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Landscapes of Cult and Kingship

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The sacral landscape of Tara: a preliminary exploration

CONOR NEWMAN

Every hierophany we look at is also an historical fact. Every manifestation of the sacred takes place in some historical situation. Even the most personal and transcendent mystical experiences are affected by the age in which they occur.¹

The central premises of this paper are that in later prehistory, if not before, Tara was conceived of as a sacralized landscape associated with hierogamy and the installation of sacral kings, and that this development coloured the kingship of Tara for many generations to come, bequeathing to them a legacy that is still evident in the landscape around Tara. Conceived of through the prism of religion and myth, sacral landscapes can have cosmogonic symbolism. Through the medium of ritual they are cosmicized by the building of shrines, temples and residences, the erection of mounds and stones, the creation of burial grounds, the naming of places, and more, for, as Gerald Arbuckle puts it, 'myth provides a framework for comprehending phenomena outside ordinary experience; ritual offers a way of participating in it'.² The analogousness of sacralized royal landscapes is connected directly to the institution of sacral kingship itself, and can be fully understood only in that context. As cosmographical analogues – mapping the universe – sacralized landscapes are drawn into rituals of regeneration and the reconciliation of nature and culture.

The historico-religious depth of the Tara landscape is one of its most potent attributes, and was carefully maintained and mined over many generations to legitimate succession, accession and rule.³ Adopting an approach that is more emic than etic,⁴ this paper explores an evocation that reflects the synchronic fusion of

1 M. Eliade, *Patterns in comparative religion* (1958), p. 2, §1. 2 G. Arbuckle, *Out of chaos* (1988), p. 13. Despite positing that 'regardless of context (cosmic or historic) temple and temple building are less connected with cosmogony than they are with kingship', J.Z. Smith, *To take place* (1987), pp 20–1, envisages the possibility of placing any building ideology on an interpretive continuum from 'nature' to 'culture', from 'building' to 'construction' respectively. Building ideologies associated with the Irish expression of sacral kingship as commented by Marion Deane ('From sacred marriage to clientship', this volume) are likely to have a cosmogonic dimension, thus locating them towards the natural end of Smith's putative progression. 3 See E. Bhreathnach, 'Transforming kingship and cult', *ibid.* this volume. 4 I use these terms in the sense that they are applied to the study of language. K.L. Pike, *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behaviour* (1954), applies them to the classification enquiry which can be either 'etic' (diachronic) or 'emic' (synchronic). K.K. Ruthven, *Myth* (1976), p. 39, draws comparison

all of these different attributes of the sacralized landscape of Tara. Only by merging evidence from various fields, such as mythology, archaeology and toponymy, will the hierophanies and sacrality of the Tara landscape as a complexus associated with sacral kingship and kingship generally be made visible for, as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl observes,

a sacred spot never presents itself to the mind in isolation. It is always part of a complexus of things which include plant or animal species which flourish there at various seasons, as well as the mythical heroes who lived, roamed or created something there and who are embodied in the very soil, the ceremonies which take place there from time to time, and all the emotions aroused by the whole.⁵

Sacralized kingship is a phenomenon that occurs the world over, and its consideration occupies a central place in the history of anthropological thought. Such is the degree of convergence between ethnographical and anthropological accounts of sacralized kingship and the evidence from Irish literary, archaeological, historical and toponymic sources that the existence of this type of kingship in pre-Christian Ireland cannot be seriously doubted.⁶ In his review of Frazer's analysis of sacral kingship, Lucien Scubla reminds us that the role of such a king was 'not to govern or to give orders, but to guarantee the order of the world and of the society by observing ritual prescriptions'.⁷ Aziz Al-Azmeh phrases it slightly differently when he says that 'Although divine creators are the prototypes for kings, the relation of type to figure is not one of correspondence and does not involve a transference of demiurgical capacities; the cosmic centrality of kings is therefore that of preservers and maintainers of both social and natural order'.⁸ Elsewhere he comments that the king 'becomes the agency for the sanctification [...] of others: a quality that comes about through the sacralization of time and of the *space* of society'.⁹

To appreciate the singularity of sacralized kingship and associated landscapes we must acknowledge that as symbols of order they are artefacts of a fundamental human concern, for, as Eric Voegelin observes, 'every society is burdened with the task [...] of creating an order that will endow the fact of its existence with meaning in terms of ends divine and human'.¹⁰ In whatever form it may eventually be

between Lovejoy's etic 'unit-ideas' and Foucault's emic 'épistèmes'. ⁵ L. Lévy-Bruhl, *L'expérience mystique* (1938), p. 183. ⁶ See, for example, C. Doherty, 'Kingship in early Ireland' (2005); M. Herbert, 'Goddess and king' (1992); M. Draak, 'Some aspects of kingship in pagan Ireland' (1959); G.F. Dalton, 'The ritual killing of the Irish kings' (1970); E.P. Kelly, 'Secrets of the bog bodies' (2006). See also M. Murray, 'The divine king' (1959), and Deane, this volume. ⁷ L. Scubla, 'Sacred king, sacrificial victim' (2005), p. 40. ⁸ A. Al-Azmeh, *Muslim kingship* (2001), p. 36. ⁹ Ibid., p. 35. Emphasis my own. ¹⁰ E. Voegelin, *Order*

realized, however protean, among mythopoeic societies the order of being is expressed and represented analogously in religious landscapes and objects that both capacitate and chronicle the attunement of human society to the primordial order of being. While such landscapes can be conceived of as cosmographical and the ceremonies cosmogonic, they seldom omit the anthropogonic. The rehearsal or re-enactment of the birth of man, or of that of society, offers solace because it re-affirms the unique place and role of human beings in the greater cosmological order. Through the installation ceremonies of sacral kingship, the world can be reborn and order, symbolized in the person of the sacralized king, can be re-established. This is why these men are described as kings of the world. Indeed, as Declan Quigley says, a desired outcome of the ceremonies surrounding the installation of a sacralized king is often to make 'culture more powerful than nature',¹¹ a goal that achieves its ultimate expression in regicide, the usurpation of nature's hand in the degenerative processes of decline and death that, affecting the king, might otherwise infect the whole of society, particularly if he embodies the role of scapegoat.

There exists a remarkably rich library of human origin myths, and though many are specific to the birth of the author-nation or tribe, they stand for all of humanity. The creation of humankind is an especially important moment in the history of the formation of the world, and it is to this genesis that many religious ceremonies refer because it represents the prototype of attunement and participation in the order of being. Re-enactment of this event can be directed towards recalibrating world order; bringing about, symbolically, a renaissance. Anthropogony, however, acquires yet another layer of complexity in the case of societies or kin-groups that source their ancestry in a magical non-human or totem, or in a union between man and an animal- or plant-deity. Regardless of how they are classified,¹² where they exist, such traditions are commemorated in kin-group, tribal and personal names, in art, and in social and religious customs that rehearse tribal origin myths. Once again, the Irish record offers a rich vein of this type of evidence. The special association of horses, and in particular white mares, with early Irish kingship is a case in point. Ní Chatháin suspects the former existence of a corpus known as *Senchas na Sen-Marc* ('Lore of the Steeds of Old') that is referred to in a poem on the toponymy of (sic) *Loch Da Gabar* ('Lake of the Two Horses'), which she describes as being

full of mythological resonances: the hippomorphic king [Eochaid] whose name and epithet are equine, the statutory pair of heavenly horses named

and history, vol. 1 (1956), p. ix. Emphasis my own. 11 D. Quigley, 'Introduction: the character of kingship' (2005), p. 3. 12 C. Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (trans. R. Needham, 1964).

respectively Wind and Sun, their foal pursuer and their final resting-place in the Otherworld under the waters of the lake which was to bear their name.

