

# Performance, place and power at Dún Ailinne, a ceremonial site of the Irish Iron Age

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## Abstract

Dún Ailinne is one of the major ceremonial sites of the Irish Iron Age (600 BCE–CE 400), a time when society was becoming increasingly centralized. We argue that these sites were a focus for the process of centralization, facilitated by performance through the site's construction and use. Physical movement in the context of ritual has been shown to affect the perception of social relationships. These would have been experienced through performance, including movement through the landscape, the visual dominance of the hill and the site located on it, the hierarchical arrangement of spaces within the bank and ditch, and the resulting ways in which movement and access are gradually more constrained through time. Experienced through the medium of ritual performance, these various aspects would have reinforced ideas of power and elite status, providing a context in which such constraints could have been created, justified, maintained and perhaps resisted.

## Keywords

Performance; Irish archaeology; royal sites; archaeology of ritual; Dún Ailinne; Irish Iron Age.

The idea of performance has been of increasing interest to archaeologists in recent years. As an outgrowth of approaches to culture and society which emphasize agency (e.g. Bourdieu 1977; Dobres and Robb 2000), it is a natural progression to consider how public action was involved in maintaining and manipulating past societies. Performance in this sense implies a conscious awareness of the actions of an individual or individuals by others, and is particularly relevant to the analysis of political systems. As Inomata and Coben (2006) note, the development of large, centralized polities may require regular public performances to change the political and social status quo and convince all relevant participants that such change is beneficial, necessary, mandated, unavoidable or all of these. This does not have to be a conscious choice; elites may feel impelled to assert power for reasons other than material or social gain. However, given that such change must involve the larger society to some degree, a public arena is an apt venue for this kind of action.

When performance is expressed through material culture (monuments, residences, tombs, temples or objects), it becomes amenable to archaeological analysis. Understanding the actions of people involved in performance can provide insight into the ideas being promulgated, manipulated, changed or reinforced. Monuments in particular can demonstrate how space was used, beginning with their construction and continuing through their use in performance. Because of their size, they necessarily involve large numbers of people in their initial construction and frequently in their subsequent use. Thus monuments can bring together large groups, the very social unit required to effect widespread social change.

Where performance combines religious ideas and ritual structure, it can be particularly effective in impacting society. Because religion typically makes reference to fundamental understandings of the physical and social world, it can create a context in which those understandings can be reinforced, manipulated, challenged, or changed. Particularly as experienced through the medium of ritual, religion can be a powerful cultural milieu for both change and the status quo. The combining of ideas about the physical and social worlds with visual, physical and other sensory aspects may lie at the heart of why religion is so pervasive and meaningful in human culture (see Altran and Noranzayen 2004). However, even without a specific religious underpinning, ritual has the ability to express ideology and, through its physical component, to combine ideas with bodily experience, making it particularly efficacious. Taken together, this suggests that an important place to look for evidence of the creation of political change is at sites where there is also evidence for public performance. The latter does not inevitably lead to the former, but public performance is an ideal arena for political and social action. To explore these ideas, we consider the site of Dún Ailinne, located in County Kildare, Ireland, and suggest ways in which the site was used to further particular political and social goals.

### **Dún Ailinne, Co. Kildare**

Dún Ailinne is on the summit of Knockaulin hill in eastern Ireland (Fig. 1). From at least 5,000 years ago, the hill was a place for both the living and the dead, indicated by two burials, ceramics, stone tool remains and one or two enclosures dating to the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. However, Dún Ailinne's most conspicuous use came in the Iron Age, *c.* 600 BCE–CE 400. Excavations on the summit (Johnston and Wailes 2007) uncovered a series of timber structures built during this period (Fig. 2), and geophysical research (Johnston, Campana and Crabtree 2009) revealed a wealth of additional features (Fig. 3). The surrounding area was also one of long-term activity, with burials, enclosures and other kinds of sites still evident on the surface (Clancy 2006). Dún Ailinne was thus situated in a larger ritual and symbolic landscape.

The Iron Age site is defined by an outer bank and an inner ditch (Fig. 4) with three phases of timber structures, each designated by color terms (Johnston and Wailes 2007). The White phase was a circular palisade 20m in diameter with an entrance to the northeast. Within this was a 4m circular or semicircular setting of timber posts. This was replaced by the far more ambitious Rose phase structure, a figure-of-eight arrangement approached by an elaborate, funnel-shaped entrance to the east-northeast. The larger of the circles has a maximum diameter of 38m. Geophysical survey showed that this structure was encircled by an oval enclosure integrated with the funnel-shaped entrance (Fig. 5, Fig. 3, below, no. 6). At about 240 x 200m, it enclosed much of the summit and probably also held a palisade. Possible gaps would have allowed access



Figure 1 Ireland, showing the four largest royal sites.

to ‘St. John’s Well’, an artificially enlarged depression that sometimes fills with water, depending on the amount of rain (Fig. 3, below). Given that part of the ritual of Iron Age life involved deposition in wet places (Cooney and Grogan 1999; Raftery 1994, 178–99), this may be a deliberate feature of the enclosure.

