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PROCESSION AND SYMBOLISM AT TARA: ANALYSIS OF TECH MIDCHÚARTA (THE 'BANQUETING HALL') IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SACRAL CAMPUS

Summary. *New analysis explores Tech Midchúarta (the 'Banqueting Hall') from the point of view of a sacral, processional approach to the summit of the Hill of Tara, the pre-eminent cult and inauguration site of prehistoric and early medieval Ireland. It is suggested that aspects of its architectural form symbolize the liminal boundary between the human world and the Otherworld of Tara, and that in so far as Tech Midchúarta is also designed to control and manipulate how the ceremonial complex is disclosed to the observer, it assembles the existing monuments into one, integrated ceremonial campus. It is argued that Tech Midchúarta is one of the later monuments on the Hill of Tara and that it may date from the early medieval period. Using the evidence of documentary sources and extant monuments, a possible processional route from Tech Midchúarta to Ráith na Ríg is described.*

> *Immráidem fós Long na Láech*
> *frisanabar Barc Ban mbáeth.*
> *Tech na Fían, nirbo long lec,*
> *co cethri doirsib deac.*
>
> Let us consider too the Hall of the Heroes
> which is called the Palace of Vain Women;
> the House of Warriors, it was no mean hall,
> with fourteen doors.

(Gwynn 1903–35, Metrical Dindshenchas III, 18)

INTRODUCTION

Mac Giolla Easpaig's recent definitive commentary on the meaning of the Irish word for Tara, *Temair*, tackles a conundrum that has exercised scholars and commentators for centuries (see Mac Giolla Easpaig 2005; see also Bhreathnach 1995, 34–5). Almost a thousand years ago the glossator of *Sanas Cormaic*, usually identified as Cormac mac Cuilennáin, bishop-king of Cashel (ob. AD 908), propounded two alternative derivations. The first was that *Temair* derives from the compound *Tea-múr*, meaning the wall or burial mound of Tea, wife of Éremón, king of

the mythological Milesians. The second suggestion was that it derives from a corruption of the Greek *teomora* meaning *conspicio*, a conspicuous place (Meyer 1912, 105 §1212; Mac Giolla Easpaig 2005, 424). This latter is further developed in the Middle Irish topographica known as *Dindshenchas Erenn* (the Lore of the Placenames of Ireland; see Gwynn 1903–35) where it is reported that '"Temair" is the name of every lofty and conspicuous spot whereon are dwellings or strong keeps' (Gwynn 1903–35, *Metrical Dindshenchas* I, 10). Although described by Bhreathnach as being equally fictitious (in etymological terms), considering the panoramic views from the top of the hill (see Fenwick 1997) this second derivation makes common sense and will not easily be supplanted in the public mind! As Lloyd Praeger lamented:

> 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. (Praeger 1937, 281–2)

Regardless of the fact that the name means something quite different,[1] the vistas to and from the Hill of Tara are, and always have been, integral to the experience of Tara. The attention of today's visitor to the Hill of Tara is still drawn – rather too hastily it must be said (see Newman 2007, 66–7) – away from the monument complex on the summit towards the idyllic fields and parklands around it. Though the view is suitably impressive, and tends to underscore the elevated status of Tara for a contemporary audience, what is sacrificed by dwelling exclusively on it is a sense of the convergence of space and iconography in the complex itself; a sense of how the monuments performed collectively as a landscape of ceremony and how this was achieved by careful control of the views of the monuments on the Hill of Tara from within the complex itself. Understanding how this has been achieved allows us to recapture an important aspect of the collective symbolism of the monuments. This paper is, therefore, concerned not so much with Praeger's *Aussichtpunkt* as with the ceremonial landscape on the summit of the hill (Fig. 1). From an avowedly phenomenological perspective, it examines how this landscape unfolds before someone processing in and among the monuments themselves. Looking at Tara through the 'window', as it were, of Tech Midchúarta (the so-called Banqueting Hall) it examines how this one monument harnesses history, mythology and symbolism in the creation of an entrance approach worthy of this most sacred of arenas and how, in so doing, it plays a central role in the composition of a royal, ceremonial campus. In this sense, it also goes some way towards addressing a dilemma articulated most recently by Charles Doherty when he commented that 'Running through the work of scholars is the difficulty of relating the symbolical associations of Tara with contemporary reality and in particular the relationship between the institution of the high-kingship of Ireland and the site' (Doherty 2005, 12). It will be argued that as both the final, processional approach to the summit of the hill, and as one of the later monuments to have been built there,[2] Tech Midchúarta brings a unique perspective to the core of this complex. It was

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1   According to Mac Giolla Easpaig (2005, 448) 'the placename Temair derives from Indo-European *tem-r-i-s, and also reflects the e-grade of the root *tem-'cut', along with – r-suffix. The name would therefore signify an area that [had] been cut off, undoubtledly one that had been demarcated for sacred purposes.'

2   In *Tara: an archaeological survey* (Newman 1997, 150–3) the suggestion was made that Tech Midhchúarta might be a type of Cursus monument, and that it was constructed very early in the history of Tara, during the later Neolithic. This was based on the broad comparisons that exist between it and Cursus monuments in both Britain and Ireland, and on the fact that like Irish Embanked Enclosures, which have been dated by Stout (1991) to the

Figure 1
Earthworks on the summit of the Hill of Tara, looking south. (Photo: Eamonn O'Donoghue, Autumn 2005)

designed to choreograph one's visual, physical and emotional encounter with the monuments and the landscape, in order to unite all of the existing remains into a distinct, symbolically charged spatial and monumental composition, thus revealing how Tara was perceived, and used, as a ceremonial theatre during the first few centuries of the early medieval period.

TARA AS A LANDSCAPE OF CEREMONY

Early prehistoric monuments notwithstanding, the wealth of monuments of later prehistoric and early historic date at Tara renders it a comparatively readable landscape of this period (Newman 2005). As a ceremonial space, Tara was a blending of natural topography and monuments, ancient and new, where the location *and* the architecture of the monuments were predicated by the desire to create a grand arena, one that lent itself to high ceremony and generated a symbolically meaningful place with its own distinct iconography. An encounter with this *temenos* in early medieval times followed established ceremonial pathways, prescribed by complex taboos (see Breathnach 1996, 70–3) that determined, *inter alia*, the pace and the sequence in which the landscape was disclosed. Approaching Tara was nothing short of a peregrination, mediated through an itinerary of traditional ceremonies and rituals at special, historical monuments and places, the lighting of fires (op. cit., 69) and, no doubt, the recounting

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later Neolithic, the banks of Tech Midchúarta derive from material scarped from the interior surface: this in contrast to the technique of creating an embankment from an adjacent and comparatively deep and definable ditch. This observation remains valid but is no longer seen to be sufficient to date the monument. It was also suggested that there might be a low, ploughed-out terminal bank across the south end of Tech Midhchúarta, a feature that would not be unusual among Cursus monuments in Britain and *Viereckschanzen* on the continent. The discovery, however, of the Ditched Pit Circle has demonstrated that the putative transverse bank across the south end is a *trompe l'oeil*, created by the very slight linear depression of the relict ditch of the Ditched Pit Circle as it passes across this end of Tech Midchúarta.

of tribal myths and legends. Conscious of the ever-present past, setting foot on the Hill of Tara itself would have been an occasion of high religious intensity and historical drama, and those whose responsibility it was to stage, or manage, such an event would have had to consider carefully the interplay of the ceremonies and the physical surroundings, especially the existing monuments. From time to time, achieving the right symbolical formula would have necessitated building new monuments.

