

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF NAVAN, IRELAND

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The Navan complex in Northern Ireland is a collection of sites occupied from the Neolithic through to the Iron Age periods of Irish history. Associated with *Emain Macha*, the legendary seat of the High Kings of Ireland, excavations and other non-intrusive investigations over the previous forty years have suggested that this complex was an important administrative, political and religious center. Investigations, including oak-dendrochronology and ground penetrating radar, are still ongoing.

The Navan complex is located approximately 1.6 miles West of the town of Armagh in the Northern part of Ireland (Mallory, "Recent Excavations", para 1). Armagh is sixty miles to the South East of the city of Belfast and is the administrative center for the county of Armagh within the ancient kingdom of Ulster. Ireland itself has many other similar contemporaneous sites including the provincial "royal sites" of Tara, Dun Ailinne and Rathcroghan (Mallory "Dating Navan Fort" para 1). Other sites in the region including hillforts such as that at Mooghaun, County Clare. Archaeologists have often compared the Navan complex to these sites in an attempt to better understand the overall view of Irish pre-history (Barry 26).

The site was first excavated by Dudley Waterman in the 1960s. After his unexpected death, there was a moratorium on any further invasive excavations on the site until the results of his work could be published (Mallory "Dating Navan Fort" para 11). Since publication of these results in 1997, James Mallory has been the principal archaeologist working on the Navan complex. His team from Queen's University, Belfast has been aided by paleoclimatologist Michael Baillie, archaeologist Chris Lynn of the UK government Environmental Services agency and US archaeologists and geologists, Kenneth

Kvamme, Daniel Larsen and Elizabeth Ambos (Larsen, para 1).

The Navan complex comprises several adjacent monuments, all presumably related. At the center of the complex are two large enclosures with associated pools. Navan Fort is the most important monument on the eastward side of the complex and contains three separate sites. To the east of Navan Fort is a marshy lake site known as Loughnashade. The western monument is a hillfort known as Haughey's Fort. To the Northeast of this site is a further pool, the King's Stables.

Navan Fort itself is a hengiform enclosure, approximately 230 meters across (Mallory "Dating Navan Fort" para 1). A hengiform is a flat area of ground surrounded by an earthwork ditch and bank ("Hengi-form Monuments"). Within the enclosure are two excavated sites, A and B, as well as a more recent discovery, Site C (Mallory, "Recent Excavations"). Site A is a low ring-barrow approximately 50 meters wide; Site B is an earthwork mound, of 6–7 meters in height (para 1); Site C appears to be a double ringed structure approximately 30 meters wide (Mallory "Dating Navan Fort" para 11). Haughey's Fort is a trivallate hillfort consisting of three elliptical ramparts, one within another. The largest rampart is 340 meters across at the widest point (Mallory, "Recent Excavations" para 1).

It would appear that there has been activity in the Navan complex since the Neolithic period although the majority of building and habitation occurred during the late Bronze and early Iron Ages. The first evidence of Neolithic activity was found in Site B in Navan Fort. Pits were found containing both flints and modified carinated bowls (Mallory, "Recent Excavations" para 2). Carinated bowls with their convex shaped and flared rim are typical of the Neolithic period not only in Ireland but in the British Isles and throughout Europe (Jackson 3). The hengiform

enclosure of Navan Fort itself could also be Neolithic, although there is some dispute and more evidence needs to be collected. The evidence from Site B and from nearby Neolithic passage graves suggests activity in the area in the Neolithic, and the structure of the enclosure is more typical of the Neolithic than of later periods; in addition, pine pollen has been extracted from the core of the ditch of a type practically unknown in the region after c. 2200 BCE (Mallory "Dating Navan Fort" para 12). However, more recent excavations have allowed oak dendrochronology of timbers located at the base of the ditch and these dated the earthwork at between 267 and 164 BCE. Archaeologists have yet to resolve this apparently contradictory evidence (para 16).

After the Neolithic stage, it would appear that the complex was abandoned and ploughed over until the late Bronze Age when a new period of building began (Mallory "Dating Navan Fort" para 5). When referring to Site B, this is period of abandonment is known as Phase 2.

The next phase of activity began at Haughey's Fort between 1200 and 1000 years BCE with the construction of the hillfort (Barry 22). Material from three ditches and the interior of Haughey's Fort have been radiocarbon dated to suggest occupation of the site from approximately 1000 to 900 BCE (Mallory, "Recent Excavations" para 2). Artefacts discovered at Haughey's Fort and the nearby King's Stables include sherds of Late Bronze Age pottery, many animal bones, human remains and fragments of metal (para 5). The metals discovered included both gold and bronze ornamentation, as well as more mundane tools (Mallory, "Haughey's Fort", Para 1). James Mallory suggests that two of the pits in Haughey's Fort are evidence of 'ritual pits' (Mallory, "Recent Excavations" para 6), while King's Stables was probably a pool used for ritual purposes (para 1).

Terry Barry points out that Haughey's Fort is one of several hillforts in the region and that evidence collected both from this site and from the other examples of trivallate hillforts suggest that not only was Haughey's Fort a defensive structure but it also was used for grain storage, gold production, animal husbandry and ritual. He

argues that there was a hierarchy of settlement in Ireland and that Haughey's Fort was in the top tier of that hierarchy: it was used by the most rich and powerful men in the region (22). This would paint a picture of Irish Bronze Age life that included significant social stratification (23).

