

Tara (or Hill of Tara)

From Old Irish *Temor*, Modern Irish *Teamhair*, meaning ‘place of assembly’, Tara was the seat of the high king (*ard rí*) of Ireland for centuries, and the site of his *inauguration. Known as Temor na Ríg (Tara of the Kings) it comprises a complex of earthworks and mounds and lies south east of Navan, Co. Meath. It was a place of ritual burial from c.2000 BC, long before the arrival of the *Celts in Ireland, as indicated by remains found in a passage grave Dumha na nGiall (Mound of the Hostages), which lies inside a large oval enclosure called Ráth na Ríg (Fort of the Kings) [see *archaeology]. This fort also contains two other earthworks known as Forrad (Royal Seat) and Tech Chormaic (Cormac’s House). A pillar stone at the latter is referred to as *Lia Fáil, the inauguration stone of the high king, but it is unlikely that this is the original monument. The other stones used in the inauguration ceremony known as Bloc and Bluigne are identified with two boulders in the graveyard of the nearby church. West of this church is Rath na Seanaid (Rath of the Synods) which was enlarged four times in the first four centuries AD. A rectangular earthwork is known as Tech Midchuarta and is said to have been a banqueting hall. The five main roads of Ireland radiated from Tara: Slige Asail went westwards; Slige Midluachra ran northwards to Dunseverick on the Antrim coast; Slige Cualann extended south east through Dublin to Bray; Slige Dála ran south west to Carrick-on-Siur; and Slige Mór led south west and joined the Eiscir Riada [see *political divisions] which went to Galway. Tara symbolized the unity of Ireland, which had its human embodiment in the king inaugurated at the site. The ritual known as Feis Temrach (Mating of Tara), where the king was mated with the tutelary goddess of Ireland, confirmed the monarch’s sovereignty [see *mythology]. It was probably held only once, at *Samhain, during a high king’s reign. Early historical records show that in the dynastic conflicts of the fifth and sixth centuries the possession and retention of Tara was a matter of great symbolic as well as strategic importance. The Uí Néill held the site until the middle of the sixth century. The feis of Diarmait mac Cerbaill in c.550 may have been the last ritual mating enacted there; during his reign St Ruadán is said to have put a curse on the place.

*Cormac mac Airt is associated with Tech Chormaic at the site and a poem attributed to *Cuan Ua Lothchain in **Dindshenchas Erenn* in the **Book of Ballymote* credits him with writing *Saltair Temrach* [*Psalter of Tara*], now lost, which told the history of Tara. According to *Keating’s **Foras Feasa ar Eirinn*, *Saltair Temhrach* was held by the ollam [see *aes dána] of the high king. *Muirchú’s seventh century life of St *Patrick celebrates the triumph of Christianity over paganism and describes Tara as the Babylon of the *druids. Patrick himself is

said to have converted the druid Dubthach at Tara. In *Féilire Oengusso* similar sentiments, expressing satisfaction at the desolation of Tara and *Emain Macha, are expressed. The twelfth century **Book of Leinster* contains a poem on the kings of Tara by *Flann Mainistrech, as well as a plan and description of the features of the site. In modern Irish history, the site of Tara has been the scene of an engagement in the *United Irishmen's Rebellion of 1798, and a monster meeting addressed by Daniel *O'Connell in 1843. In Irish, Anglo-Irish, and modern Irish writing from *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* to Thomas Moore to James *Joyce, Tara is a continuous point of reference.