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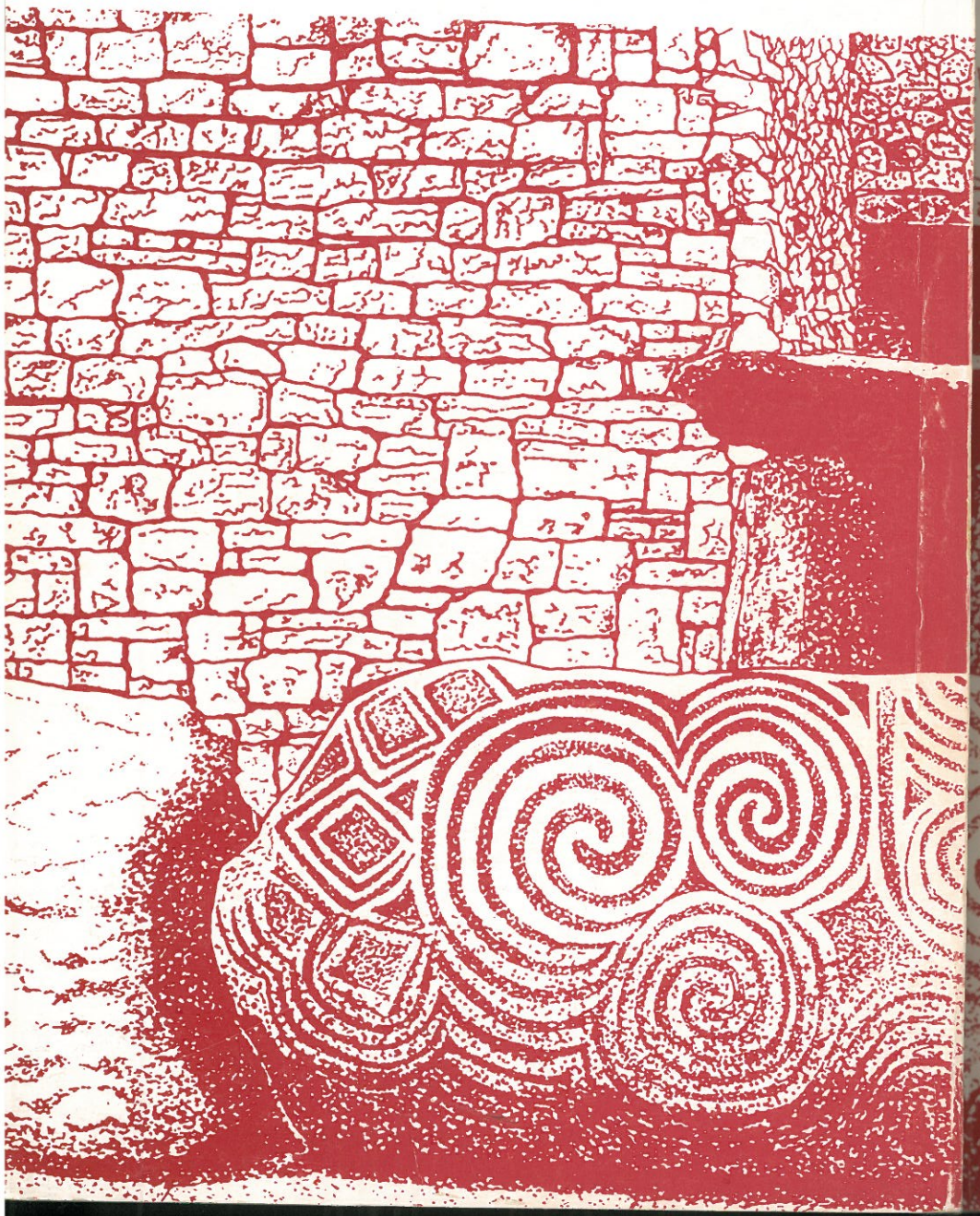