Loch Da Gabor, as we shall see in a moment, is closely connected with Tara.¹³ Aspects of this equine motif also refer to a more universal, Indo-European cult associating supreme, universal kingship with horses and horse sacrifice.¹⁴ Charlie Doherty, for example, has highlighted cosmogonic hierogamy themes common to both Irish traditions and those of Vedic India, where the *asvamedha*, a horse sacrifice ritual, was central to the declaration of universal kingship (*śakka vatti*).¹⁵ While it is a ceremony of initiation, according to Eliade, 'the essential and primitive element of the *Asvamedha* is its connection with the creation of the world. The horse is identified with the cosmos and the sacrificing of it symbolizes (that is, *reproduces*) the act of creation'.¹⁶ A related equine theme is reported by the first-century AD Roman historian Tacitus, who notes that one of the functions of Teutonic priests and kings was to interpret the neighing of white horses. In an account that mirrors the motif of the wild (that is, unbroken) horse being yoked to a special chariot contained in the description of Conaire Mór's inauguration at Tara,¹⁷ Tacitus describes how, though normally left to roam in the sacred groves, untamed and 'unpolluted' by earthly work, these horses were yoked to a sacred car or chariot (nature harnessed in the service of culture), whereupon their neighs and snorts were interpreted by the priest and the king walking alongside; these were considered to be the most sacred of auguries.¹⁸ Thematically, this phenomenon might suggest that an equine sovereignty-goddess, in the form of a Rhiannon, Epona, Étaín Echraide or Macha, guaranteed the institution and the lineage per se, the *stirps regia* or royal stock of sacralized kings,¹⁹ via rituals such as this and hierogamy. Medb, of course, is the sovereignty goddess of Tara and in his analysis of the etymology of the name, Puhvel emphasizes inter alia her equinity and suggests semantic connections with *asvamedha*. In a world where gods and goddesses manifest in nature, the relevance of this strand of evidence to Tara and its sacralized landscape is that the Gabhra river was probably so named because it was perceived to have been a manifestation of an equine sovereignty goddess, suggesting that the river itself may have been central to the cosmography of the

¹³ P. Ni Chatháin, 'The cult of the horse' (1991), 124–5. See also E. Bhreathnach, 'Dog and horse bones at Tara' (2002). ¹⁴ A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (1974), p. 407, for example, considered the drowning of these two mythological horses at *Loch Da Gabar* as evidence of horse sacrifice. ¹⁵ Doherty, 'Kingship in early Ireland'. ¹⁶ Eliade, *Patterns in comparative religion*, p. 96, §30. ¹⁷ L. Gwynn (ed.), 'De Shil Chonairi Móir' (1912), 138–9. ¹⁸ M. Hutton (ed.), *Tacitus, Germania* (1946), p. 280; W.A. Chancy, *The cult of kingship in Anglo-Saxon England* (1970), p. 8. The aural motif is important and includes the cry of the *Lia Fáil* and the great noise made by MacConglinne as he ground his teeth against a sceptre(?) whetstone; see K. Meyer (ed.), *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* (1892), p. 46. ¹⁹ Chancy, *The cult of kingship in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 5ff.

royal sacral landscape of Tara. The *Dictionary of the Irish Language* refers to two possible meanings of the word *gabor*, namely 'goat' (modern Ir. *gabhar*) and, what seems to be an older meaning, 'horse' (notably a white mare). In her study of the Gabhra valley in early Irish literature, Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin suggests that, in effect, *gabhra* means 'horse-headed'.²⁰

The book of evidence from early medieval Ireland is punctuated with motifs of a relict mythopoeic and heroic past.²¹ The tradition of *dindshenchas* ('lore of place-names') demonstrates that the early Irish landscape was a touchstone of knowledge and wisdom, called forth by the utterance of place-names in a manner markedly similar to that of the Apache in New Mexico described so eloquently by Keith Basso.²² Having been imbued with special religious meanings and symbolism, the nexus that was the sacralized landscape of Tara proved historically resilient, not least because it was enshrined in the institution of the kingship of Tara into the early medieval period and beyond. Thus, the places and place-names associated with this early period in the kingship of Tara endured as hierophanic portals unto its mythological, legendary and historical past. Such was ever-present and formed a constant backdrop to human engagement with this landscape, for, as Mircea Eliade puts it, 'every kratophany and hierophany whatsoever transforms the place where it occurs: hitherto profane, it is henceforward a sacred area [...] nature undergoes a transformation from the very fact of the kratophany or hierophany, and emerges from it charged with myth'.²³ Religious monuments are primary evidence of sacrality and it is unsurprising that they dominate the archaeological persona of this landscape. Occasionally, however, acknowledgment of the sacrality and historicity of places finds expression on settlement sites. Co-location can be commemorative and appropriative, and may account for some of the remarkably long site-histories encountered here. It, too, is a form of sacralization.

This essay is concerned with hierophanies and the investment of religious and historical meaning in the Tara landscape, and focuses on sacralization associated with the sacral kingship of Tara in later prehistory and its resonance into the historic, Christian period. It explores both the cosmographical centrality of the Gabhra river and the influence exerted by it on the placement and complexions of prehistoric and historic monuments. It does not attempt to 'look' at Tara through the window of any one period, because the story of this landscape is one of

²⁰ See J. Puhvel, 'Vedic *asvamedha*' (1955), 353–4; idem, *Comparative mythology* (1988), p. 261; Bhreathnach, 'Dog and horse bones at Tara', p. 120; M. Ní Bhrolcháin, 'The Tara-Skryne or the Gabhra valley' (2006), 1. ²¹ The tactic of deliberately embedding present-day political institutions and ceremonies in the past is rehearsed throughout this landscape (see C. Newman, 'The making of a "royal site"' (1998)) and in associated documentary sources, and recalls how J. Elsner 'Inventing Christian Rome' (2003), pp 79–83, interprets the creation of a Christian Rome in the fourth century through tactical deployment of monumental art and liturgical commemoration. ²² K. Basso, *Wisdom sits in places* (1996). ²³ Eliade,

curation and appropriation, where existing prehistoric monuments lived on in contemporary tableaux as symbols of mythology, history and so on. The historical significance of the Gabhra valley and the potential for the existence there of exceptional archaeological sites has been recognized for some time. There is no comfort in the fact that confirmation of this came during the construction of a motorway. The failure of those associated with the building of the motorway to admit at the time that any of the monuments in its path had a connection with Tara is an injustice to history that would be compounded if those of us who believe otherwise ignored this body of evidence. The range and significance of the archaeological sites excavated in advance of the M3 motorway construction through the Gabhra valley proved this point and speak to the culturalization and sacralization of this landscape over a very long period of time. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss all of the findings, and what follows, therefore, represents merely a selection based on what has been reported thus far and is made for the purpose of illustrating the role of the Gabhra river as an ordering agent in this landscape. It therefore includes both prehistoric and early medieval sites, religious as well as domestic, for sacralization is an imposed order that, by its very nature, is suspended in the harmonics of routine and religion. Similarly, I am not unaware of the bias generated by the fact that many of the archaeological sites referred to below are perforce close to the Gabhra, because unfortunately this is also the trajectory of the new motorway. Doubtless there are many other important archaeological sites awaiting discovery nearby, but this does not negate the observable fact that the selected monuments were positioned beside the river, and, in my opinion, deliberately so.