As the cultural significance of Tara grew, and as the landscape changed with the addition of monuments, the challenge of introducing new and, above all, *appropriate* architectural forms became considerably more complex. The existing monuments, beliefs and iconographies inherited by each generation must have imposed significant constraints on what types of changes were feasible, or indeed permissible. Moreover, every significant change in a context such as this demanded a rethinking of all of the elements into a new, coherent and meaningful whole. Put simply, one of the core challenges facing successive generations was how best to harness the old in the service of the new, for the success of any new monumental or, for that matter, religious initiative at Tara depended on devising architectural and ceremonial forms that were symbolically meaningful in the contemporary context *and* converged sensitively with the existing historical, iconographical and architectural matrices. If such was achieved, the religious and historical resonance of the ancient monuments was preserved; maybe even enhanced; and their role in religious ceremony was guaranteed. Curated in this way, at the very least the older monuments conferred the imprimatur of history and religious tradition on the monuments and ceremonies of the day. The importance of such an undertaking lies in the fact that places where ceremonies are repeated over generations begin to resonate with religious and historical symbolism, and come to represent the historical continuum of human society. Thus, as religious and political ceremonies, and the places where they occur, evolve, they generally do so with specific reference to the historical past of that locus and of the institutions associated with it: as Waddell (2005, 22) observes, 'origin myths are both divorced from and joined to the contemporary world with ritual serving to connect the mythical past with the present'. Historical affirmation is thus achieved through regular repetition of tried and tested ceremonial formulae. The prefix to Cúán úa Lothcháin's poem *Temair toga na tulach* confirms this in the case of Tara:

> *Suidiugad Tigi Midchuarta. Ní cac ri las ta indiu amail bae la Conn Ceth-catach, occus tech n-Airt, occus Cormaic, occur Cairpri Liphecair, occus tech Cathair Máir, occus tech gac rig ro fallna I Temraig co Niall Naicclech, arrulaed fo tri ro giall h-Eriu do fo tri.*

The situation of Tech Midchuarta. Each king who has it at this day does what was done in the time of Conn of the Hundred Battles, and [when it was] the house of Art, and of Cormac, and of Cairbre Liffeachair, and the house of Cathair Mor, and the house of every king who ruled in Temur to Niall of the Nine Hostages, who made a visitation thrice, and to whom Ireland was rendered hostages thrice.

(From the Yellow Book of Lecan (TCD MS 1318) col. 245 translated by O'Donovan and quoted in Petrie 1839, 197)

Religion does not evolve independently of contemporary culture-politics, particularly, it might be said, in the case of sacral kingship which is the ultimate convergence of these two dominions, and any examination of the rapidly evolving religious canvas of later prehistoric Ireland must also consider what factors were acting on society generally. Crucial, in this regard, was the changed political complexion of Late Iron Age and sub-Roman Ireland, and particularly how this

Figure 2
Ráith na Senad (Rath of the Synods) looking south. Encroached on by the churchyard wall and a townland boundary, damaged by the British Israelites during a search for the Ark of the Covenant around 1900, and excavated by S.P. Ó Ríordáin in the early 1950s (unpublished), Ráith na Senad is a complex, multi-phase earthwork. The remains of the incorporated barrow can be seen in the north-west quadrant. (Photo: Leo Swan, Spring 1973)

appears to have been influenced by Roman traditions surrounding the practice of religion and the control of power (see de Paor 1993, 23–37; Newman 1998, 132–4). Ceremonies, rituals and iconographies new to Ireland arose (e.g. Ó Floinn 2000, 29). It is against this back-drop, for instance, that the evidence of occupation at Ráith na Senad (Fig. 2), which may seem on the face of it to represent a departure from pure ritual, should be considered. Constructed some time between the later second and the fourth centuries AD, and built over a mixed cemetery (see O'Brien 1990), the religious significance and standing of this multivallate enclosure is symbolized overtly by the incorporation of a barrow into its ramparts, and by the associated material assemblage, which includes, *inter alia*, an impressive collection of objects of Roman origin, and the remains of quite massive dogs (for analysis of the significance of dog burials at Tara see Bhreathnach 2002). Rather than an arrest of religious activity, or an imposition on the existing religious theatre of Tara, Ráith na Senad may represent a new model and redirection of religious activity and should therefore be viewed as a measure of the unprecedented changes being wrought on Irish society and its religious institutions during this period. Indeed, the remarkable concentration of Roman material around Tara in modern-day County Meath indicates that this area was particularly susceptible to influence from the Roman world. There is increasing evidence to suggest that Roman material culture penetrated society far deeper than the level of mere novelty and was actually circulating amongst 'Romanized' elites who deployed it in much the same way as their Roman/Romano-British counterparts.

  Leaving aside, for the moment, the question of the existing spatial iconography inherited by the would-be builders of Tech Midchúarta, a more immediate practical concern was the availability of space, particularly when a large and imposing monument like Tech Midchúarta was being planned. The chronology of the monuments generally (including Tech Midchúarta itself) is central to envisaging the physical or monument context into which it was placed. Our

general understanding of the sequence of monument constructions and spatial patterning on the Hill of Tara was advanced considerably with the discovery of the so-called Ditched Pit Circle in 1998–9 (Fenwick and Newman 2002). The Ditched Pit Circle has not been independently dated, but significant comparisons that exist between it and the broad church of henge monuments in Ireland and Britain suggest that it belongs to the later Neolithic period (centring around the middle of the third millennium BC). The Ditched Pit Circle is what might be termed a 'monumental monument' in the sense that it is one of the really huge monuments on the Hill of Tara. It had an enormous and enduring physical presence and, consequently, has played a definitive role in shaping the long-term spatial development of the complex generally. Measuring around 210 m from north to south, and with a fosse more than 5 m wide, it could not be ignored and had to be accommodated in any development plan. There can be no doubting, for instance, that Ráith na Senad, dating from the first few centuries AD, was deliberately placed at the centre of it, even though it was by then a very ancient enclosure indeed. Likewise, in the comparative short term, it was surrounded by a great ring of barrows, probably during the Bronze Age (Fig. 3). This is a clear case of the presence of one monument influencing the placement and configuration of others. If our reading of this juxtaposition is correct what is revealed is not just a pattern but also a relative chronology – the barrows being later than the Ditched Pit Circle. Furthermore, the patterning of these barrows brings a firmer logic to bear on the initial suggestion that such barrows on Tara are
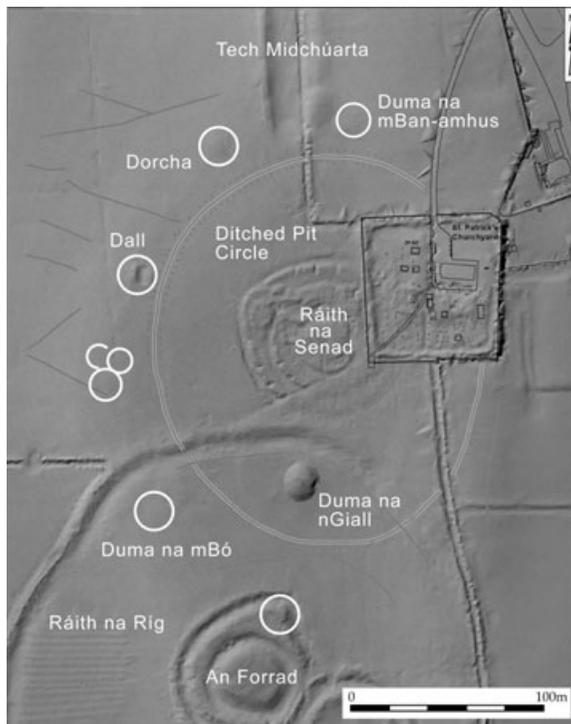