RÍOCHT NA MIDHE

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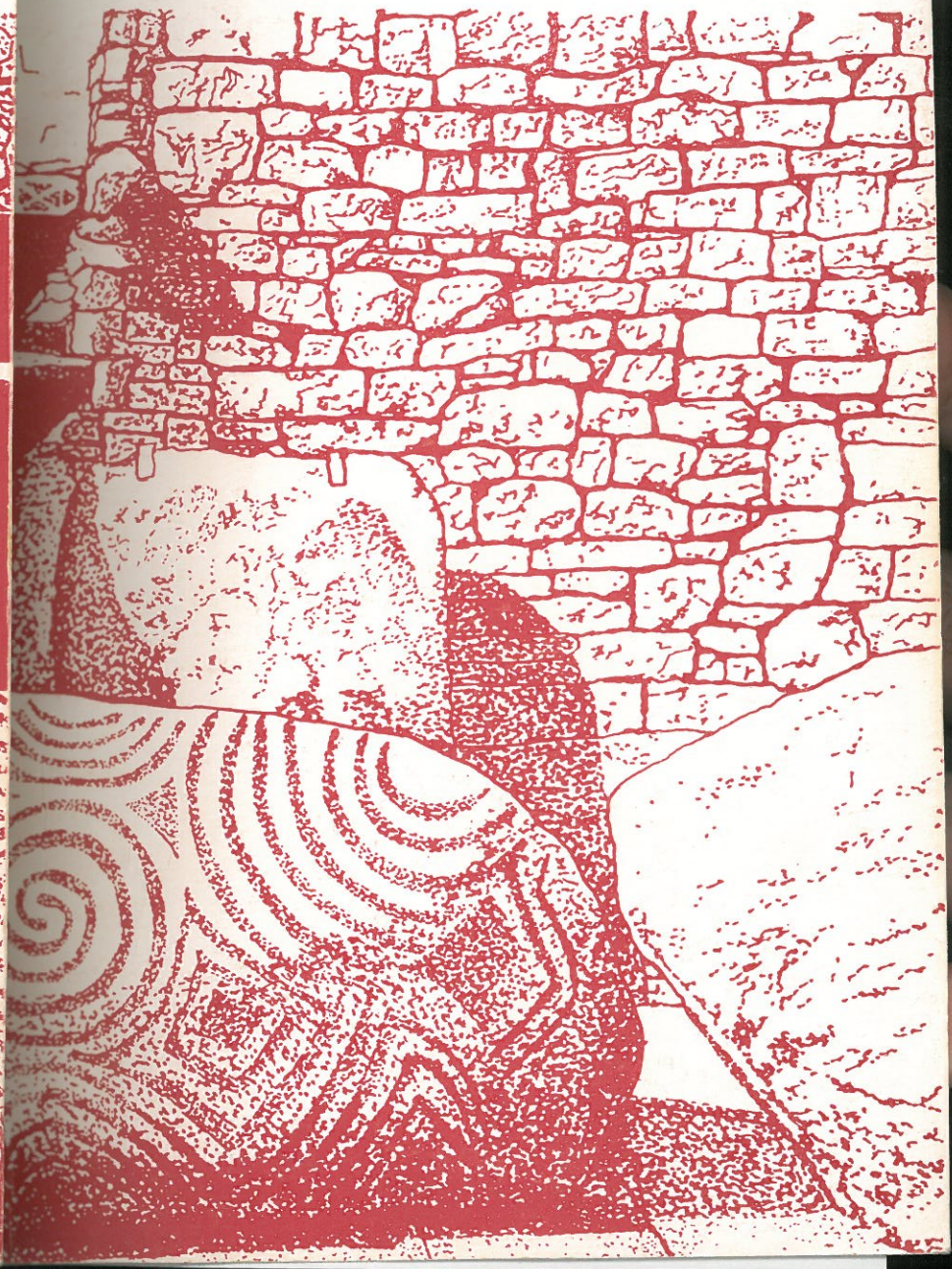

Ríocht na Midhe

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A panoramic view from the Hill of Tara, Co. Meath