The Rose complex was replaced in the Mauve phase by a series of concentric structures opening slightly further north. The outermost palisade of this structure is 43m in diameter and surrounds a circular setting of thirty large posts 20m in diameter. At the center is a smaller circular structure 6m in diameter known as Feature 42. This has a palisade trench holding extremely robust posts with no apparent entrance. The Mauve structure was also dismantled,

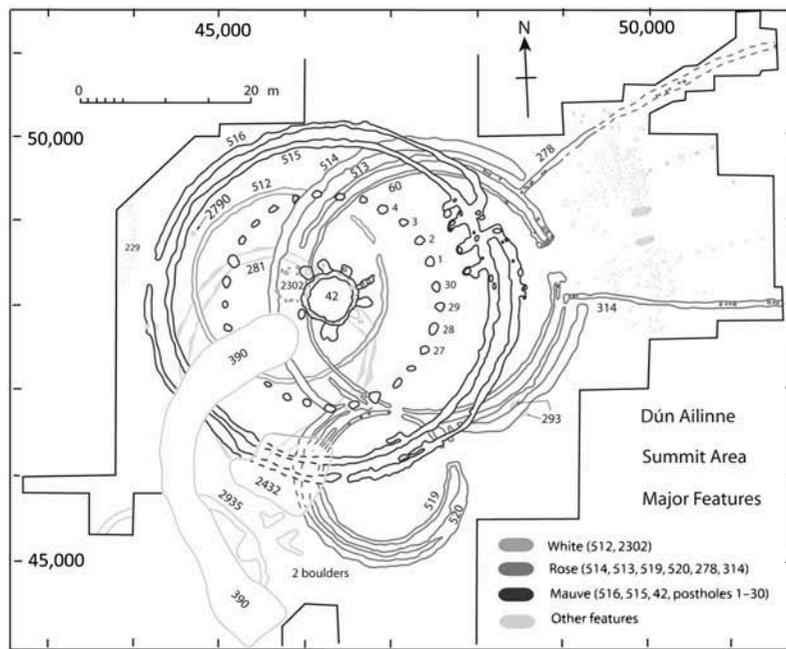
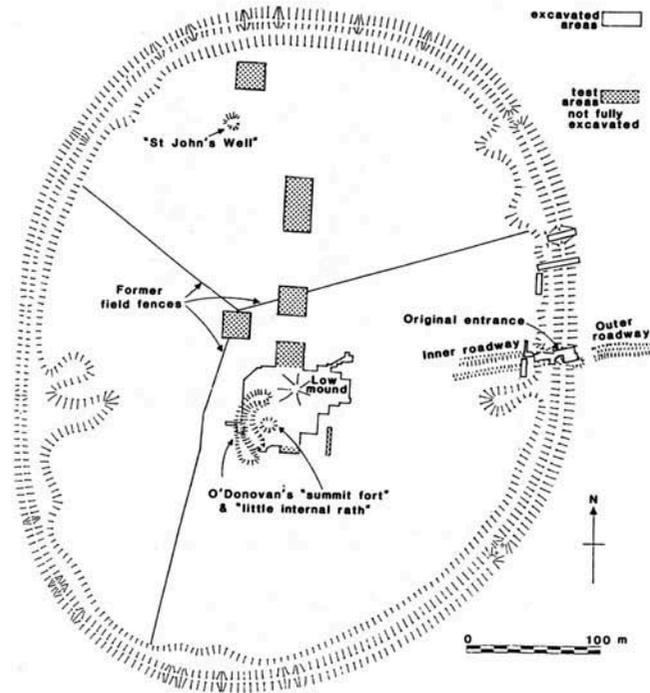


Figure 2 Above: site plan, 1968–75 excavations, showing excavated areas. Below: major excavated features on the summit according to phase. Adapted from Figures 1–1 and 2–1, (Johnston & Wailes 2007), reproduced with permission, University Museum Publications.