Figure 3
Hill-shaded model of the crown of the Hill of Tara, illustrating that the Ditched Pit Circle (line-work from gradiometry survey) was surrounded by a ring, or halo, of barrows (circled and named following Petrie's 1839 nomenclature).

broadly contemporary with one another (Newman 1997, 153–70): if they can be shown to belong to one, grand, spatial scheme then they are indubitably coeval. Other possibilities also arise, such as the likelihood that Duma na mBó and the barrow incorporated into the south-eastern quadrant of the Forrad are part of this group, suggesting more specific connections between monuments than were heretofore apparent. The Ditched Pit Circle also has a bearing on how we might assess the location, and the date, of Tech Midchúarta.

RETHINKING TECH MIDCHÚARTA

Tech Midchúarta approaches the southern edge of this ring of barrows, terminating between two of them, Duma na mBan-Amhus (the Mound of the Mercenary Women) on the east and Dorcha (Dark) (Newman 1997, 31:33:22 and 31:33:21 respectively) on the west. The somewhat schematized map accompanying Petrie's famous 1839 paper on the monuments of Tara (Fig. 4) depicts Duma na mBan-Amhus as quite separate and distinct from Tech Midchúarta. In reality, however, the eastern bank of the latter encroaches somewhat upon Duma na mBan-Amhus. Previously, I considered this melding of the two monuments to be the result solely of the fact that this side of Tech Midchúarta had been ploughed over and spread out laterally, and so desisted from reading this evidence as a discrete relative chronology. Indeed, prior to the discovery of the Ditched Pit Circle, there was a tacit consensus that Duma na mBan-Amhus and Dorcha were more or less a couplet, flanking, equidistant, the exit of Tech Midchúarta as suggested on the Petrie drawing. That these barrows can now be shown to relate to a different developmental initiative suggests instead that Tech Midchúarta may, in fact, have had no bearing whatsoever on where they are positioned. For the purposes of analysis, moreover,

Figure 4
Detail from George Petrie's reconciled and annotated plan of the monuments on the summit of the Hill of Tara (Petrie 1839, pl. 7) showing the spatial relationship between Tech Midchúarta and the barrows known as Duma na mBan-Amhus and Dorcha.

this conclusion has the important outcome of releasing, as it were, Tech Midchúarta from the existing matrix, encouraging us to reflect anew on its position in the monument sequence. As a starting point, we might now cautiously consider taking at face value the observable relationship between Tech Midchúarta and Duma na mBan-Amhus, which can be read as indicating that Tech Midchúarta is the later of the two. By how much may well have been answered, as we shall see, by recent excavations at the Knockans, Co. Meath.

Features such as the curvature of the banks and the fact that they run down slope towards what was once marshy ground are attributes that Tech Midchúarta shares with the Mucklaghs, of the royal complex of Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon, and the Knockans at the royal complex of Teltown, Co. Meath (Newman 1997, 151). A further point of comparison between Tech Midchúarta and the Mucklaghs is the occurrence of irregularly spaced gaps in the banks. The absence from all three sites of identifiable trenches from which the bank material was obtained is another significant point of comparison. In 1997 the Knockans was partly destroyed and Waddell and O'Brien undertook the excavation and re-instatement of the monument the following year (I am indebted to them for providing the following information ahead of its full publication). The excavation revealed a complex and protracted history of development from prehistory to the early medieval period. During this latter period two distinct phases of development are attested, the first some time between AD 640 and 780, the second between AD 770 and 990. This is a quite startling result. It introduces into the world of early medieval Ireland a new and rather surprising type of monument, *and* it provides vital evidence of what medieval kings may have contributed structurally to the great royal complexes: far from their being unchanging, static symbols of an ancient order, they were still being used and still being added to monumentally. The dates from the Knockans have clear implications for Tech Midchúarta – and indeed also the Mucklaghs – suggesting that it could date from as late as the early medieval period. Tech Midchúarta may, consequently, be one of the later monuments to have been built on the Hill of Tara, a chronology that would connect it far more definitively with the institution of early medieval kingship of Tara than if it were already some thousands of years old. There are other reasons for suggesting that Tech Midchúarta may be one of the later monuments and these pertain to aspects of its *performance* as a monument of ceremony.

TECH MIDCHÚARTA: A WINDOW ON TARA

Monuments and buildings do not just change the appearance of the landscape, they also provide new vantage points from which to observe it and so alter how it might be perceived. In this sense, the placement of a monument or a building is both relational and perspectival. When it was built, Tech Midchúarta was, therefore, a bold new addition to the existing cultural landscape of Tara and, particularly so in the case of this monument, an architectural space that offered a new and unique vantage point.

Tech Midchúarta is a linear earthwork comprising two arcuate but nonetheless parallel banks, 25 m to 28 m apart and 203 m long. Over this distance it rises more than 8 m. It was made by scarping, or scraping away the soil in the middle and piling it into the two banks on either side. The result is that the whole surface of the interior has been lowered and is markedly below exterior ground level. The banks rise to above head height, or at least the west bank still does; the east bank has been ploughed over and is considerably more denuded. The banks, therefore, are higher from the inside because the viewer is standing on a lowered surface (Fig. 5). At irregular intervals along each bank are narrow gaps, possibly as many as 11 in total. In its original state,

Figure 5
The combination of lowered interior surface, lateral banks and incline renders Tech Midchúarta a profoundly enclosed space; the only place on the Hill of Tara where the otherwise panoramic views are blocked, a point well illustrated by this alignment of students (those at the top of the photograph have exited the monument and are standing on the crown of the hill). The hollow at bottom left is a large hole that is the result of quarrying (Winter 2006).

one would have ascended Tech Midchúarta without being able to see out from either side. Moreover, up ahead would have been nothing other than the skyline; just like today, there would have been no indication of what awaited the traveller ascending the hill. It is, in short, a monument designed to *deprive* one of the otherwise celebrated views from the Hill of Tara. So doing, it removes the visitor temporarily from the familiar, outside world, into an enclosed, interior space.