LOCH DA GABOR: THE STARTING POINT

The basic configuration of the landscape at Tara is well known to us, namely the twin hills of Tara and Skreen, smoothened over by glaciers that also left behind large and sinuous eskers. Skreen, or *Achall*, should perhaps be considered the cosmographical opposite or counter-point of Tara, for legend has it that it was to *Achall* that a blemished Cormac mac Airt was banished after being blinded in one eye by Óengus Gaíbuibthech's spear.²⁴ Francis John Byrne compares this account of the fall of a king with the Parzifal legend and its wasteland, which 'represents the state of a country whose sacral king has lost his power or virtue'.²⁵ In his poem about *Achall*, the poet Cináed úa hArtacáin (d. 975) uses the somewhat unusual

Patterns in comparative religion, p. 367, §140. ²⁴ K. Meyer (ed.), 'The expulsion of the Déssi' (1907). E. Bhreathnach, *Tara: a select bibliography* (1995), p. 96, no. 150, notes that the Rawlinson B 502 version of the text adds that '... it was not lawful [lucky] for a king with a blemish to sleep in Tara'. ²⁵ F.J. Byrne,

formula *Achall araicci Temair*, 'Achall which faces (that is, confronts) Tara', which Edel Bhreathnach too reads as meaning more than simply a topographical juxtaposition.²⁶ In fact, it may be a defining cosmographical motif. This may be the first and grandest ordering of the landscape, point and counter-point, seeing and unseeing, darkness and light.

Between these two hills is a short but comparatively broad valley through which flows the Gabhra, northwards from its source near Dunshaughlin. Thus, the Gabhra separates, but also connects, the 'seeing' of Tara from the 'unseeing' of *Achall*. The fluvio-morphological footprint of the ancient river-bed indicates that what is today a stream is but a remnant of the river that it once was; the land has been drained and in many cases the streams that feed it have been constrained into field ditches. As we have already seen, *Gabhra* is a place-name that comes laden with meaning in the context of early Irish kingship, notably the fact that it may also contain the same element as the name of the lake-residence of the early medieval kings of South Brega (Deiscert Breg), *Loch nGabor* ('Lake of the White Mare') or *Loch Da Gabor* ('Lake of the Two White Mares'), anglicized to Lagore.²⁷ The royal residence itself, a crannóg or lake dwelling, was built in the shallows immediately to the east of Dunshaughlin, 7km or so from the Hill of Tara. Historical, archaeological and toponymic evidence all suggest an enduring connection between Tara and Lagore, linking them in an *itinerarium sacrae* that may have followed the Gabhra river as it wound its way northwards into the valley between Tara and Skreen.

Even if there were no documentary sources, the structural and artefactual assemblages from this remarkable site would attest to its royal status. The crannóg was occupied between the seventh and tenth centuries AD, but the special pedigree of the location goes back a lot further. In the lowest levels of the site, the excavators came upon the body parts of more than sixty people: men, women, adolescents and an infant.²⁸ This section of the report makes for grim reading, the bodies having been variously decapitated and dismembered. It would appear that many if not all of the skulls belonging to the dismembered torsos were removed and disposed of somewhere else entirely. By contrast, a group of fourteen occiputs, cleaved from the backs of the skulls, was found in the north-east area of the site; this time it was the sub-cranial remains that were disposed of elsewhere. The excavator's suggestion that these were the bodies of crannóg-builders murdered during a surprise attack is quite unconvincing.²⁹ These are not the result of a frenzied attack but rather of systematic, ritualized dismemberment. Indeed, the

Irish kings (1973), p. 55. 26 E. Bhreathnach, 'Documentary evidence for pre-Norman Skreen' (1996), 37–41. 27 Ibid. See also Ní Chatháin, 'The cult of the horse', 124–5. 28 The human bone report by Howells & Woodbury (in H.O'N. Hencken, 'Lagore' (1950), 198–203) falls short of providing a definitive count of the minimum number of individuals, and is largely restricted to a commentary on the skulls. 29 Hencken,

possibility of there having been a long tradition of human sacrifice at Lagore is supported by radiocarbon dating of a selection of the human remains by the Discovery Programme's Lake Settlement Project, which reveals three phases of ritual deposition, the first dating from the early Bronze Age, the second from the early Iron Age and the third from the early medieval period.³⁰ We can be less assertive about the possibility of votive behavior surrounding the deposition of an anthropomorphic figurine of oak, carved in the form of a naked man, owing to the fact that it was retrieved from Phase 2, occupation levels.³¹ Regardless, given the late date of some of these human sacrifices, and the fact that some of the remains were retrieved from the foundation deposits of the crannóg itself, it might be argued that the royal residence was deliberately situated at a place steeped in ritual and cultic associations. The comparatively late date of this association of cult and kingship may also explain the nearby location of its very early Christian counterpoint in the form of Secundinus' fifth-century church in what is now the village of Dunshaughlin. The area around Lagore lake represents the southern boundary of the royal or sacred domain of Tara.³²

TRACING HISTORY: TRACING THE GABHRA RIVER

The Gabhra can be traced to within about 2km of Dunshaughlin (pl. 1), but appears not to be connected in any detectable way with *Loch nGabor* itself; indeed, I am not sure that the source of the Gabhra can any longer be pin-pointed on account of land improvement, drainage and culverting. Under such circumstances, all that can be said is that it seems to rise a little to the north of the village of Trevet. Its appearance here as no more than a field drain belies its erstwhile historical status, which is nowadays commemorated in the fact that it demarcates parts of the townland boundaries of Branstown, Collierstown, Ross, Baronstown and Skreen. Trevet, of course, has its own historical importance evidenced in the form of a church, a mound (probably a motte) and, nearby, a very impressive bi- or possibly tri-vallate ringfort that was surely also a significant residence.³³

Collierstown

Travelling northwards from Lagore, via Trevet, through gently rolling countryside, one arrives at Collierstown, some 2.5km east of Rath Maeve. Here, on a slight rise overlooking the Gabhra, the motorway archaeologists uncovered a very important

'Lagore', 39, 201. 30 I am indebted to Dr Christina Fredengren for supplying me with this information prior to its publication. 31 Hencken, 'Lagore', 168, pl. xvi. 32 C. Newman, 'Re-composing the archaeological landscape of Tara' (2005), pp 374–5. 33 The monastery at Trevet (Ir. Treóit) was associated with the Uí Chernaigh branch of Síl nÁedo Sláine: see T. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (2000),

