicion that the fuss was about, as Meath County Councillor Tommy Reilly, put it, 'nothing but old pots and pans'. The battle was clearly for the hearts, not the minds, of the people.

In late July 2004 Joe Fenwick and I went on one of our regular flights over Tara with Eamonn O'Donoghue, looking for cropmarks. And while we spotted quite a few new sites in the general vicinity of Tara, what struck us most forcibly was the clear scar across the landscape left by the test trenches. Whatever about seeing the route drawn out on a map, nothing quite prepared us for the shocking reality of the motorway marked out in regular lines, like crude blanket-stitches, across the landscape. Eamonn immediately offered us a day of flying out of Weston Aerodrome to take journalists, and any other interested parties, over the road corridor so that people could see for themselves the scale of the impact and just how very close the motorway, and in particular the Blundelstown-Castletown Tara interchange, came to the Hill of Tara itself. The response was instantaneous, Tara and the M3 were once again in the news. On 10 October the *Sunday Tribune* newspaper took the extraordinary step of launching its own campaign against the routing of the motorway. On the previous Friday's *Late Late Show*, Irish actor Stuart Townsend announced that he too was joining in the campaign to save the Tara landscape from the M3. Over the

next couple of months, Eoghan Rice, journalist with the *Sunday Tribune*, produced article after article about the controversy. His colleague, Diarmuid Doyle, who actually commutes daily from Navan to Dublin, contributed some particularly insightful pieces. The *Irish Independent* published quite contrasting views. Whereas in February 2005 columnist John S. Doyle wrote a series of incisive commentaries querying the sanity of sacrificing a unique heritage for a motorway, the *Independent*'s Property Editor John O'Keeffe adopted a particularly hostile position towards academics who were protesting against this and other road-related archaeological issues (e.g. the Viking settlement at Woodstown, Co. Waterford), commenting that 'The debate of course highlights the important distinction between professional and non-professional archaeologists, often academics. Academics are often criticised for living in ivory towers with a very weak grasp of reality. This of course is entirely correct' (*Irish Independent*, 12 September 2005). With respect, I do not think that even the NRA archaeologists would describe us as non-professional archaeologists!

In late Autumn 2004, licence applications to excavate 38 archaeological sites were submitted to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Following a Cabinet re-shuffle after poor showing by Fianna Fáil in the summer bye-elections in Meath and Kildare, the decision now rested with Dick Roche, the new Minister for Heritage, to grant licences and give the go-ahead to the motorway. Inheriting a poisoned chalice from his predecessor Martin Cullen, Roche prevaricated and eventually referred the issue back to the Oireachtas Committee for Environment. In mid-December the Committee organised a field excursion to Tara and its environs. The excursion was led by the NRA and Meath County Council. Our repeated requests to attend, for the sake of fairness (not to mention our expertise on Tara), were

turned down. In the end the Committee agreed to invite Professor George Eogan along. In January 2005 the same three groups opposed to the routing of the motorway presented once again before the Oireachtas Committee for the Environment. The new chairman of the Oireachtas Committee for the Environment, Séan Haughey, had earlier declared his disquiet about the proposed routing through the Tara/Skreen Valley saying 'I think that an alternative route would be less intrusive on the whole hinterland of Tara and Skryne Valley ... It's of primary archaeological importance. It does appear to be bordering on vandalism having regard to what is being proposed' (as reported in the *Irish Times* 30 November 2004). In our submission, Edel, Joe and I argued that the reports on the trial trenching of the route attempted to down play the significance of what was found and that the Minister could not be expected to make an informed decision on the future of the sites in question based on the incomplete interpretation of the sites and the very confusing manner in which the data were presented. We also suggested that the Committee might invite before it the director of the National Museum of Ireland, the chief archaeologist in the DoE,H&LG, the chairman of the Discovery Programme and the chief executive of the Heritage Council, with a view to checking with four of the main institutions in Irish archaeology the *bona fides* of our assessment of the cultural landscape of Tara and the impact of the proposed motorway on it.

Dr Pat Wallace, Director of the National Museum of Ireland was prevented, on the grounds of protocol, from appearing before the Committee. According to his political master Minister John O'Donoghue, since he had not yet fulfilled his statutory responsibility to advise the Minister for Heritage it would be inappropriate for him to first give his opinion to an Oireachtas committee. I suspect that were Dr Wallace prepared to endorse the route choice he would have appeared at the meeting. Brian Duffy appears to have

been prevented on grounds of protocol as well. The Discovery Programme's position remained much the same as before and the Heritage Council had this to say:

> If Council were the decision making body with decision making powers on this issue it is most unlikely that it would have chosen this new route. This is based on a wide appreciation of the historic landscape in the Tara-Skreen Valley and the important place of Tara in the construction of Irish identity. [...] It may well be asked if we are handing Tara on to future generations in a better condition than we inherited it.

Prior to this meeting the NRA initiated its plan to develop a research strategy around the archaeological excavations along the M3, and had recruited, in a private capacity and *pro bono*, Dr Michael Ryan, chairman of the Discovery Programme to assist. Ryan specifically requested that his association not be used as leverage in favour of the road. Apart from referring to some of our publications in a select bibliography, the resulting document, however, made no reference to the last 13 years of Discovery Programme research on Tara.

