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An Bó Bheannaithe: Cattle Symbolism in Traditional Irish Folklore, Myth, and Archaeology

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An Bó Bheannaithe: Cattle Symbolism in Traditional Irish Folklore, Myth, and Archaeology

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the role cattle played in Iron Age Irish society, in their sociopolitical and economic systems, as a means of subsistence, and finally as a symbol within their belief system. Religious traditions play an integral role in any society and have a profound and systemic effect on many other aspects of culture, and should therefore be of great interest to archaeologists. However, belief systems might not be well-represented by material culture. In order to potentially understand the relationship between Iron Age Irish economy and religion, in this case as it pertains to cattle, it is necessary to make use of evidence from a variety of disciplines: Classical texts referencing Celtic culture, early historical Irish law tracts and mythologies, and archaeological evidence from known pre-Christian ritual sites. By comparing the evidence from each field, I illustrate how nearly every aspect of life in Iron Age Ireland was dependent on cattle and, as a result, cattle became a symbol of the entire society's well-being.

1.1 Sources

No single field of evidence is sufficient to inform our interpretations of the Iron Age Irish cosmology. Each has its own strengths and drawbacks and through a comparative examination of these sources, we can begin to form an impression of the nature of Irish belief in the Iron Age.

1.1.1 Classical Texts

The first of these sources comes from the multitude of contemporaneous Classical writings from the Greek and Rome neighbors of the Celtic world. Though little is written of the Irish themselves, there is a great deal of information that can be gleaned from these texts on the related Celtic peoples of the Continent and Britain. These offer the only true first-hand, albeit outsider's, reports available pertaining to the Celts, as they were, for the most part a pre-literate society. Unfortunately, an equal amount is based on rumors and hear-say as well, especially when directly concerning the Irish. Also, one has to take into account the inherently biased point of view, since the Romans and Greeks considered most everyone beyond the Mediterranean as barbarians and the reports are often highly exaggerated. However, if we take into account the biases, propaganda, and simple misinterpretations that certainly occurred, the Classical texts still offer the only contemporaneous records on the Celts.

1.1.2 Irish Texts

After Christianity spread to Ireland in the 5th and 6th centuries AD, the Irish established their own highly prolific literary tradition. For my purposes, I'll examine two categories of Early Historical Irish texts: the so-called Brehon Laws and the pseudo-historical mythologies. The law texts are some of the earliest writings to emerge out of

Ireland. They claim, at least, to be primarily based on the oral law tradition practiced before the coming of Christianity. Unlike the mythologies, there is only a relatively small gap of time between the pagan Iron Age and the writings of the first law tracts in the Christian era. Also, though they were Christian by this time, they are the first writings we have directly from the Irish themselves. The real problem arises when we remember that these tracts were written down by Irish clerics and Christian scholars, who had a vested interest in ridding Ireland of pagan practices. Anything that was deemed inherently un-Christian was either changed or completely disregarded. Also, a great number of the texts were destroyed for political reasons, especially in the Elizabethan era, particularly the texts relating to the common people, so there is a large gap in the original body of knowledge that is lost to time.

1.1.3 Myths and Folklore

The mythologies are fraught with even more problems than the law texts. Most were written 300 to 700 years after the Christian conversion, long after the last of the pagans were gone. The stories, like the law texts, were originally kept in an oral tradition by the religious caste, the druids, who were notorious for keeping such knowledge secret (Caesar 1998: 141). Even a cursory comparison of a few myths illustrates the convoluted and disorganized nature of the tales, full of contradictions (see Appendix 1). Though the sheer mass of information demonstrates the Irish clerics' interest in preserving these stories, they are undoubtedly filled with inaccuracies. Also, there were likely as many different versions of any one character or myth as there were tribes in Iron Age Ireland, which some estimate to fall between 100 to 150 local divisions (or *tuatha*) (Richter 1995: 18). Though other evidence does support that the basis of the belief system was extremely similar in most of the Celtic world, there would certainly have been local variation. Again, we have to remember that they were written by Christian monks and clerics who were concerned with preserving the Irish culture and history, but not with encouraging pagan myths. Many, even most, of the stories are obviously manipulated to appear as pseudo-historical accounts of Ireland and the characters, certainly deities once, are often presented more as historical heroes and kings, their formerly divine status severely downplayed. On the other hand, though the details of the myths may be scattered and disorganized, the basic themes within them are extremely consistent. If we concern ourselves only with understanding the basic tenets of Iron Age belief, and use comparative information gleaned from Classical texts on the related groups in Britain and Gaul, it is possible to strip away the finer points and see certain overriding ideals embedded within the myths.

1.1.4 Archaeological Evidence

The archaeological record is the one source of relatively unbiased information, and it can provide us with the physical evidence related to ritual activity. Of course, artifacts are silent, and it is extremely difficult to interpret how activities at ritual sites fit into a belief system that we hardly understand. Compounding the issue is an almost total lack of evidence from occupational sites in Ireland, especially from the Iron Age, with which we could compare to the ceremonial sites. However, due to a number of major excavations in the last few decades, we have more information on the nature of these ceremonial activities and ritual sites than in all the time before combined. We finally have an opportunity to at least form some idea of what actually went on at these imposing sites.

1.2 Celtic Origins

Before examining the Iron Age Irish Celts specifically, it is helpful to understand their background and origins in a larger European context. This also helps to illustrate why we can examine information pertaining to British and Continental Celts when studying Ireland.

The first groups to emerge in Europe that could be tentatively called ‘Celtic’ (which is technically a linguistic term), originated from the merging of the Tumulus and Urnfield cultures around 1000 BC in the Danube Basin (Ó hÓgáin 2002: 2). They formed the cultural group referred to as the Hallstatt people, who are generally associated with the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age. The first major expansion period occurred between the 8th and 7th centuries BC. It is believed that a form of proto-Celtic language was already spoken at this point. The word ‘Celt’ is rooted in the Indo-European root *kel*, meaning ‘to strike,’ and according to Classical sources, it was a term at least some Celtic tribe used for themselves (Ó hÓgáin 2002: 2). This alone gives us some indication of a warrior-based society living just beyond the boundaries of the ‘civilized’ Mediterranean.

For all intents and purposes, the Hallstatt essentially gave birth to the Iron Age La Tène culture around the 6th century BC, whereupon another extensive expansion across Europe occurred (Fig. 1). A thorough discussion of the La Tène culture could easily fill several books (and it has numerous times), but here it is sufficient to say that they are distinguished best by their highly skilled iron-working technology and distinctive insular art forms, parallel examples of which bond all the La Tène groups together (Ó hÓgáin 2002: 6).



Fig. 1: Spread of La Tène Cultural Influence (Raftery 1994)

Both the Hallstatt and La Tène groups immigrated into Ireland at some point during these expansions, but it is still unclear exactly when this occurred. The terms Bronze and

Iron Age are problematic as chronological terms to begin with, but they are especially troublesome when applied to Ireland. The earliest iron objects in Ireland date to the 7th century BC, but the next set dates to between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, with little material evidence of any sort found in between. There is fairly extensive evidence of Hallstatt C origin (usually considered Early Iron Age), especially in terms of weaponry and burial practices, enough to believe that the Hallstatt Celts were present in Ireland as opposed to simply representing a foreign influence on the indigenous population, but most of the artifacts are bronze, not iron (Cooney 1991: 33-35). Unlike those on the Continent, the Irish Celts seem to have preferred bronze over iron far longer than most (though both were used to an extent), despite apparently having the knowledge to utilize the more advanced iron technology and possessing their own sources of both materials.

The issue of continuity versus intrusion is even more complex and ambiguous when applied to the later La Tène presence. The earliest distinctively La Tène-style artifact found in Ireland thus far dates to the early 3rd century BC (Raftery 1991: 30). Some of the early examples are imports, though most of the relatively small amount found are indigenously made, but all are wholly La Tène, implying that the art form arrived after it was fully developed with some level of immigration (Raftery 1991: 29). Most of these artifacts are high-status items, so they primarily inform us of only one elite faction of the population. Material evidence pertaining to the rest of the population, that of typical lower-status settlement life, is nearly non-existent in the Irish Iron Age, though they certainly would have constituted the majority of the population. Though it is probably safe to say that most of Ireland was made of Celtic groups, there is evidence pointing towards both indigenous Hallstatt continuity and a foreign La Tène intrusion, so there may have essentially been two separate cultures living side by side, one ruling over the other.

By the earliest beginnings of the historical period around the late 5th to 6th centuries AD, Ireland was undeniably Celtic, but as discussed, when the Celts arrived, and which Celts arrived, is still ambiguous and hotly debated. What evidence does exist primarily indicates immigration from Britain, though some have suggested the Celtiberians in what is present day Spain as another origin, and it is likely that Ireland at least had fairly consistent contact with Gaul as well. For the purposes of this paper, however, we are concerned primarily with the mid to late Iron Age Celts up to the historic period, from roughly around the 3rd century BC to the 5th century AD. Whether Ireland was Celtic at this point is not much debated. In summary, it is sufficient to say that by this era Ireland was Celtic in origin and had important cultural ties to the Celts of Britain and the Continent.

From these texts, myths, and archaeological sources, I will now summarize the subsistence, sociopolitical system, known ritual activities and religious themes, followed by a close examination of the archaeological evidence at several important Iron Age sites to illustrate the importance of cattle in every aspect of Iron Age Irish life.

2. Subsistence

Interpreting the symbolic nature of cattle in Iron Age Ireland must first start with their most primary role, as a form of subsistence. As previously mentioned, there is little material evidence pertaining to domestic sites in Ireland during this period, so it is difficult to draw detailed conclusions (Raftery 1994: 112). A major gap exists in the archaeological record from the 7th to the 3rd centuries BC (though it is not entirely absent), and this period represents the transition between the Bronze and Iron Age. Most of the evidence that does exist, however, points more to continuity with little external intrusion (Cooney 1991: 33).

Thus, it is likely that the Iron Age subsistence practices closely resembled those of the Bronze Age.

Within this earlier period, both cultivation and animal husbandry were practiced with an emphasis on cattle as the dominant food source (Raftery 1994: 21). This seems to also be the case in the Iron Age, though whether this was primarily for dairy or meat remains unclear. In the far better documented Early Christian Era, cattle were still the primary food source, and it was clearly a dairying economy (McCormick 1995: 35) and recent biochemical research in the British Isles supports that this was the case far earlier than the 5th century AD.

This is not particularly unique to Ireland of course. There exists a long history of cattle pastoralism in Europe and both Ireland and the British Isles are especially suited for it. For successful pastoralist practices, an area requires the development of open country, grasslands or moorlands, preferably longer growing seasons, and a temperate climate with little snow, all of which apply to Ireland (Fleming 1972: 187). On top of the amicable climate, according to the pollen analyses, Ireland underwent a major woodland clearance by at least 600 BC, dominated by grassland with some evidence of arable agriculture (Weir 1994: 176).

A heavy reliance on pastoralism seems to have been the case in most of the Celtic world. Nearly all contemporaneous Classical accounts of Britain and Gaul tell a similar story. In his *Geographia*, Strabo writing that the Britons are “well-supplied with milk” from the cattle they keep in massive circular pens (1969: 255-7). Though he says nothing of the subsistence practices in Gaul, within his lucid description of their sacrificial rituals, (which I will touch again on later), he specifically notes that cattle were often included the offerings (1969: 249). Caesar, too, makes note of the British homesteads with their “numerous cattle” and claims that most of those living in the interior of the island “do not grow corn but live on milk and meat, and wear skins (1998: 111).” In his history of the Roman Empire, written sometimes between 154 AD and 211 AD, Cassius Dio states that the Britons hold “no walls, nor cities, nor tilled fields, but living by pasturage and hunting and a few fruit trees (2004: 77:12).” The only author to discuss Ireland’s means of subsistence is Tacitus in his biography of Agricola, and though he fails to mention cattle, he does write that “in soil, climate and in the character and civilization of its inhabitants it is much like Britain (1960: A24:74)” which given all other evidence, likely implies a similar reliance on cattle pastoralism.