early, enclosed burial ground or *fert* (referred to as Collierstown 1).³⁴ Periodization is evident stratigraphically and seems to be generally borne out in the radiocarbon dates – though identical radiocarbon dates were returned for burials 48, 58 and 1, representing Phases 1, 2 and 3 respectively. According to Rob O'Hara, during the first phase, nine burials were interred within a ditched enclosure, about 17m in diameter. The first burial (no. 48), radiocarbon-dated to AD422–596,³⁵ appears to have been that of an adult female, centrally placed and covered over by a low mound. In an interesting elaboration of the funerary ritual, burnt pig bone covered the woman's pelvic area and deposits of burnt clay and burnt hazel, cherry and oak were placed alongside the body.³⁶ Inviting comparison with human-and-animal burials in late Roman and sub-Roman Britain,³⁷ this burial may speak to the internationalization of north Leinster evident in the material record³⁸ and brings to mind the sacrificial funerary ritual of *porca praesentanea*. This mandatory sacrifice to the goddess Ceres was performed to cleanse the family of the deceased of the pollution arising from association with death, to legitimate the inheritor (who was required to make the sacrifice), and to sanctify or consecrate the tomb by setting it off as a *religione*, a 'place held in awe', creating what Barbetta Stanley Spaeth describes as a 'boundary between the world of the living and of the dead'.³⁹ In short, this was how tombs and burial grounds were created as religious phenomena. Ceres Mater is also associated with birth and in this context the position of the pig bones across the pelvis or womb area may be equally significant. That this foundation(?) burial is that of a woman is also of importance and calls to mind another remarkable female burial uncovered further north along the M3, on the north side of the River Boyne at Ardsallagh, in what is probably also a *fert*.⁴⁰ Radiocarbon-dated to AD539–655,⁴¹ this body was interred with a copper-alloy necklace and ferrule-like object with three forward-projecting roundels (broadly reminiscent of the 'fingers' of hand-pins) that had been mounted on an oak shaft described by the excavator as a 'staff'. This was positioned over the left shoulder. Though the wood type may be different, the

p. 271. 34 R. O'Hara, 'Collierstown 1, final report' (2009), 83ff. 35 1550±40BP (Beta-247001); *ibid.*, 18–19 and table 1. 36 Idiosyncrasy *per se* is not indicative of conversion-horizon burials but rather of an indifference towards burial rituals and liturgy on the part of the Church until the eighth/ninth centuries AD. See É. Rebillard, *The care of the dead* (trans. E. Trapnell Rawlings & J. Routier-Pucci, 2009). Rebillard quotes Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and paganism* (1997), p. 111, where he says: 'for centuries the pagan cult of the dead was a common part of Christianity'. 37 See n. 35, above. 38 Newman, 'Re-composing the archaeological landscape of Tara', pp 378–82; F. Gavin & C. Newman, 'Notes on Insular silver' (2007). See also E. O'Brien, *Burial practices reviewed* (1999), pp 179–84. 39 B. Stanley Spaeth, *The Roman goddess Ceres* (1995), pp 54–6. 40 Burial 29 in L. Clarke, 'Ardsallagh 1, final report' (2008), 9ff; L. Clarke & N. Carlin, 'From focus to locus' (2009). The Ardsallagh 1 ring-ditch dates from c.AD30–230 but was lined with stones between the late fourth and mid-sixth century, and there were thirty associated burials. Three further ring-ditches were found in close proximity to one another to the south, at Ardsallagh 2, one of which (ring-ditch 3) was also in use between the fifth and seventh centuries AD. 41 1460±40BP

possibility arises that this is related to the tradition of the *fé fleisc* or *fé crann*, a rod of yew used for measuring corpses and graves in pagan cemeteries. Bhreathnach speculates that this pagan Irish tradition was a precursor to the later Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian practice of placing wooden staffs (wands or rods) in graves, a phenomenon interpreted by Roberta Gilchrist as an amalgamation of Christian burial customs and older magic. Bhreathnach suggests that the *fé fleisc* referred originally to a sorcerer's wand, thus accounting for the fear associated with touching it.⁴² These cemeteries and contemporary settlement evidence, particularly at places like Dowdstown,⁴³ reveal the intensity of religious and settlement activity in the Tara landscape during the fourth to sixth centuries AD.

Sherds of Bii ware, dating from the late fifth and early sixth centuries AD,⁴⁴ were found in the enclosure ditch at Collierstown, but according to the excavator do not date its construction per se, which may have been as early as the first quarter of the fifth century. The pottery, which testifies to the high status of those buried here, may relate to the second phase of burials, marked by the digging of a slightly larger, internally banked, segmented enclosure, which may have been extended later by the addition of an arcuate ditch to the east. About twenty-six burials, again predominantly adults, belong to this phase. In addition to further finds of Bii ware, other imported ceramics associated with the second phase included Phocaean Red Slip ware and E ware. The presence of E ware, which is thought to have derived from western France,⁴⁵ has the potential of extending the chronology of the site into the seventh century, and this is supported by a radiocarbon date of AD 559–663 obtained from the fill of the Phase 3 ditch.⁴⁶ Also belonging to this phase was a small square enclosure or building (6m by 6m), with which were associated sherd(s) of B ware (unclassified) and a fragment of a ribbon-twisted armlet or neck-ring.

The large circular enclosure of the third phase, which may have been associated with twelve more burials, was converted into a possibly trapeze-shaped enclosure during the fourth phase, datable broadly to the later sixth or seventh century on the basis of an associated spiral-ringed, loop-headed ringed pin. Finally, O'Hara suggests that the small, centrally placed mound that alerted attention to the site in the first place, may have been created with the purpose of marking the location of the disused cemetery.⁴⁷ Though a somewhat novel explanation, it is not

(Beta-237060). ⁴² I am grateful to Edel Bhreathnach for alerting me to this possibility and for providing me with her paper, 'From fert(ac) to relic' (2010) prior to publication. See also R. Gilchrist, 'Magic for the dead?' (2008). ⁴³ L. Cagney & R. O'Hara, 'An early medieval complex at Dowdstown 2' (2009). ⁴⁴ A. Kelly, 'Imported pottery (PRSW/Bii ware)' (2009); idem, 'The discovery of Phocaean Red Slip Ware' (2010), 40. ⁴⁵ E. Campbell, *Continental and Mediterranean imports* (2007), pp 32–53. ⁴⁶ 1430±40BP (Beta-247011): O'Hara, 'Collierstown 1, final report', 47. ⁴⁷ R. O'Hara, 'A late Iron Age–early medieval

discordant with the concept of a historicized landscape where the commemorative imperative may have found expression in such ways.

The longevity of use of this cemetery accords with its identification as a dynastic or family burial ground, and illustrates how the cogency of a locus in this landscape was sustained over many generations. Passing, as it eventually must have, into collective historical memory may have altered the nature of its relevance but did not necessarily diminish the fact of it. It is interesting in the present context that O'Hara also notes that Collierstown 1 shares the same riverside position as ring-ditches excavated as part of the same project in Ross townland (namely Ross 2, immediately to the north of Collierstown 1) and Lismullin.⁴⁸ In fact, a small easterly meander in the river separates the townlands of Collierstown 1 and Ross 2, which lie respectively to the south and north of the river, with the result that the river here is flanked on either side by burial monuments in an arrangement that evokes comparison with the positions of the tombs of SS Peter and Paul on opposite banks of the Tiber. By their presence, observed Prudentius, were the banks of the Tiber thus consecrated.⁴⁹ Whereas Prudentius privileges the tombs of the Christian martyrs as sanctifiers of the banks of the Tiber, in the case of those placed alongside the Gabhra and, as we shall see, the Níth, the relationship might have been more co-dependent, a mutual sharing of sanctity.