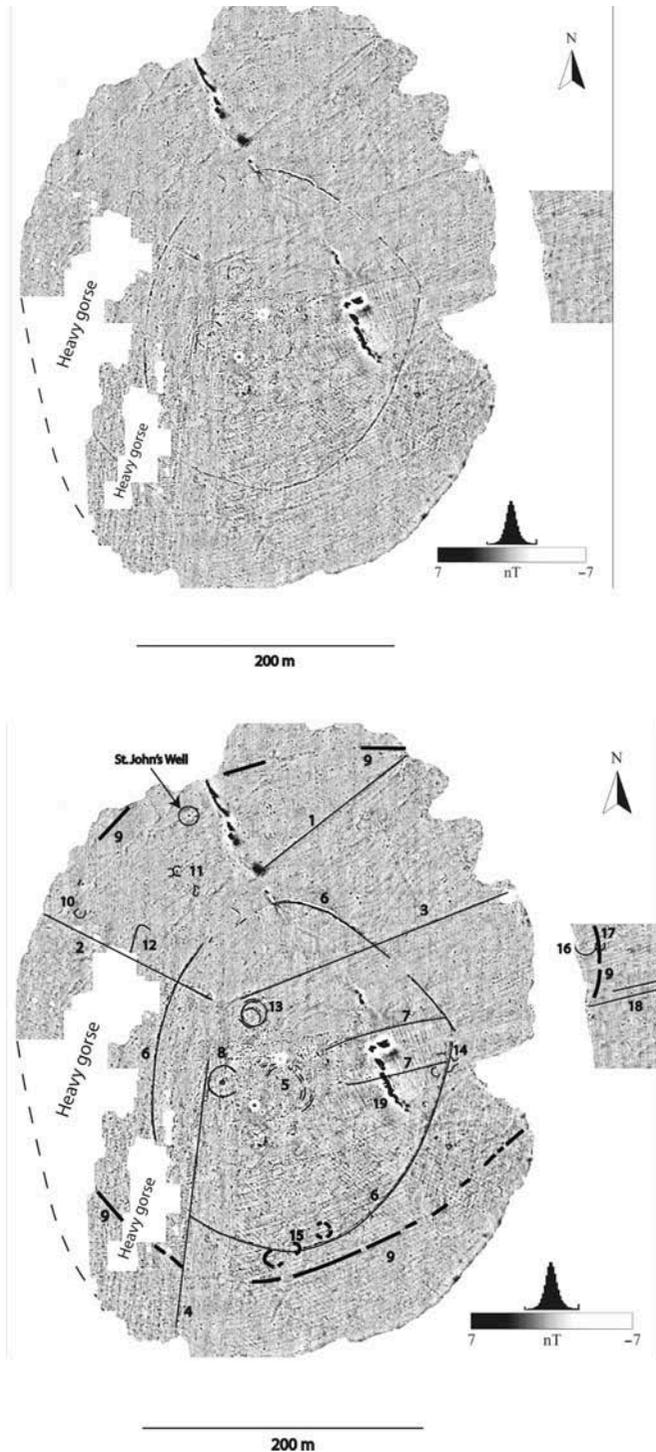
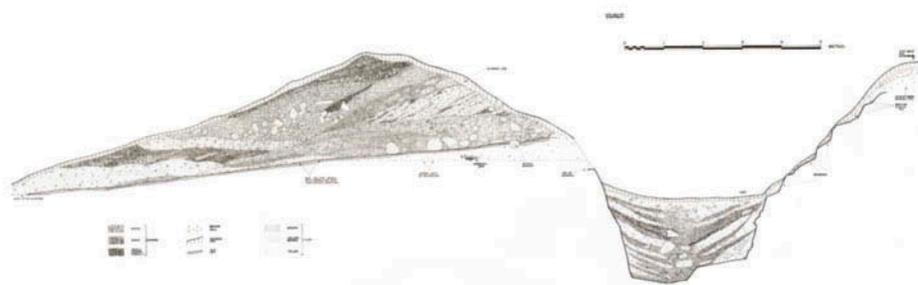


Figure 3 Above: magnetometer image. Below: magnetometer image with major features emphasized. The pre-Iron Age enclosure and the ring ditches are outlined in bold. The small section to the right of the larger image lies outside the bank and ditch. Adapted from Figures 9 & 10, (Johnston, Campana & Crabtree 2009), reproduced with permission from Maney Publishing.



*Figure 4* Above: aerial view of Dún Ailinne, looking southwest, showing bank and ditch (indicated by the darker vegetation). Below: cross-section of the bank and ditch. Adapted from Figure 3, (Johnston, Campana & Crabtree 2009), reproduced with permission from Maney Publishing; and Figure 3–1, (Johnston & Wailes 2007), reproduced with permission, University Museum Publication.

and there is no evidence for any further monumental structures on the hill. However, people continued to use the site for a time, leaving a series of deposits known as the Flame phase (Fig. 6). This material contained ash and charcoal, burned stones, and some 6,000 fragments of burned and unburned animal bone. The majority of the identifiable species were cattle and pigs, but there were also sheep, horse and a few fragments of deer. Burn patterns on the bone and the fact that they include both expensive meats (beef, pork and veal) and meats that may not have been part of the normal diet (e.g. horse) suggest that they are the remains of feasting. The fact that this material occurs in lenses indicates that this was a periodic activity (Crabtree 2007).

Geophysical research revealed a large number of additional circular features scattered throughout the interior, most of them undated. Among these is a row of three ring ditches along the southern edge of the summit enclosure (Fig. 3, no. 15) which may contain burials (McGarry 2009; Newman 1997, 153–5). There is also a magnetic anomaly at the center of St. John’s Well, which may be either archaeological or geological in origin. Finally, there is a very large enclosure that pre-dates the Iron Age bank and ditch (Fig. 3, no. 9). This massive oval structure, which shows up as a discontinuous, slender band, ringed the top of the hill, encompassing all the features described so far within its 390m maximum diameter. It is oriented northeast/southwest, quite differently from the bank and ditch with