The Irish law texts, primarily developed in their oral form within the Iron Age, emphasize the importance of cattle at every level. A nearly countless number of laws were written to address crimes against the cattle herds, for example, theft or injury done to the animals. Interestingly, there are also laws related to harm done by the cows themselves, such as damage to property caused by a wayward animal (O’Donovan Vol. IV, 1879 III). This may indicate that there was rather sizeable number of cattle roaming through Ireland at the time, though of course any accurate guess as to how many there were would be difficult to make. As a whole, the legal scholars of Ireland seem to have been very concerned with the herds being protected and maintained properly, above all other forms of livestock or food production.

I will address the details of the faunal reports for the ceremonial sites of Ireland further on, as this pertains more to ritual activity than to subsistence specifically. It bears mentioning, however, that of the remains found at the three excavated sites, two, Tara and Dún Ailinne, are heavily dominated by bovine remains, both at around 50% (McCormick 2002: 103, Crabtree 2007: 158) . The third site, Emain Macha, is a bit more complicated. Within two areas, cattle are the predominant species found, while at the other two areas, pigs are actually more common, with cattle running second. Even so, cattle would have provided

a greater amount of food by sheer weight alone (McCormick 1997b: 145, 2000: 37, 1997a: 119).

3. Sociopolitical System

As Iron Age Ireland was primarily a pre-literate society, most of our information concerning their sociopolitical system comes from the early law texts, often referred to as the Brehon Laws. As some of the earliest writings to emerge from Ireland, and due to their immense complexity, it is believed that they are reflective of the earlier prehistoric law as well as those of the Early Christian Era (Ginnel 1894: 26). The pseudo-historical introduction to the *Senchus Mor*, one of the largest collections of law tracts, states just that:

What did not clash with the Word of God in the written law and in the New Testament, and with the consciences of the believers, was confirmed in the laws of the Brehons by Patrick and by the ecclesiastics and the chieftains of Ireland; for the law of nature has been quite right, except the faith. (O'Donovan Vol. I, 1865: 17)

The texts themselves claim to have been written in the time of St. Patrick, in the 5th century ad, and while they may actually date as late as the 7th and 8th centuries, they are still some of the earliest writings available (Richter 1995: 16).

Early Irish society was formed around a heterarchy, neither a hierarchical monarchy nor a feudal system, where an individual's rank varied depending on the conditions. At the top of the heterarchy was the *flaith*, a class of nobles. Each local tribe, or *tuath*, was governed by a king (*ri*), chosen from within the *flaith* as a secular and spiritual leader of sorts. Above the tribal king was a regional king who presided over several *tuatha* and above him sat the provincial king, the highest authority (Ginnel 1894: 64-67, 96). Though only nobility were eligible to rule, the position was an elected one, chosen from a division called the *derbfine* – those within a four-generation relationship to any former king – and though such a large body of potential electorates likely caused its own conflicts, this theoretically ensured that only the most qualified individual held the position (Ginnel 1894: 67, 136).

The whole of Ireland was divided into five major provinces or *cóicedaig*: Ulaid (Ulster), Mide (Meath), Connachta (Connacht), Laigin (Leinster), and Mumu (Muster). This is also supported by the archaeological record, evidenced by the existence of five major ceremonial centers, one in each region (Newman 1998: 132). As early Ireland was entirely rural, there were no urban centers until the Viking invasions of the 9th century ad, these capitals served more as symbolic capitals and spiritual centers to the *cóicedaig* as opposed to being more actively political, as I will discuss later.

Within the *flaith*, and apart from it, existed the professional class, the most noteworthy being the *druíd*. I will discuss this group in detail further on, but for now it is sufficient to say that these individuals were the only ones with full legal rights outside of their own *tuath* and possessed the freedom to essentially come and go as they pleased, something not even the nobility had a right to (Richter 21-22). They were religious and legal scholars, the most highly educated class in the Celtic world (both Britain and Gaul had their own *druíd* as well) and in fact the word 'brehon' is an anglicization of the Irish *brithern*, the druidic legal scholars theoretically responsible for the creation of the Brehon Laws.

Outside of the nobility and professional class, most of the Irish population was composed of common people, who can be divided into three categories: freemen with property (or *céiles*), freemen without property, and slaves (Ginnel 1894: 98-99).

Unfortunately, most of the laws pertaining specifically to ‘ordinary’ people have been lost or destroyed and the archaeological evidence of their lives is very scarce (Raftery 1994: 112).

Comparable systems seem to have existed in Britain and the Continent, according to the Classical texts. Cassius Dio states that the Britons’ “form of government is mostly democratic (2004: 77:12) and Caesar gives a remarkably similar description of the Gallic political system in the 1st century BC, with tribal, regional, and provincial divisions:

In Gaul, not only every tribe, canton, and subdivision of a canton, but almost every family, is divided into rival factions. At the head of these factions are men who are regarded by their followers as having particularly great prestige. The object of this ancient custom seems to have been that all the common people should have protection against the strong ... The same principle holds good in intertribal politics: all the tribes are grouped in two factions. (1998: 138-9)

The tribes themselves were essentially kinship-based, all members claiming descendency from a common ancestral family or *fine* (Ginnel 1894: 102). The king as the head of the *fine*, was seen more as a caretaker, protector, and legal representative of the *tuath*, not a despot. He had no real legislative power, nor was he responsible for enforcing or maintaining the law. His central duty was to defend the *tuath* against its enemies and to serve as a sacerdotal leader (Richter 1995: 17-18). The king was also responsible for providing cattle to his subjects and in return, they paid a tribute back to him in “victuals, labour, and respect (O’Donovan Vol. II 1869: 345).” This likely consisted, more literally, in new calves, meat and dairy products, and potential military service when needed. This twice-yearly tribute was meant to be used for the interests of the tribe, not the king’s personal use and the local kings paid their own tributes to the kings above them (Ginnel 1894: 121, 136).

This system was part of the complex property arrangements that were both communally and individually divided (Ginnel 1894: 113-6). Though land could be individually owned in a way, it belonged first to the *tuath* as a whole and could not be sold or gifted to someone outside of the community:

No person should grant land except such as he had purchased himself, unless by the common consent of the tribe, and *that* he leaves his share of the land *to revert* to the common possession of the tribe after him. (O’Donovan Vol. III 1873: 53)

An individual could rise, or fall, in rank and position through many avenues, but primarily through the accumulation of wealth in land or cattle (Ginnel 1894: 61). Traditional ideas of money, as in coinage, did not appear in Ireland until centuries into the historical period and as such, monetary value was defined in a number of ways: through *cumals* (literally female slaves, but usually meant to refer to the amount of gold or silver equivalent to the value of a female slave), *séts* (nearly always defined as a particular number of cattle), or in ounces of silver (Kelly 1998: 112).

Cattle were the most common form of ‘currency’ until the 13th century AD. The base unit and most valuable type of cattle was the mature milch cow and all other types were defined against that, e.g. a two-year-old heifer would be considered 1/3 of the value of a milch cow, a yearling bullock was 1/8 of that value, and so forth (Kelly 1998: 113). Individual status was ranked by an honor price, defined by a certain number of *séts*, which in turn represented a certain number of cattle (Ginnel 1894: 104). Essentially, a person’s importance was calculated by how many cows their life was worth. This is especially significant since most crimes and offenses could be satisfied by paying an fine, usually in cattle,

to the wronged individual or their family, including murder, where one paid the established honor price of the victim plus a 'body fine' (Ginnel 1894: 188).

As a whole, the entire sociopolitical system relied almost entirely on the cattle herds. They served as the primary basis of wealth and as such, as the basis for social rank. Most monetary transactions were dealt with in cattle, including the tributary exchanges between the king and his subjects. Even a human life was defined by how many cattle that individual was worth. If, for some reason, harm befell the cattle herds of Iron Age Ireland, the people would not only have starved, their entire sociopolitical system would have collapsed around them.

4. Ritual and Religion

It may be impossible to know precisely what the Iron Age Irish believe in a religious context, but reasonable inferences can be made through a combination of the archaeological evidence of ritual activities, Classical and insular descriptions of Celtic belief systems, and the mythologies collected and recorded by Christian monks in the early medieval era. Through these lines of evidence, I will review the "who," "what," "where," and "when" of Irish ritual activity in an attempt to uncover the "why" of such events.

Though local and regional religious variation would have persisted throughout the Celtic world, certain themes do emerge that bind these groups together. I have already discussed the general cultural connections between Ireland, Britain, and the Continent earlier on. The first grounded similarities in belief can be seen in cognate place-names, especially those referencing related deities between the various regions (Newman 1998: 131). The attributes of these deities also bear a strong resemblance to one another. The Classical reports of Celtic ritual activity often mirror activities described in the earliest Irish Christian documents and activities referenced in the mythologies, many of which seem to be reflected in the archaeological record of the Irish sacred sites. Also, it would be a mistake to assume that paganism fully ceased after the Christianization of Ireland. The early writings of Irish monks show that they were greatly concerned about the continuation of such 'heathen' practices. The archaeological record, too, supports this, especially in the persistent practice of Iron Age-style funerary customs up until the 7th or 8th centuries AD, which differed significantly from Christian burials (Raftery 1995: 7). As such, though many of the details of pre-Christian Irish religious belief may elude us, we do have an ample amount of information with which to work from.

4.1 The Druids

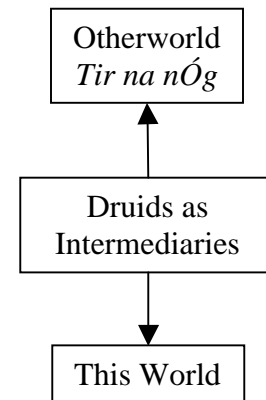
Precluding any decent discussion of Iron Age Irish religion, it is important to understand the system in which it worked and the social class, the druids, who dictated all ritual activity. These mysterious figures have so entranced popular culture that it is sometimes difficult to separate the numerous misconceptions attached to them today from what we can confidently support through archaeological and textual sources. Maringer states that there are a number of conditions that must exist for a culture to support a professional priesthood, all of which seem to have been present in Iron Age Ireland:

...a differentiated economy with a settled way of life, including leisure for spiritual activities; the existence of a production surplus, the material foundation of rich sacrificial custom requiring special ritual members; and the existence of cult centers requiring priests or priestesses for daily worship or for conducting seasonal ceremonies. (1977: 101)

The voluminous data from all fields of evidence, strongly indicate that the Celts of Ireland, Britain, and the Continent had a special religious caste. The Classical authors were especially interested in the Celtic druids and nearly all make mention of them. Strabo states that there were three classes with the Gallic religious caste: the Bards, Vates, and Druids, all with “exceptional honor” and the “most just of men” who arbitrated disputes on every level, could single-handedly stop a battle, and led all religious ceremony (1969: 245). Caesar does not differentiate between the various sorts of Gallic druids, but his description is much the same. They “officiate at the worship of the gods, regulate public and private sacrifices, and give ruling on all religious questions [and] act as judges in practically all disputes (1998: 140).” He further states that druids were held in great honor by their people who sent their children to them for instruction, that they answered to “one head” above the tribal level, and that though they were highly educated and literate, they were forbidden to write down their religious teachings. Interestingly, Caesar is told that the druidic order began in Britain and that many would travel to the island for decades of religious training (1998: 141). Whether or not the former is true, the latter illustrates the cultural cohesion between the religious communities of far-reaching Celtic areas.