Baronstown

Following the Gabhra northwards to Baronstown townland, we come upon the remains of a substantial, multi-period settlement dating from as early as the second century to the tenth century AD.⁵⁰ The remains were concentrated around a prominent bluff on the eastern bank of the Gabhra, and are referred to collectively as Baronstown 1. Consideration of the Iron Age phase at the site has been somewhat eclipsed by the extensive and high quality evidence for early medieval activity. The structural remains comprise two sub-circular enclosures (referred to as Areas 1 and 3) uncovered outside the area of the early medieval settlement and date to AD436–649 and AD390–550 respectively.⁵¹ The existence of an Iron Age phase places a question mark over the description of the inner annular enclosure as a 'ringfort' given the evidence that it might have been the earliest feature on site (the earliest fill dates from AD172–433),⁵² and the anomaly of its having no entrance. Moreover, on the northern side of the interior was a C-shaped enclosure about 14m wide, defined by a fosse that may have abutted a putative

enclosed cemetery' (2009), p. 85. ⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 97. ⁴⁹ *Dividit ossa duum Tybris sacer ex utraque ripa inter sacratum dum fluit sepulchra*: Prudentius, *Peristephanon*, 12. 29–30, in H.J. Thomson (ed.) *Prudentius: Crowns of martyrdom*, xii (1949), pp 323–7. ⁵⁰ S.J. Linnane & J. Kinsella, 'Baronstown 1, final report' (2009); idem, 'Military lords and defensive beginnings' (2009). ⁵¹ Linnane & Kinsella, 'Baronstown 1, final report', 32–3. ⁵² Ibid., 1710±50BP (Beta-241287).

internal bank. The scale of the fosse suggests that this was not a building, but there are nevertheless tantalizing hints, in the guise of an arcuate trench, of a building inside it. This manner of demarcation of internal space is alien to ringforts and merits closer scrutiny than is possible here. The nature of an earlier phase of use might be hinted at by the fact that what few fragments of human bone were found occurred only in the primary deposit in the fosse and in the area thus enclosed.

Whatever the date of its construction, this annulus was fully incorporated into the somewhat trapezoidal enclosure of the early medieval settlement, the causewayed entrance to which was on the east side, giving on to the Gabhra. The excavator suggests that the entrance to the annulus, however, took the form of a wooden bridge on the *south* side, evidenced by a series of roughly parallel trenches that may have held large horizontal timbers, or sleepers, for a corduroy-style bridge.⁵³ These sleeper trenches line up with a metalled surface inside the annulus, a juxtaposition that has heavily influenced the excavator's proposal that the entrance was here. Under these stones, close to the lip of the annulus, a horse's head had been buried, inverted, in a pit.⁵⁴

If this is indeed the entrance to this possibly Iron Age enclosure, the occurrence of the horse's skull under the 'threshold' means that anyone entering the site would have stepped over the inverted skull. In addition to raising the spectre of horse sacrifice or indeed a direct connection with the 'horse-headed' *gabhra*, this sequence of actions also recalls to mind the ritual significance attaching to crossing over *fertae* or burial mounds familiar to us in the context of *tellach*. This is what Thomas Charles-Edwards refers to as the 'legal sacrament' invoked for taking possession of land which involved leading incrementally increasing numbers of horses across boundary-burials onto the claimed land. In what is yet another example of the involvement of ancestors in regulating rights of ownership and succession, Charles-Edwards argues that the dead were relied upon to attest to the *bona fides* of the claimant's affiliation with the kin-group.⁵⁵ If we add to this Ger Dowling's analysis of the ritual significance of fosses, the possibility of ritually choreographed movement around this monument acquires considerably more substance.⁵⁶ Ó Suilleabháin refers to a tradition of horse skulls being placed under the floors of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Irish houses as an acoustic device,

⁵³ The logic informing the provision of entrances at Baronstown remains to be fully rationalized. According to the scheme suggested by the excavator, it was not possible to access the inner, annular enclosure from the trapezoidal garth or vice versa. That the sleeper trenches relate to the metalled surface and horse skull burial is likely but contemporaneity with the outer fosse is less convincing. ⁵⁴ Linnane & Kinsella, 'Baronstown 1, final report', 17–19; pit with skull is F1444: *ibid.*, 17, fig. 16, pl. 28. ⁵⁵ T. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship* (1993), pp 259–73. See also Bhreathnach, 'Transforming kingship and cult', pp 136, 143, *in this volume*. ⁵⁶ G. Dowling, 'The liminal boundary' (2006). Interestingly, Linnane & Kinsella, 'Baronstown 1, final report', 59, suggest that a wooden bowl (A008/O17:1284:1001) was ritually deposited

or sound-box, to amplify the noise of dancers' feet. While Mallory and McCormick query the efficacy of this, it is a tradition that raises the intriguing possibility that, in addition to the symbolism of placing one's foot where the skull lay, there may have been an acoustic, qua oracular, dimension also.⁵⁷

The date of the main fosse enclosing the Baronstown settlement is somewhat problematic. The excavators are undoubtedly correct to dismiss the early Neolithic radiocarbon date as residual – although this and the lithic assemblage speak of a Neolithic horizon at this location that should not be overlooked – and to refer instead a radiocarbon determination of AD540–650. A cattle bone from higher up in the fill yielded a date of AD880–1020, and is indicative of sustained activity into the tenth or eleventh century.⁵⁸

A very wide range of activities is evidenced in the artefact and ecofact assemblages; indeed, waterlogging of the fosses resulted in the preservation of an impressive amount of wooden objects and palaeobotanical material. There is an exceptionally long history of grain-drying on site, which is represented by many hearths/kilns, some of them figure-of-eight-shaped, ranging in date from the mid-third to the late eighth century AD,⁵⁹ some of the earlier ones possibly being associated with the two Iron Age enclosures mentioned above. The excavator's commentary on the relative paucity of the artefact assemblage, however, should be gauged against the practice on this and other road schemes of removing mechanically all of the topsoil from the sites, a methodology that runs the risk of compromising the entire stratigraphical record. Such as it is, the material assemblage is indicative of the comparatively high standing of the owner-occupants. Much has already been made of an ornithomorphic penannular brooch, but there has been insufficient reflection on the implications arising from the fact that a brooch of the same type was found nearby at Lagore crannóg.⁶⁰ While such brooches, with their large, 'Germanic' eye, were being produced at

in the fosse. ⁵⁷ S. Ó Suilleabháin, 'Foundation sacrifices' (1945); J. Mallory & F. McCormick, 'Horse skulls at Bay Farm Cottage' (1984). The possibility of amplified or unusual acoustics accompanying one's footfall resonates with the tradition of the declarative cry of the *Lia Fáil* ('Stone of Destiny') that occurs when the rightful king places his foot on the stone; see also E. Ettlinger, 'Oracular and speaking stones' (1962). D. Watts, *Religion in late Roman Britain* (1998), pp 47–8, refers to a number of instances of horse burials in Iron Age Britain, linking them to the cult of Epona, whom she characterises as a chthonic protector of the dead as well as an earth goddess. At Stanwick, a horse's head was placed on a male human interment at the back of the rampart (see C. Haselgrove, 'Stanwick' (1990)) in a location that is comparable to the burial at Baronstown. Watts suggests that the burial of four horses and a dog in the fosse enclosing the late-fourth century cemetery at Dunstable (see C.L. Matthews, 'A Romano-British inhumation cemetery' (1981)) implies a return to pre-Roman rites. ⁵⁸ 1460±40BP (Beta-252086) and 1090±40BP (Beta-252084) respectively: Linnane & Kinsella, 'Baronstown 1, final report', 9; *pace* their suggestion, however, the first of these is not an Iron Age date. ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, table 4. ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pl. 58, A008/017:1009:13; Hencken, 'Lagore', 61–4, fig. 10 (a); R. Ó Floinn, 'Irish metalwork' (2009), pp 240–5.

the Dalriadic caput at Dunadd, Argyllshire,⁶¹ the specimens from Lagore and Baronstown are of a slimmer, more naturalistic variety.