Elaborate attempts to reconcile the gaps in the banks with the doors mentioned in literary accounts of Tech Midchúarta (e.g. Macalister 1917–19, 262–9) have perhaps preconditioned us to read the gaps as points of ingress, as doors. If we invert this notion we can appreciate immediately that these gaps are, in fact, windows; windows that create, frame and therefore control what is seen and viewed. Because of its better condition, we can be far more certain of what specific views were offered through the gaps in the west bank, than those looking eastwards. Allowing for the fact that soil regeneration has raised the interior surface today, what the viewer sees through the gaps is the immediate foreground: that is the ground (literally the grass) alongside Tech Midchúarta. In fact, such is the height differentiation that the foreground *becomes* the horizon, and as such it obscures the usual panoramic vista across the Central Plain. And in this foreground are tombs (Fig. 6). Nearest, and visible through the third and fourth gaps on the right-hand side, are the almost ploughed-out graves 31:33:24 and :25. A little further away, but appearing above the grassy foreground through the first and second gaps on the right, are the embankments of Ráith Ghráinne and the Cloenfherta (the Sloping Trenches), the three biggest ring-barrows on the Hill of Tara, all incorporating earlier tombs (Newman 1997, 115–36). The lie of the land is such that it falls away slightly more steeply to the east, with the result that through every gap along the east side one's view is dominated by Skryne (Fig. 7), offset against a background of the undulating plains of Brega. There are no tombs visible along this side of Tech Midchúarta, though future geophysical survey may yet change that.

Figure 6

The view through the second gap on the right as one ascends Tech Midchúarta is dominated by an impressive ring-barrow known as Ráith Gráinne. Through the third and fourth gaps on this side are two conjoined ring-ditches/barrows (Newman 1997, 111–12, pl. 20, fig. 45, 31:33:24 and :25) now almost invisible on the surface (Spring 2007).

Figure 7

View across the Gabhra Valley to Achall (Skryne; distinguished by the remains of a fifteenth century belfry on the summit) through the fourth gap on the left, ascending Tech Midchúarta. The gaps on the left-hand side are almost completely back-filled as a result of agricultural interference in the last century (Spring 2007).

Tech Midchúarta is, therefore, not simply a sunken, semi-subterranean avenue but one that is lined, antefact, with tombs: unlike other tomb-lined avenues (see below), in this case the tombs probably *pre-dated* the avenue, making it an all the more remarkable achievement in architectural contrivance. In designing a monument that allowed complete control over what was revealed and what was hidden from sight, the builders of Tech Midchúarta succeeded in creating a space that united into one coherent and integrated composition a host of existing monuments on the Hill of Tara. Coherence, in this case, derives from the binary relationship that is at once established between the restrictive, enclosed space of Tech Midchúarta and the select few monuments that one is privileged glimpses of from it. This, therefore, is an architectural space that actively marshals and assembles the existing monuments into an ordered group and converts them into the props of a grand, and possibly remodelled and rescripted, ceremonial stage.

Assuming, for the moment, that Tech Midchúarta is indeed a late addition to Tara, then it was imposed onto an already quite dense ceremonial landscape, one crowded with monuments, ceremonies and traditions long in the gestation; a place with established iconographies and of profound religious significance. As Mac Giolla Easpaig (2005, 446–8) has demonstrated in his analysis of the meaning of the word *Temair*, Tara was a *temenos*, a sanctuary, a place apart, indeed a place cut off from this world: it was the domain of the gods. The builders of Tech Midchúarta had, therefore, not just to succeed, as they clearly did, in finding an architectural form that blended with what was already present physically at Tara, they had also to meet the far more esoteric requirement of creating a space that converged with the religiosity and iconography of Tara as a sanctuary, and with the institution of sacral kingship itself.

At the core of the monuments on the Hill of Tara is the sanctuary of Ráith na Ríg. Through an inversion of the normal, its external bank and internal fosse may be an architectural motif intended to symbolize the paranormal, the reflexive, binary dynamic between gods and humans. *This* is the Otherworld into which the sacral king must pass, and it is the *nexus* from which he must eventually emerge as the conduit and intermediary between the human world and the world of the gods. The king's reign is the very life-blood of his people, a sentiment that may be reflected in the following stanza of the *Metrical Dindshenchas* eulogizing Cormac mac Airt:

> *Ní fríth amail Temraig,*
> *ba sí rún belaig betha.*
>
> No keep like Tara could be found,
> She was the secret place of the road of life.

(From Gwynn 1903–35, Vol. I, Temair IV, 25)

As a semi-subterranean avenue, Tech Midchúarta may have been specifically designed to symbolize and to facilitate, in a tangible way, the journey or passage taken by the king into this *nexus*. It is a shared, or liminal, space, half in this world and half in the Otherworld of Tara, into which the king must immerse and surrender himself. The absence of fosses, which would otherwise account for the banks, evokes a sense that this is a spontaneous opening of the very body of Tara itself; it is *of* Tara. A critical moment in this genre of sacral inauguration is the hierogamy, the symbolic sexual union between, in this case, the king and the tribal goddess who is often portrayed or symbolized as the fecund land itself. Her acceptance of this earthly king, and her willingness to participate in union with him, are perhaps here symbolized by the opening that is Tech Midchúarta and the subsequent magical parting before his horse of the two standing stones Blocc and Bluicne (see below). His passing between these stones, I have suggested elsewhere (Newman 1997, 150), represents at once both copulation and birthing: in this one movement the king both joins in union with the scared and is reborn, fundamentally altered, into the Otherworld. Indeed, the late Middle Irish poem Cnucha cnoc os cionn Life from *Agallamh na Seanórach* recounts how Ráith Medba (an enormous embanked enclosure on the southern flank of the Hill of Tara; see Newman 1997, 190–1) was built by the Leinstermen for Medb Lethderg, one of the sovereignty goddesses of Tara, observing that Cormac mac Airt did not attain the kingship of Ireland until he was united with Medb: nocor fhaidh medbh lesin mac/nir bo righ Eirenn Cormac (Power 1917, §30). Thus, as he moves along Tech Midchúarta, the king is both entering Tara and undertaking a journey of transcendence, as he undergoes a symbolic transformation, union and rebirthing into the sacred.
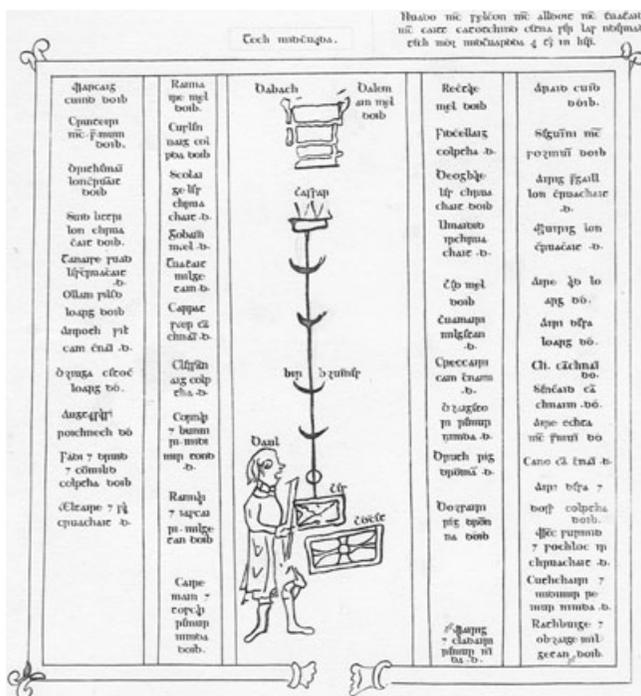
Figure 8
Schematized drawing of Tech Midchúarta from the Book of Glendalough (from Petrie 1839, pl. 8).