Within the Irish texts are almost identical classes to what Strabo described: the *bard* or *fili*, *fáidh*, and *druí* (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 72). Nearly all early Irish texts mention the druids. In the same way as shamans and priests cross-culturally, they are said to act as mediators between this world and the Otherworld and are repeatedly associated with prophecy and sacrifice (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 75, 85). In Macthéni’s pseudo-historical biography of St. Patrick, he says the kings “had men possessing knowledge and magi and diviners and enchanters and finders of every evil art (2006: 1:X:7-8).” The law tracts claim to be co-authored by druids, in the “joint memory of two seniors, the tradition from one ear to another, the composition of poets [*fili*],” most importantly Dubhthach, who’s said to have explained the laws of Ireland to Patrick so that all that “did not disagree with the word of God in the written law” would be preserved (O’Donovan Vol. III 1873:31-33). The mythologies are filled with druids in the service of kings, usually performing some act of magic or divination. In a precursor story to the great Irish epic, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, King Conchobor of Ulaid employs a druid named Cathub who foretells the downfall and exile of Ulaid’s great warriors before the great battle with Connachta for the Donn Cúailnge, the Brown Bull of Cooley (Gantz 1981: 258-9).

The archaeological evidence also supports the existence of a priesthood as described in the texts in Ireland and abroad. The size and complex nature of massive ritual sites like Tara, Dún Ailinne, and Emain Macha indicates that a religious caste existed that exerted a tremendous amount of power over people and resources (Lynn 1992: 41). The morphological similarities between the sites support the idea that this religious community was organized above the tribal level and its members practiced the same basic religious activities (Newman 1998: 131). It is extremely likely that an organized, highly educated religious caste did exist in Iron Age Ireland.



4.2 The Calendrical System

In one form or another, the traditional Irish festivals have been observed Ireland continuously from the prehistoric era to the present, though of course with countless modifications. Modern traditions at these events certainly can’t be said to be the same as

those performed in pre-Christian times, but some of the associations seem to have survived in folk practices. These 'quarter days' that divide up the Irish calendar were so integral to the pastoral and agricultural practices that the Church was unable to suppress their observation (Patterson 1994: 120). There is also archaeological evidence suggesting the great antiquity of these holidays, which I discuss below.

The Irish year was divided into four seasons, each marked by a 'quarter-day' festival: Samhain (winter), Imbolc (spring), Beltaine (summer), and Lughnasad (autumn). Samhain, celebrated around November 1st, marked the end of the old year, the beginning of the new year, and was presumably the most important festival of the year (Lynn 1992: 42). The fact that the Irish thought of the New Year beginning in winter is related to a larger theme within the Celtic cosmology where winter comes before summer, night before day, and death before life. Caesar mentions a similar Gallic view of counting each day as beginning when the sun set (1998: 142). The emphasis of that time of year was on meat production, killing of the surplus cattle before the winter months began (Patterson 1994: 122).

Samhain was also believed to be the time when the boundary between the real world and the Otherworld was the most permeable (Patterson 1994: 128). Modern holidays that usurped the Samhain tradition (Halloween and All Soul's Day) still seem to echo this concept. The Irish law tracts and myths repeatedly describe feasts and festivals held at this time of year:

Each year the Ulaid held an assembly: the three days before Samuin and the three days after Samuin and Samuin itself. They would gather at Mag Muirthemni, and during these seven days there would be nothing but meetings and games and amusements and entertainments and eating and feasting. That is why the thirds of Samuin are as they are today. (Gantz 1981: 155)

Imbolc, the first of February, was considered the first day of spring when work with the livestock and land could begin again. In fact, the name Imbolc roughly translates to 'milking,' (Ó Catháin 1995: 7). In modern folk practices, this is also considered the feast day of St. Brigid, who is very likely the euhemerization of an early female deity associated with fertility, cattle, and Imbolc festivals (Ó Catháin 1995: 17).

The beginning of summer, May 1st, began on Beltaine. This was the time just before the communities divided so that the livestock could be taken to summer pastures and it was the traditional occasion for assemblies and inaugurations (Patterson 1994: 135-6). It was strongly associated with grand bon-fires, the word itself means 'bright fire,' (Úa Cuileinnáin 1913: 12) which will become a great deal more significant when I explore the Celtic sacrificial practices.

Lughnasad marked the beginning of the final season, autumn, when the community and cattle herds rejoined at the start of harvest time (Patterson 1994: 141). It is named for Lugh, the 'multi-skilled' god, who many believe was the most important deity in many, if not all, parts of Ireland. He represents one of the deities that strongly ties all parts of the Celtic world together for there are locations named after him in Ireland, Britain, and the Continent.

4.3 Ritual Activities

A number of Iron Age ritual activities have been postulated through a variety of academic fields, but for the purposes of this paper, I'll focus on two widely attested practices that involved cattle directly: sacrifice and ceremonial feasting.

4.3.1 Sacrifice

While the extent to which it was practiced is difficult to determine, sacrifice, of humans, animals, and material objects, was indisputably practiced throughout the Celtic world. Archaeological evidence, Classical writings, and early Irish texts and mythologies all provide support for this ritual activity. The Classical authors, in fact, were rather fixated on the subject and though they undoubtedly exaggerated for political reasons, their consistent and repeated descriptions of the practice suggest that it certainly wasn't an outright invention on their part.

Sacrifice has been a common part of ritual activities in many parts of the world throughout human history and the basic significance behind it is often the same. Atran summarizes the ideals behind sacrifice and some of the various practices often involved that may be relevant to the Irish Iron Age rituals:

Religious sacrifices are not only designed to be materially costly, they also aim to be emotionally arousing. Blood, especially human blood, is optimal for sacrifice on both accounts ... Such costly offering of a significant part of a particular human life was made to the gods to obtain an even fuller and more enduring life for the congregation as a whole. Blood offered at the altar was usually conceived to be drunk by the deity ... In many of the world's religions, blood sacrifice has persisted in one form or another. Usually it survives as animal sacrifice, with animal blood replacing human blood ... Often the animal is consumed by the congregation, at least in part. This serves to redistribute meat and affection among members of the community ... In religious offerings, there is *always a nonrecuperable cost* involved both in the selection of the item offered and in the ceremony itself ... In many cases, the first or best products of one's livelihood must be given to the gods ... (2002: 115-116)

Strabo, who seemed to enjoy painting rather graphic depictions of 'barbarian' peoples, lists a number of ways the Gallic druids performed sacrifice, including shooting people to death with arrows, impaling them in the temples, throwing cattle and wild animals into the fray, and lighting the whole thing on fire (1969: 247-9). Caesar, at least, offers some clue as to why the Gallic sacrifices were performed:

"...persons suffering from serious diseases, as well as those who are exposed to the perils of battle, offer, or vow to offer, human sacrifices, for the performance of which they employ Druids. They believe that the only way of saving a man's life is to propitiate the god's wrath by rendering another life in its place (1998: 141)."

It is from him that the infamous 'Wickerman' is known, which mirrors Strabo's account as well: "Some tribes have colossal images of wickerwork, the limbs of which they fill with living men; they are set on fire, and the victims are burnt to death (1998: 141)." Significant archaeological attention has been given to the possibility of the 'Wickerman' ever really existing, and it has been deemed structurally impossible, at least in exactly the way Caesar describes it, but there is strong evidence of similar practices that this idea was likely based on (Lynn 1992: 47). Caesar also mentions that after a battle "they sacrifice the captured animals and collect the rest of the spoils in one spot [and] high piles of it can be seen on consecrated ground (1998: 142)."

Pomponius Mela stated that the Gauls "used to believe that to gods the best and most pleasing sacrificial victim was a human being" (1998: 3:18:107) and Cassius Dio claims that captives in the Iceni uprising in Britain were tortured in the most grotesques manner, then impaled in sacred places as sacrifices made to Andate, a goddess of war (2004: 62:7).

The archaeological evidence does support some forms of sacrifice, albeit not usually in just a graphic manner as the Classicists. Though it is the most widely attested form of

sacrifice in the texts, it is rather difficult to identify sacrificial victims of fire. Cremation was the most common funerary practice in much of the Celtic world, especially in Ireland, and it is impossible to know how or why an individual died from cremated remains (Cooney 1991: 39). It is also nearly impossible to tell from faunal remains if an animal was ritually sacrificed before being consumed. Most forms of food preparation would have involved fire and cremating the bones could have been a likely means of disposal. With that said, it is not unreasonable to presume that faunal remains found at ritual sites, devoid of any domestic evidence, were sometimes, or even often, first offered as sacrifices before being consumed, especially when the animals were killed on site. Also, the faunal remains at Irish ritual sites are often found within a copious amount of burnt material, far beyond anything needed simply for cooking, supporting the Classical and Irish stories of massive bonfires. For example, among the extensive faunal remains recovered at Site C of Emain Macha, out of almost 1400 bones, all but 11% were burnt so thoroughly that they couldn't be identified (Murphy 2002: 19).

Beyond fire sacrifice, other forms are a great deal more easily recognized in the archaeological record. Severed heads buried at ritual locations (and occasionally bodies without heads), usually attributed to sacrifice, have been found in both Britain and Ireland. This is likely related to the so-called 'cult of the head' concept that permeated throughout the Celtic world, that the spirit of a man (or the spirit of an animal) resided in the skull (Cooney 1991: 40) and that the spirits of the victim would then guard that location (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 47). There are many burials in Ireland that may represent sacrificial victims, both human and animal (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 46). One burial uncovered in County Kildare strongly suggests, from the strained position of the skeleton, that the woman was buried alive, likely as a form of sacrifice (Raftery 1999: 199). Children are frequently found buried with adults in otherwise typical graves, but they are found in such pairs so often that some believe this indicates sacrifice as well, though whether it was of the child or the adult is uncertain (Raftery 1999: 199).

Most animal remains can just as easily be explained as simple food refuse, but a small number of horse bones have been found at all three excavated Irish ritual sites (McCormick 1997a: 120, McCormick 2006: 106, Crabtree 2002: 64). It is fairly unusual to begin with to find evidence of horseflesh being consumed at all in Ireland (and all the bones do bear butchery marks), as they obviously would have been far more valuable for purposes other than food. In fact, there are a number of Irish stories that place a *géis* (taboo) on the consumption of horseflesh. If horses were used as food, it would likely be only under the most auspicious of occasions. One medieval writer, Giraldus Cambrensis, claimed that at the inauguration of an Ulster king, a white mare was sacrificed, dismembered, and made into a broth in which the new king bathed and he and all the people partook of (1863: 138). While this does not necessarily mean that all the animals within the same context were ritually sacrificed first, it does point towards such a possibility.

As previously mentioned, cattle bones represent the majority of the faunal remains found at the excavated Iron Age Irish ritual sites. It is not unreasonable to assume that some of these remains are evidence of sacrifice and not merely food refuse (though even as food refuse, they likely represent ritual activity as I will describe in the next section). There are a number of cases where animal bones in Iron Age Celtic Britain were found buried beneath ramparts, thus likely sacrificed before constructing a home or fortification, or interred with human burials, indicating that the animals were sacrificed as part of the funerary ritual (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 46). There is also archaeological evidence of cattle sacrifice within the preceding Irish Bronze Age as well, such as at King's Stable, a small artificial ritual pond

within the Navan Fort (Emain Macha) complex, where a large number of cattle bones were deposited, along with several other species, a human skull, and a number of metal objects (Raftery 1994: 24, McCormick 1994: 182).