JOSEPH FENWICK

The Hill of Tara, through a wealth of references in early medieval texts and a profusion of archaeological monuments, has long been identified as an ancient ritual complex and royal capital associated with the seat of the high kings of Ireland (Bhreathnach 1995, 27-8; O'Donovan 1836). It is situated in the gently undulating countryside of south central Co. Meath, immediately to the west of the main Dunshaughlin to Navan road and midway between the two towns. Though only 155m (508ft) high and little more than 90m (300 ft) above the surrounding plains, the Hill commands extensive panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. This was undoubtedly a deciding factor in choosing the location as the focus of considerable ritual activity, from at least as early as the Neolithic period, and ultimately dictated its choice as a royal seat and major ceremonial and ritual centre prior to the coming of Christianity (Bhreathnach and Newman 1995, 32-3).

Though many have commented on the extensive uninterrupted panorama from the Hill of Tara, the extent of this has never been documented in any detail. In this paper the visible archaeological monuments are identified, along with the mountains, hills and other natural features, in the context of prominent modern landmarks (which will also serve as an aid to location and bearing), both on the far horizon and in the near distance. Figure 1 can be used as an additional aid to locating features that can be seen from the Hill. Long, intermediate and short lines correspond to features in the far horizon, middle distance and near distance, respectively. Natural features are assigned numbers, archaeological features upper case and modern features lower case letters. The complete panorama of the horizon cannot be observed from any single place on the Hill but the best vantage points are "The Mound of the Hostages" (*Dumha na nGiall*) and the southern end of "The Banquet Hall" (*Teach Miodhchúarta*) (Pl. 1).

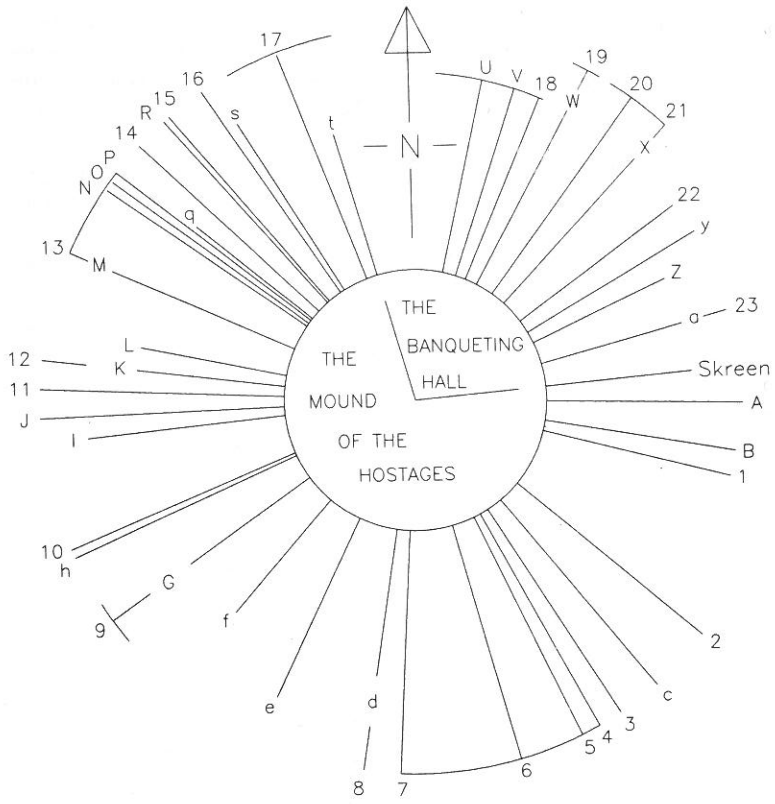
It must be borne in mind that the landscape is ever changing and the view today may be considerably different from that of the distant past. The landscape may have been considerably more

forested. Land sub-division and territorial demarcation have changed over the centuries to reflect not only the farming practices and technology available but also the individual farmsteads, communities and political territories of the time. Some monuments visible today may have been considerably more prominent in the past. Passage tombs, for example, though ruinous today, were deliberately built on commanding hilltop locations to be clearly visible from afar. Similarly, sites such as castles or monastic foundations, perhaps white-washed when occupied, may be the only durable remains of what were originally more extensive settlements. Many more sites, of course, have simply been erased completely from the modern landscape. Certainly, distinctive features and landmarks, which served both as signposts and territorial markers at a time long before the use of maps or the written word, would have been well recognised by people of the distant past.