Aspects of the transformative dimension of Tech Midchúarta are also possibly preserved in the name. Variously translated as the 'House of the Mead Circuit' and the 'House of the Middle Circuit', the first of these explanations clearly informs the widely held view that these are the remains of a great hall, as illustrated in the *Book of Glendalough* (Fig. 8) wherein feasting occurred and, if we take it more literally, where mead, or some other drink, was shared out, perhaps following some social or ritualized hierarchy. However, if we consider for a moment the more arcane function and symbolism here ascribed to Tech Midchúarta, the alternative translation of *mid* as 'middle' (viz. House of the *Middle* Circuit) becomes potentially very significant because it lends itself to the idea that this is liminal space, the ambulatory, literally and metaphorically, between two worlds. Tech Midchúarta is also referred to in the *Metrical Dindshenchas* as Barc Ban mbáeth (Palace of Vain Women) and Tech na Fían (House of the Warriors) (Gwynn 1903–35, Vol. I, Temair III, 19), names that are also compatible with the suggestion (developed in more detail below) that this is a processional way specifically designed to invoke the *longue durée* of history into the ceremonies surrounding the inauguration and burial of kings.

AVENUES TO POWER

The proposition is, therefore, that Tech Midchúarta is a ceremonial avenue, a processional way and an inauguration path. During an inaugural ceremony, the king and the

inaugural party would have processed along this avenue, ever more removed from the outside world, catching just glimpses of the ancestral tombs of the kings and queens of Tara, through the gaps to their right and to their left. The ancestors would, in this way, be present at the inauguration; they would underwrite it and the longevity of the title *Rí Temrach*, *Rex Temro*. During this final leg of the processional journey the king may have been encouraged to reflect on the qualities and achievements of his predecessors among whose tombs, temples and symbolic domains he now walked. He would have been mindful of the gravity of the tradition of *fir flathemon*, the challenge of maintaining good and just rule, and the perils awaiting those who were found wanting. And, though the stories relating to the names of the monuments on the Hill of Tara are fanciful, and are almost certainly later in date than the period under discussion, they can be yet drawn upon to convey a sense of what thoughts may have gone through the mind of a person in this position. He may have reflected, for instance, while glancing through the second gap on his right towards the Cloenfherta (Sloping Trenches), on the demise of Lugaid Mac Conn whose flawed adjudication against a simple herdswoman caused the catastrophic collapse of his courthouse, symbolizing the end of his reign. Another version of the story has it that Lugaid Mac Conn, upon being accused of giving false judgement by Cormac mac Airt, chased the boy thrice around Tara before he escaped by jumping across the rampart, a symbolic leap, perhaps, from the Otherworld of Tara where the king was confined, back into the world of men. Lugaid Mac Conn reigned on for another year but this was marked by widespread crop and foliage failure, signifying his impotency and how urgent it was to supplant him (e.g. Ó hÓgáin 1991, 123). The end of his reign signalled the start of the reign of Cormac mac Airt, the most famous of the kings of Tara, during whose kingship boughs sagged under the weight of their fruits and rivers burst their banks with fish. Glancing to his left across to Skryne, however, the king may have been reminded of the fall of this once-great king, for Skryne is Achall, which can be translated as 'blind', where Cormac was banished after being blinded in one eye (e.g. Ó Cathasaigh 1984, 4, 10; Meyer 1907). This episode contains a deep stratigraphy of meaning and symbolism where *achall* may imply more than just blindness but also that which cannot be seen, counterpointing the *seen* of Tara. Skryne is the mirror of the kingship of Tara, the Yin of Tara's Yang. And the orientation of monuments on Tara, tilted as they are eastwards towards Skryne, connects these two places in an enduring symbolic harmony. In this way the very morphology of Tech Midchúarta meets the challenge of rendering in symbolic form the sacral transformation at the heart of the inauguration of the kings of Tara, it transports him over to the Otherworld of Tara and Skryne where he must live out his days.

Whereas the views to the right and left are preparatory, the entire peregrination has been directed towards entering the sanctuary. Yet, even as one stands before the final incline, or threshold, of Tech Midchúarta, the view ahead is still blocked by the rising ground directly in front (Fig. 9). As one ascends the last few paces, the top of Duma na nGiall (Mound of the Hostages) comes immediately into view. Another step and so too do the ramparts of Ráith na Senad. From this perspective, while the Duma na nGiall looms large, the two monuments cannot be distinguished from one another and it looks at first as though the mound is part of Ráith na Senad itself. In fact, one is looking right across Ráith na Senad, slightly to the right of centre, and from this point of view, which is close to ground level, the ramparts of the rath appear singularly impressive and imposing. Indeed, from this perspective, on a hazy day, the ramparts convey the impression of being a distant mountain range, a peculiarity that in its own right invokes a sense of apartness and otherness about the ceremonial landscape laid out before one. As one emerges completely, the distinctness of the Duma na nGiall, and one's actual distance away from it,

Figure 9
Just a few steps away from the final incline out of Tech Midchúarta the view ahead remains blocked and obscured by the rising ground (Winter 2006).

become at once apparent. There is no mistaking that the Duma na nGiall is intended to be the primary object of one's attention: it is the king's destination.

This is a contrived experience, the views and the impressions have been carefully managed and manipulated, and what lies ahead has been deliberately hidden from view to the very last. The slight curvature of the banks of Tech Midchúarta may also have contributed, in some way, to this experience. Although to the casual visitor they appear to be straight, topographical analysis has demonstrated that the banks of Tech Midchúarta were originally somewhat curved or bow-shaped (Newman 1997, 106, fig. 43). In its original state, as one ascended Tech Midchúarta one would be veering slightly to the right along the whole length. The curvature is certainly not so marked that the left-hand (eastern) bank obstructs the view forward from any point, but it may be of relevance that the alignment at the northern end of Tech Midchúarta is, *sensu stricto*, on the centre of Ráith na Senad whereas at the southern, higher end it is aligned squarely on Duma na nGiall. Moreover, as we shall see, this curvature may also be intended to nudge the processional party into the correct, pagan orientation for entering the *temenos* and may, therefore, be yet another layer in the iconography of Tech Midchúarta.