4.3.2 Ceremonial Feasting

Ceremonial feasting is not only far easier to support through archaeological means, it is one ritual activity that is entirely accepted as having taken place in Iron Age Ireland by nearly every field. The “why” of it, however, is another matter. Feasts, especially within the context of a ritual site, cannot be assumed to be nothing more than a particularly grand meal. It is a ceremonial act by its very nature. Dietler defines a feast as:

...a form of public ritual activity centered around the communal consumption of food and drink ... feasts provide an arena for both the highly condensed symbolic representation and active manipulation of social relations ... The ritual symbolism of feasts is constituted through a complex semiotic relationship to daily consumption patterns, and both form part of a common semiotic field. To adapt a concept from linguistic analysis, feasts may be viewed as the ‘marked’ form to the ‘unmarked’ meal. (2001: 67, 69-70)

Support for this activity can be found in the Irish mythologies, the law tracts, and there is extensive archaeological evidence. Only one Classical author, Cassius Dio, makes note of ceremonial feasting in his account of the Iceni uprising in Britain, though he does point out that it is in honor of a deity: “All this they did to the accompaniment of sacrifices, banquets, and exhibitions of insolence in all of their sacred places, but chiefly in the grove of Andate, that being the name of their personification of Victory, to whom they paid the most excessive reverence (2004: 62:7).”

The *Senchus Mor* gives its own definitions of appropriate types of feasts: “Question: How many banquets are there? Answer, – Three; a godly banquet, a human banquet, a demon banquet (O’Donovan Vol. III 1873: 19).” This particular part of the Brehon Laws was probably quite influenced by Christianity. The ‘godly banquets’ include all those related to Church activities and Christian holidays. The ‘human banquets’ are described as “the banquet of each one’s feasting house to his chief according to his (*the chief’s*) due, to which his (*the tenant’s*) deserts entitle him,” obviously feasts for political reasons. The glosses in the text describe one subclass of a ‘human banquet’ involves the “feeding of a collection, i.e. at the making of ‘cain’-law and ‘cairde’-law, i.e. a cow *from* every farm (O’Donovan Vol. III 1873: 21).” This reflects that reciprocal relationship within the heterarchy discussed earlier, whereby each lower king had to give tribute to the king above him, often through a feast.

The ‘demon banquets’ are said to feast in honor of those who do not deserve one, most of which are references to types of pagan or druidic individuals, of which I will list a few from the text. The satirist (*caintib*) in most myths, is a poet-druid (*fil*) who has the power to physically mar an individual (usually a king) through the power of his words. The begging poets or jesters (*oblairib*), is translated in a few ways, but was also traditionally a druidic profession. Heathens or pagans (*geintib*) is obviously just what it sounds like, and does imply that there were still pagan practitioners around at the time. The ‘sons of death’ (*macaib báis*) are the name given to those accompanied by druids. The last type given, *druthaib*, which translates to buffoon, is thought to have likely been a misprint of the word *druidib*, or druid (O’Donovan Vol. III 1873: 25, McCone 1990: 221-222). That the early Irish clerics went to such great lengths to condemn pagan feasts suggests that the practice was still alive and thus must have been incredibly important to those still practicing pre-Christian traditions.

The Irish myths are filled with stories of great feasts, usually set within the known ritual sites on either Beltaine or Samhain. The *dinshenchas*, collections of early poetic writing specifically in reference to important locations in Ireland, attribute a number of such events at the major sites:

The feast round the mighty Feast of Tara,
the fairs, round the Fair of Emain;
annals there, this is true;
every division into which Erin has been divided (Gwynn III: 21)

Many myths tell of the gods holding great feast on the Hill of Tara. In “Midhir and Etain,” the feast takes place on Samhain and lasts “from the fortnight before Samhain and the fortnight after it (Gantz 1981: 90)” and though it doesn’t say when the event took place, the story of Lugh’s arrival is heralded by a grand feast at Tara as well. Even when feasting is not specifically mentioned, in nearly every myth, there is at one point or another, a great assembly or fair hosted by a king, which one can easily assume involved feasting.

One particular ritual described in the early texts, the *tarbfeis*, involved both the sacrifice and feast of a bull, before the inauguration of a king. A bull was sacrificed, and after eating his fill of meat, a druid would then sleep while his colleagues performed incantations around him so that he might dream of the rightful new king (MacKillop 1998: 65). This is also reminiscent of the bull-sacrifice scene on the Gundestrup cauldron (Fig. 2) found on the Continent and bulls as a symbol of kingship are extremely common throughout the Indo-European world.



Fig. 2: Bull-Sacrifice Plate of the Gundestrup Cauldron (Olmstead 1979)

Archaeological evidence at all three excavated sites, Tara, Dún Ailinne, and Emain Macha, indicate ritual feasting within the Iron Age levels. Based primarily on the structural elements and lack of distinctive domestic artifacts, these sites have been repeatedly shown to be ceremonial in nature rather than domestic sites, and extensive faunal remains were

excavated at all three sites. Analyses of the faunal remains indicate that the animals were slaughtered on site, which at least hints at possibility of sacrifice as well (Crabtree 2007: 169). The bones are often severely fragmented and calcined, indicating that they were exposed to a wide range of temperatures, and are found among burnt material (Murphy 2002: 19). The volume of burnt bones is one of the key indicators that these were sites of feasts and/or sacrifice (Lynn 2002: 17). Butchery marks are found on the majority of the bones, strongly suggesting they represent food refuse, but this was food refuse situated outside domestic settings (Crabtree 2007: 166, McCormick 1997a: 117).

4.4 The Irish Pantheon

The vast majority of our knowledge of the Irish deities comes from the mythological texts written at least 300 to 400 years after the Christianization of Ireland, most significantly later (Johnston 2007: 202). This obviously presents a number of problems when attempting to determine the original nature of these deities. Even if the authors had meant to record a faithful version of the original myths, so much time had passed since the pre-Christian era that they likely didn't know the original forms: these tales were orally transmitted and there were probably a number of different versions even when they were contemporary. Also, though the early religions survived to an extent possibly as late as the 8th century AD, the well-organized druidic community did not, and they were the official 'keepers' of that particular knowledge. Furthermore, the early clerics had a vested interest both in discouraging paganism and in preserving their own Irish heritage, so many characters presumed to have originally been gods were euhemerized into heroes, kings, and fairies, thus safeguarding the ancient stories without promoting the old religion*.

Though the Classical authors did describe a number of Celtic ritual activities, few of them named the particular deities the ceremonies were dedicated to. This makes it difficult to draw linguistic parallels between the names of Continental, British, and Irish deities. Caesar, for example, does mention several specific Gallic deities, but he identifies them with Roman names (1998: 142).

There is also a lack of helpful archaeological evidence to this effect. The prehistoric Irish rarely depicted their gods literally in their art, unlike a number of images from the Continental Celtic art, and though there are instances of the Irish ogham writing in prehistoric contexts, most are territorial markers and grave stones with no mention of the deities.

Considering these points, it is possible at least to gain an idea of the nature of the Irish deities through the consistent and repeated themes that arise. Some figures are far better represented in the myths and as such, we have a better idea of their original significance. Like many pre-Christian pantheons, the Irish gods were extremely anthropomorphic; they had human-like motivations, needs, and desires. As Raftery explains, the gods "were capricious and moody, at times benevolent and helpful, at times malicious and spiteful. It was necessary to mollify and appease them constantly by means of offerings, by the correct rituals and by the proper manner of behavior (1994: 178)." As with many early European cultures, there was no real line between the natural and the supernatural to the Celts. The world of mortals and the world of gods existed in tandem with one another and directly affected each other. Any unexplained phenomena would have been attributed to their deities. The majority of specific characters that we can identify clearly have strong connections to the seasons, livestock, agriculture, and fertility in general.

4.4.1 The Dagda

The Dagda, a paternal-type sun-god, may be the only character in the myths still specifically referred to as a god and is one of two strong candidates for the original head of the Tuatha Dé Danann pantheon, the gods thought to have been connected specifically with the Celts who arrived in the Iron Age. His name translates to the “Good God,” though this is not meant as a moral indication, rather that he is all-powerful. The Dagda “performed miracles and saw to the weather and the harvest and that is why he was called the Good God (Gantz 1981: 39).” The fecundity of the land and people was dependent on his goodwill and he is often portrayed with a hammer and a cauldron (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 63) and he has two magical pigs, one who is always cooking, the other always alive (MacKillop 1998: 125). In the *Cath Maige Tuired*, he single-handedly rescues the cattle herds with his magical milk

*See Appendix 1 for a partial reconstruction of the Irish pantheon’s genealogy.

the heifer which had been given him for his work; because when she calved her calf, all the cattle of Ireland which the Fomoiré had taken as their tribute began to graze (Gray 1995: §165).”

He may be related to Dis Pater, the ancestral god named by Caesar, the “god of night, death, and the dark underworld (1998: 145),” which since the Irish seemed to believe in a coexisting duality between light and dark, does not necessarily contradict his role as a sun-god. As such, he is also associated with both Samhain and Beltaine, the seasonal markers between the dark half of the year and the light half (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 109). He was undeniably a fertility god of some kind, most of his stories portray him either feasting or fornicating, and like the Roman Jupiter, he has countless children, nearly all with different goddess mothers. In one of the most significant tales, “The Wooing of Étain,” the Dagda sleeps with the goddess Bóand who, in her own right, has strong connections to the land. When he decides that he desires Bóand, the Dagda tricks her husband Elcmar into leaving on an errand. He then stops the sun for nine months so that Elcmar will believe that only a day has past while Bóand carries and gives birth to their son Aongus, the god of youth and beauty (Gantz 1981: 39).

4.4.2 Lugh

Lugh, the ‘Long-Armed’ and ‘multi-skilled’ god, is the second potential head of the pantheon and possibly was the most important deity of all. His name, Lugus in the Gaulish language, is at the root of several ancient Celtic settlements, for example, the city of Lyon in France. He is associated with lightening and harvest-time and like the Dagda, is connected to idea of a sacred king, the divine examples of the sacred Irish kingship. He is rarely portrayed in a negative light, and in the story of his arrival among the Tuatha Dé Danann, he mysteriously appears before the battle of Mag Tuired, just in time to lead the Tuatha Dé army against their enemies, the Fomoiré (Gray 1995: §53-71). He is associated with many ritual sites of Ireland, often the father or consort (or both) of the patron goddess of the site and as mentioned before, the harvest festival, Lughnasad, and the month of August (both the same word in Irish) are named after him.

Though sovereignty was thought to be gifted by a female deity, Lugh seems to have been the one who chose who it would be bestowed upon. In one tale, the mythical King Conn is transported to the Otherworld, at Tara, where he meets Lugh and the goddess of sovereignty, who confirm him as the rightful king of Ireland (Gregory: 1904 69-70). In what may be a remnant of the original creation myth, Lugh was also indirectly responsible for providing the continued well-being for all the cattle of Ireland (and their crops as well) by extracting such a promise from Bres the Beautiful in exchange for his life at the battle of Mag Tuired:

she is the daughter of the Dagda (Gray 1995: §124) and both she and the saint are connected to water, fire, poetry, healing, and smithcraft. She is said to have two sisters by the same name, an example of the sacred Triad in Celtic symbolism.

