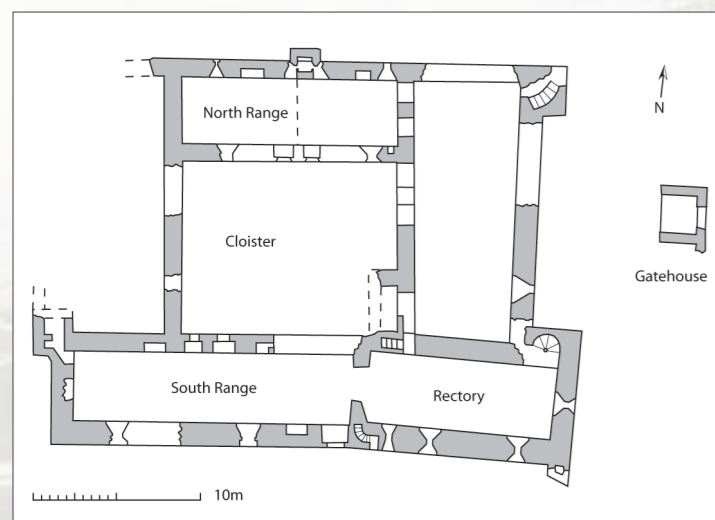


The college

To the north-east of the graveyard is the college, also misinterpreted as a friary. It is clear, however, that the Fleming family founded a friary at the hermitage by the river, rebuilding it in the fifteenth century, as a mark of private devotion. The earliest building in the college is a three-storey structure—the stonework of the western end of the south range abuts it with a straight joint. This building, referred to as the rectory in medieval sources, was the centre of parish business. The ground floor has wicker-centred vaulting and houses numerous architectural fragments. There are staircases at the north-east and south-west corners. The windows in the upper floors are large and may be later insertions.



Above: **Plan of college (after Westropp 1901).**

Below: **View of the college.**

A chantry college was attached to this in the later fifteenth century, with three ranges of residential, dining, kitchen and storage buildings around a courtyard. It was rebuilt in the sixteenth century following a bequest by Christopher Fleming. Sculpted gutters in human and animal forms and window surrounds with Tudor rose motifs emphasise family patronage and piety. It accommodated priests and choirboys who sang Mass daily for the souls of the family. The north range, called the ‘priests’ house’, emphasises comfort, with first-floor fireplaces and a double garderobe. The south range contains a two-storey hall and refectory, also with fireplaces. A free-standing gatehouse is the only remnant of a surrounding bawn several metres to the east.

Stone sculptures, clearly not in their original positions, include window mouldings and tracery, the arms of France and England above the doorway, a griffin at the western end of the south range, and the Fleming coat of arms along with an early depiction of an artillery weapon, a mortar, set into the west wall of the cloister.

High cross fragments

In a fanciful twelfth-century story the high cross of Slane was miraculously shattered into pieces. Harbison described the most recently found fragment, built into stonework in the church and subsequently removed to OPW headquarters in 1994. The fragment’s interlace panel is compared by Harbison to crosses at Clonmacnoise and Kells, suggesting a date of c. 950–1000. The head of a high cross was found at the medieval church at Fennor, south of Slane Bridge, and is now housed in St Patrick’s Church in Slane. Westropp noted other fragments within a house in the village whose location is no longer known.



The wider landscape

There are many antiquities in the environs of the Hill of Slane, attesting to a rich past. Archaeological evidence for early medieval settlement can be seen to the east of the hill, with known souterrains and stone enclosures on Gallows, Norris’ and Stanley hills. The Brú na Bóinne LiDAR survey, as well as geophysical survey undertaken to the east of the village, has revealed a range of large enclosures and other features, some of which have been archaeologically dated to the seventh to eighth century AD.

Conclusion

The standing remains and historical evidence emphasise the importance of the hill as an ecclesiastical and legal centre in early–late medieval times. While prehistoric activity on the hill is poorly understood, its strategic landscape setting and the morphology of the mound and enclosure suggest that it was the site of prehistoric ritual which may have been incorporated into the construction of the early–later medieval identities of those controlling Slane. While the importance of Brú na Bóinne is rightly emphasised in the heritage of the Boyne Valley, the Hill of Slane became an important focus of

power with the decline of the Knowth dynasty. The hilltop remains a beautiful place to visit, and archaeology has a significant role to play in furthering our understanding and enjoyment of it.