Obscuration and redirection are devices employed at many religious sites. Whilst perhaps motivated by a precautionary desire to restrict to an elite or privileged few direct access to highly sanctified objects/places, obscuration has the additional effect of generating suspense, and with it an elevated sense of mystery. Aspects of the layout of the formal avenues identified at Dún Ailinne and Rathcroghan suggest that here too direct visual access to the core sanctuary may have been obscured and at the point of entry the traveller redirected (Fig. 10).[3] Though aligned on the centre of the great Iron Age 'Rose' structure at Dún Ailinne, the funnel-shaped

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3   A similar case of deliberate misalignment can also be argued in the case of the long, narrow avenue leading to the burial mound at Glauberg (Herrmann 2002).
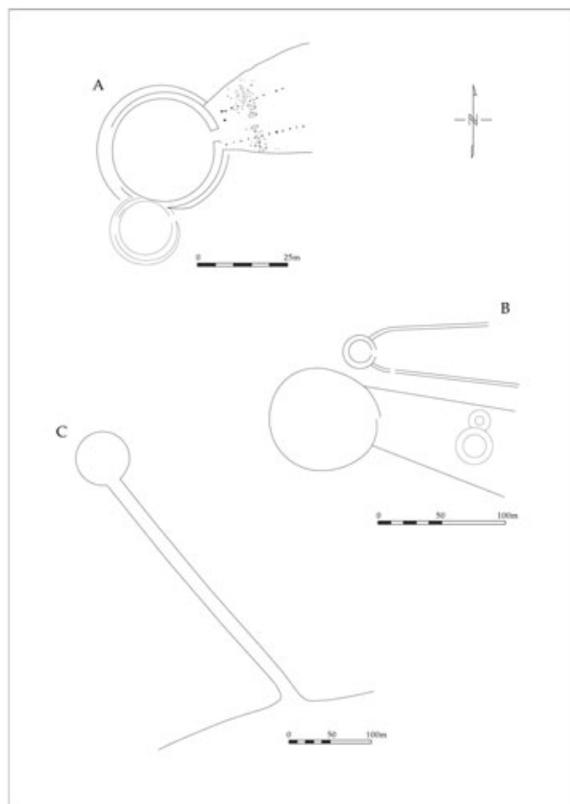
Figure 10
Obscuration and redirection along the avenues leading to sacred or religious spaces are devices that were commonly employed to deny persons approaching such places knowledge or view of what lay directly ahead. (a) 'Rose' structure at Dún Ailinne, Co. Kildare (after Wailes 1990, fig. 2); (b) Rathcroghan Mound, Co. Roscommon (after Fenwick *et al*. 1999, fig. 3); (c) Glauberg, nr. Frankfurt (after Herrman 2002, pls. 59 and 61).

approach intersects decidedly to the north of the entrance gap (Wailes 1990, fig. 2). This means that if one were approaching the enclosure along the centre-line of this avenue – through what Wailes has reconstructed as a 'portico' (his features 2231 and 2232) – the façade on the right hand, which extends half way across the approach avenue, would interfere quite substantially with one's view of the middle of the enclosure ahead. Moreover, the alignment of smaller post holes apparently attaching to either side of the 'portico' would further block the view into the interior. Likewise, the avenue approaching Rathcroghan Mound, discovered through geophysical survey (Fenwick *et al*. 1999), is aligned tangential to the mound itself. Furthermore, the mound appears to be surrounded at its base by a palisade, the entrance through which is very narrow and with slightly overlapping terminals, with the result that the view forward towards the mound would be almost completely blocked until the viewer side-stepped through the gap. Neither of these examples has been dated, though there is a very strong comparison to be made between the 'Rose' buildings at Dún Ailinne and the Phase 3(ii) buildings at Emain Macha (Lynn 1991), a comparison that might indicate contemporaneity in the third or second century BC. A further

possible point of comparison between the avenue at Rathcroghan and Tech Midchúarta is, of course, the presence of barrows and ring-ditches, both alongside and within the avenue itself.

Roads, or formal avenues, flanked with tombs and leading to the seats of power are not unknown in early historic Europe. Some of the best known examples are from the Roman world where, arising from a prohibition against burial of the dead within city limits, many of the major roads leading into towns were lined with tombs, cemeteries and temples. In Britain examples occur at London, Colchester, Leicester, Canterbury, Gloucester and Lincoln (Wacher 1995). One of the most famous examples, however, is the *early* fourth century BC Via Appia Antica, which, as it approaches Rome, is lined with the monumental tombs and temples of the great and good of Roman society. In the case of public roads, such as the Via Appia Antica and the Via Flaminia, the presence of the tombs conveys a sense of both power and history. The traveller is left in no doubt that he or she is approaching the capital of a great, important and permanent kingdom. Through the eyes of the vanquished, paraded and sometimes even crucified along such avenues, the architecture of this space would have contributed to their sense of defeat and humiliation. The message was loud and clear: we are great and you, on the other hand, are insignificant. The victor would have enjoyed a quite different experience, one of affirmation of the individual and of the society to which he or she belonged, living and dead, a society in process of elevating him or her to the highest echelons among their ranks. And the significance of the tombs in this scenario is that they confer the deep resonance of history on to the occasion and on to the position that the victor has now earned for him- or herself. Parading along such an avenue, past the ancestral tombs and vaults of the founders of the city and the defenders of the empire, the victor would, literally, be assuming his or her place in history. The experience of processing along Tech Midchúarta would probably have been, at least in this respect, little different.

The inauguration of the kings of Tara belonged to the very ancient and arcane institution of sacral kingship. Accounts of sacral inauguration, and the sacral kingship of Tara itself, are, however, shrouded in obtuse symbolic and allegorical language, and, furthermore, have been overwritten from the *antithesistic* position of the Christian church. Circumscribed by a labyrinth of taboos (see Dillon 1951–2), key elements of the mythology and rituals of sacral kingship are, by their very nature, beyond the range of scientific detection. Archaeologists should be alert, however, to the fact that in highly charged religious contexts such as this, even the apparently mundane is potentially pregnant with magico-religious significance: how else, indeed, would the routines and objects of everyday life be brought into the benign orbit of religion? Drawing on early texts and archaeological evidence, Doherty (2005) has argued convincingly that the Irish expression of sacral kingship emerged from a far wider and more ancient Eurasian tradition. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to rehearse the substantial body of literature on the subject, in so far as sacral inauguration occurred on the Hill of Tara, this was the *de facto* physical setting and context of such ceremonies: *this* topography and *these* monuments constituted the sacral theatre. Although any description of the setting will be unavoidably biased in favour of what is visible today, it is well to remember that geophysical survey continues to reveal an enormous complexity of physical features, probably of all periods, on the Hill of Tara. By far the densest concentration of activity occurs within the area enclosed by Ráith na Ríg, which is in itself confirmation of the focal importance of this space. The central area of Ráith na Ríg, viz. the space around and now occupied by the Forrad and Tech Cormaic, witnessed sustained activity in the form of multiple enclosures, including at least one figure-of-eight structure now buried beneath Tech Cormaic (Fig. 11). Many of these appear to be the remains of impermanent structures, such as palisaded enclosures. Although it may be difficult to identify the exact
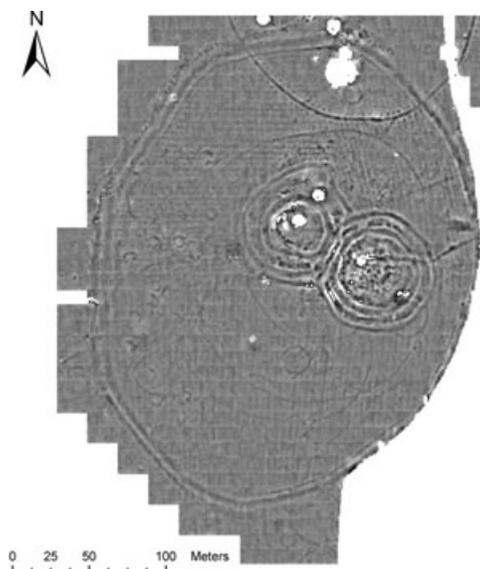
Figure 11
Magnetic gradiometry survey of the interior of Ráith na Ríg has revealed sustained, multi-period activity centring on the area of the Forrad and Tech Cormaic (May/June 2003).

sequence of these enclosures on the basis of geophysical survey alone (some are clearly earlier than the existing earthworks, others probably contemporary), the scale of the geophysical anomalies recorded suggests that the palisades were very substantial and capable of supporting posts that would easily have been tall enough to hide from view anything that was taking place inside, if such were desired.