Fig. 1 (opposite). This diagram and accompanying key indicate the bearing and relative distance of features that can be seen from the Hill of Tara using "The Mound of the Hostages" (*Dumha na nGiall*) and southern end of "The Banquet Hall" (*Teach Miodhchúarta*) as viewing platforms. Long, intermediate and short radial lines correspond to features in the far horizon, middle distance and near distance, respectively. Natural features are assigned numbers, archaeological features upper case, and modern features lower case, letters.

Skreen: Hill of Skreen, Co. Meath
A Fourknocks Hill, Co. Meath
B Knockbrach, Naul, Co. Dublin
c Pigeon House Power Station, Dublin
d Dunsany Demesne, Co. Meath
e Radio mast, Summerhill, Co. Meath
f Quarry, Kilmessan, Co. Meath
G Ringlestown Rath, Co. Meath
h Rhode Power Station, Co. Offaly
I Trim, Co. Meath
J Hill of Uisneach, Co. Westmeath
K Bective Abbey, Co. Meath
L Dillon Castle, Co. Meath
M Hill of Ward, Co. Meath
N Carnbane West, Co. Meath
O Carnbane East, Co. Meath
P Patrickstown Hill, Co. Meath
q Bellinter House, Co. Meath
R Hill of Lloyd, Co. Meath
s Tara Mines, Co. Meath
t Dalgan Park, Co. Meath
U Slieve Breagh, Co. Meath
V Mountfortescue, Co. Meath
W Hill of Slane, Co. Meath
X Boyne Valley passage tomb cemetery, Co. Meath
y Cement factory, Donore, Co. Meath
Z Rath Lugh, Co. Meath
a Tara Hall, Co. Meath

1 Hill near Garristown, Co. Meath
2 Howth Head, Co. Dublin
3 Bray Head, Co. Wicklow
4 Little Sugarloaf, Co. Wicklow
5 Three Rock Mountain, Co. Dublin
6 Kippure, Co. Wiclow/Co. Dublin
7 Church Mountain, Co. Wiclow.
8 Mount Leinster, Blackstairs Mountains, Co. Wexford/Co. Carlow
9 Slieve Bloom Mountains, Co. Laois and Co. Offaly
10 Croghan Hill, Co. Offaly
11 Sion Hill, Co. Westmeath
12 Knockdrin, Cruckboeltane and Knockeyon, Co. Westmeath
13 Ben of Fore, Co. Westmeath
14 Aghacashel, Co. Cavan
15 Carrigasimon, Co. Cavan
16 Mullagh Hill, Co. Cavan
17 Loughanlea Mountains, Co. Cavan
18 Mount Oriel, Co. Meath
19 Slieve Gullion, Co. Armagh
20 Cooley Mountains, Co. Louth
21 Slieve Donard, Co. Down
22 Hills near Monasterboice, Co. Louth
23 Hills at Bellewstown, Co. Meath



Under suitable weather and lighting conditions, the summit of "The Mound of the Hostages" (lying within *Ráith na Rí* north-west of the churchyard), a passage tomb and among the earliest monuments to be built on the Hill, provides the best views of the surrounding landscape (De Valéra 1961, 27-8). Though many of the features mentioned below are visible to the naked eye, to fully appreciate the view, binoculars are recommended.

The tower of the Church of St. Colmcille on the nearby Hill of Skreen is clearly visible to the east and provides a convenient landmark from which to start our identification of the most notable features visible from the Hill. The tower is part of an important fourteenth-century Augustinian foundation within what was once a substantial, possibly walled, medieval town (Hickey 1984, 181-91). To the right of Skreen is Fourknocks Hill (A), identified by a television relay mast positioned along its

ridge, and site of a passage tomb cemetery (Hartnett 1956/57). Further to the right are the hills south of Naul, the first of which, (Knockbrack), is the site of a hillfort and several tumuli (B) and further right still is the hill at Garristown (1) (Keeling 1983).