4.4.6 Medb

Medb and Macha offer a slightly different picture of an Irish female deity. Both are strongly associated with sovereignty, battle, and fertility. Medb is one of the leading figures in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as the Queen of Connachta and the instigator of the war with the Ulaid in her desire for their mythical Brown Bull (Kinsella 1969: 52). Her popularity was quite wide-spread as it is believed that she was the principal deity at both Tara and Crúachan and, as the following passage illustrates, played a major role in the inauguration rituals: “Great indeed was the strength and power of that Meadhbh over the men of Ireland, for it was she who would not allow a king in Tara unless he had her for a wife (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 134).” Her role as a fertility goddess is often more akin to the Dagda than to Brig or Bóand. The myths list her as married to quite a number of different gods and mythological kings, but she always the dominant partner and often is said to use sex to advance her cause. It is difficult to know much of this was manipulated by the early Christian writers, since it’s usually portrayed in a negative light, but consistent theme suggests that she was strongly associated with fertility.

4.4.6 Macha

Macha is not mentioned quite so often in the myths as Medb, but she carries all the same associations of sovereignty, battle, and fertility. She was the patron goddess of Emain Macha, named in her honor. She is connected to deities in both Britain (with Rhiannon) and Epona (in Gaul) in her role as a horse-goddess. It isn’t surprising then, that Cambresis’s account of horse sacrifice, mentioned before, takes place in Ulster. Macha is also part of the Mórríona (Ir. ‘great queens’), a Triad of rather frightening, shape-shifting, war-goddesses repeatedly cited as a cause of countless battles and conflicts (MacKillop 1998: 337). In “The Labor Pains of the Ulaid,” one of the place-name myths of Emain Macha, she is forced into a foot-race with the king’s horses, despite the fact that she is pregnant. When she reaches the finish line (and wins), she gives birth to twins, identifies herself as the goddess, and curses all the men of Ulster with labor pains for their cruelty (Gantz 1981: 129).

4.5 The ‘Royal’ Sites

For each of the five Iron Age provinces of Ireland, there is a corresponding ritual center, a kind of capital: Teamhair (Meath), Emain Macha (Ulster), Dún Ailinne (Leinster), Crúachan (Connacht), and Caisel (Munster). The archaeological evidence of those that have been closely examined consistently supports the theory that these were extremely significant religious sites for thousands of years, not only in the Iron Age. The early Irish texts not only emphasize the ‘pagan’ elements associated with these sites, but their role as the symbolic seat of Irish kingship. They are repeatedly referred to in the myths as the dwelling places of various important deities and each is especially associated with at least one particular female deity. According to Caesar, the concept of a sacred center in a Celtic territory seems to have existed in Gaul as well: “On a fixed date in each year [the druids] hold a session in a consecrated spot in the country of Carnutes, which is supposed to be the center of Gaul (1998: 140).” Unfortunately, though we can see a parallel with the activity on the Continent, there are no Classical references to Ireland’s royal sites specifically, save for a single name on Ptolemy’s map, Isamnion, which may represent Emain Macha (1991: 45) (see Fig. 3).

Excavations in recent decades have revealed “significant common cultural, architectural and spatial motifs (at least for the later phases) indicating possible contemporaneity and commonality of purpose, and, most importantly, revealing the predominantly ritual character of these sites with little evidence for settlement (Newman 1998: 129).” The overall purpose of these sites, as ritual centers, is no longer disputed in anyway. Both Dún Ailinne and Emain Macha have been thoroughly excavated in recent decades as has Tara to a far lesser extent, so we now have a great deal of archaeological evidence to work from. Crúachan was recently surveyed, but with no actual excavations, so we have far fewer details of Connacht’s capital. The same holds true for Caisel, plus there is evidence that southern Ireland may not have been as culturally related to the other four regions during the Iron Age. There’s next to no evidence of a La Tène presence in all of Munster, and though they were certainly Celtic, the earlier Bronze Age Celtic culture may have survived there much longer than in the northern areas (Raftery 1994: 228). As such, I will focus primarily on Tara, Emain Macha, and Dún Ailinne, and to a lesser degree, Crúachan.

All three sites include the remains of extremely similar Iron Age structures: circular, wooden, hilltop hengiform enclosures with an internal ditch, (differentiating them from an externally-ditched defensive structures) and external bank, some in a distinctive figure-eight shape (Raftery 1994: 65). Very similar structures have been found in Britain as well (Robertson 1992: 25). Any one of these structure were large enough to have demanded considerable manpower, resources, and the political power to direct their construction. Of the two thoroughly excavated sites, Emain Macha and Dún Ailinne, there is strong evidence that some of the structures were destroyed shortly after they were constructed, either through fire or dismantling, and considering the amount of work it would have taken to built them in the first place, it is thought that they may have been destroyed for ritual purposes as a kind of sacrifice (Lynn 1992: 40). Though no extensive excavation has been performed on the structures at Tara, one myth tells of a god, Aillén mac Midgna the ‘burner,’ who incinerated the sídh ‘palace’ of Tara every year at Samhain until he was killed by Fionn mac Cumhaill (MacKillop 1998: 9).

The construction period coincides with first appearance of high-status La Tène artifacts, implying that a new group of Celts from Britain or the Continent may have immigrated to the island and taken power (see Sec. 1.3 for the problems of immigration vs. indigenous influences in Ireland) (Raftery 1994: 65). Each one includes evidence of ritual activity spanning from the Neolithic to the historic period, and that continuity plus the ritual

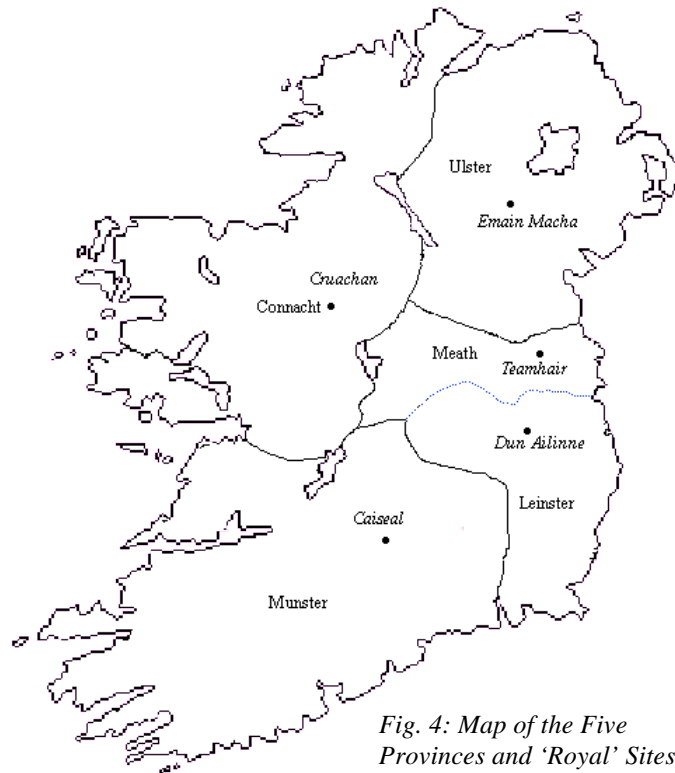


Fig. 4: Map of the Five Provinces and 'Royal' Sites

reuse of older monuments in later activities and the deliberate attempt to incorporate those earlier structures within newer ones implies that each group (for no claim is made for cultural continuity over 3,000 years) understood that the sites were already considered sacred (Newman 1997: 68). It should be noted that the ritual reuse of older monuments makes typical dating techniques extremely difficult to utilize, so oftentimes, dating a feature to the Early or Late Iron Age is as exact as one can surmise, though chronologies for individual sites can usually be established.

Some of the mythological stories about the sites are likely medieval inventions used to explain their names, but they incorporate the deities that may have originally been associated with them and there are enough consistent connections between these characters and the locations, beyond the place-name stories, to support those connections. Likewise, though the details of the myths may be later inventions, the overall themes, symbols, and general activities attributed to the sites are repeated so often that they are likely echoes of the original oral myths and real activities.

4.5.1 The Hill of Tara

Teamhair free from feebleness hides not
the glory due to women for its building
.....

The abode was a keep, was a fortress,
was a pride, a rampart free from ravage (Gwynn 1991 I: 7)

The Hill of Tara, or Teamhair na Rí, is the largest and best-known of the Irish ritual sites. It serves as the center of Meath (Mide), and later in the historical period, it was considered the symbolic seat of the High King of Ireland, and contemporaneous documents state that it continued to be used as the site of the king's inauguration well into the early Christian Era. This does not mean that it was used in precisely the same manner in the Iron Age, but the fact that it was chosen for such an event supports that it was still considered a very important site, either spiritually or secularly, and may indicate their "desire to concord the sustaining role of the divine in early kingship with the medieval tradition ... and a desire to associate, legitimately or otherwise, with ancestral territorial markers" (Newman 1998: 130).

There are multiple examples of ring-ditch enclosures in and around the Tara complex, the two most significant areas being the Ráith na Ríg and the Ráith na Senad (Fig. 5). The largest hengiform enclosure, the Ráith na Ríg (Rath of the King), sits on the summit of the hill, certainly the pinnacle of the site, and has recently been dated to around the 1st c. BC, though the precise absolute dating is still forthcoming (Roche



Fig. 5: The Forrad and Teach Cormaic on Ráith na Ríg (Newman 1997)

1998: 29). Post holes from a palisade trench just inside the external ditch surrounding the entire area were recently found in a small excavation (Roche 1998: 26-28). In its center are two conjoined Iron Age earthworks, The Forrad and the Teach Cormaic that form a figure-eight, both with the internal ditches and external banks. Within the Forrad stands the Lia Fáil, a pillar-shaped stone that originally stood in the center of the Teach Cormaic (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 130). From the shape of the larger ring, it appears that an effort was made to include older Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments within the ring. A recent (though rather small) excavation in the ditch and external bank revealed a significant number of animal bones (discussed further on), human skull fragments, and the remains of an infant burial (Roche 1998: 27).

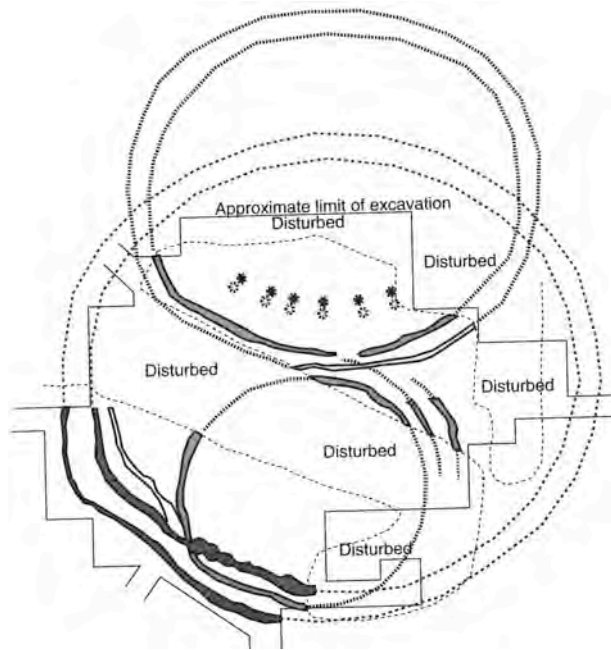


Fig. 6: Ráith na Senad Outline (Cooney 1994)

The Ráith na Senad (Fig. 6), the second largest enclosure, has unfortunately been badly damaged by the church built next to it and a turn-of-the-century search for the Ark of the Covenant (Newman 1997: 91, 94). It includes similar bank and fosse enclosures, both a circular structure during one Iron Age phase and a figure-eight structure in another (Newman 1997: 96). A GPR survey of the complex recently revealed that the entire rath is surrounded by a circular palisade of 300 post holes, each two meters across, that joins the Ráith na Senad with the Ráith na Ríg.