This is not the place to speculate in too much detail about the remainder of the processional journey undertaken after exiting Tech Midchúarta, for such would necessitate a detailed analysis and re-evaluation of the archaeological and historical records. Suffice it to say that, armed with all of the new information about the monuments, a complete reassessment of the topographical lore relating to Tara is warranted. The following, therefore, merely offers a few preliminary, speculative notes in this regard.

Two reasons occur to the writer for suggesting that the inaugural procession would turn to the right, i.e. towards the south-west, upon exiting Tech Midchúarta, namely (i) the *gessa* or taboos surrounding the kingship itself, and (ii) the description of the inauguration and the location ascribed to key monuments in *Dindshenchas*. The *gessa*, or taboos, relating to the kingship of Tara refer to the 'correct' direction from which to approach or leave Tara: Ní thuidchis deaseal Temra 7 túaithbiul mBreg: 'You shall not come sunwise around Tara and withershins around Brega' (Knott 1936, 6, 172). This reference bears the hallmarks of a universal tradition of correct orientation towards the sacred, one not restricted solely to Tara. In her discussion of this issue, Bhreathnach (1996, 73) refers to Bieler's commentary on Patrick's pointed transgression of this tradition – deliberately journeying from Mag Inis to Inber Colpdi with the coast (viz. Brega) on his *right* hand – where he observes that for Muirchú, the pagan way was to keep [Brega?] on one's left-hand side (Bieler Patrician texts, 202, c. 14, note (1)). This

would seem to suggest that to approach Ráith na Ríg in the appropriate, pagan direction meant turning to the right, thus keeping the enclosure, the *temenos*, and indeed Brega on one's left hand.

The second reason pertains to the location ascribed to key monuments in *Dindshenchas Erenn*, in particular monuments referred to in medieval accounts of inauguration at Tara. Here one has to proceed with extreme caution because the exercise of combining texts and archaeological evidence is fraught with danger, particularly when the texts pertain to ritual or ceremonial practices which by their very nature are arcane. Attempts to distil from this literary corpus genuine pagan sacral elements are at best painstaking, at worst folly. McCone (1990), for instance, argues that in the hands of their Christian redactors pagan traditions were so thoroughly embedded in Christian orthodoxy that what emerged in the literature was what Doherty has more recently described as 'a virtually new mythology' (Doherty 2005, 6). Drawing on a combination of archaeological, ethnographical and Irish documentary sources, however, Doherty (2005) lends his weight to the view that sacral kingship did exist in later prehistoric Ireland and that at the core of this institution were cult sites like Tara. Regardless of how Christian kings managed to reconcile with their allegiance to Christian doctrine the innate paganism of inauguration at places like Tara, there can be no real doubting that pagan sacral traditions underscored such ceremonies. The newly constructed early medieval monuments at Tara, such as Tech Midchúarta and Tech Cormaic, reveal how relics of the ancient pagan order were drawn into the contemporary ceremonial campus. Literary sources, on the other hand, reveal how history, myth and legend were also called upon to add temporal and cultural depth to the ceremonies. Thus, the account of an inauguration contained in *Dindshenchas* describes how the king approached the graves of three druids, Mael, Blocc and Bluicne, each of which was marked by a stone. According to the Prose *Dindshenchas* these graves formed a triangle, with Blocc to the south, Mael to the east and Bluicne to the north. If he was the rightful king, the stones on the graves of Blocc and Bluicne would part magically and allow his chariot to pass between them. Whereas it has not been possible to identify these three sites with any of the surviving remains on the Hill of Tara, this has the ring of a legend that grew up around real monuments, in this case three standing stones, two of which must have been close enough together as to make it difficult, or perhaps impossible, for a person to pass between them notwithstanding the fact that they are not, *sensu stricto*, to the north of Ráith na Senad as recorded in *Dindshenchas*. It is tempting to reflect on the possibility that the triskele of ring-ditches identified in the geophysics to the west of Ráith na Senad (Fenwick and Newman 2002, fig. 3 nos.: 72–4) may be the three graves of this story.

Regardless, according to both the Metrical and the Prose *Dindshenchas*, these graves are to the *west* of Lecht in Abaic (the Grave of the Dwarf; Ó lecht ind abaci sin síar/Mael, Bloc, Bluicne, borb a cíall/forru atáit na tri clocha/dusfarlaicc Mál mór-Macha: Westwards from the grave of this dwarf/are Mael, Bloc and Bluicne – foolish for their wisdom/over them are the three stones/that prince of Macha flung (Gwynn 1903–35, *Temair* III, 18–19)). The detailed description of Lecht in Abaic contained in the Book of Leinster (see Bhreathnach 2003, 82) leaves little doubt but that this was a Bronze Age cist. To an audience unfamiliar with cist graves the dimensions would appear diminutive indeed: 'The grave is [orientated] south-east, south-west. Only three feet its measure. A small depression below. Its grave is thus: a small stone underground in its eastern part and another in its western part. Three feet are found at one time and three and a half feet at another time' (quoted from Bhreathnach 2003, 82). This site has not been identified either, but since it was visible as a rectangular, stone-lined depression, one wonders whether or not it is the robbed-out grave identified by Petrie as Dorcha (Petrie 1839, 184; Fenwick and Newman 2002, fig. 3 no.: 20). Lecht in Abaic is said to be to the south of Dall

and Dorcha and they in turn are described as being to the south-west of Tech Midchúarta. In consequence, therefore, a processional party walking from Tech Midchúarta towards Blocc and Bluicne would, it seems, have had to veer to the right.

The description of Dall and Dorcha in *Dindgnai Temrach* contains the following qualification: 'there is no wall between them [Dall and Dorcha] and the stones [Mael, Blocc and Bluicne] and the grave [Lecht in Abaic]' (translated in Petrie 1839, 140). This seems to suggest that they were not separated from one another by any of the obvious embankments or enclosures, and that they occurred across open ground. Could it be that this curious addendum is an indirect reference to the relict fosse of the Ditched Pit Circle, a way of articulating that this group of monuments all fall outside this ancient enclosure? Against this is the fact that although the Ditched Pit Circle must still have retained some physical presence into the first few centuries AD, that is up until around the time of the construction of Ráith na Senad, on present reading it appears that it is not described in the corpus of topographical lore relating to Tara. Though only a preliminary observation, it would seem to introduce the possibility that the Ditched Pit Circle may have been all but entirely back-filled before the compilation of *Dindshenchas*, and may no longer have played a role in the toponomy of Tara. Attendant on this is the possibility that the gazetteer of sites in *Dindshenchas* was not determined solely by extant remains but rather more specifically by the prevailing toponymic conceptions of contemporary, early medieval Tara.