Another marker of social rank is a fragmentary discoidal pin pendant from Baronstown 1, which was found in the inner fosse. It is of a well-known type that is also represented at Lagore.⁶² The Baronstown specimen, however, is quite remarkable because it is decorated with the image of a man flanked by two beasts rampant, which is a familiar and popular symbol throughout early medieval Europe and the eastern Mediterranean. It is usually read as the Old Testament scene of Daniel in the Lion's Den but might also represent St Menas, who is sometimes depicted between two camels. This is a unique and sophisticated object that testifies to both the wealth and the religion of its owner.

Between Skreen 3 and Baronstown are five locations where the archaeological remains were more ephemeral and these are referred to collectively as Skreen 1 and 2.⁶³ Dating from the later Neolithic and middle Bronze Age, the features included the remains of post-built buildings, occupation areas and one partial cremation pit. The site referred to as Skreen 3 is structurally impressive and complex, and is located to the north of Baronstown. The principal features are two superimposed U-shaped enclosures; the second being a later version of the first. Though opening downslope towards the west, in the direction of the nearby Gabhra, they both share an east-facing entrance, and span the middle to late Bronze Age period (c.1000–800BC). The remains of at least two elliptical buildings occur within the enclosure, one (Structure 2) being roughly centrally placed.⁶⁴

Earlier Bronze Age activity, represented by pits and post-holes, is associated with an assemblage of Beaker pottery. There is also evidence for later activity in the form of kilns, two of which are the same figure-of-eight shape as encountered at Baronstown. The kilns range in date from the first to the late sixth century AD. One of them is possibly more aptly described as a fire-pit and contained a fragment of an adult male cranium, though the specialist report does not specify which part. The 'kiln' is dated to AD410–580, and the skull fragment was deposited after the last fire had been lit.⁶⁵ The excavator cites two other cases of human bone occurring in kilns, namely, at Raystown, Co. Meath, and Corbally, Co. Kildare,⁶⁶ and comments that such may be a measure of disrespect for the deceased. An alternative explanation is offered by the comparison that exists between this and a cranial fragment burial at Raffin Fort, Co. Meath.⁶⁷ While the

⁶¹ A. Lane & E. Campbell, *Excavations at Dunadd* (2000), pp 114–18. ⁶² Linnane & Kinsella, 'Baronstown 1, final report', pl. 57, A008/017:1045:2; R.B.K. Stevenson, 'Brooches and pins' (1987); Hencken, 'Lagore', 76, fig. 18. ⁶³ T. O'Neill, 'Skreen 1, final report' (2008); idem & R. O'Hara, 'Skreen 2, final report' (2008). ⁶⁴ T. O'Neill, 'Skreen 3, final report' (2009). ⁶⁵ 1570±40BP (Beta-241314); O'Neill, 'Skreen 3, final report', 12–13; the fire-pit is numbered F299. ⁶⁶ M. Scaver, 'Through the mill' (2006), pp 78–9, fig. 5. The burial is radiocarbon dated AD 410–570 (1574±35BP: Wk-16819); R. Tobin, 'Excavations at Corbally' (2003). ⁶⁷ C. Newman, M. O'Connell, M. Dillon & K. Molloy, 'Interpretation

skull fragment at Raffin dates from between the late second century BC and mid-second century AD, the pit was dug and the fires lit in it sometime between the early third and late fifth century AD (more likely towards the second half of this date range). The pit at Raffin had witnessed a succession of fires and re-linings, leaving behind charcoal and heat-reddened soil lenses. Unlike the Skreen 3 burial, however, the one at Raffin had a squat standing stone placed on top of it. The picture emerging at Raffin is of a ritual sequence in which the pit was scorched ceremoniously before the skull fragment was placed in it. The age of the skull at the time of its burial suggests that it was a religious object and that the ritual surrounding its interment may have been directed towards transference of its magic to the stone overhead. Though the burial at Raystown differs in being a full skeletal inhumation, burial in a fire-pit or 'kiln' is a unifying motif. Moreover, these are not isolated burials. The one at Raffin is part of a larger religious complex, and the Raystown specimen is adjacent to an early enclosed cemetery of the same type as at Collierstown 1. Raystown lies between Ratoath and Ashbourne, to the east of Lagore, and is bounded by the water system draining eastwards from it, known as *An Gabhar*.⁶⁸

The Níth river

The first major meander in the course of the Gabhra occurs north of Skreen 3 (pl. 2). Here, as the river turns westwards, it enfolds a large and prominently sited ring-barrow,⁶⁹ and what may be the remains of a larger enclosure surrounding it. On the north bank are the remains of a souterrain that testifies to early medieval settlement hereabouts. From a monumental point of view, however, the dominant feature here is Rath Lugh; perched on a high esker ridge from where it commands this entire stretch of the valley, Rath Lugh is a great, 120m-diameter earthwork comprising a large, raised platform surrounded by a fosse and outer bank. Taking full advantage of a very steep gradient of the esker, it was designed to police the Gabhra valley. As a monument type, it is difficult to date but I have suggested elsewhere that it is one of a number of earthworks (including Ringlestown Rath and Rathmiles and the Riverstown linear earthwork) built to demarcate and defend the western and northern approaches to Tara.⁷⁰ On the basis of what little comparanda exist, I have suggested that this *cordon sanitaire* may date from the first few centuries AD. We have no knowledge of when or how this monument came to be named 'Rath Lugh', but the association of this pan-Celtic deity with a monument in this landscape is clearly telling us something. In the absence of

of charcoal and pollen data' (2006). ⁶⁸ M. Seaver, 'Run of the mill?' (2005). ⁶⁹ C. Newman, *Tara* (1997), p. 188 and fig. 67; should this now be interpreted as a cemetery settlement or *fert*? ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 191–206; *idem*, 'The making of a "royal site"' (1998), 138. See also G. Dowling, 'The architecture of power', this volume.

evidence, it would be foolish to write this toponym off as the work of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century fantasist, given the endurance of the cult of Lug into the early medieval period, as witnessed in place-names and text.⁷¹

The relict bed of the Gabhra is visible on aerial photography, showing that it once swept a lot closer to the foot of the esker than its present course suggests. Here, directly opposite Rath Lugh, and overlooked by the ring-barrow, is where the Níth – the river issuing from the spring known as *Nemnach*, on the Hill of Tara – joins the Gabhra. Absolute certainty on the point of confluence is denied at present by the fact that the Níth has been tamed here in the more recent past and the footprint of its original bed is difficult to follow on the available aerial photographs. What we can be certain of, however, is that like the Gabhra, the Níth is also tracked by monuments. Sharing a common etymology with *nemeton*, *Nemnach* is the sacred spring of the Hill of Tara. According to *dindshenchas*, it is where Cormaic mac Airt, king of Tara, had the first water mill in Ireland built for his bondswoman, Ciarnait.⁷² The possibility that *Nemnach* was a cultic spring is suggested not only in the toponym but also in *dindshenchas*, where it is recorded that a mound or *síd* once marked the site of the spring, and that nearby were three stones representing the remains of *Tech Mairisiu*.⁷³ R.A.S. Macalister was also sympathetic to the possible cultic significance of this spring, and his suggestion that the three stones (sadly now gone) near the mound were originally part of a stone circle makes sense.⁷⁴ The sub-text of Macalister's commentary is that these monuments commemorate the significance once attaching to this spring. The significance of the River Níth, in the context of the sacralized landscape of Tara, is that it issues from the Hill of Tara itself. As a manifestation of the sovereignty goddess, liquid issuing or springing up from Tara is *of* the goddess herself, it is holy water, emanating from her divine body. The toponym *Níth* occurs in river names elsewhere, for example, the Rivers Dee (in north Co. Meath) and Nith (in western Scotland). Though its etymology is somewhat obscure, it may be derived from Indo-European **neigw-t-*, Sanskrit *nikta-*, 'washed, purified', Old Irish *necht* (see the god *Nechton*; Welsh *Nwythan*). In this case, its root is verbal 'to wash, to cleanse' (as in Modern Irish *nigh*, Old Irish *nigid*, 'washes'). The personal name **Nechton*, popular among the kings of Scotland and also of the Shannon/Burren region, contains a participial formation from the verbal root and means 'clean, pure, white'. On the other hand, it could be from Indo-European **new-*, Old Irish *nua*, Latin *nōvus*, 'new, lively, vigorous, fresh' (compare Old Irish *níth*, 'conflict, anger'), like the Scottish Nith.⁷⁵ Of further interest on this theme is the fact that,

71 See, for example, B. Lacey, 'Three "royal sites" in County Donegal', pp 157–8 and R. Schot, 'From cult centre to royal centre', this volume; D. Mac Giolla Easpaig 'Placenames and early settlement' (1995).