Acknowledgements

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Further reading

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 See <http://hillsofslane.wordpress.com/>
 See also: <http://www.francisledwidge.com> and <http://www.slanetourism.com/>

Top: **Panoramic view from north-east corner of college.**

Above left: **Coat of arms of the English king above the entrance to the college. The arms of both England and France are depicted, as France was claimed by the English monarchy during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.**

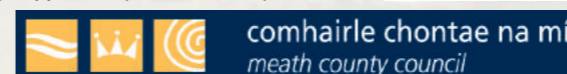
Cover image: **Aerial view of the Hill of Slane.**



Credits

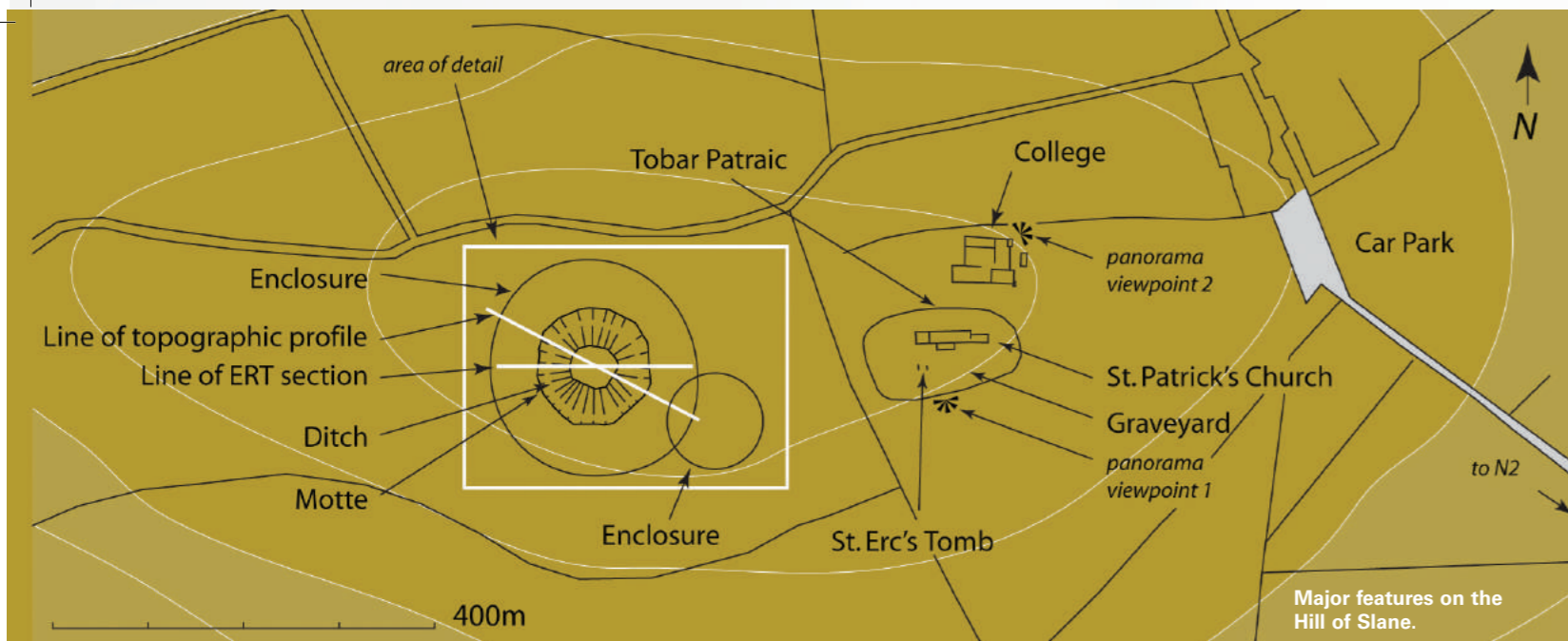
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Hill of Slane