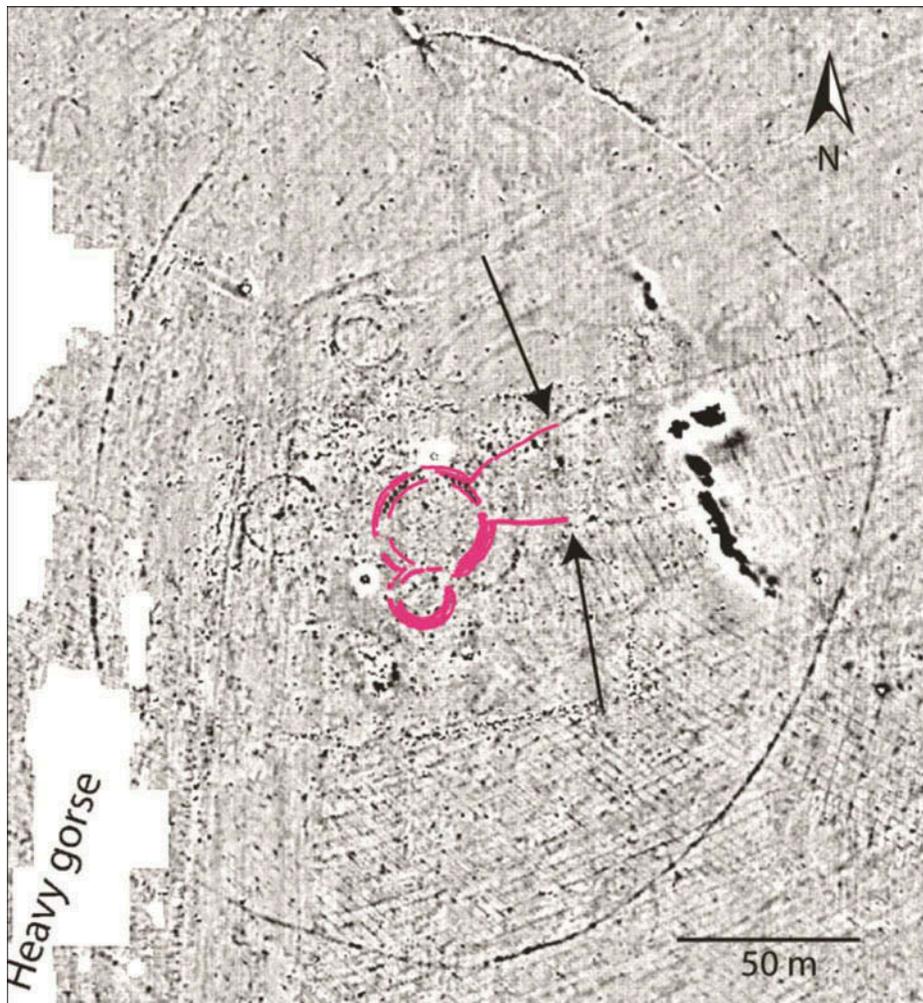


Figure 5 Rose phase structure superimposed on the magnetometer image, showing how it integrates with the summit enclosure. The arrows indicate the limits of the 1968–75 excavation of the funnel entrance. Close-up of Figure 9 (Johnston, Campana & Crabtree 2009) with additions, reproduced with permission from Maney Publishing.

their entrance to the east, and clearly underlies them, making it earlier; its specific date has not yet been determined by excavation.

That Dún Ailinne is a ceremonial center is indicated by the excavated evidence. Most of the artifacts recovered were items of personal dress, weapons and small tools. There is no evidence that any of the timber structures were roofed, and some of them are too large to have carried roofs without internal supports. There is no evidence of ordinary domestic debris, which would have resulted from everyday occupation on the hill. So archaeologically this appears to be a place where people gathered for communal activity, most probably of a ritual nature. Dún Ailinne is also one of the so-called ‘royal sites’, a group that began to emerge in Ireland during the Iron Age (see Johnston 2006; Johnston and Wailes 2007 for discussions of this term). It is

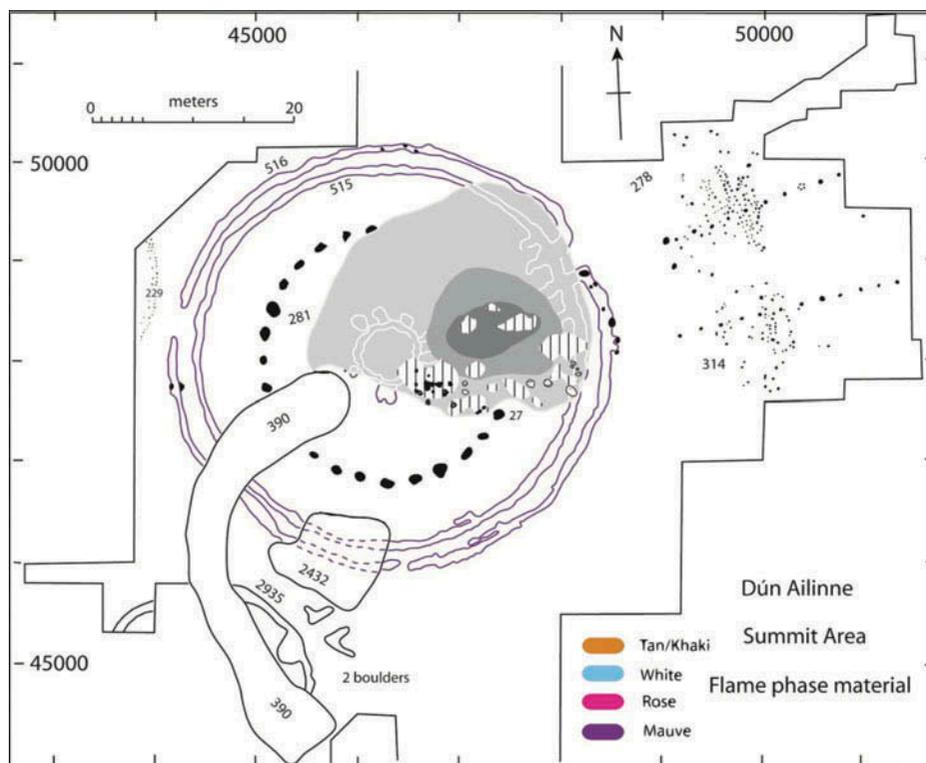


Figure 6 Location of the Flame phase material, indicated by the grey area. The darker shades of grey indicate the increasing density of the spread. The material overlay the northeast section of the Mauve phase structure indicating that it was at least partially dismantled.

one of the four largest, along with Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon; Navan Fort, Co. Armagh; and Tara, Co. Meath. Other sites that are probably in the same category include Raffin Fort, Co. Meath (Newman 1993, 1998), Uisneach, Co. Westmeath (Schot 2006) and possibly Cashel, Co. Tipperary (Hodkinson 1994; Gleeson 2012). More broadly, it may even include sites like Lismullin, Co. Meath (O'Connell 2009). These sites were not royal in the literal sense, but rather were central places, reflecting an increasingly centralized political and ritual landscape (Newman 1997, 1998; Waterman 1997; Waddell, Fenwick, and Barton 2009; Wailes 1982).

