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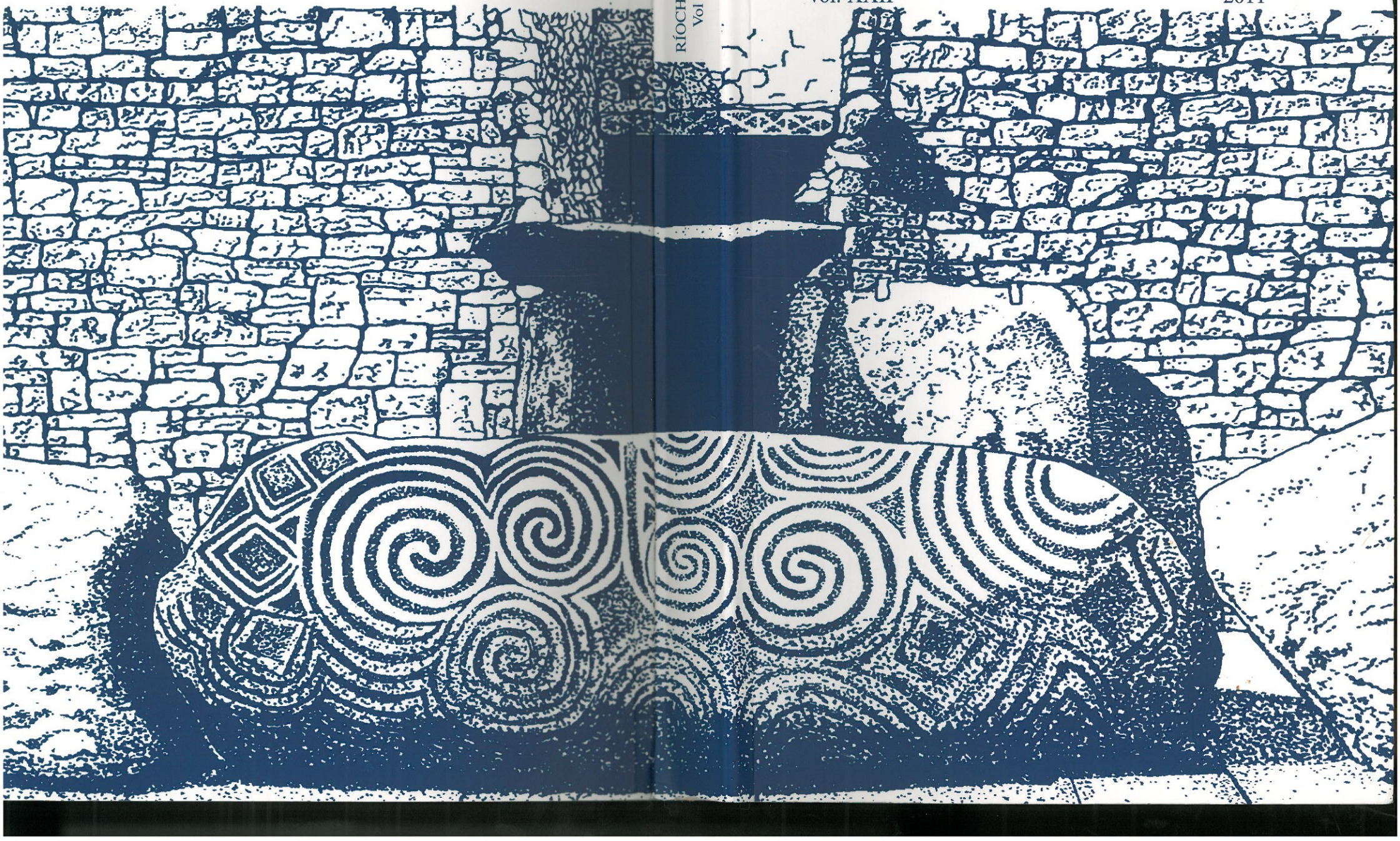