Site B also saw a great deal of building activity during this Late Bronze age period, known as Phase 3. At first, the inhabitants built a ditched enclosure but then replaced it with a series of figure-of-eight structures. Wooden posts from these structures have been radiocarbon dated to between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE (Mallory "Dating Navan Fort" para 7). A particularly interesting artefact has been discovered at Site B, dating from this period. Archaeologists have discovered the skull and mandible of a Barbary Ape, native to Mediterranean Europe (para 7). This would place Navan within a trading network that extended to Southern Europe and included not only bulk goods but prestige items. Use of Site A of Navan Fort also began in this period with the construction of a triple-walled enclosure (Mallory, "Recent Excavations" para 6).

A third site within Navan Fort was postulated by researchers but only discovered in 1994 with surveys conducted by Kenneth Kvamme, Daniel Larsen and Elizabeth Ambos. Kvamme used the technique known as proton precession magnometry that measures changes in the earth's magnetic field across a particular site: these differences can indicate different materials within the ground (Kvamme para 3). Larsen and Ambos used ground penetrating radar to further locate anomalies within the site that could be of cultural origin (Larsen para 1). Such an 'anomaly' was located within the Navan Fort, and is known as Site C. It is a circular structure, 30 meters across, adjacent to Site A and appears to form a figure-of-eight structure with the outer edge of Site A's enclosure (Kvamme, para 7). Subsequent excavations at Sites A and C have revealed Site C to be a triple ring-slot enclosure dating to between 150 and 1 BCE (Mallory, "Recent Excavations" para 11).

Construction within Navan Fort continued into the early Iron Age. Site B saw two more phases: five and six,

during which the figure-of-eight structures were replaced by a large circular building, which was almost immediately infilled with limestone boulders and encased in an earthen mound (Mallory “Dating Navan Fort” para 9). Charred wooden timbers found in both the Site B mound and in the Navan ditch seem to indicate that the wooden structure of phase five was burned ritually (Mallory, “Recent Excavations” para 9). This construction and burning can be dated to 95 BCE by oak dendrochronology. As Michael Baillie notes, radiocarbon dating together with a large amount of oak data for chronologies have made oak dendrochronology in Ireland ‘routine’ (Baillie, para 5).

James Mallory notes that there is currently a great deal of speculation as to the purpose of the figure of eight structures, both that formed by Site A and C, and those from the phase 4 period of Site B. In all three sites there is evidence of ritual burning, included cremated animal bones found in Site C. Previous speculation that the structures in Site B were houses and yards seem to have been refuted by these finds (“Recent Excavations, para 12).

Ritual was clearly important to these early people. James Mallory argues strongly that Navan Fort was used as a sacred space for much of its life as suggested by the burning evidence and by the ditch itself (“Recent Excavations, para 9). He speculates that the ditch in Navan Fort is less useful than it might appear for defence and may be of a more symbolic meaning. If Navan Fort is seen as a “limnal monument”, a doorway from the mundane to the spiritual world, that the ditch may be protecting the outside world from the dangers of the unknown (para 9).

Such speculations and supporting evidence have usually concluded a strong ceremonial purpose for Navan which would seem to be corroborated by local legend about the site. The Navan Complex is usually recognised as the site of *Emain Macha*, the seat of the High Kings of Ulster, and an important location in the Ulster Cycle of the sagas of CuChulainn, Conchobar, and Deirdre of the Sorrows (Bender 10). *Emain Macha* was named after Macha, a mother goddess of Irish myth often though to be analogous with Epona, a European horse-goddess (Steeney 4). Although many of the texts of the Ulster Cycle were

finally written down only in the Medieval period, they are thought to date to the pre-Christian Iron Age period of Irish prehistory, and together with the work of the archaeologists working on Navan may give some glimpses into the Irish culture (Bender 11).

At the time when Navan was at the height of its occupation and use, Ireland was split into separate Kingdoms, each ruled by a High King (Duke, para 1). As these kingdoms vied for power and prestige, strongholds such as Navan Fort and Haughey’s Fort were important not only as defensive structures but also as symbols of the power of the King (King, para 2, Barry 27). These chieftains lived well, enjoying a wide range of foods as well as gold and bronze ornamentation; their chiefdoms traded far afield for such luxuries. Navan itself would probably have been used for many ritual purposes, including the inaugurations and burials of the Kings (Duke 2).

Despite the potential for warfare and upheaval, however, the Navan complex presents compelling evidence to suggest a remarkable continuity to Irish early history (Barry 27). From the Bronze Age through the Iron Age, Navan was in constant use, with new structures built over old; the new often mimicking the older structures. A stone was found at the Late Bronze Age Haughey’s Fort and the hengiform formation of Iron Age Navan Fort are both more typical of the Neolithic (Mallory, “Recent Excavations”, para 14). The encasement of Site B during phase 6 seems to mimic Neolithic tombs. Mallory speculates that a strong oral tradition in Ireland together with a desire to reflect the past for ritualistic purposes (para 15). Barry further contends that this continuity of use and reflection of the past might indicate the lack of significant immigration to the region which prevented significant changes in culture (27).

The Navan Complex, site of ancient *Emain Macha*, is one of the most important ‘royal’ sites of Irish culture. Excavations and other archaeological studies over the past forty years have shown us a picture of a ritual site used in the Neolithic and continually in use in the Late Bronze and early Iron Ages: a remarkable length of time. Structures in

the complex were used for defense, habitation, storage and ritual as well as a nexus for trade in a place that was a focus for the region and a center of a stable kingdom.

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