As ceremonial centers, these sites, both large and small, would have been the focus for ritual and performance, and, in particular, places where political relationships would have been created and maintained. The emergence of political centralization in Ireland is not a straight-line process, but rather occurred to different degrees in different times and places (e.g. Grogan 2005), and efforts to consolidate elite power occurred in the context of other kinds of community ties and identities (Soderberg 2013). However, the end result, by the early medieval period, was a series of polities of varying sizes (Ó Cróinín 1995). The process thus became intensified during the Iron Age and the royal sites would have been one arena in which it was enacted.

Dún Ailinne provides one example where this can be investigated in more detail. Similar processes undoubtedly occurred at other centers, both large and small, but, as one of the largest

ceremonial sites, Dún Ailinne would have been a major focus for such activity, the results of which would have had a widespread impact. It would have required people from a broad region to construct, and there is evidence that it brought in people from the larger region in various ritual contexts, e.g. feasting (Crabtree 2007; Crabtree, Johnston and Campana 2010). Ritual performance would thereby have incorporated a large group, as direct participants or as people who were aware that such gatherings were occurring. Dún Ailinne was thus a place where social relationships could have been negotiated very effectively. Those at the top of the emerging centralized hierarchy could have used this site to create and maintain their position; equally, that position could also have been resisted or challenged there.

### Performance at Dún Ailinne

How might performance at this site have been experienced in the Iron Age – with fear, anticipation, relief from boredom or all three? While the lived details are unknowable, evidence from the physical interaction with the site can be explored in terms of how it might have affected both observers and participants during ritual performances.

Performance at Dún Ailinne would have begun during its construction (see Baines 2006). This would have drawn from a wide area to acquire materials, assemble people to gather and process them, and construct the bank, ditch and various internal features (Johnston 2013). While not a performance *per se*, performance provides a useful model. The ability of those in charge to direct work and promulgate specific ways of interacting with the emerging site, both ideologically and physically, provides a context for the negotiation of power relationships. Similarly, whether workers saw this as a job, a service, a requirement or an unavoidable burden, their activities constitute a kind of performance. Day-to-day activities can take on a ritual quality as they are repeated (performed), and these may have been imbued with other kinds of meanings in a more conventional symbolic sense. As the various structures emerged, their visual qualities would gradually have become apparent, and their meaning been either discussed openly or considered implicitly. It may have been here, too, that resistance could be expressed (e.g. Horning 2007; Scott 1985; Wells 1999). While leaders can compel behavior, they cannot necessarily impose ideological acceptance (e.g. Inomata 2006). Group labor may have worked as much to foster a sense of local community identity and connectedness (see Soderberg 2013) as it did to create elite spaces for ritual.

Once constructed, the site would then become the focus of more conventional types of performances. These would not have been confined to the site itself, but would have included movement to the site through the surrounding landscape. At Dún Ailinne this includes monuments of many different periods. The database of the Archaeological Survey of Ireland (<http://www.archaeology.ie/ArchaeologicalSurveyofIreland/>) lists dozens of sites in the immediate vicinity. On the Curragh, the flat, open plain to the northwest, over 180 monuments have been recorded, many of them burials (Clancy 2006; Ó Ríordáin 1950); a possible cursus monument there suggests that procession through this landscape was not a new phenomenon (see Gleeson 2012, 12). Regardless of their specific dates, one thing is clear – anyone moving through this landscape, on the way to or from Dún Ailinne, would have been constantly confronted with evidence of its earlier significance, and so its context (cf. Bowser and Zedeño 2009). Walking this landscape meant moving past monuments of many different

kinds with all the meanings associated with them. Interestingly, the maps produced by the recent Heritage Council study on Iron Age domestic sites do not show many of these in the immediate area of Dún Ailinne (see Becker, Ó Néill and O'Flynn 2008, 82, map 4). There are many (potentially non-archaeological) reasons why this may be the case, but it raises the possibility that this landscape was perceived as a ritual, not a secular, place.

At the same time, Dún Ailinne looms large over this landscape. The hill itself is the highest in the immediate area and so has a significant geographical presence. Depending on vegetation, the timber structures would have been visible as people approached; the summit is clearly visible now from several spots along the modern roadway, and at least part of the site could have been seen from the surrounding landscape. Because of the specific placement of the summit enclosure, one could have seen some activity within it from the top of the hill at Old Kilcullen, 1.3km to the southeast. At least one researcher (Schrijver 2006) has derived the name 'Dún Ailinne' from linguistic elements meaning 'the hill of the palisades', suggesting such a visual presence. However, the inside of the Rose structure (and that of the succeeding Mauve phase) would have been obscure since it lies on a relatively flat area just over the summit. This may have added to a sense of mystery for those not present on the hill during ritual performances.