In the distance to the south-east is Howth Head (2), Co. Dublin, rising above the tops of the trees, with the Pigeon House power station chimneys (c) to its right. Further to the south-east is Bray Head (3) and the Little Sugarloaf (4) a little further over, both in north Co. Wicklow. The Wicklow and Dublin mountains dominate the horizon, in a series of rounded summits, from the south-east to south, stretching from Three Rock Mountain, overlooking Dublin city, at its eastern extremity and tapering towards Church Mountain (7), at its west. A number of important passage tomb cemeteries were built on the summits of many of the Dublin and Wicklow mountains (e.g. Montpelier Hill, Saggart Hill, Seehan, Knockanvinidee, Seefin and Baltinglass, among others) (Eogan 1986, 93; Herity 1974, 75). Three Rock Mountain (5) and Kippure (6) are the most easily identifiable of mountain peaks through the masts on their summits. Below them and just 1km south of the Hill of Tara, though obscured from view at this point, is Rath Maeve, an enormous sub-circular henge or hill fort with a maximum diameter of *c.* 270m (Bhreathnach and Newman 1995, 11; Ó Ríordáin 1954, 24-5; Stout 1991).

Killeen castle, though not visible from the Hill, lies 5km to the south-southeast of Tara (Bence-Jones 1988, 170). The castle was founded in 1181 by Hugh de Lacy and has been enlarged and altered considerably over the centuries. Dunsany Demesne (D), with the castle which was also founded by Hugh de Lacy around A.D.1200, lies 5km south of Tara, in an extensively landscaped and wooded area in line with the western flank of the Wicklow Mountains (Bence-Jones 1988, 117).

Just west of the Wicklow Mountains, in the very far distance, over 110km away, is Mount Leinster (8), the principal peak of the Blackstairs Mountains, straddling counties Wexford and Carlow, and visible only on exceptional days. A little west of south a tall, slender radio mast at Summerhill (e) can be seen silhouetted against the sky. The grass-covered spoil heaps of an extensive and still active quarry (f), east of Kilmessan, can be observed in the near distance. Below the horizon, to the south-west, a dense, circular mass of trees reveals the location of Ringlestown Rath (G) (Moore 1986, 47). This is an impressive enclosure, *c.* 150m in diameter, defended by closely spaced and massive multiple ramparts. Above it, far in the distance, are the

Slieve Bloom Mountains (9), straddling the Laois-Offaly border some 85km away. The profile of the Rhode power station cooling towers (h) in Co. Offaly can be seen on the horizon to the south-west and immediately adjacent to them is Croghan Hill (10).

To the west, in the middle distance, a little below the horizon, is the town of Trim. Trim castle (I), the Yellow Steeple and the steeple of the St. Patrick's Catholic church are clearly visible from the Hill (French 1988, 1-8). The first castle at Trim was founded by Hugh de Lacy in 1172. The present structure is substantially late twelfth to early thirteenth century and is the largest Anglo-Norman castle in Ireland, composed of an impressive bastioned curtain wall with barbican entrance, enclosing a central keep of uniquely cruciform plan (Sweetman 1974; Sweetman 1978). The Yellow Steeple is the solitary remains of St. Mary's Monastery bell tower and dates to the latter part of the fourteenth century.