The number of mythological stories related to Tara could fill its own book and it was easily the most important location in all of Ireland for most of its early history and prehistory. It is claimed as the seat of kingship for a vast number of divine king-gods, ruling over both Mide and Ireland as a whole and is repeatedly connected to the feasts of Samhain. The site is said to be named for Téa, a daughter of Lugaid (maybe Lugh), a rather minor character in the myths, but the site is far more strongly connected to Lugh and Medb.

Lug was considered the manifestation of kingship at Tara. The story of Conn of a Hundred Battles perfectly illustrates the significance of the Ráith na Ríg, the Lia Fáil, and the role of the deities:

Conn was in Teamhair one time, and he went up in the early morning to the Rath of the Kings at the rising of the sun ... And on this day he chanced to stand upon a stone that was in the rath, and the stone screamed under his feet ... Then Conn asked his chief druid how the stone came there, and what it screamed for ... 'The Lia Fail is the name of the stone ... And as long as there is a king in Teamhair it is here will be the gathering place for games, and if there is no king to come to the last day of the gathering, there will be hardness that year ... And while they were in the same place, there came a great mist about them and a darkness, so that they could not know what way they were going, and they heard the noise of a rider coming towards them ... he came to them and bade Conn welcome, and asked him to come to his house. They went on till they came to a beautiful plain, and there they saw a king's rath ... And there was a young woman in the house, having a band of gold on her head ... She said then to the master of the house: 'Who am I to serve drink to?' 'Serve it to Conn of the Hundred Battles,' he said, 'for he will gain a hundred battle before he dies' ... And the master of the house told them the young woman was the Kingship of Ireland forever. 'And as for myself,' he said, 'I am Lugh of the Long Hand, son of Ethlinn.'

(Gregory 1904: 68-70)

As mentioned previously, Medb is the manifestation of sovereignty at Tara (likely the woman in Conn's story) and it's believed she was the primary deity to which the ritual activities were dedicated to. One ritual referenced in the medieval texts, the *ban-fheis*, or the feast of the kingship inauguration, literally means 'sleeping with a woman,' when the new king was symbolically wed to the goddess, and thus the land.

The archaeological evidence of ritual activity is rather scant since only one very limited excavation has been performed, on the Ráith na Ríg specifically, in decent decades, involving only two ditch cutting on the northern end of the rath and two small samples beneath the bank of the enclosure (McCormick 2002: 103). However, even from this rather small excavation, over 400 species-identifiable bone fragments were recovered. Cattle predominate the assemblage, making up almost half (48.1%) of all the faunal remains recovered, with pigs accounting for 22% (McCormick 2002: 104). The sample was too small to gauge an detailed ageing pattern of the cattle slaughtered, but most seem to have been more than three years old (McCormick 2002: 106). If this was reflective of typical subsistence, it would contradict the theory that the Iron Age Irish used cattle primarily for dairying.

Pigs are usually the second most common type of animal bone found in prehistoric Irish sites including Tara, sheep at third, but there was also an unusually high number of horse bones (6.2%), the largest amount ever found, with obvious butchery marks, giving credence to the anecdotes and mythological traditions of horse sacrifice (McCormick 2002: 106-7). An unusually high number of dog bones were found as well (9.4%) (McCormick 2002: 107) and some of the earliest Irish writings tell of a druidic divination ritual involving the sacrifice and consumption of dogflesh (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 79).

Even with a very limited sample, Tara's faunal assemblage is indicative of consumption patterns that would be extremely unusual in a domestic setting. The cattle being slaughtered are of the most valuable variety: if this was a dairying economy, those who would have provided the most milk. The butchery marks are obviously indicative of consumption, and the location of the bones, away from domestic sites, indicates feasting, but it is possible that sacrifice was involved as well. These early results are already intriguing by themselves, and the extensive, recent ground-penetrating radar survey of Tara is meant to be used as a reference for future work at the site. Hopefully future excavations will be performed to provide a fuller picture of the faunal assemblage and related ritual activity.

4.5.2 Emain Macha

'My name and that of my children will mark this fairground for ever – I am Macha daughter of Sainrith son of Imbath,' she said. She raced against the chariot, then, and, as the chariot reached the end of the field, she gave birth in front of it, and she bore a son and a daughter. That is why the place is called Emain Macha. (Gantz 129)

Emain Macha, also called Navan Fort, was the ritual capital of Ulster. If Tara is the most significant site in all the Ireland, Emain Macha runs a very close second place. There are several different Iron Age structures within the complex, all likely ceremonial in nature. The 40 Meter Structure (Site B) is the largest and most impressive (Fig. 7 and 8). Through dendrochronology dating of its center post, we know that it was built in 94/95 BC. It is a circular structure of multiple oak rings leading to a massive central post that may have been as tall as 13 meters (Raftery 1994: 78) and is situated near the summit of the area within an earlier hengiform earthwork (Robertson 1992: 25). After the wooden rings were constructed, a limestone cairn was added to the inside, and the entire structure was then deliberately burnt to the ground and covered with a clay mound (Lynn 1992: 33). All the evidence suggests that it was built with the intention of a very short lifespan and meant only for ritual (non-domestic) use (Lynn 1992: 34).

The purpose of the earlier Iron Age structures built at Site A/C is still debated. It consisted of two conjoined circular structures with triplicate rings, a figure-eight, possibly with an entrance palisade off the larger northern circle. Before the archaeologists realized that the rings were conjoined (in much the same way as ritual structures at Tara and Dún Ailinne) and due to artifactual evidence of what could indicate occupation, it was first assumed that they were high-status domestic dwellings. However, after further excavation showed the relationship between the two ring, and other evidence indicated the same sort of thorough burning as at Site B, and burnt bone indicative of ceremonial feast and/or animal sacrifice was discovered, it was concluded that they may have been used for ceremonial

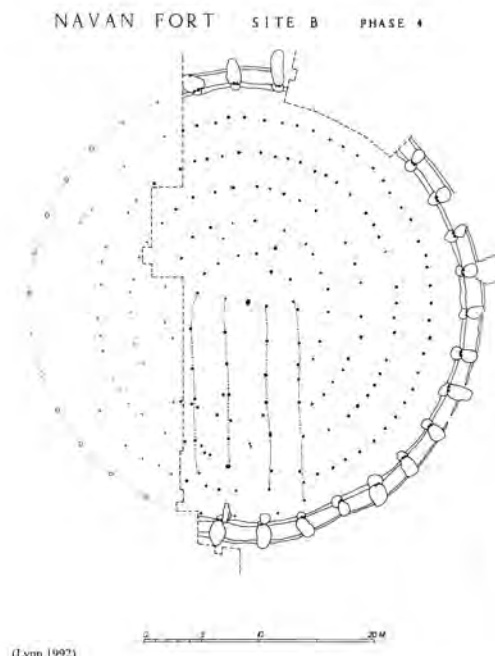


Fig. 7: 40 Meter Structure Outline (Lynn: 1992)

purposes (Lynn 2002: 17). The fact that no other Irish ritual site thus far has shown any strong evidence of occupation supports this more recent conclusion.

According to the myths, Emain Macha was the sacred seat of kingship in Ulaid and it is one of the two main settings of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Like Tara, it is repeatedly said to be the site of feasts, assemblies (*óenach*), and fairs, especially at Samhain. Several different stories of how the site came to named for Macha, but she is always the primary deity associated with the site. She was the equine land-goddess to whom the king must be symbolically wedded, and *macha* was one word used to define a certain portion of land or enclosure (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 174). The first part of the site's title, *emain* or *eumania* is probably rooted in the Celtic word *isomnis*, or 'sturdy posts' (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 172). Ptolemy in fact refers to the site as Isamnion in the 1st century ad (1991: 45).

The archaeological evidence of feasting or sacrifice, specifically the faunal assemblage, is highly variable from one part of the complex to another. The majority of bones found in all areas bear butchery marks, or at least those not burnt so thoroughly as to make it impossible to tell, so they generally represent food refuse (McCormick 1997a: 117-8). Within Sites B and C, pigs actually predominate the record, though cattle are second (exact percentages vary considerably) and cattle still would have provided the majority of meat by weight alone

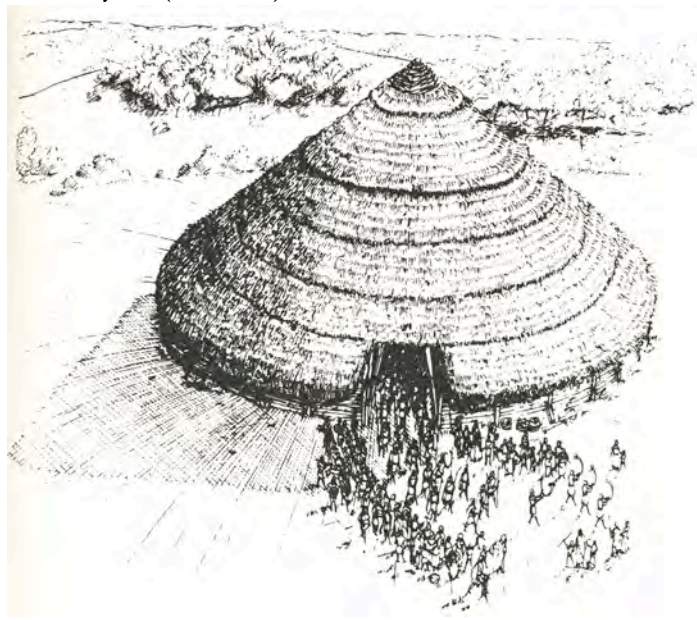


Fig. 8: Reconstruction of 40m Structure (Raftery 1994)

(McCormick 1997a: 118-9). Unlike the cattle remains, the high proportion of pig remains cannot be explained by environmental factors, but it can be attributed to the Irish notion of pork as a high-status food and to the Otherworldly connotations attached to pigs and boars, as sited repeatedly in a number of Irish myths. Though the assemblage doesn't emphasize cattle as the most valued domesticate in this particular context, (and there's bound to be some variation between the regions despite their close relationship) it does support the idea that there was a ritual overtone to the consumption patterns at Site B and C, further supported by the comparative faunal assemblage at Haughey's Fort, the neighboring settlement site (though they are not quite contemporaneous), where cattle are the dominant species (67.8%) (McCormick 1991: 48).

Within Site C specifically, the bones were so fragmentary that only 11% could even be identified by species (Murphy 2002: 19). Most were severely burnt and it appears that they were subjected to a wide range of temperatures. The cremated bones and various burnt material at Site A and C can be associated with the deliberate burning of the Site A/C Structure, which may be indicative of ceremonial feasting and/or sacrifice (Lynn 2002: 17). Within Site A and the Navan Ditch, cattle are the dominant species found, and both are contemporaneous with the other two areas (exact percentages were not reported) (McCormick 1997b: 145, McCormick 2000: 38). The variety from one area to the next within

the complex is perplexing, but if they are the result of ritual feasting and sacrifice, it could suggest various practices were performed dependent on the particular ceremonial occasion. There were not enough cattle remains to provide a decent age-of-slaughter pattern at Emain Macha, but they were likely mature animals as at Tara (McCormick 1994: 185).

Sheep/goat remains were found in very small numbers, but as at Tara, a number of horse remains also were found with butchery marks (though not nearly as many as at Tara) (McCormick 1997a: 120). Considering the equine associations with the patron deity of Emain Macha, it would be surprising if this were not the case. Along with the animal remains from Site B, a single human clavicle was found (McCormick 1997a: 120) and at Site C, a human skull fragment and tooth were found (Murphy 2002: 19). While it is impossible to know exactly what activity resulted in their presence, funerary or sacrificial, it strongly supports the involvement of religious practices.