Book Reviews

Grogan, E. 2008 *The Rath of the Synods, Tara, Co. Meath: excavations by Seán P. Ó Ríordáin*. Wordwell, Dublin. Pp 172, Figs 49, Pls 7, Tables 4, Hardback, Price €40.00, ISBN 978-1-905569-24-3

Bringing archaeological excavation to publication is an enormously time-consuming and demanding endeavour at the best of times. To grapple with the challenging complexities of a major excavation conducted some sixty years ago (between 1952 and 53), long after the untimely death of its director, however, must surely be a herculean task. This is perhaps the reason why it has taken some twenty years to finally bring *The Rath of the Synods, Tara, Co. Meath: excavations by Seán P. Ó Ríordáin* to publication.

This hardback A4-format book, a handsome volume, lavishly illustrated and beautifully presented, is a credit to the author, contributors, illustrators and publisher. It consists of six concise and elegantly written chapters augmented by a total of 13 appendices (listed A to M) comprising 10 specialist reports – which are of particular importance to the interpretation and understanding of the site – and complemented by separate registers of finds, burials and samples.

Grogan rightly acknowledges the "considerable difficulties in dealing with the archival record", which consists of a card-index of finds, various notebooks, a pre-excavation plan and various other field plans and sections. Unfortunately, some of these original site drawings, committed to an early type of drafting film, had degraded to a point beyond restoration, with the result that a number of important section drawings were beyond salvage. Furthermore, in the intervening decades, all the bone artefacts and some pottery finds were mislaid or lost and only a small proportion of the human remains unearthed at the time of the excavations had been successfully located. To compound matters further, the number of carbon-based samples with sufficient context details for the purposes of dating was limited, due to the fact that the excavation was carried out in an era when radiocarbon dating was in its infancy. Appropriate samples, therefore, were not collected during the course of the excavation with this specific intention. Despite this, a total of 15 suitable radiocarbon samples from various contexts from the remaining available material

have been dated in order to provide some form of chronological framework to the excavation. The details of these are contained in Appendix J.

Four principal phases of ritual, funerary and domestic activity have been identified at the Rath of the Synods and these are addressed under the following chapter headings: (Ch. 1) Introduction; (Ch. 2) Phases 1 and 2: the Iron Age; (Ch. 3) Phase 3: the Iron Age burials; (Ch. 4) Phase 4: the residential enclosure; (Ch. 5) Phase 3: the residential enclosure: discussion; (Ch. 6) The Rath of the Synods: general discussion.

As these chapter headings suggest, the book is presented very much as an interpretation of the excavation results. Grogan states that he has attempted to present Ó Ríordáin's original interpretation but, as the greater portion of the analysis and discussion draws comparison to research and excavation conducted in more recent times (most notably at Navan Fort in Co. Armagh and Dún Ailinne, Co. Kildare) it is not immediately apparent on reading the text what part of this interpretation can be attributed to the original excavator and what part is based on the author's own deliberations. Similarly, the line between the objectivity of the empirical excavation data and the subjectivity of the subsequent interpretation remains somewhat blurred in places, which may inhibit the scope for the reader to explore alternative interpretations without having recourse to the original archive (now housed in the National Museum of Ireland). With this in mind, it may have been useful to have included a fourteenth appendix, containing, for instance, transcripts of some key passages of Ó Ríordáin's notebooks or select examples of the original site drawing archive.

Despite a brief mention in the Summary that the earliest activity at the Rath of the Synods dates to the Later Neolithic and is possibly associated with the primary use of the nearby passage tomb known as 'the Mound of the Hostages', the principal phases of activity included for discussion in the book span a period of time from the Late Bronze Age / Early Iron Age to the fourth century AD. This chronological framework, however, is not wholly supported by the evidence of the radiocarbon determinations because, as explained in the Summary, this "significant chronological data [only] emerged after Dr Eoin Grogan had completed the text".