As people approached the foot of the hill and moved up the slope to the bank and ditch, they would have encountered the beginning of a roadway. This feature is visible now as a depression and was mapped for about 40m beyond the entrance. Moving along the roadway through the bank and ditch would have been an intensely visual experience. At the entrance, which faces east, the ditch was around 3m deep while the bank would have risen several meters above the surrounding ground surface. Together, these provide an imposing barrier physically, visually and perhaps symbolically as well (see Dowling 2006; Warner 2000).

Once inside, there are several ways to move within the site, depending on the specific nature of the performance and the structures standing at a given time. The latter might have allowed views of the surrounding landscape, which now are quite substantial and impressive in all directions. By contrast, an obstructed view would have provided a different visual experience, focusing attention inward rather than outward. Either way, ritual movement through the interior space would have been dictated by a given performance and its associated structures. In all structural phases on the summit, there is a clear pattern of hierarchical concentric spaces defined by timber structures and/or enclosures (Fig. 7). In the White phase, this was fairly simple, with a timber setting within an enclosure. For the Rose phase, this was much more elaborate. People would have approached the summit enclosure via an inner roadway, which may have held a palisade. Once the roadway encounters the summit enclosure, it runs along the centre of the Rose phase entrance feature towards the larger of the two circles. Given its configuration, it literally funnels those who approach within the structure. The summit enclosure itself provides another layer of interior space, but it may have had gaps in its circumference (Johnston, Campana and Crabtree 2009). Significantly, one of these would have allowed access to St. John's Well. Soderberg (2013) has argued that, during the Iron Age, elites were making connections not only within Ireland but outside as well. Given that the deposition of objects in wet places is a practice found throughout Iron Age Europe, perhaps this ritual invoked such connections at Dún Ailinne.

Within the enclosure, the Rose phase figure-of-eight is composed of two to three concentric palisades. The specific height of the palisade posts is not known but it is likely that they were at least as tall as the average person (Johnston 2013), and so would have formed a significant

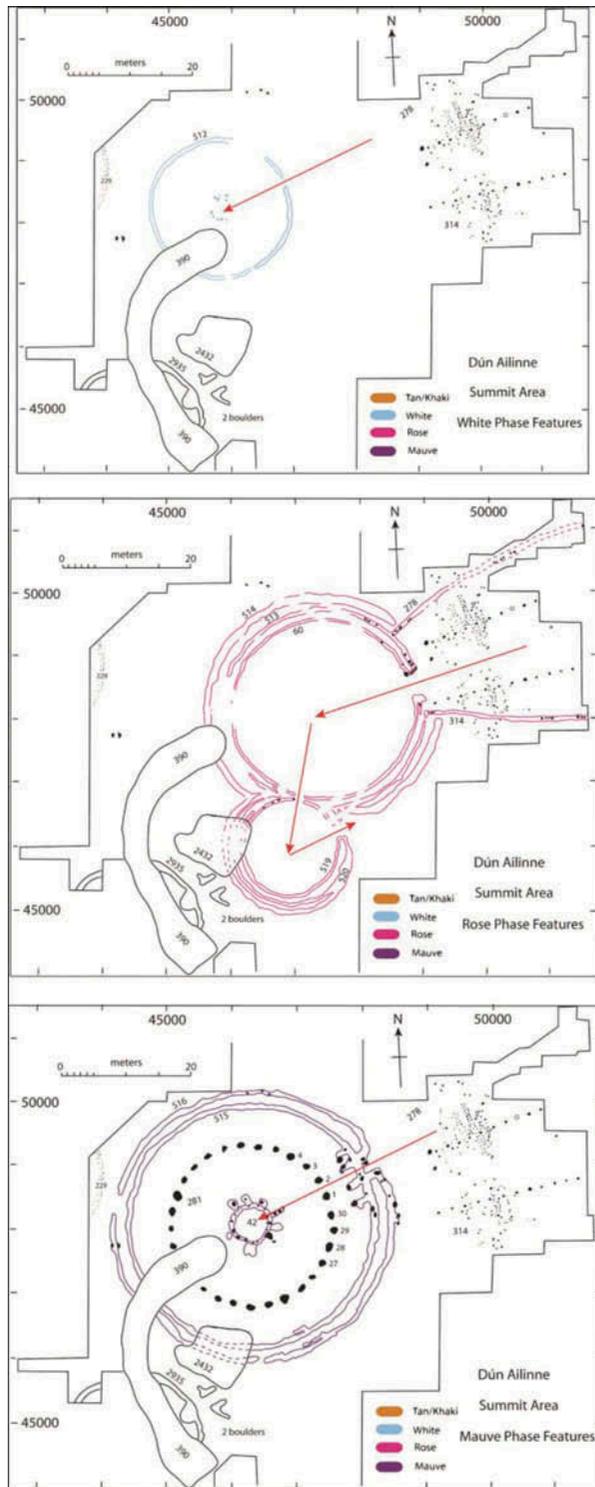


Figure 7 Major structural remains of the White, Rose and Mauve phases. The arrows indicate the options for movement within these structures.

visual barrier separating inside from outside. Apart from the entrance, the only other way out of the larger circle is through the smaller one, which could be accessed in two ways. There is a gap in the larger circle on its south edge, where it joins the smaller circle. It is narrow, about 1.5m wide, but would have been passable unless intentionally blocked. There is also a gap about 2m wide in the northeast arc of the smaller circle, providing access outside the figure-of-eight. Movement is thus possible through the entrance, through the larger circle, through the smaller, and then out, or in reverse. If it is the reverse, then there would have to be some access through the summit enclosure other than what is clearly the main entrance. This is certainly possible given the apparent gaps in the circumference, but it seems less likely given the overall configuration of the structure.