Archaeology IRELAND Heritage Guide No. 55



Introduction

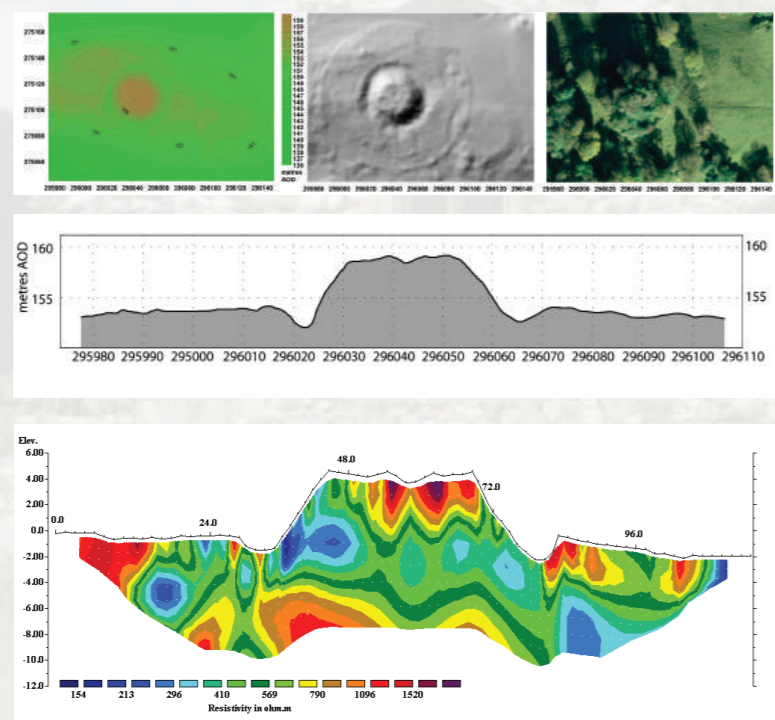
The Hill of Slane, in the townland of Slane, 500m north-west of the village, holds an important complex of prehistoric, early medieval and medieval monuments. The hilltop rises to 158m OD, 3km from the edge of the Brú na Bóinne World Heritage Site buffer zone, with Knowth and Newgrange visible from its eastern flank. This historic silhouette on the Meath skyline is partly situated on the estate lands of Slane Castle, once the residence of noted antiquarian William Burton Conyngham. It has inspired artists such as Beranger and Du Noyer, and antiquarians like Wilde and Orpen, and has attracted a small but steady stream of archaeologists. It remains important to local people, who maintain graves in the grounds of the impressive ruined medieval church—a funerary tradition stretching back 1,500 years. While research to date has focused on the standing buildings, and the site's heritage and tourism potential has been overshadowed by the Brú na Bóinne World Heritage Site, there are exciting prospects for archaeological exploration of this scenic location.

History

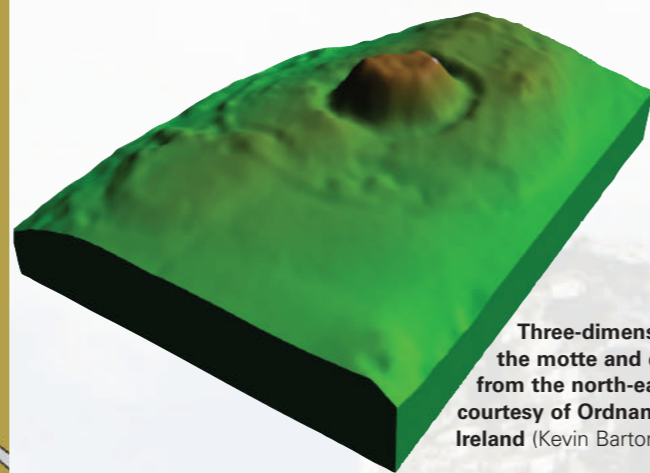
The Hill of Slane overlooks a key fording point of the River Boyne, with clear views of the Hill of Tara and Skryne to the south. Little is known of the hill's prehistory, although geological work suggests that some stone for the Brú na Bóinne tombs came from here. A large enclosed mound hidden in the wood on the hill's western edge is classified as an Anglo-Norman motte. The nature of its enclosure and its association with a possible ring-barrow suggest that it originated as a prehistoric monument. Herity has compared it to other large mounds, such as that at Rathcroghan, and has stressed its possible ritual significance.