Veering to the right after exiting Tech Midchúarta, and keeping Ráith na Senad on one's left, one crosses a quite wide area of almost completely level ground, interrupted only by a number of small barrows. Like stepping stones, these barrows are strung out in a broad arc – the ring of barrows surrounding the Ditched Pit Circle – and even today draw the walker inexorably forward in this direction. If the fosse of the Ditched Pit Circle was still visible on one's left, the guiding hand of the monuments (including the standing stones) would have exerted an even stronger pull in this direction. This is the northern sweep of the brow of the hill, and from here the full panorama of the view over the Central Plain towards Kildare unfolds. Although the decline cannot yet be seen, it is clear that, given the strong sense of elevation, the ground must surely drop away quite abruptly to one's right. Looking ahead at this point, one's attention might be drawn to Ringlestown Rath (now shrouded in afforestation; Fig. 12), a great fortification in the middle distance. And, if it were still actively manned and perhaps even topped off with a palisade, one would have a near bird's eye view of the embankments of the linear earthwork to the right of Ringlestown Rath, stretching northwards across the middle distance. To one's left would be Ráith na Senad, possibly temporarily blocking Skryne from view, and directly ahead would be the rampart and palisade of the north-western side of Ráith na Ríg. This point in the rampart marks the start of the decline, so as soon as one starts to walk around the outside of Ráith na Ríg one is descending. A secondary (undated) entrance into Ráith na Ríg has been identified along this section of the ramparts (Newman 1997, 58–60); however, there is a strong case to be made, as we shall see, that the main entrance was on the eastern side. The ramparts of Ráith na Ríg continue to sweep down slope, reaching their lowest at the point where today the earthwork is intersected by a field boundary running east–west. This is the best preserved part of the bank. Even today, with the assistance of the gradient, it rises above head height and it is easy to imagine how in its original form, with a palisade on the up-slope side, it would completely block one's view of the interior, casting the veil of secrecy, and mystery, over what lies ahead. Outside and on the western slope of Ráith na Ríg, according to *Dindshenchas*, were two grave mounds marked with standing stones (*sic* Petrie), Leact Con and Leact Cethen, and down slope from these was Lóeg, one of the springs of Tara (Fig. 13) which is visible to this day.

Figure 12
Approaching the north-west side of Ráith na Ríg (where the bank is today quite depleted) the ground drops away to the west and south-west to reveal a fine view across the north-western part of the Central Plain. On a hill in the middle ground, identifiable as a dense stand of spruce trees just below the horizon, is the hillfort known as Ringlestown Rath that defends the western flank of Tara. In the fields to the right, though not visible on this photograph, is a double-banked linear earthwork that travels northwards for at least 1.5 km, also defending the western flank of Tara (Feb. 2007).

From this point on begins the gradual incline back up towards the top of the hill; a surprisingly debilitating ascent! Cresting the hill between the ramparts of Ráith na Ríg to the left and Ráith Lóegaire to the right, one encounters yet more graves (Newman 1997, fig. 20). Crossing over them one is, at last, presented with one's first, and quite magnificent, view over southern Brega. Immediately in front is the Gabhra Valley (the Valley of the White Mare) and Skryne. And to the left, in the middle distance, is Loch Dá Gabor (Anglicized to 'Lagore', this is the Lake of the Two White Mares, reminding us of the special status conferred on horses in Irish sacral kingship) where there was once a royal crannóg (Hencken 1950) and beside it the monastery town of Dunshaughlin. The gradient of this side of the hill is less steep as one follows around the ramparts, but what is perhaps interesting is that just before one reaches the entrance to Ráith na Ríg there is a remarkably well preserved section of the bank which is otherwise well-nigh non-existent along this eastern range. The massive bulk of this surviving portion illustrates just how big Ráith na Ríg really is, and is a timely reminder that it would still be impossible to see over the ramparts into the interior.

The eastern entrance to Ráith na Ríg is aligned on the entrance to Tech Cormaic, a mere 35 m between the two monuments. It is a busy 35 m from the point of view of geophysical anomalies, the interpretation of which is made considerably more complicated by dint of the fact that while some of the features are probably contemporary with Tech Cormaic, many appear to pre-date it. The alignment of the respective entrances suggests a measure of co-functionality (though not contemporaneity) and this implies that upon entering Ráith na Ríg during the early medieval period one might expect the royal party to have proceeded directly towards and into Tech Cormaic. Great significance was attached to crossing boundaries, particularly a boundary of such profound religious significance (Bhreathnach 1996, 72 quoting *Din Techtugud*; see

Figure 13
Detail from Petrie's plan of the monuments of Tara showing the position of (*sic*) Leact Con and Leact Cethen and the
spring Loég to the west of Ráith na Ríg (from Petrie 1839, pl. 8).

Dowling 2007). Ráith na Ríg is probably the prime sanctuary of Tara and entering it would have
been a moment of intense religious drama as the ceremonial procession crossed the liminal zone
of the boundary and into the Otherworld of Tara.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The ceremonial landscape and procession just described is situated, notionally, in the
early medieval period, and the suggestion is that Tech Midchúarta, like the ringfort known as
Tech Cormaic (Newman 1997, 180), was built during this period (though I am not suggesting
that they are *constructionally* contemporary). Both represent significant additions to the
monumental landscape on the Hill of Tara and both reveal through their architectural form how
their builders positioned *themselves* relative not only to the physical complex of built monuments
on the Hill but more specifically to the religious and historical phenomenon that is Tara. It has
been argued (loc. cit.), for instance, that by constructing this royal ringfort adjacent to the Forrad
(Assembly Mound) of Tara, and enclosing it within the outer rampart of the ringfort, the builders
of Tech Cormaic (Fig. 14) employed an architectural device to announce their claim on this most
important mound at Tara. It was an act of appropriation; a declaration and affirmation of the
elevated status of those who now controlled Tara. Moreover, it now seems clear from the
geophysical survey that Tech Cormaic was built over a series of older monuments, and this too

Figure 14
The conjoined earthworks of the Forrad and Tech Cormaic. The Forrad is the assembly mound of Tara and has been enclosed behind two banks, the outer one of which was added by the builders of Tech Cormaic, a ringfort of early medieval date. (Photo: Con Brogan, Dept. of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 1992)

represents a process of appropriation, affirmation and ascension. Tech Midchúarta appropriates this ceremonial landscape in a more subtle way, by indirectly harnessing, or marshalling, the existing monuments into an integrated spatial and ideological composition. It has also been suggested that the somewhat unusual form of Tech Midchúarta may have a symbolic dimension, that being semi-subterranean it is a space that invokes the motifs of liminality and transformation integral to the process of sacral inauguration. That Tech Midchúarta succeeds on all of these levels suggests not only genius on the part of those who designed and executed it, but also testifies to a most intimate knowledge of and familiarity with the topography, the monuments and the symbolism of Tara.

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