The earliest feature discussed (Phase 1), a partially rock-cut ditch,

32m in diameter and interpreted as a barrow or possible embanked enclosure, is considered likely to be of Bronze Age or Iron Age date. It is, however, undated, though the fact that it is possibly associated with the early prehistoric flint assemblage (as postulated in Chapter 5) might suggest that it is considerably earlier. The significance of its situation, at the very centre of the great 'ditched pit enclosure' (of possible Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age date) is not explored in Chapter 2 and only fleetingly alluded to in the general discussion of the Rath of the Synods in Chapter 6.

The general description and discussion of the various palisade enclosures of Phase 2 is also problematic. Some of the structural details of these features (e.g. the concentricity of some trenches) are certainly reminiscent of the figure-of-eight palisade enclosures unearthed beneath Site B (Phase 3) at Emain Macha or the 'Rose Phase' structures at Dún Ailinne. The comparative evidence from the Rath of the Synods, however, is in fact very incomplete and rather disjointed in nature (owing largely to the disturbance caused by British-Israelite activities at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). Grogan concedes too that the "stratigraphical evidence [for these features] is by no means clear cut". Despite these shortcomings, several disparate and fragmentary sections of palisade trench have been selectively joined or projected to form full circles (see Fig. 2.10) from which a sequence of constructional phases is hypothesised. Similarly, selected pairs of post-pits, singled out from a mass of post-pits of various size, shape and depth, within a relatively confined zone between areas of 'British-Israelite disturbance' have been projected to form a timber circle.

Some of these projected circles are more convincing than others. The dashed line representing Circle A, for instance, is joined rather awkwardly with feature F239. Even less convincing, however, are the relatively short lengths of meandering trenches, labelled [Enclosure] D and [Enclosure] E, whose ends have been projected to form complete concentric circles of 40m and 42m in diameter respectively. Later, in the discussion of Phase 2, these are directly compared to the penultimate stages of Iron Age building at Navan Fort and Dun Ailinne: namely the 40m structure and the 'Mauve Phase' structure. Curiously, these same features (i.e. Enclosures D and E), which are also illustrated in Fig 10.2 of *Irish Prehistory: a social perspective* (Cooney and Grogan 1994), are projected there to form concentric circles of approximately 32m and 34m in diameter. The fact that the projected

outline of these same features is drawn quite differently in two separate publications is an illustration of the problems associated with attempts to extend features beyond their visible limits and the consequent potential to distend an archaeological interpretation beyond the natural boundaries of the available evidence. No doubt, the putative timber circle, the proposed sequencing of figure-of-eight structures, and the scale and projected outline of enclosures D and E – if indeed these trenches can be legitimately projected to form enclosures – will provide an opportunity for researchers to study and re-evaluate the details of Ó Ríordáin's excavation in the years to come.

The evidence for Iron Age burial (Phase 3), both inhumation and cremation, and the presence of a barrow (later subsumed within the ramparts of the multivallate enclosure) complements the growing corpus of evidence that the Hill of Tara served as a major prehistoric necropolis, a place set apart primarily for ritual and ceremonial activity.

That being the case, the description of Phase 4 of the Rath of the Synods as a residential enclosure, albeit a high-status residence of second to fourth century AD date, would seem to suggest a rather mundane and utilitarian function for a monument which is otherwise extraordinary in every other respect (i.e. in terms of its context on the summit of the Hill of Tara, its physical morphology and its associated material assemblage). The special significance, or alternative possibilities, of this final stage of the monument's development seem not to have been explored to their full potential, particularly in the light of the evidence contained in the appendices.

Grogan notes in Chapter 4 that "Within the Rath of the Synods material, at least 24% of the contexted finds were clearly of Roman origin, the only such domestic assemblage yet found in Ireland. In combination, the date range of these individual objects spans a considerable period from the first century BC to the early fourth century AD or even later". He further comments that while this material assemblage may not be unusual in the context of contemporary Romano-British sites situated on the periphery of the Roman Empire, it is certainly rare and unexpected in an Irish context. What makes the material assemblage from the Rath of the Synods even more unusual, however, is the apparently atypically high proportion and unusually exotic types of drinking vessels, which may suggest activities that are not exclusively domestic in nature. Edward Bourke, in Appendix C, identifies a type of mould-blown glass bowl

