



Ancient Royal Sites of Ireland

Lesson Transcript

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Ireland was an island of many kingdoms where the people of a *tuath* (territory or community) controlled and protected their land and elected their figurehead, their chieftain, or *rí*, from amongst themselves.

Currently, there are about 30 ancient royal sites identified in Ireland. These sites had a religious as well as a civil significance to the early Irish who didn't make the same distinctions of Church and State as we do today, but rather lived a life that blended the lines of the two.

Of the 30 sites identified, 13 are mounds or hills. Many of them had a coronation stone or chair or in earlier times, a sacred tree standing as an old witness to the *tuath's* history called a *bile* by the early Irish.

Reference to these locations can still be found in many Irish place names; that is when we refer to the Gaelic forms of these place names, not the subsequent anglicised forms. In particular, the words: *ard* - height, *cnoc* - hill, *mullach* - top, *tullach* - hill, *lec* - flagstone, *carraig* - rock, *cairn* - a heap or a pile of stones, and *cruachan* - another word for a heap, or a pile, or a hill. And these are occurring in the place names of inauguration sites which were more often than not in high places giving a panoramic view of the surrounding territories.

Next, I'm going to share an excerpt I found from an affidavit by Dr. Ron Hicks, which addresses some of the key features of these ancient royal sites. He said certain characteristics tend to be shared by such complexes.

"Number one they can be identified by the presence of clusters or monuments recognised as being of a ritual or ceremonial nature passage, tumuli, earthen, enclosures of the type usually called henges, stone circles, parallel banks of a sort known as 'cursuses' are a combination of such monuments as well as others. At Tara, for example, you have not only the Mound of the Hostages but also henge-like



earthworks as well as standing stones. The cursus-like like banqueting hall and a considerable number of other monuments. Number two, they usually include monuments or other archaeological evidence belonging to more than one period. This is indicative of their continuing importance of sacred places, as can clearly be seen in the Bend of the Boyne complex where we find the central monument of Newgrange reliably dated to over 5000 years ago, serving as a place for the deposit of apparently ritual offerings of coins and other objects dating to the immediate pre-Christian period. Number three, while these complexes often focus on one or more hilltops or other high points of land, they extend well beyond these." - Dr Ron Hicks

There are six ancient royal sites of notable significance for their antiquity and their continued use as places of ceremony and seats of power, which we will take a look at now in a bit more detail.

They are Cashel, situated in the province of Munster; Navan Fort, situated in the province of Ulster; Knockaulin, situated in the province of Leinster; Carnfree, or *Carn Fraech*, in Connacht; the Hill of Tara in modern-day Co. Meath, and Uisneach, in modern-day Co. Westmeath.

Now, you may have noticed four of the Irish provinces here in this list, and that's because these sites were the key sites of the leading chiefs of each province. But Ireland once had a fifth province called Meath, meaning the middle. And it is in this province that the all-Ireland high kings traditionally sat. Uisneach originally sat in this province of Meath, but it was considered to be the meeting point of the five provincial kingdoms.

Though it went through many changes throughout the years, ultimately becoming the site of a monastery from around the eleven-hundreds, this was originally the site of Munster's mighty chieftains, the kings of the *Eóganachta*, since ancient times. It is supposed that the earliest use of this name, Caiseal or Cashel, referred to the site as a tribute stone, a place where subservient chiefs, lesser lords and those in allegiance with the high-chief would pay their yearly rents and tributes.

Navan Fort, or *Emain Macha*, in Co. Armagh in the province of Ulster might not look like much today, but Navan Fort was once a great palace; the seat of Ulster's most powerful chieftains. There was also the seat of King Chonobhar and the boyhood home to the great warrior *Cú Chulainn* in the legendary *Táin Bó Cúailnge* epic, otherwise known as 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley'. It is clear from both the genealogies, the annals and the legends, that this site bore royal significance since the earliest times.



The site is strongly connected to the goddess *Macha*, from whom it is said to derive its name, again showing the strong association between kingship, rule and the Gaelic goddesses in early Ireland.

Knockaulin, meaning 'Allen's Hill', is variously known as *Dún Ailíne*, which is closer to: Aulin's Fort or Stronghold, situated in County Kildare. It was the power base of Leinster's senior chieftains and leading families in pre-Christian times. Though, it is said to have been abandoned as a sacred site around 400 A.D.

Even though it was clearly a site of some significance, its connection to royalty seems to be like the other sites simply because there was very minimal distinction between the king as a civil leader of the people and a king as a priest officiate over religious ceremonies in the earliest pagan times, and it is apparent that this site, Knockaulin, was fundamentally a sacred site used in religious ceremonies.

Carnfree in Connacht comes from *carn fráech* meaning Fraech's Cairn. It is situated very close to another significant site at Rathcroghan, meaning Crogan's Ringfort.