72 *MD*, i, pp 20–3, ll. 107–20. 73 *Ibid.*, pp 20–1, ll. 97–102. 74 R.A.S. Macalister, *Tara: a pagan sanctuary* (1931), pp 7–12. 75 I am very grateful to John Wilkinson and Alan James for supplying me with

as they emerge from the Gabhra valley and pass beyond Blundelstown, the combined waters of the Níth and the Gabhra meet the River Skane and turn northwards, flowing into the Boyne at Dowdstown/Ardsallagh. Coupled with the goddess Bóinn, Nechtan is the god of the Boyne. Moreover, the main strongholds in *Mag mBrega* listed in the *Book of Leinster* version of the *Táin* include *Dún meic Nechtain Scéne*, 'the Fort of the sons of Nechtan Scéne', where Cú Chulainn slew three monsters who emerged from the mouth of the Skane. The Skane runs along the western side of the Hill of Tara and is overlooked by the impressive hillfort known as Ringlestown Rath, which may be *Dún meic Nechtain Scéne*.⁷⁶

An important quality of landscapes associated with sacral kingship is that they are endowed with topographical features that can be conceived of as symbols of divine world order, for they lend themselves to rituals of cyclical regeneration and the assertion of human participation in the order of being. Re-imagining and using a landscape shaped by nature presents a unique set of challenges, especially if it is to be used, in its totality, as a theatre for ritual. We have seen how nature's hand has been supplemented by the creation of monuments and significant places along the course of the Gabhra. In the case of the Níth, we witness how nature can sometimes meet us more than half way: the location of the source of the Níth on the Hill of Tara; its course down the eastern flank of the hill; and its confluence with the Gabhra are aspects that establish its iconographical credentials.

We have seen that a measure of the significance attaching to the Gabhra is found in the types of monuments built alongside it, and the same is true of the Níth. The Heritage Council/Discovery Programme's recent LiDAR survey gives us an invaluable insight into the original path of the upper course of the Níth. Over the first two or three hundred metres, it meanders quite close to a remarkable complex of figure-of-eight-shaped enclosures in the townland of Belpere. Represented only as crop marks, they were first photographed in the 1960s but were not spotted again until 2006. The new photographs confirm their survival despite years of ploughing, and allow us to pin-point them with greater accuracy. Combined, the LiDAR survey and the new photographs demonstrate that these structures were situated, deliberately I would suggest, on level ground close to the Níth. The figure-of-eight is a leitmotif of religious and elite architecture in later prehistoric and indeed early medieval Ireland. These specimens find their match in respect of size and ground plan among Iron Age buildings at Dún Ailinne, Co. Kildare, and at Emain, Co. Armagh, two of the sister royal-cult sites of later prehistoric Ireland.⁷⁷

this analysis and commentary, and to Edel Bhreathnach for her observations on the Irish dimension. See J.G. Wilkinson, 'Deep thoughts on the Devon, and a fresh look at the Nith' (2002). 76 *TBC* II, p. 29, ll. 1059–60. See Newman, *Tara*, p. 198ff; M. Ní Bhrolcháin, *An introduction to early Irish literature* (2009), pp 119–20. 77 See, for example, C.J. Lynn, 'Knockaulin and Navan' (1991).

From here, the Níth flows into what are today the grounds of Tara Hall, gathering in a natural sump of marshy ground. About 30m east of this, across dry ground, is a deep, spring-fed pool of water, about 20–25m across, that appears to have been at least partially embanked.⁷⁸ In this respect, it looks quite similar to the King's Stables, one of the sacred pools associated with Emain, and may have fulfilled an equivalent religious purpose. From this point on, the Níth descends into a deep, steep-sided glen that slices through the eastern flank of the Hill of Tara, extending eastwards as far as the N3 road. Overlooking the glen from the south, about half way along it, is a mound. Dilapidated though it may now be, estimates of its original size and shape suggest that it may have been a passage tomb. Excavations by Rynne and Prendergast unearthed what appears to have been a souterrain inserted into it sometime during the early medieval period.⁷⁹ This mound is the last in a lineation of mounds of similar size stretching from here to the Boyne at Ardmulchan Bridge.⁸⁰ One of them occurs in the grounds of Lismullin House and will feature later in the discussion. From this mound on the glen-side, the line of mounds dog-legs towards the summit of the Hill of Tara, ending with the Mound of the Hostages.⁸¹

The Níth passes under the N3 whereupon it flows across gently inclined pastureland towards the Gabhra about 700m to the east. From this point, the Gabhra turns in a broad, north-easterly arc, though still punctuated by smaller meanders. One of these, around 300m or so north of where the Níth joins the Gabhra, defines the western side of a most extraordinary natural amphitheatre at Lismullin. Here, in the bolus of the amphitheatre, the road builders uncovered an early Iron Age temple.⁸² The structure, built around the later fifth/early fourth century BC, appears to have been for open-air worship and comprised two concentric enclosures: an outer, double ring of posts (80m in diameter) and an inner, single post ring (16m in diameter). These were connected by a 4m-wide post corridor, the point of ingress being a break in the eastern side of the outer enclosure marked by a rectangular arrangement of four large posts. There is some evidence of an earlier, slightly smaller enclosure with a short, parallel-sided entrance corridor.

This is a design that is not unfamiliar in the repertoire of prehistoric religious architecture, even if every known expression is in some way unique. Broadly contemporary examples are known from other cultic royal sites, namely Navan Fort (Emain), Knockaulin (Dún Ailinne) and Rathcroghan (Cruachain);⁸³ the difference in this instance is that the monument is situated on low ground (in fact

⁷⁸ Newman, *Tara*, p. 242. ⁷⁹ E. Rynne & E. Prendergast, 'Two souterrains in Co. Meath' (1953).

⁸⁰ G. Eogan, 'A probable passage grave site' (1974). ⁸¹ Newman, 'Re-composing the archaeological landscape of Tara', p. 377. ⁸² A. O'Connell, 'Lismullin 1, final report' (2009); idem, 'Director's first findings' (2009). ⁸³ See J. Waddell, J. Fenwick & K. Barton, *Rathcroghan* (2009).

in a valley) and not on a hilltop, as is the case elsewhere. Aidan O'Connell is undoubtedly correct in suggesting that locating it in the middle of a hollow allows the natural lie of the land to mimic or replicate the effect of the embankments surrounding the other specimens.⁸⁴ Indeed, this is a textbook example of how nature and culture can be harmonized and fused.

