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THE "BATTLE" OVER TARA AND THE M3 MOTORWAY IS THE CORE THEME OF THIS ISSUE WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE DEBATE, INCLUDING THE MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT, MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL, TARAWATCH, NRA, THE IRISH TIMES, UCG AND OTHERS.
Tara retains a unique cultural resonance for Ireland and for people of Irish descent throughout the world. Though its archaeological legacy is of enormous significance, it is the wealth of early historical, mythological and legendary sources associated with Tara in addition to its singular importance to Irish language, folklore and place-names studies that truly sets this place apart.

According to some of the earliest literary sources, Tara was chief amongst the ancient prehistoric royal centres of Ireland, serving as a major ritual sanctuary before and after the coming of Christianity; a place of royal inauguration and the seat of the high kings of Ireland. Indeed, a number of these documents record that Tara, in recognition of the central political and symbolic role that it continued to command well into the historic period, was the central focus of five major roadways (the Slige Asail, Slige Chualann, Slige Dálraid, Slige Mór and Sligh Maellasra) which were said to have radiated to the furthest reaches of the island.

Over the intervening centuries the political focus has shifted and today all roads lead to Dublin. Like the spokes of a great inscribed wheel converging on the M50, one of these spokes, three major motorways (the M1, M2 and M3) will traverse Meath. The one currently under construction, the M5, will bisect the royal demesne of Tara.

Tara has been the focus of State-funded archaeological and historical research since the Discovery Programme was founded in 1992. This work has yielded a wealth of new and exciting material, the results of which are published in numerous peer-reviewed articles and books (eg Conor Newman’s book Tara, An Archaeological Survey published in 1997 and Edel Breathnach’s...
The significance of Tara’s archaeological and historical landscape is undisputed amongst scholarly and academic circles; indeed it was recognised as such long before the current route for the M3 motorway was chosen as the “preferred route” option. It has been demonstrated conclusively, both archaeologically and historically, that the cluster of unusual earthworks on the hilltop of Tara is but the nucleus of a well-defined, integrated complex of archaeological monuments extending into the surrounding landscape, a place universally acknowledged as one of Europe’s foremost cultural landscapes.

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

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

In its immediate hinterland are the physical remains of related prehistoric barrows, cemeteries and ritual sites such as the series of earthmounds in the Gabbhra valley, the barrow cemetery of Skyne, the unusual cemetery of mixed burial tradition at Collinstown (some 2000m to the southeast of the Hill), the vast embanked enclosures of Rath Meeve and Riverstown (situated 1600m and 1000m to the south and west of the Hilltop summit respectively), or the post-built ceremonial enclosures with central temple at Lismullin (1600m to the northeast).

The common settlements and high-status royal residences of those who lived in its shadow, who worshiped and ruled over Tara, were kept remote from the Hilltop sanctuary. It appears, therefore, that Tara is quite literally a necropolis, a “city of the dead”, and not a citadel, as some had speculated. The complexity of conjoined enclosures noted from aerial photography at Belpere, for instance (situated approximately 810m to the southeast of the hilltop), or the extensive multi-period earthwork remains at Barmastown (lying midway between the Hills of Tara and Skyne) are likely to represent the remains of high-status settlements.

At some stage in late prehistory the western and northern limits of this broader surrounding hinterland were more clearly demarcated by a series of defensive earthworks and fortifications. This remains of a substantial double-tiered linear earthwork, situated about 1000m to the west of the Hill of Tara, can be traced for a distance of some 1600m. Reinforcing this defensive earthwork is a semi-circular array of equi-spaced fortifications (among them Ringletown Rath, Rathnilies and Rathlagh) strategically placed to defend the western, northern and north-eastern flanks of the Hill and control passage through the Gabbhra valley.

Together these monuments define a buffer-zone defending what was, at this stage, a major political, religious and symbolic powerbase from potential military incursions from the north. By the Early Historic period (from around the 6th century AD) the limits of this zone had become more formally defined as the ferrens ri, or royal demesne, of the kings of Tara. As if proof were needed of the significance of the Gabbhra valley and the connection between the Hill of Tara and its sister hill of Skyne, a charter dating to AD 1285 mentions the existence of a “royal roadway that goes from the manor of Skyne to Tara” (regulm viam qua inu de villa de Scyrn versus Taurnagh).

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

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

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