In the Mauve phase, the flow of movement would have been more restrictive. The figure-of-eight structure was dismantled to make way for the Mauve palisades. The summit enclosure may have remained intact, but the Mauve entrance does not line up with the Rose entrance funnel, so it seems likely this was also dismantled. In his final analysis of the Mauve phase, Wailes proposed its reconstruction as a series of viewing platforms with a tower at their center (Johnston and Wailes 2007, 9–25). However, there is no direct evidence for this idea, and no known parallel in Iron Age Ireland for such a structure. Thus our analysis is based solely on the ground plans of the structures and assumes as little as possible about their above-ground configuration.

The outermost circle of the Mauve phase is a double palisade with a substantial gateway into the interior (indicated by large postholes). There are gaps in the outermost palisade to the northwest and south, but these do not go through the inner palisade, and so would not have provided access to the interior, but only to the space between the two palisades (the same is also true for the Rose phase palisades in several different places). This space would have been narrow, about a meter in width. Its function is unclear since there is nowhere else to go once there. Perhaps it had something to do with construction or maintenance of the palisade structures, though symbolic or ritual meanings are possible. Once inside, people would next encounter the timber circle, composed of thirty upright posts. Unlike the palisades, these are not continuous. There is considerable space between them, providing a different visual experience from that within the palisades, though surviving postholes depths suggest these posts may have been upwards of 3m in height (Johnston 2013). This space is thus less confining, both physically and visually. Within this, however, was the smallest space, Feature 42. This is a 6m-wide circle composed of upright timbers that are very close set, separated by less than a meter, and through which there is no apparent formal entrance. If this feature was not a tower, as reconstructed by Wailes, then it could have been entered and exited, though with some difficulty. Once within, however, the internal space could have held a number of people or objects. Its significance in this analysis thus lies in it being the most exclusive space, the smallest and the one most difficult to access.

What is notable about this progression from Rose to Mauve is that the options for movement through the latter are far fewer than for the former. Once inside the summit enclosure, people could have moved through the Rose palisades and out again in one direction; during the Mauve phase, once inside the palisade the only option would have been to exit the same way that one entered – the potential for moving *through* was replaced largely by movement *within*. This suggests a different flow of movement through the internal spaces in these two phases – movement up to and within the site was characterized by increasingly small and more exclusive spaces. Whatever the criteria that determined this access, it seems clear that the intention was to

manage movement approaching, entering and within Dún Ailinne. Other structures in the interior would have added complexity to this performance. Were earlier features completely eradicated when new ones were built, or were they left there, whole or in part? This would have had a significant impact on the overall visual experience.

The final Iron Age phase is Flame, where the periodic accumulation of vegetation interspersed with deposits of burned material, including animal bone, suggests cycles of feasting and disuse. There was no evidence for burning *in situ*, so this material was derived from elsewhere. There are no known structural features associated with this phase, and the material that defines it was deposited after the Mauve structure had been at least partly dismantled. Since the material is redeposited, the actual feasting occurred elsewhere within the interior, perhaps in a structure not yet identified. How would feasting fit into this analysis? Certainly feasting is a kind of performance. The fact that the food provided for consumption came from the larger surrounding region would have been known to participants. Whether this was the result of taxation, tribute or gift, the origin of the food would have provided a context in which to negotiate power relations, a social practice well attested anthropologically (e.g. Dietler and Hayden 2010). In addition, ceremonial feasting can be a highly structured activity with important spatial components, e.g. where participants sat, where they accessed food and in what order, where other activities were experienced and so on, and it may have been accompanied by music, drama or storytelling. Regardless, the difference of this activity from that in the previous phases indicates something significant had changed (see below). After the Flame phase, the site appears to have been largely abandoned as a ceremonial space (Johnston and Wailes 2007). However, the area clearly retained some power, as indicated by the establishment of the nearby church at Old Kilcullen, perhaps as early as the fifth century (Purser 1945; Stokes 1887, 187), and Brigit's establishment at Kildare (Hughes 1972, 32).

### **The meaning of performance at Dún Ailinne**

Dún Ailinne clearly had different meanings to different people at different times. However, there are some broad suggestions that can be made about what some of those meanings might have been. That this was a central place seems self-evident. All the royal sites, particularly the four large ones but perhaps any number of smaller ones, served this purpose. They were communally built, they were physically large and visually imposing, and they provided space for ceremonial events, whether for large groups or small. Beyond participants, performances happening at the site would have been known and so had a still wider impact. The visual presence of Dún Ailinne is hard to avoid, and this presence would have been enhanced by the knowledge of what went on there, however vague or inaccurate it might have been.

It is also known that this was a time in Ireland's past when society was becoming increasingly centralized. While there were people of varying importance throughout the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, there is increasing evidence for elites from the late Bronze Age through the Iron Age. By the early medieval period, elites had created positions of power for themselves that were expressed through politics in places like Leinster and Connacht, after Christianity had become the religion of the land. This change is thus intensified in Iron Age society, and sites like Dún Ailinne provided a venue in which it was enacted. How was the change brought about?