Dr Wallace finally met with Dick Roche on 1 March 2005. The meeting was also attended by Brian Duffy. *Irish Times* correspondent Frank McDonald reported on aspects of the discussion and the interaction between Duffy and Wallace which was, at times, quite antagonistic. Most alarming were the restrictions placed on Dr Wallace's input. This was the first real test of the powers of the National Museum of Ireland under the amended National Monuments Act and it emerged that the interpretation being placed on the Act largely confined the Museum to commenting on the recovery, storage and conservation of artefacts. Wallace's concerns about the routing of the M3 were relegated to the status of 'personal views' (see *Irish Times*, 21 May).

On 16 March Dr Wallace submitted an 18 page dossier to the Minister. In the covering letter he re-visits his concerns about the motorway.

Dear Minister,

I am writing about our meeting on 1 March 2005 for which I thank you and the Directions in respect of the M3 which you handed to me on that occasion. I have now examined these documents in detail.

I include herewith a site-by-site commentary outlining my views from the perspective of the statutory responsibilities of the Director of the National Museum of Ireland. As a practising archaeologist, I would have preferred to comment on the Tara landscape as a whole but instead am presenting my comments in line with the format of the Directions.

I wish however to make a number of general observations which may be taken to apply to the scheme as a whole.

Preamble

I wish to preface my response to the Directions by pointing out that I believe Tara and the complex or association of monuments and sacred spaces in its surroundings to be the most important of their type in Ireland, if not in Europe. Taken together, this group of monuments constitute an archaeological and cultural landscape which deserves the fullest and most generous archaeological protection. The process of evaluation by which the planning authority agreed to the proposed works in such a culturally sensitive area seems narrow. This is because it chose to confine its deliberation to Tara on the basis of the requirements of individual sites and ignored the importance of the place as a complex in the first millennium and later when it was as important as it was in the Iron Age and before. I would respectfully point out that under Section 5.(2)(b) of the 1987 Act you have the power to designate important complexes as 'archaeological areas', I would advise that a proposal to place such landscapes on a Register be considered.

He returns to these points in his concluding remarks:

Conclusions

I hope you will bear my reiterating that Tara is a unique cultural landscape, which has significance for our national heritage that extends beyond the sum of its individual archaeological components. It is one of a small number of monumental complexes that are of more than usual cultural importance from the standpoint not only of archaeology but also of history, mythology, folklore, language, place-names study and, in the case of Tara, even national identity. The spiritual and symbolic aspects of such sites are real and must be regarded as crucially important elements of their cultural significance. Archaeology is one of a number of methodological approaches that can be used to investigate and interpret ancient sites and when engaged in at a level of best practice, archaeology is informed and complemented by the contributions of the related disciplines.

The Proposal for Archaeological Resolution document I have been sent quotes from the report of the Inspector appointed by An Bórd Pleanála who concludes 'I am satisfied that the route as proposed would not have a significant impact on the archaeological landscape associated with the Hill of Tara.' The importance attributed to this quote in the document would suggest that archaeology and archaeological method has been the exclusive criterion from a cultural standpoint in the assessment of the potential impact of road development on the Hill of Tara.

Given the exceptional nature of the Tara complex it is, in my view, essential that any methodological approach undertaken in assessing the impact of road development on Tara should, from an archaeological standpoint be comprehensive, detailed and informed by a multi-disciplinary attitude. It is also clear from the most recently available scientific literature that the density of sites in the Tara-Skreen valley is greater than elsewhere along the proposed road take. It is certain that other sites will turn up given that those we already know were uncovered only in limited geophysical survey and rough archaeological testing.

You will be aware of the controversy that presently rages about what constitutes the core area of Tara. I accept the most up-to-

date definitions of this from the archaeological and historical standpoints. The proposed large-scale interchange at Blundelstown crossroads is only a field and a half away from Rathmiles which is part of Tara. This will have a flyover and will compete with the Hill of Tara with the competitive advantage that it will have 24 hour lighting! In location and scale it will demean Tara and while outside my statutory remit it has to be said will seriously detract from our ancient capital.

[...]

Needless to say I remain committed to act within my statutory remit and to do everything possible to ensure the highest standards of archaeological practice and knowledge retrieval on the M3 route, whatever the ultimate decision may be with regard to the route. However I continue to have a difficulty with this relatively small section of the M3 because of what I sincerely believe to be the unacceptable degree of negative impact, which it will inevitably have on the incomparable landscape of Tara and the proximity and scale of the proposed interchange at Blundelstown crossroads. Incidentally, I fail to see how the Inspector could be so certain about the lack of impact on the archaeological landscape of the area given that the archaeology of the area – both monumental and artefactual – still remains to be fully defined through the application of acceptable standards of research, remote sensing and excavation.

At one point in his letter to the Minister Dr Wallace urges the Minister to use his powers under the 1987 Act to protect the Tara complex by designating it as an 'Archaeological Area'.

