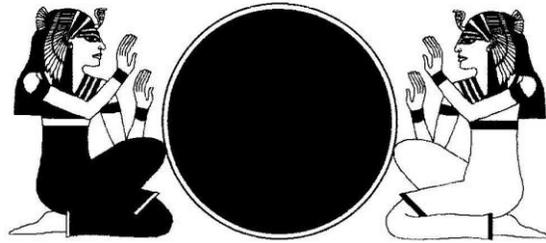


Temple of the Dark Moon



Tara - The Hill of Kings

By Frances Billinghamurst © July 2006

Situated some 48 kilometres north west of Dublin in County Meath is one of Ireland's most sacred sites – the Hill of Tara. This hill, together with the surrounding area that stretches over two kilometres, has been inhabited since Neolithic times and in true Irish fashion, is associated with many myths and legends. On a clear day it is said that from the top of this sacred hill, you can see half the counties of Ireland. Due to the history of this area, it is little wonder that 19th century antiquarian, William Wilde (the father of Oscar Wilde) included the following romantic view of Tara in his writings:

“Standing at the top or southern extremity of this remain, and bearing in mind the various prose and bardic histories of the Irish annalists, one cannot help reverting to ancient heroic times, and again, in imagination, peopling it with its early occupants. Here sat in days of yore kings with gold crowns upon their heads; warriors with brazen swords in their hands; bards and minstrels with their harps; grey-bearded ollamhs; druids with their oak leaf crowns ...”

One of the oldest of the 30 visible monuments at Tara is a megalithic passage grave known as the “Mound of the Hostages”, which dates back to around 2,500 BCE. Its very name is believed to have derived from the custom of kings, like those who inhabited Tara, retaining important persons from subject kingdoms to ensure their

submission. Another discovery that was made by aerial photography, and which further confirmed the importance of Tara to the ancient Irish, was that there once stood a huge building, possibly a banquet hall, measuring some 170 metres in size. Being the point where the five great roads radiated from, Tara must have been a truly impressive site, and it is little wonder that it has long been associated with Irish kingship.

It is believed that some 142 High Kings reigned from Tara, dating back to the mythical race of people known as the Firbolg, who first made Tara their capital. According to Irish mythology, the Firbolg escaped slavery in Greece to settle in the Emerald Isle, where they ruled until being conquered by another race of mythical beings, the Tuatha de Danaan. Later, but still being some 1,500 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, the Milesians, or Gaels, came to rule Ireland, again making their centre at Tara.



An aerial photograph of Rath na Rig (the Fort of The Kings), the location of inaugurations of Tara kings.

Coupled with kingship, Tara was also considered to be a gateway to the Otherworld. This belief in the supernatural and magick has long infiltrated Irish history, making the determination of fiction and fact almost impossible. It is believed that when a High King died, a feast known as the “Tarbfeis” (the “*Bull Feast*”) took place within Tara’s great banquet hall to determine the next ruler. This feast included the roasting of a bull from which a chosen man would eat his fill and drink its broth. When the man fell asleep, a sacred rite known as the “Imbad Forosnai” (“*Knowledge that Illuminates*”) took place. This rite included incantations being chanted over the sleeping man to encourage visions of the future ruler to appear.

Suitable candidates for the office of the High King would also be tested by the Lia Fail, the “Stone of Destiny”, one of the most notable landmarks found on Tara today. According to legend, the Tuatha de Danaan brought this sacred stone to Ireland. It was said to cry out with approval when the right High King was crowned,

while remaining silent when the wrong candidate attempted to usurp the royal destiny.

Another important event surrounding the making of the High King was the “Feis Temhrach”, the ritual marriage feast. During this feast the newly crowned High King mated with a beautiful woman, who as a personification of the Goddess, the spirit of the land itself. This union symbolically bound the sovereign to the realm of the Gods, and thus sanctifying the reign of the king.