In the legends, it is associated with the powerful queen Maeve, who led the men of Ireland in a battle against the men of Ulster and who was said to have lived on the summit of this mound.

However, it is said to be named from a lover of Queen Maeve's daughter Findabair; a champion of the Connacht men called *Fráech*, who was slain by the Ulster champion *Cú Chulainn* in single combat.

Following his death, the legend tells how his body was carried back to Connacht by the *síd*-women, or the Banshee, the fairy folk descendants of the Tuatha Dé Danann, and he was buried at this site.

The Annals of Connacht attributes the name to another man named *Fráech* living at a later stage in history, during a time when the sovereignty of the island was jealously shared between two kings, Conn and Mogh. At this time, there are only two provinces of Ireland Conn's half and Mogh's Half, and there was a bitter rivalry between them and their people. This *Fráech*, who was also a mighty champion of the Connacht-men, was stationed at Cruachán when it came under attack by the Munster men of the southern half of the country.



He found himself in combat against two men sharing this same name, Fráech. And though he was slain in this battle, he fought with such vigour and courage that it urged his fellow countrymen to fight stronger, ultimately pushing the enemy back into retreat. However, the site came to be named.

The Annals of Connacht record the inauguration of Connacht's high chieftains here and it was particularly associated with the powerful royal O'Connor dynasty. It was a member of this lineage, Rory O'Connor, who was serving as High King when the Anglo-Normans began their invasions in 1169. He would be the last serving Irish High King. Both the legends and the histories of Ireland attest to the importance of Carnfree as a site of royal significance.

The Hill of Tara, or Cnoc Teamhair, is now situated in the province of Leinster, but it was once situated in the province of Meath; an area much larger than the modern-day county boundaries. This province, of 'Mide', or Meath, meaning 'the middle,' was the traditional seat of Ireland's high kings.

When it was annexed by the Anglo-Normans. It came under the control of the De Lacy family and when they were unable to produce male heirs, they divided the territory in half between two female heirs. And this broke up the original province into the two distinct districts of Meath and Westmeath.

Stories associated with the Hill of Tara have a colourful tapestry of mythology, folklore and real history to reveal a centre of learning, justice and education very worthy of our consideration. Even through the mist of time and centuries of conquest, the Hill of Tara remains one of Ireland's best-known and most loved sites, bearing perhaps unrivalled significance as a political, social and religious site.

And all that remains today of this Gaelic palace are a series of mounds and trenches. Though it does have stunning views of the surrounding country.

The Firbolgs are said to be the first people to occupy a kingship at the site, now known as 'Cnoc Teamhair,' and they held this for 34 years until the coming of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Unable to strike up peaceful terms the Firbolg and the Tuatha De Danann went to battle at the famous Battle of Moytura.

Having defeated the Firbolgs at a fair battle the Tuatha De Danann assumed the position as rightful rulers and chose Tara as the continued seat of the royal Irish kingship. Later in these mythic accounts the Sons of Mill, king of Spain travelled across the sea to Ireland with their mother a daughter of an Egyptian pharaoh named Scotia.



With vengeance on their minds they sought to slay the murderers of their kinsman Ith who had been killed by the Tuatha De Danann while he was on a previous scouting excursion to the bountiful island. The Milesians were led by their great druid poet, judge Amergin. And having come to battle terms with the current leaders of the Tuatha De Danann, the Milesians sailed. Out the sea to a distance of nine waves and despite the Tuatha De Danann's attempts to subdue the Milesians with their magical druidic storms, the Milesians made it to the island shores and succeeded in taking her as their own. It is said that from this point on all the kings at Tara were to be descended from the sons of Míl.

The Hill of Uisneach, or *Cnoc Uisnigh*, in County Westmeath, is historically associated with the druids and the site of the great Fire Festival of Beltaine held annually on May 1 when the druid priest lit the symbolic first fire of the summer on the summit of the hill.

Here stands the once revered *Aill na Mireann*, 'The Stone of Divisions'. A sacred stone that stood as the meeting point between the five provincial kingdoms. A spiritually and politically significant centre it was also known as Umbilicus Hiberniæ, the 'Naval of Ireland'. And, like Tara, it was also the seat of ancient high kings.

Naturally, any chieftain who managed to secure control of this area would be considered to hold a powerful and prestigious position. It has a strong association to Eriu, a goddess of sovereignty, after whom Ireland is named Éire in its Gaelic form. According to the old myths, having travelled across the waves from their base in Spain, it was here that the Milesians met the goddess Eriu on their way to challenge the Tuatha De Danann kings for the sovereignty of the island.

By the use of their druidic powers, they defeat Eriu's army of magically conjured spectres and she yields to them and blesses their venture. In return, the Milesians submit to her requests and agree to name the island in her honour. And it remains Éire to this day.