On the horizon, a little to the right of Trim and just visible, is the Hill of Uisneach (J) lying west of Mullingar in Co. Westmeath (Macalister and Praeger 1928). This was an ancient place of

Pl. 1. An oblique aerial view of the Hill of Tara from the east, looking west (Office of Public Works).

assembly and a cult centre dedicated to the festival of *Beltaine*, held annually at the beginning of May (Raftery 1994, 83). It is symbolically positioned at the centre of the country at the point where the five ancient provinces are said to have met. A little further to the right of Uisneach is Sion Hill (11), north-west of Raharney, Co. Westmeath. A small group of low hills, directly west of Tara, lies principally in the vicinity of Loughs Owel and Derravaragh, also in Co. Westmeath. The most prominent of these are Knockdrin, Cruckboeltane and Knockeyon (12), below which, in the near distance, is Bective Cistercian abbey (daughter house of Mellifont abbey) founded in 1147 (K) (Stalley 1987, 13, 242-3). The ruined remains of a four-storey Dillon castle (L) can be seen above the branches of the hedgerow which joins to the principal enclosure on the Hill (*Ráith na Rí*), and is but a few fields north of the large, partially-destroyed earthen enclosure (*c.* 150m in diameter) at Riverstown (Moore 1986, 41, 175). The Ben of Fore (13), in Westmeath, marks the beginning of a low range of hills extending into Co. Meath and ending at Slieve na Calliagh. In a direct line between the Ben of Fore and the Hill of Tara is the Hill of Ward or ancient *Tlachta* (M) (Byrne 1973, 58). Today the hilltop is dominated by a large circular earthwork, *c.* 150m in diameter, and composed of four closely-set ramparts of massive scale, surrounding a platform or mound at its centre (Raftery, B. 1994, p. 82). This site is associated with an ancient fair or *óenach*, held at the annual pagan festival of *Samhain*, celebrated near the end of October.

The three large hills to the north-west, Carnbane West (N), Carnbane East (O) and Patrickstown Hill (P), which compose Sliabh na Caillighe (Loughcrew), are clearly visible from Tara. These hills are the site of a large passage tomb complex and, under good conditions, "cairn L" and "cairn T" of the megalithic cemetery can be seen with the naked eye, at the summits of Carnbane West and East respectively (Eogan 1986, 92-3; Herity 1974, 41-55; McMann 1993; Raftery 1994, 121, 180).

A little to the right of Patrickstown Hill, below the horizon and nestled in the Boyne river valley, is Bellinter House (q), past residence of Lord Tara, whose estate encompassed vast tracts of land in Co. Meath, of which the Hill of Tara was but a small part. This neo-classical residence in the palladian style was designed by Richard Castle around 1750, and served as home for the Preston family before being willed to Gustavus V. Briscoe in 1892 (French 1993). The house is now owned by the Sisters of Sion.

Proceeding clockwise from Sliabh na Caillighe and north-west of Tara is the hill of Aghacashel (14), south-east of Ballyjamesduff in Co. Cavan, and further to the right are the hills east of Virginia, including the hill at Carrigasimon (15) and Mullagh Hill (16). In the centre of this group is the Hill of Lloyd (R), Co. Meath, site of a hillfort and clearly identifiable by its tower. Lying in the foreground before them is the town of Kells. This town was established around the important early monastic site which today occupies its centre (Simms and Simms 1990). The bright orange industrial buildings, head frame and smoke stack of Tara Mines (s) are plainly visible in the middle distance. Teltown, or ancient *Tailtiu*, though not easily distinguishable from the surrounding countryside, lies a little beyond Tara Mines. The Hill of Tara, however, can be more easily identified from Teltown. This was the site of the greatest and most important of ancient Irish fairs (*óenach Tailten*), which was intimately associated with the monarchy of Tara (MacNeill 1962, 311-38; Morris 1930). This area is situated by the river Blackwater, near to where it issues into the Boyne, north-west of Navan (Raftery 1994, 82). Here a collection of monuments, including a pair of parallel, curving, linear earthworks (the Knockans), several enclosures and a large flat-topped mound, known as "Rath Dubh", can be seen today.

The Loughanlea Mountains of Co. Cavan dominate the horizon to the north-west. Below them and adjacent to the Hill of Tara is Dalgan Park (t), within which is situated the missionary college, built by the Columban Fathers between 1938 and 1941. It is an impressive and imposing building whose facade faces, and is clearly visible from, the Hill. Within its grounds is Dowdstown House, dating to the nineteenth century. It is the former residence of Lord Taylor, who, at one stage, owned a considerable portion of the Hill of Tara. The view to the north-east is obscured by the trees of the churchyard. The remaining panorama can be best observed from the monument known as "The Banqueting Hall", lying north-west of the churchyard (Pl. 1).