The hill was first associated with a life of St Patrick written by the seventh-century hagiographer Muirchú, who described the saint's journey from the mouth of the River Boyne and the lighting of the paschal fire at *Fertae Fer Feic* ('grave-mound of the men of Feic'). A central figure in the story is Erc, first

bishop of Slane, who was linked with an area containing *Fertae Fer Feic* and Slane. Cathy Swift has shown that the antiquarian James Ware linked *Fertae Fer Feic* with the hilltop, although sources suggest that this place may have been elsewhere along the Boyne Valley. Swift stresses, however, that early medieval mounds, churches and forts were often connected with legal centres. The Hill of Slane contains both an enclosed mound and an important church site documented as an important legal centre from the eighth century AD, with links to French monastic sites. Therefore, while Slane is unlikely to have been the site of the legendary paschal fire, it has important links to the Patrician story.



Above, from top: **Area of detailed fieldwork in 2010** (images: Kevin Barton, LGS; data courtesy of Ordnance Survey Ireland).
Topographic profile of motte and enclosure (Kevin Barton, LGS).
Electrical resistivity tomography profile of the motte (Kevin Barton, LGS).



Three-dimensional view of the motte and enclosures from the north-east. Data courtesy of Ordnance Survey Ireland (Kevin Barton, LGS).

The bones of St Erc were revered at the hilltop church site, the most powerful in northern Brega, and a life of St Patrick may have been written and held at the monastery, further demonstrating its authority. Another ecclesiastical complex close to the bank of the River Boyne, known as St Erc's Hermitage, is first mentioned in the thirteenth century. The Annals of the Four Masters refers to abbots, bishops and archbishops (monastic officials) at Slane between 512 and 1001. It was raided by the Hiberno-Norse in 833 and 948 and by the Irish in 1150 and 1161. These references describe an oratory, the first mentioned round tower (*cloigteach*), burnt in 948, and a wooden church (*dairthech*), which collapsed in 1028. The hilltop was a contested political centre for the northern Uí Chellaig Breg kings, and in 1161 Muirchertach úa Cellaig, *ri Bhreg*, and his wife Inderb, daughter of the king of the Cenél Lóegaire, were killed there by Máel Seachlainn Ua Ruairc. The standing remains comprise an early-later medieval church and a gable shrine (see below), along with a well known as *Tobar Patraic*. How was the church complex connected to the mound?

Dumhach Sláine

The mound is classified as a motte, an earthen hill created by upcast soil from a large ditch, part of an Anglo-Norman castle. Slane was the heart of a medieval barony granted to the le Fleming family and contained a castle, a church and a borough settlement. Richard le Fleming built castles at the power centres of Knowth (*Cnogba*) and *Dumhach Sláine*. We know from the 'Song of Dermot and the Earl' that this was '*Un mote*'—a motte castle—at Slane. The castle, dwelling and garrison were destroyed in 1176 by Maol Sheachlainn Ó Lochlainn, king of Cinéal Éoghain, with the reported deaths of 500 people. The word *Dumhach* itself usually refers to a

Top right: **Watercolour of St Erc's Tomb by Du Noyer** (by permission of the Royal Irish Academy © RIA).
 Right: **View of St Erc's Tomb.**
 Below: **Panoramic view from south side of graveyard.**

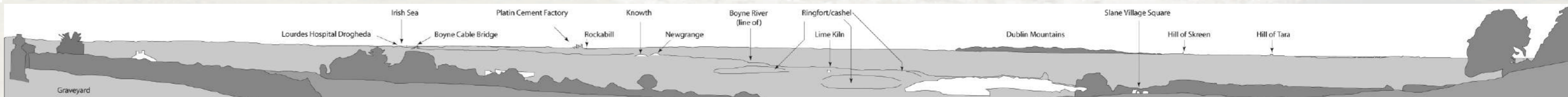


burial mound, and the mound has characteristics of other local enclosed barrows. In the metrical *Dindsenchas*, a poem written in the twelfth century to explain Slane's placename, we learn that Sláine, king and judge of the Fir Bolg, died and was buried on *Druim Fuar* in a great mound called *Dumha Sláine* (CELT 2005, Poem 77). This story links the mound to themes of kingship and judgement. Thus it seems certain that the first castle at Slane was built on an important prehistoric site close to the medieval parish church.