We argue that it was the result of people in positions of power gradually consolidating that power through, among other things, the construction and use of sites like Dún Ailinne in the

context of performance. A somewhat similar argument has been made by Demarest (1992, 2005, esp. chs 8 and 9) for the Maya area, comparing it to Southeast Asia, and using the phrase ‘theatre states’ to describe the fluctuations in centralized power there. While there were no states in Ireland at this point, the emphasis on ritual performance as a way to generate political authority is analogous. It was in the spaces created through performance that these positions were consolidated. Dún Ailinne was already an important place; the hill and its surrounding landscape had been used for thousands of years for ritual and ceremony. It would not be necessary for Iron Age peoples to know the specific details of who was buried where and how in the ancient past for them to know more broadly that this had been an important place for generations. And if you know that this was an important place, and everyone else knows it too, then what better way to claim power than to make it your own, put your own stamp on it and demonstrate to the larger society that you are the inheritor, literally and metaphorically, of those ancestors who also shared this place? We argue that this is what was happening during the Iron Age at Dún Ailinne, and probably in similar ways at the other royal sites as well.

The act of creating structures on the top of the hill could have impacted on the larger community in a number of different ways. In their study of hillforts in southeast England, Hamilton and Manley (2001) argue that the addition of hillforts to the landscape ‘monumentalizes’ the hills on which they are created, in effect making the hill a monument in a way that it was not before. This provides a visual reminder of communal identity for an otherwise dispersed community. At Dún Ailinne, where there had been a hill, associated perhaps with memories, stories or legends of ancient peoples, now there was the ‘hill of the palisades’, something both the same and yet fundamentally different. It was simultaneously both an old place and a new one. As people moved to the hill, through the landscape, they would also have been reminded of the presence of others in that landscape, through burials and other, smaller sites. But they would have bypassed those places and ended up on the hill, overlooking the landscape that they were simultaneously both above and a part of. Was this a statement by those who built the palisades, drawing in a wide range of social and cultural strands and weaving them together through performance at a single place, Dún Ailinne?

The coordination and control of movement in this way would have been particularly resonant in the context of an emerging centralized power structure. Experimental research has increasingly connected physical movement with the creation of particular social relationships. Synchronous action, including movement through space, has been shown to increase feelings of connectedness (Xygalatas 2011), likeability (Hove and Risen 2009) and compassion (Valdesolo and DeSteno 2011) among participants. Significantly, the greater cooperation produced by synchrony can occur even without positive feelings among those acting in concert (Wiltermuth and Heath 2009). This literature suggests a mechanism by which movement coordinated in ritual can bring about changes in social relationships. The flow of movement within Dún Ailinne would have created the experience of synchrony and fostered a sense of cooperation and community, but against a backdrop of increasingly restricted spaces. Coordinated movement in a ritual context created the sense of community, of relationship, but it was defined here in the context of hierarchy, of restriction. Not only did the structures in which performance occurred provide the space in which these relationships were expressed, but also the performance provided the means through which they were manipulated and changed, as more and more was gathered into the hands of fewer and fewer. Whatever it was before, the hill had become a place where hierarchy was literally performed.

These processes are likely to have occurred at other royal sites, given the structural similarities that many of them share (Lynn 1991; Johnston 2006). Similar kinds of ritual movement have also been described at Tara (Newman 2007) and at Armagh (Aitchison 1994, 265–81) in the early medieval period. In these latter cases, the potency of the ritual procession derives from larger cosmological meanings. This may be true at Dún Ailinne, too. The orientation of the major timber structures has been tied to astronomical and calendrical alignments (particularly Beltaine) and also set within themes of mythology and folklore (Hicks 1975, 2007), ideas that may have continued into the early medieval period in the context of kingship (Gleeson 2012). If the ring ditches are burials (and there are burials at other royal sites), moving by and around them would also have had cosmological significance, invoking the presence of the ancient dead. Tying kinesics into cosmology would connect the physical experience with potent symbolic meaning. These meanings are then not just remembered ideologically, but connected with particular sensory experiences that ground them in bodily reality and so giving them particular potency (cf. Xygalatas 2008).

The shift that occurred with the Flame phase is somewhat harder to tease out. It could have been tied to the creation of hierarchy, with animals for feasting drawn from surrounding communities to provide for elites. Concepts of power were then being expressed through resources and economics rather than ceremonial movement within physical structures. Alternatively, this may have had to do with both social changes and degrees of hierarchy. The Flame phase, being late in the sequence, may correlate with an apparent shift to a more mobile society seen in the latter part of the Iron Age (Becker 2009; Soderberg 2013). In this case, the emphasis on livestock rather than structures takes on a different symbolic resonance. If the construction of large monuments was a means of establishing regional identities (see Becker 2009) then the shift to large-scale periodic feasting might be a way of maintaining these identities in a time marked by mobility and pastoralism. Or, the shift may be connected to a period when hierarchy was less marked, and so communal feasting expressed communal identity or, indeed, masked power relations within an apparently communal setting. Feasting might even have expressed resistance to the creation of power through structured movement. While elites can try to promulgate particular meanings through ritual, they cannot ensure that such meanings are accepted or acted on. So the Flame phase may represent a period when others had taken over the ritual activity on the hill. At a time when community identity was becoming increasingly important (ibid.), feasting may have had an entirely different social context from the hierarchical ritual enacted in earlier phases.

In the end, however, elites emerged as leaders in a centralized landscape. We argue that this was created during the Iron Age through performance, by the orchestration of physical movement through a series of structured spaces. Hierarchy was created through ritual, and society was thereby changed. By the time Dún Ailinne was abandoned as a place of ceremonial performance, political centralization had become a fact of life in Ireland.

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