and a cone-beaker with wheel-engraved decoration which can be included among the highest-quality Roman table glass. Similarly in discussion of the Roman pottery in Appendix G, Jeremy Evans states that "functionally [ ] the Tara pottery would seem to be largely associated with drinking, using relatively high-status vessels [and] this evidence seems to correlate neatly with that of the vessel glass". Intriguingly, he further comments on the preponderance of high-status drinking vessels proposing that "the assemblage may largely represent the remains of funerary meals/toasts, with the vessels discarded on the surface", citing a number well-evidenced examples from cemeteries in Italy and Britain by way of illustration.

Grogan comments that the date of the multivallation associated with the 'residential phase' of the Rath of the Synods is unusually early and outside the conventional chronology for ringforts. The origins of multivallation and its potential symbolism (beyond a purely utilitarian defensive purpose), most particularly for such a conspicuous monument on a hilltop resonant with ritual and ceremonial significance, is not fully explored. It is readily apparent, however, that this monument is not a ringfort.

Similarly, he makes little comment on the nature of the internal *sic* 'houses'. In contrast to the complexity of the ramparts, the identified house structures (F20 and F66) are small, flimsy and ill-defined. F20 is sub-rectangular in plan, measuring *c.* 3.5m by 4.0m, and composed of an irregular line of light upright posts. F66 is represented by an irregular scatter of similar sized post-pits, from which a sub-rectangular structure of *c.*3.5m by 2.75m has been identified. Considering the elevated status of the occupants, neither is particularly convincing as a residential structure. It is quite probable, however, that the British-Israelite disturbance to relatively large zones across the central area, and around the peripheries of the northern and eastern quadrants of the interior may have destroyed other important structural evidence.

Coupled with the occupation evidence, the potential for a funerary-related ritual or ceremonial element to Phase 4 – very possibly a shrine – must surely be considered in the context of its exceptional location, its elaborate morphology and the peculiarly exotic and prestigious nature of its associated cultural assemblage.

In conclusion, despite the inherent difficulties in doing so, it is of immense importance that the results of Ó Ríordáin's excavation have finally been brought to publication. This volume will undoubtedly provide a rich seam among the growing corpus of Tara-related research and publication from which present and future scholars can extract, explore, analyse and debate.

JOE FENWICK.

Tom French (ed.), *A Meath Anthology* (Navan: Meath County Library), 2010, paperback €20

The physical landscape can have a special significance for each of us, evoking sensations, emotions and memories of times gone by that are deeply personal. For centuries poets have recognized this fact and have drawn on the landscape as a source of inspiration. The landscape of Meath, which is particularly rich and steeped in history, has provided that inspiration for the sixty-one poets whose work is gathered together in Tom French's *A Meath Anthology*. In its own way, the collection provides a unique insight in the county's long history through the various references to prehistory (the sites of Newgrange, Loughcrew, Tailteann and Tara), Norman fortifications, the election of Henry Grattan, the Yeomanry and Fencibles, the Great Famine, the world of the big house and support for Parnell. Contemporary events such as rock concerts at Slane Castle also have their place in the volume. Place names play a central role, not only reflecting the county's bilingual heritage, but also bringing the reader on a journey through the Meath landscape, from the north of the county to Clonee, on to Skreen cross roads, past Tara, along the Boyne to Newgrange, on to Bettystown and a host of other places in between.

The work opens with an introduction by Patrick Duffy of the Department of Geography in NUI, Maynooth, who reminds us that although the collection offers 'a medley of experiences of places', it is also a fusion of memory and place, providing 'landscape sensations, sometimes profoundly personal musings, inspired by locality in Meath' (p. vii). Commenting on the manner in which landscape can be 'written', he notes that it can be described either in a factual manner or represented as 'personal experience'. Focusing on the important role played by poets, who he views as 'valuable interpreters of our worlds in the past and the present' (p. viii), he notes that the narratives of landscape they construct can often have a greater impact on the reader than the physical reality. Because a poet's reaction to a