4.5.3 Dún Ailinne

Here dwelt the wife of Balla,
heroic daughter of Lugaid;
the clan was not disgraced by her repute;
from her came the royal name of Alend.
(Gwynn 1991 II: 81, 85)

Dún Ailinne, or Knockaulin, is not so well-known in the myths, but as a ritual site, it is equally as impressive as Tara and Emain Macha. It was the ritual center of Leinster (Laigin) and within the Iron Age, saw three separate construction phases (Fig. 11). Each structure was disassembled before constructing the next, never left to rot away naturally (Wailes 2007: 13). The initial White Phase (Dún Ailinne's phases were given 'nonsense names' by the archaeologists and have no special significance) is the simplest of the three, a circular palisade trench possibly with a small ring of free-standing post in the center (Wailes 2007: 13). The Rose Phase structure (Fig. 9) is a figure-eight of two conjoined circles, plus an entranceway off the larger northern circle (Wailes 2007: 13). The larger circle is made of three concentric rings, the smaller 'annex' circle of two concentric rings, possibly as viewing platforms (Wailes 2007: 14). The final Mauve Phase (Fig. 10) consists of a circular structure of three separate, related constructions. The outer ring is made of two concentric trenches enclosing a palisade, with an elaborate gateway (Wailes 2007: 16). The second is a ring of free-standing posts, some of were subject to intensive burning near the surface (Wailes 2007: 17). The third center circle may have been a small wooden tower or 'viewing stand' (Wailes 2007: 18-9). Directly following the three structural phases is the so-called Flame Layer, the last of the Iron Age phases. The only construction in this period was the addition of a stone-paved area (Crabtree 2002: 63). This is, however, where the majority of the faunal remains were found, the largest faunal assemblage ever found within any Iron Age Irish site.

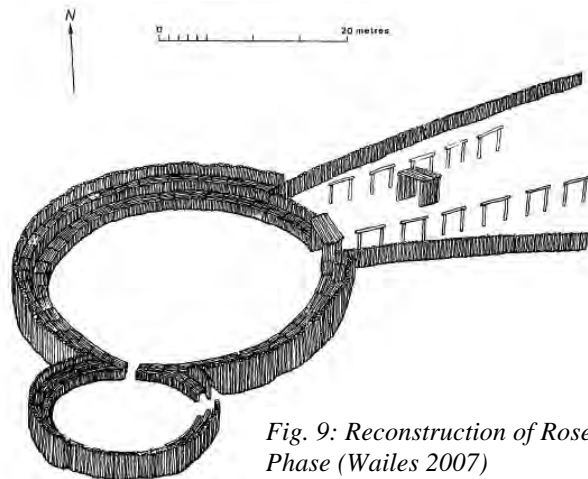


Fig. 9: Reconstruction of Rose Phase (Wailes 2007)

There's a great deal less in the texts on Dún Ailinne, though as previously stated, it is identified as the symbolic seat of the Leinster kingship. Geographically, it is the closest site to Tara, it's possible that it was a bit overshadowed. It's name is usually attributed to a minor female deity called Aillenn (or Alend), the daughter of king Lugaid (possibly referring to Lugh), who was kidnapped and died of shame on the hill (Stokes 1895: 310). Brigit, however, is more often associated with the site (Hicks 2007: 185). She was the tutelary goddess of Leinster, and as previously mentioned, she's strongly associated with fertility, cattle and milk, poetry, and fire.

Outside of containing the largest faunal assemblage ever found within the Iron Age in Ireland (18,755 bones and fragments), it is also possibly the most intriguing collection (Crabtree 2007: 157). Due to its size, far more conclusions can be made from the evidence than at Tara or at Emain Macha. As noted, the majority of the bones were found within the Flame Phase, the last of the Iron Age phases (Crabtree 2002: 63) though a large number of bones were also found in association with the Rose and Mauve Phases (Crabtree 2007: 158). The extremely thin humus layers throughout the phase suggests that the site was used repeatedly for years, with short periods of inactivity no longer than a single year (Wailes 2007: 21).

Cattle remains predominate in nearly every phase and layer (53.8%), followed by pigs (36.5%), sheep/goat (7.1%) and horse (2.5%), all with butchery marks (Crabtree 2007: 160) and the distribution of body parts, all parts of the skeletons were found, implies that the animals were brought to the site before being slaughtered (Crabtree 2007: 161). This seems to be the case at Emain Macha as well (McCormick 1997a: 120).

Unlike Tara and Emain Macha, the majority of cattle were slaughtered at a very young age, most under 6 months and over half of all the cattle remains were under a month old, though the rest were mostly over 4 years of age (Crabtree 2007: 162). This is neither indicative of a dairying or meat-based economy, if we are tempted to view the evidence as subsistence. If it were a dairying economy, killing calves before they were 6 months of age would stop their mothers from lactating. If it were a meat-based economy, slaughtering calves at such an immature size would have been counterproductive. No matter which economic context it is in, a slaughter pattern like this would have been extremely expensive (Crabtree 2002: 64). Whether for political reasons or religious ones (or both), the Leinster kings and/or druids felt the need to slaughter extremely 'expensive' animals. It is impossible to know if this was for the sake of political clout at ceremonial feasts as conspicuous consumption versus actual religious sacrifices to the gods, but both are possibilities and are not exclusive of one another.

The number of calves slaughtered also makes it unlikely that they came from a single herd, since doing so would have made the herd unviable (Crabtree 2007: 169) This seems highly reflective of the system described in the Irish law tracts, where the populous paid a tribute, usually in the form of cattle, twice a year to the local king who in turn paid a tribute

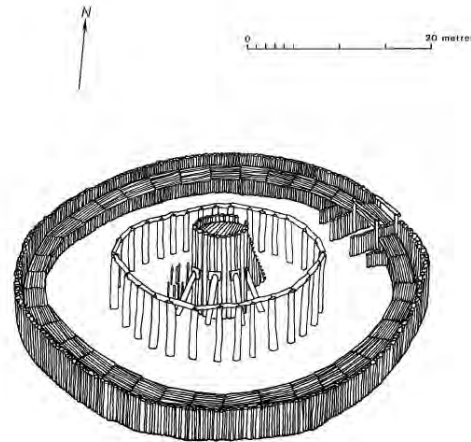


Fig. 10: Reconstruction of Mauve Phase (Wailes 2007)

to the king above him. As Dún Ailinne was the capital of all of Leinster, the cattle likely came from all over the entire province to make the massive feasts possible.

The large number of neonates also makes it possible to roughly judge what time of year they were slaughtered. The calves were probably born some time in March, as they are today, so the large number neonate calves would have been slaughtered between April and May. The older calves would have been slaughtered in late September or early October (Crabtree 1990: 24). According to the Irish calendar, the first of these corresponds very closely to the Beltane festival, just before the herds would have been taken to the summer pastures. Also, there are numerous stories of ritual bonfires at this festival where the cattle were driven between two such fires to protect them from disease, and the Flame layer is absolutely covered in burnt material (Ó hÓgáin 1999: 97). The second date does not correspond so well to the Irish calendar, though it is only a few weeks away from Samhain. This particular holiday is often said to have lasted as long as a month, so this could still indicate the beginnings of such a festival. Either way, autumn was undoubtedly the time of year when the excess animals would have been

slaughtered in preparation for the winter months, so the domestic activity associated with that time of year is still synonymous with the timeline at Dún Ailinne.

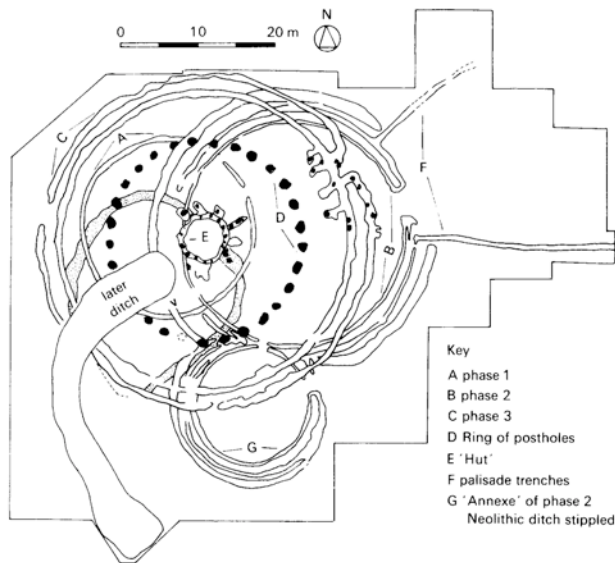


Fig. 11: Three Phases of Dún Ailinne Iron Age Activity (Johnston and Wailes 2007)

4.5.4 Crúachan

Said Cruachu the lovely,
 in presence of the spacious tribes,
 “O Midir, yet unconquered,
 shall my name be on this Sid?”

He gave the fine dwelling as reward for her journey
 to Crochen, a fair recompense:
 by Midir, report says, northward at his home,
 by him her name was given to it as ye hear.

.....
 It was Crochen of pure Cruachu
 who was the mother of Medb great of valor” (Gwynn 1991 III: 351-355)

Unfortunately, no excavations have been performed as yet at Crúachan, also commonly referred to as Rathcroghan. However, there are nearly fifty known monuments within the complex, with a central mound near the center. Some are distinctively Neolithic,

Bronze and Iron Age in appearance, compared to the monuments at well-dated sites. The only examination so far, in 1981, did give a radiocarbon date of between 350 BC and 230 AD, placing at least one feature, Daithi's Mound, within the Iron Age and roughly contemporaneous with the other sites (Raftery 1994: 70).

There are nearly as many mythological stories about Crúachan as there are of Tara. It was the symbolic seat of kingship in Connacht and is repeatedly connected to Samhain feasts. It shares the same sovereignty goddess as Tara, Medb, more thoroughly discussed earlier. There are in fact more stories connecting her to Cruachan than to Tara. The site said to be named for her mother Cruacha, the handmaid of the queen Étaín, both kidnapped by the god Midir in "The Wooing of Étaín." Several different monuments within the complex are sited as locations in the Táin Bó Cúailnge, including Medb's palace and the site of the great bull-fight between the mythical Brown Bull of Cooley and the White Bull of Connacht, the Ráith na Darbh.

Of course, since no excavations have been performed, there is no evidence as yet of specific ritual activities. However, due to the strong morphological similarities of the rings and mounds of Cruachan and those at Tara, Emain Macha, and Dún Ailinne, it is extremely likely that similar evidence will be found if an excavation is performed in the future.

4.5.5 Comparisons of the 'Royal' Sites

The similarities between all four ritual sites are remarkably strong, implying that not only were these sites at least roughly contemporaneous, (and the absolute dates support this), but that those who planned and constructed them were very culturally similar, and likely in communication with one another (Fig. 13). The very short life-span of most of these structures makes it unlikely that any one group was mimicking the previous structures of another group, which does seem to be the case with the construction of certain types of Bronze Age mounds. Such structures are never found within domestic settings, though admittedly few of these have been found, and little evidence of domestic activity exists.

The reasons for building these particular types of structures is somewhat ambiguous, though Warner has a theory that the internal ditch was meant 1) as a demarcation of a sacred space that represented a conduit between this world and the Otherworld, 2) to provide a viewing platform for the attendants of the ritual activity being performed, and 3) most importantly, to keep the gods, who could be rather malevolent at times according to the myths, from leaving the sacred area (2000: 39, 42). The internal ditch of the sacred structures is a perfect reversal of the external ditch found with contemporaneous defensive structures (Fig. 12), so it follows that their function might have been a reversal of that same idea.