The question of the role that this monument played in the sacral landscape of Tara is given careful consideration by O'Connell,⁸⁵ but boils down, inexorably, to the question: why is a monument-type that is thus far known only to occur at the highest point or on hilltops of cultic royal complexes in this case found at the foot of the hill? The short answer is that our perceptions of 'centre', coupled with excavation bias, are probably the most dominant force informing our expectations concerning the siting of these monuments: this is where we have concentrated our efforts. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine's commentary of the complex dynamics operating in the sacral landscape of Dullu⁸⁶ is relevant here because it reveals the virtually impenetrable, layered fusion of geography and religion at play in such landscapes; to wit we are reminded that archaeology alone will never reveal the inner dynamics of such landscapes in later prehistoric Ireland. The individualistic impulse is in constant attendance and the gravitational pull exerted by natural phenomena like the Lismullin amphitheatre can be as definitive as the prescriptions of arcane religious beliefs. While the concentration of monuments on the crown of the Hill of Tara testifies to its importance in this landscape, it does not necessarily earn for them cosmogonical exclusivity nor indeed permanent centrality. Cautioning against the tendency to equate all 'centres' with Eliade's 'world mountain', Smith reminds us that the 'language of "centre" is pre-eminently political and only secondarily cosmological. It is a vocabulary that stems, primarily, from archaic ideologies of kingship and the royal function. In any particular tradition, it may or may not be tied to cosmological and cosmogonic myths'. Commenting on the situation in the Near East, he observes that the 'power of kingship is such that it constitutes a place as central sheerly by being there'.⁸⁷ Moreover, as has been observed on many occasions, the conception and configuration of place can change quite substantially over time; the most important point is that the Lismullin monument is part of this landscape which confers upon it superior importance.

The sweep of land between Rath Lugh and the temple at Lismullin boasts a very impressive range of monuments of different periods. Despite the fact that this represents only the area exposed for the road construction, this was clearly a place of special significance from at least the fourth millennium BC.⁸⁸ Prehistoric activity is predominantly religious and funerary in nature, becoming gradually more

⁸⁴ O'Connell, 'Lismullin 1, final report', 98. ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 107–9. ⁸⁶ M. Lecomte-Tilouine, 'Imperial snake and eternal fires', this volume. ⁸⁷ Smith, *To take place*, pp 17, 22. ⁸⁸ For summary, see O'Connell,



industrially-orientated throughout the early medieval period. Fire-pits and kilns occur throughout this area and seem to date from all periods. Occupying the north-eastern lip of the amphitheatre is a souterrain, the capstone of the end chamber of which is a reused megalith decorated with passage tomb art.⁸⁹ O'Connell writes of the impracticality of moving such a large stone from any of the putative passage tombs nearby, such as the one in the grounds of Lismullin House overlooking the natural amphitheatre from the opposite bank of the Gabhra. Logic suggests, therefore, that the stone must have come from the east side of the river, implying the former existence here of a tomb. One is reminded once again of the juxtaposition of burial monuments on opposite banks of the Gabhra at Collierstown/Ross (see above); the same might have been the case here at Lismullin. The frequency with which decorated and inscribed stones are incorporated into souterrains suggests that the simple exploitation of stones-to-hand is not the full story; Waddell has demonstrated that such stones occur at significant places in souterrains,⁹⁰ which suggests to me that this propensity is itself analogous to the processes of sacralization unfolding across the whole landscape, characterized by the fusion of ancient and modern.

South-east of the Iron Age temple at Lismullin was a series of large, enigmatic pits dated to the early Bronze Age on the basis of associated sherds of Beaker pottery and a fragmentary stone macehead. A few metres to the east of these was a ring-ditch that may also date from this period.⁹¹ Geophysical survey in the field adjacent to the excavated portion of the Iron Age temple revealed the presence of another ring-ditch on the southern lip of the natural amphitheatre, which was a feature that evidently attracted the attention of successive generations.

From this point on, the River Gabhra begins a long, gentle swing towards the west. At Dillon's Bridge, it crosses the foot of the Hill of Tara, where it is overlooked by a prominent earthwork known as Rathmiles. The ground also rises to the north of the river, though at a less steep incline, into the townlands of Philpotstown and Dowdstown. If the general north-south alignment of the *Tech Midchúarta* is indicative of the direction from which one ascended the Hill of Tara,⁹² then we might envisage the final leg of the journey to have started from around here. Though a wide range of archaeological features was unearthed ahead of the construction of the Blundelstown Interchange, the record is dominated by evidence of Neolithic activity comprising both settlement and burial. At Castletown Tara 1, for instance, on the northern slopes of the Hill of Tara, were the remains of a possible Neolithic cremation-pit cemetery. Nearby was an early

⁸⁹ 'Lismullin 1, final report', 120ff. ⁹⁰ O'Connell, 'Director's first findings', ill. 2.11. ⁹¹ J. Waddell, '*Uaimh na gCat* and the Otherworld' (forthcoming). ⁹² O'Connell, 'Lismullin 1, final report', F1501, pl. 23. ⁹³ C. Newman, 'Procession and symbolism at Tara' (2007).



medieval period settlement. At Blundelstown 2 and 3, on the opposite side of the Gabhra, was a concentration of burnt mounds also dating from the late Neolithic.

CONCLUSIONS

Like the myths and religions that give birth to them, sacral landscapes evolve over time. Participation in the historical narrative is an invitation to each generation to contribute to the palimpsest of such places, to join the roll-call of history or to re-conceive and change what has been inherited, even to the extent of disengaging from the past and renouncing the legitimation and authentication offered by genuine historical continuity. However, if disregard for the historical authentication of authority ever manifests in the archaeological record, as it surely does in the case of the M3 motorway, it is not apparent in the ancient sacral landscape of Tara; instead monuments of different periods seem to speak of memorialization, renewal, continuity and the preservation of tradition. So many of the excavated sites are multi-period or are of long duration, and in many cases the observances of rituals are in evidence, preserving the hierophanic nature of these places. This essay attempts to visualize the cosmogonical proportions of the broader religious backdrop of such rituals.

The sacralization of a landscape occurs and operates at different scales. Over-arching the suite of daily and occasional rituals, which are sometimes traceable in the archaeological record, is a grand conception that contextualizes and enriches all behaviour. Thus, in the case of Tara, a topography comprising two almost identical hills (Tara and Skreen) separated by a valley through which flows a river (the Gabhra) is conceived of as a cosmography of binary opposites united by the cosmogonic(?) sovereignty goddess who flows, literally and metaphorically, between them. Though manifesting in the form of a river, the equinity of the goddess is preserved in the toponym *Gabhra* that, *inter alia*, evokes deep traditions of creation and sacral kingship linked through marriage to a horse-goddess. The enduring sanctity of the Gabhra is perhaps reflected in the nature of many of the sites and monuments built alongside it. Likewise, the additional symbolic strata attendant on the fact that the sacred river is fed by springs issuing from both hills seem to have been similarly acted upon, as evidenced in the case of the Níth. The correspondence between the hierophanies, the monuments and the rivers speaks to the alignment of human institutions with the cosmicized landscape. The heightened symbolic status of the Níth and its source (*Nemnach*) on the Hill of Tara may be related to the visibility of the legacy of prehistoric religious and funerary monuments everywhere on the hill. While there are tantalizing hints of prehistoric monuments on the Hill of Skreen, the contrast between these and the

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multiplicity of monuments on the Hill of Tara is striking, and in and of itself is bound to have contributed considerably to the religious and political potency of this place.

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