THE ARRIVAL OF LUGH

In the 9th century text known as the “Cath Maige Tuird” (the “*Battle of Moytura*”), one of Ireland’s most important Gods came to Tara wearing the crown of a king and leading a band of strangers. This God was the Sun God, Lugh, who was not recognised by the gatekeeper. In order to gain entry, Lugh was asked what art or skill he practiced. This was because people without a particular art of skill were denied entry into Tara.

The arts that Lugh listed were rejected because the High King, Nuadu, already had men skilled in such arts. Not to be outdone by, Lugh asked if the High King had a man skilled in all the listed arts. As this was not the case, the God was granted entry and was immediately recognised by the king.

ST PATRICK AND THE PASCAL FIRE

For Christians, Tara is associated with Ireland’s patron saint, Patrick, who was attributed with bringing Christianity to this land. It was customary that on the eve of May (the Celtic festival of Bealtaine which marked the beginning of Summer in the Northern Hemisphere), that all fires would be extinguished and lit again from the royal fire that that High King would light from Tara. According to legend, in 433 CE St Patrick challenged this practice and just prior to the lighting of the sacred Tara fire, lit his own fire on the nearby hill of Slane (referred to the “Pascal fire”). When summoned to the High King’s presence to explain this sacrilege, St Patrick managed to get royal assent for a contest of magick during which two huts were set on fire.

One hut contained a boy wearing the cloak of the royal magickian, while in the other hut was the magickian wearing the robe of the saint. According to the Christian monks who penned the records of this event, the magickian apparently incinerated leaving the saint's robe untouched; while the boy was saved but the magickian's cloak was burnt to the cinder.



St Patrick

The symbolic importance of Tara as a ritual centre survived Ireland's adoption of Christianity until the 6th century CE and the reign of King Diarmuid. According to the "Annals of Tigearnach", in around 560 CE, King Diarmuid broke sanctuary to take a prisoner and punish either a relative or close friend of the Lord Abbot, St Ruadhan. This resulted in Ruadhan cursing the name and place of Tara, so that after the death of Diarmuid in around 565 CE, no other High King have ever lived at this ancient sacred place. Mention of the decline of Ireland's sacred site can be found in a "Calendar of Saints" compiled around 830 CE by Oengus:

*"The strong fortress of Tara has perished,
with the death of her princes;
with its choirs of wise men;
great Armagh lives on."*

Despite all this history and archaeological evidence, Tara and the surrounding area is under threat due to modernisation. In 2004 plans were announced to build a motorway that will run in the valley between Tara and the neighbouring hill of Skryne. Half a world away, it is difficult to comprehend why the Irish government would contemplate the construction through what could easily be the heart of Ireland's cultural heritage. What is equally disappointing is that little of this fight to preserve Tara has been picked up by media outside Ireland itself. Is it because Caucasian history holds little relevance compared to the history of other peoples? While not of Irish descent myself, it is my view that a site steeped in as much history

as Tara and its surrounding area should be preserve for future generations and given the same respect as those ancient monuments from other cultures.

After all, it only takes a visit to Ireland's ancient Hill of Kings, coupled with a little knowledge of its fascinating history, to realise that these legendary events go beyond the earthworks which remain – the true magick of Tara is in the tranquillity of the land itself.

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About the Author:

Frances has been a student of metaphysics and the occult for most of her life, with her formal training having commenced in 1993. She has been initiated into the Alexandrian Wicca tradition, with interests also in ceremonial magick, the Qabalah and traditional Wytchcraft.

After founding the Temple of the Dark Moon in 1999, Frances spent some six years as secretary for the Pagan Alliance Inc (SA) where she worked closely with both the Police and Attorney General with respect to changes in legislation. She has led rituals with Chief Druid, Philip Carr-Gomm, and occult philosophy Ramsay Dukes, as well as presented lectures at various national and international events.

Frances regularly writes for *Insight*, Australia's number one spiritual lifestyle magazine, with her articles also appearing in over 10 separate publications, including *Spellcraft*, *The Cauldron*, *Circle* and the Llewellyn's *Witch's Calendar*. She has further essays in a number of anthologies including *The Faerie Queens*, *Unto Herself: A Devotional Anthology for Independent Goddesses*, and *Memento Mori*.

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