Again, using the tower on the Hill of Skreen directly to the east, as a bearing, the banks of "The Banquet Hall" run roughly north-south. Lying marginally east of north, a group of low hills, situated just north of Slane, can be observed. Slieve Breagh (U), site of a large barrow cemetery, lies in the centre of this group, and the summits of the hills to either side are defended by hillforts (Moore 1986, 25, 26, 86, 106, 126). The ramparts of the hillfort to the right, encircling the summit of Mountfortescue (V),

Fig. 2. The extent of the views from the Hill of Tara.

can be clearly observed. Still further to its right, in the middle distance, is Mount Oriel (18), near Collon. Beyond it, within south Armagh some 60km away, is Slieve Gullion (19), site of a passage tomb (Herity 1974, 82). Beneath Mount Oriel, though difficult to distinguish from the surrounding countryside, is the Hill of Slane (W). This is the place where Saint Patrick is said to have lit his paschal fire in defiance of Lóegaire, king of Tara (Bhreathnach and Newman 1995, 26-8; Bhreathnach 1995, 60). Today the ruined remains of a medieval Franciscan foundation can be seen on the summit of the hill (Leask 1960, 22-3). The

Cooley Mountains (20) of north Co. Louth, an area which gives its name to the early Irish epic tale *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ("Cattle Raid of Cooley"), can be seen to the north-east (Kinsella 1969). Behind them, extending further east, are the Mountains of Mourne, Co. Down, which loom above the horizon, terminating at its eastern extremity with Slieve Donard (21) sweeping down to the Irish sea. Slieve Donard, some 80km from Tara, boasts the highest passage tomb in Ireland, at 825m above sea level (Herity 1974, 79). In the middle distance, with the Mountains of Mourne as a backdrop, Newgrange passage tomb (X), over 10km away, is revealed to the naked eye as a narrow, white, horizontal band (O'Kelly 1982). Site 1 of Knowth's passage tomb cemetery can be seen to its left, and Dowth, hidden in trees, to its right (Eogan 1986). In the distance behind it are the hills (22) east of Monasterboice, an important early monastic site situated 5km north of Drogheda (Roe 1981). This site has a fine round tower and some of the finest scriptural high crosses in the country, the most famous of which is the "Cross of Muiredach".

The red and white striped chimney stacks and buildings of the cement works (y), at Donore, near Drogheda, Co. Louth, stand out starkly against the sky to the north-east. In the near distance (2.5km), a little further to the right and hidden beneath a canopy of dense forestry, is Rath Lugh (Z), an imposing earthwork, strategically positioned on a steeply-scarped bluff and one of a number of important prehistoric sites surrounding the Hill (Bhreathnach and Newman 1995, 11-12; Moore 1986, 79; Hickey 1952). Moving further clockwise, in the fields immediately below the village of Tara, are the remains of Tara Hall (a), built in the eighteenth century, with extensive estate lands owned by Lord Brabazon of Tara. In November 1921, the furnishing and outdoor effects were sold by public auction and after a period of decline, sadly, its extensive lands were reallocated and the magnificent house demolished. Above, the hills at Bellewstown (23), in the distance, complete the 360-degree circuit of the horizon.

Approximately a fifth of the country can be seen from the Hill of Tara, including counties Dublin, Wicklow, Wexford, Carlow, Laois, Offaly, Kildare, Westmeath, Cavan, Monaghan, Armagh, Down and Louth (Fig. 2). Despite its relatively diminutive elevation there are few places in the country which offer such extensive, distant and magnificent views of the surrounding countryside. The Hill of Tara was indeed a fitting and symbolic place as focus for religious, ritual and ceremonial activities from where the king, on inauguration, would be literally lord of all he surveyed.

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