The motte is on private land owned by the Slane estate, while the college and church are publicly accessible from the carpark signposted from the N2 exiting to the north of Slane.

Motte

Although hidden and overgrown, this monument is impressive and was surveyed in 2010 by the Hill of Slane Archaeological Project. It is steep-sided, 7.8m high, with a summit measuring 20m north-south by 23m east-west. Low stone walling is evident around the summit edge, especially on the northern side. The motte is c. 45m wide at the base and is surrounded by a 4-5m-wide ditch up to 2m deep, partly rock-cut, especially along the south-eastern side. It stands centrally



within a circular enclosure c. 163m in diameter. This is well defined along the southern and south-western sides as a bank with an outer ditch but gives way to a simple terrace from the north-west to the north-east, while to the east and south-east it is a low bank. This is not a feature of a classic Anglo-Norman motte-and-bailey and is likely to significantly pre-date it. Low earthworks lie within the enclosure on the eastern side of the motte. The 2010 geophysical survey on the motte suggests a buried stone structure, and the circular enclosure surrounding it has similarities to a prehistoric barrow and enclosure at Mountfortescue, 5km to the north.

Enclosure

On the south-eastern side of the enclosure there is a smaller enclosure, c. 25m in diameter, defined by a low bank without an accompanying ditch. The line of this smaller enclosure is clearly cut by the larger enclosure surrounding the motte and is thus earlier.

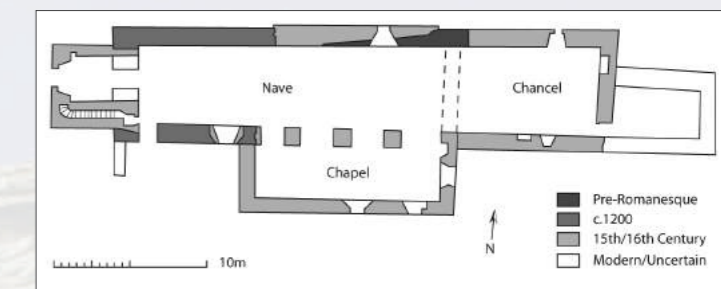
Medieval church

The hilltop church, dedicated to St Patrick, is often mistakenly referred to as a Franciscan friary church. It served as the parish church for Slane until the eighteenth century. The long, rectangular nave was probably rebuilt in the thirteenth century. Manning recently argued for a pre-Romanesque date for an earlier phase, noting that the sandstone stonework at the east end of the nave suggests the presence of antae, a projecting feature common on masonry churches from the early ninth century to the eleventh century.

The extensively rebuilt chancel at the east end unusually has no window but includes a reused sandstone window head. A fifteenth-century bell-tower was added at the western end, with a fine Gothic window above the doorway and an anthropomorphic corbel at the top of its south face. Around this time the south aisle was added, containing a chantry chapel. This involved rebuilding the south wall with a new door, twin-light windows and a reused sandstone window. This chapel, separated from the nave by an arched arcade, contains a piscina (liturgical drain) and ambry (cupboard).

The Bishop's or St Erc's Tomb

Standing several metres from the church's south doorway, this feature is regarded as being the burial place of St Erc. It is comprised of two triangular stones, each c. 1.5m high, set c. 2m apart. The grooves cut into the edges of the stones may have accommodated large closing slabs. Such shrines, known on monastic sites predominantly in the west of



Above: **Plan of St Patrick's Church** (after Manning 2008).
 Below: **St Patrick's Church, tower and south aisle.**



Ireland, contained the disarticulated remains of a saint, and St Erc's Tomb would have been a focus for devotion at a very early stage of the church's development. According to tradition, coffins were carried around the graveyard enclosure three times before being set down at this tomb before burial. Other ancient graveslabs found in the graveyard include a medieval slab illustrated by Westropp, which has since disappeared.