Given the density of previously unrecorded monuments in the Tara-Skreen valley that are now known, the others that will inevitably turn up and my belief that similar densities may exist at other important complexes I would strongly advise that provision to place them on the Register as 'archaeological areas' is justifiable and should be considered. The major finds of Iron Age and early Medieval metalwork (chariot harness pieces and brooches) that were found in the past in the Tara-Skreen valley only underline this point.

Around the middle of May 2005, Dick Roche announced that he was issuing directives for the excavation of the archaeological sites along the route of the proposed M3 motorway. In so doing he chose not to exercise his ministerial right to protect for posterity this landscape and refuse permission to excavate the sites. Rounding on his critics, he claimed that to have done so would have amounted to his halting 'a properly approved project [and] would represent a very serious misuse of ministerial power (*Irish Times*, 21 May 2005). Labour TD Michael D. Higgins, and former Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage (1992–97), retorted that 'Dick Roche is outrageously wrong in his interpretation of the legislation that I introduced as minister in 1994. Indeed, it is explicit that the Minister's role comes into effect after the planning process'. He went on to describe Roche's claim that he could not 'revisit' An Bord Pleanála's decision in August 2003 as 'an outrageous distortion' of the provision of the 1994 National Monuments Act, and even of its amendment in 2004 (*Irish Times*, 25 May 2005).

In an opinion piece in the *Irish Times* of 21 May 2005, Dick Roche dismissed concerns against the routing of the M3 motorway through the Tara landscape as 'Misinformation, disinformation and downright distortion'. His is the rhetoric of corporate and political Ireland in 2005. It is a sad and a shamefully inadequate response to the legitimate and substantiated concerns of almost every heritage body in Ireland (including the National Museum of Ireland, The Heritage Council, the Royal Irish Academy, The Discovery Programme, The Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, the Meath Archaeological and Historical Society, archaeologists and historians from throughout the Irish university sector) and abroad. The Minister, however, speaks the language of the worst excesses of Celtic Tiger Ireland and of a government that is threatening to introduce a means test into legal challenges

against infrastructural developments: if you cannot prove, *a priori*, that you have the resources to meet costs that may be awarded against you, you may not proceed with your legal challenge. This represents a very serious attack on democracy, and all the more so because it is couched in a rhetoric that paints people who would challenge government policy as irresponsible, serially-backward and ultimately unpatriotic. Unpatriotic, that is, to the new, forward-looking Ireland of profligate consumerism, where traditional Irish culture has degenerated into a branded commodity: make a profit from it if you can, use it as a green smoke screen to hide the real Ireland, but do not be so naive as to let Old Ireland stand in the way of profit.

On the summer solstice of 2005, thousands of ordinary people assembled on Tara. They brought this wonderful and holy place to life. By their presence, many of them were making a quiet and dignified protest against the clumsy, developer-led vandalism being visited upon ancient Ireland. The strength of this voice continues to be the broad church of people who have united against an authority that would drive a motorway through the sacred and historic precinct of Tara. Informal and spontaneous though the genesis of this movement may be, together the protesters comprise a very real voice and politicians would do well to listen.

Since this paper was written Mr Vincent Salafia took an unsuccessful High Court action against the State, Meath County Council and the National Roads Authority, ruled on at the beginning of March 2006. His argument was that the core area of Tara archaeological landscape was itself a National Monument and should have been recognised as such when Minister Dick Roche issued his directives concerning the excavation of the sites ahead of the construction of the motorway. In his judgement, Justice Thomas Smyth dismissed Mr Salafia's "local standing" as a person immediately affected by the proposed road and criticised the timing of the action. Neither was he convinced that Salafia's contention (supported by affidavits from me, Edel Bhreathnach and Joe Fenwick) that the Tara-Skryne landscape was a National Monument. Costs were awarded against Vincent Salafia but these now appear to have been quashed. No more than the might of the State's defence, the bravery required of anyone to take on a case such as this should not be underestimated. It ought also to be recorded that contrary to popular perception, no injunctions on the work were taken out and this protest has not delayed the construction of the M3 motorway. Suggestions to the contrary are unfounded.

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This essay is merely a summation of selected aspects of the planning process and the controversy itself from just one perspective, and by no means does it tell the whole story. The campaign to stop the NRA and MCC from building the M3 motorway through the Tara-Skreen valley is on-going and with each passing day more and more people join our ranks. People join the protest not for personal gain or notoriety but out of a sense of civic duty and outrage. It would be wrong to single any of them out for special mention. While Edel, Joe and I have brought a specific type of expertise to bear on this issue, ours is not the only perspective. The Meath Roads Action Group has fought long and hard for a rational approach to transport in Meath, including pointing out the obvious merit in re-opening the Navan-Dublin railway line. Likewise, the Bellinter Residents Association, their neighbours the Columban Fathers at Dalgan Park, and the Meath Archaeological and Historical Society have remained steadfast and dignified throughout. Tara merits nothing less. Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin has worked tirelessly to garner national and international support and, most importantly political support at home. Vincent Salafia has been brave enough to set in train a potentially costly legal challenge. Others who have helped know who they are and know that it is appreciated.