The same themes are attached to each of the sacred sites. They are always considered the royal seat of the divine kings and are the location for the 'earthly' king's inauguration. Each one is strongly associated

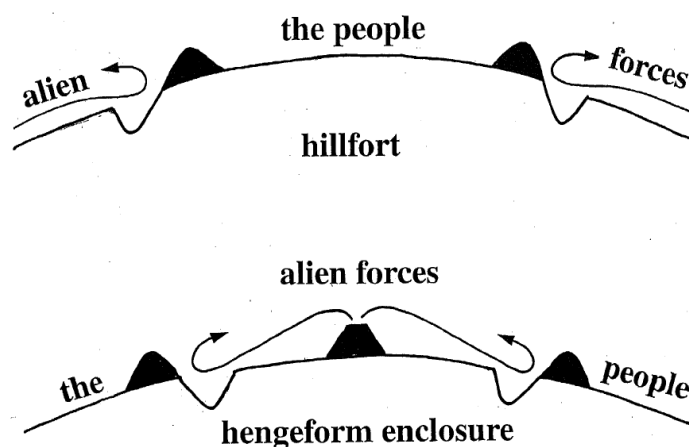


Fig. 12: Hillfort Ditch vs Hengeform Ditch (Warner 2000)

with female deities, symbols of sovereignty and of fertility, quite often with the daughters of either Lugh or the Dagda. The same types of festivals and feasts are said to have taken place within them, especially in connection with Samhain.

Cattle are always a dominant part of the faunal assemblage, either in first or second place. The animals killed are usually either 1) prime age cows, (the sex is not often reported), the most valuable type of cattle according to the law texts if they are female or 2) extremely young calves, the most expensive animal to kill as it would have provided little meat and stopped their mothers from lactating. The butchery marks found on the bones, and near total lack of other domestic evidence, strongly suggest ceremonial feasting at these sites. The body part distribution implies that the animals were slaughtered on site, and though this does not absolutely confirm sacrifice, this would be a prerequisite for the archaeological indication of sacrifice.

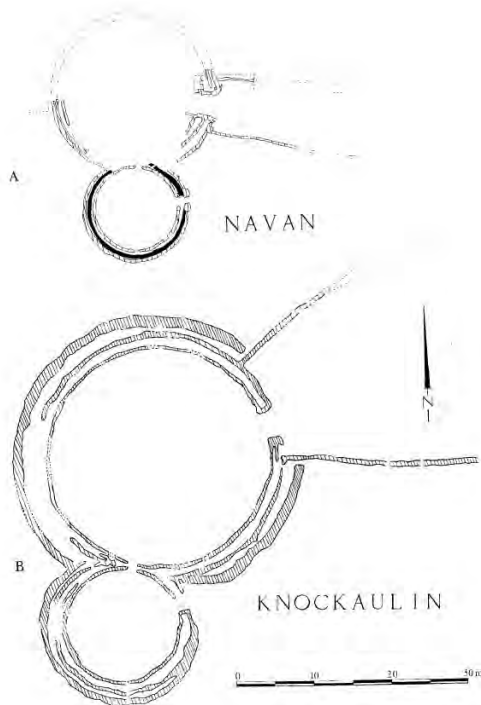


Fig. 13: Comparison of Emain Macha (Navan) and Dún Ailinne (Knockaulin) Structures (Lynn 2002)

Though there were only five major provinces in Iron Age Ireland, and thus only five major capitals, it was suggested years ago by Wailes, the lead archaeologist at Dún Ailinne, that there were likely smaller ritual sites that served the same purpose for the smaller polities within the larger provinces (Wailes 1982: 22). A newly excavated site, Raffin Fort, seems to support this theory. It shares all the share characteristics of Tara, Emain Macha, and Dún Ailinne, only on a smaller scale. No faunal analysis has yet been published, but beneath a stone resembling the Lia

Fiall, and other similar phallic-shaped stones at ritual sites, part of a human skull was discovered with a number of animal bones, all of which appear to have been purposefully placed there (Newman 1993: 22). Unfortunately the chemical properties of the soil at Raffin Fort are poor for the preservation of faunal remains and few if any can be identified by species (Newman, personal correspondence, 2008). Nonetheless, this does mean that future excavations of other smaller ritual sites could lead to more evidence explaining the nature of Iron Age ceremonial feasting and sacrifice.

5. Conclusions

The importance of cattle in nearly every aspect of Iron Age Irish life cannot be overstated:

- They represented the principal means of subsistence above all other forms of livestock and agriculture, even if it is still unclear whether they were used primarily for dairy or meat.
- They were an indispensable part of the sociopolitical system as the main form of currency and thus determined one's social class and level of wealth.

- They also served as the primary vehicle of tributary exchanges between the various levels of society. Even a person's life and honor were measured through cattle.

If the cattle were healthy, they provided ample food, useful secondary products, and they allowed the sociopolitical system to run smoothly. If the cattle were unhealthy, the people would have been without their main source of food and the sociopolitical system would likely have collapsed. The entire population would have had a vested interest in maintaining the well-being of the cattle herds.

The Iron Age Irish attributed all natural forces to supernatural forces, i.e. the gods, including the health and welfare of the cattle herds. These gods could be both beneficent and malevolent, and seem to have had very human-like needs and desires that needed to be satiated by the populous. They are not only the primordial source of cattle, but they desire their own animals as well. The most obvious method one can imagine in which to symbolically give anything to a deity is to sacrifice that object.

The relationship between the Irish and their gods also seems to be reflected in the role of the quasi-divine king to his subjects. Raftery summarizes this relationship best:

... if we can succeed in stripping away the inventions of the early Irish synthetic historians we can discern a sacral kingship with a quasi-divine king, hemmed in by awesome religious taboos and onerous social obligations. He is the personification of his tribe and upon him rests the well-being of his people. Thus he must marry the earth in an elaborate inauguration ceremony to ensure the fertility of the crops and the animals. The enactment of this ceremony, in effect a fertility cult, was in all probability a primary activity carried out at these royal sites – which thus became the ritual and symbolic embodiment of tribal consciousness. (1994: 80-81)

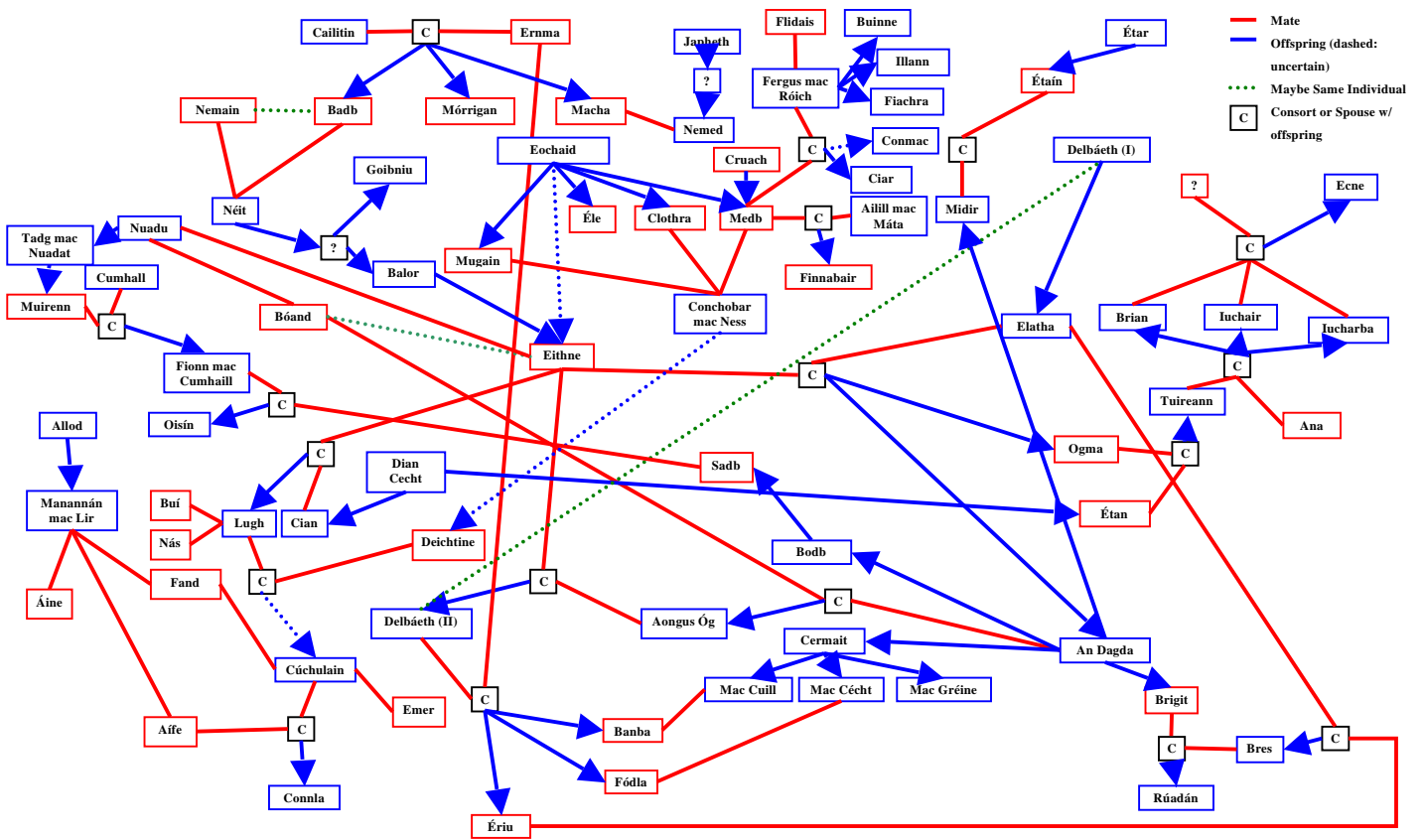
Just as the gods grant cattle and prosperity to the people in return for their devotion and sacrifice, the king gives cattle and protection to his subjects in return for their tribute and respect. Cattle, kingship, and religion are all bound together and dependent on one another.

It is well accepted by archaeologists that the faunal remains of the ritual sites are evidence of ceremonial feasts, not typical food refuse, and there is some tentative evidence suggesting that they were ceremonially sacrificed first. Pollen analyses suggest that a large part of the Irish Iron Age, roughly between 200 BC to 200 AD, was a time of severe environmental stress, and as the Irish believed that all natural phenomena were a result of a divine whim, they likely concluded that their gods were unhappy with them. It isn't surprising then, that most of the major Iron Age ritual structures, presumably dedicated to these deities, were built within this period. At the same time, this is the period when most of the evidence of highly elaborate ceremonial feasting took place, which almost certainly added to the stress on the resources.

When we place these activities within the framework of Iron Age Irish belief, though, it begins to make sense, from two different perspectives. The Irish king was symbolically and literally responsible for the fertility and prosperity of the land. If any one person was to be blamed for failed crops and sick cattle, it was the king. He would have been under a great deal of pressure, therefore, to secure his position and demonstrate his power and prestige. One effective method for this, already well-supported in the texts, would have been to host grand feasts with the conspicuous consumption of valued animals. Since the rest of the blame would have gone to the gods, the king and his religious advisors (druids)

may have offered sacrifices as well in an attempt to appease the deities. It stands to reason that the more valuable the object of sacrifice was, the greater the sacrifice it represented. No animal was more valued in Ireland than cattle, who, due to their immense importance in every facet of life, were almost certainly seen as a symbol of the community's abundance, prosperity, and fertility as a whole.

Appendix 1



This is only a partial reconstruction of the Irish pantheon’s genealogy, which gives an indication of the convoluted nature of the Irish myths. Many figures have more than a single set of parents listed, depending on the text cited, and only the most common parentage is shown here.

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