

The Cultural Heritage of
Medieval Society

Nua Gaeilge

ID 202

7.5 ECTS Credits

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL SUMMER SCHOOL
CENTRE FOR IRISH CULTURAL HERITAGE
ID202 THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

Contact Hours: 40+

Credits: 7.5 ECTS

COURSE AIMS

Students will develop a broad understanding of early cultural heritage in the areas of archaeology, history and early Irish literature and assess this in the context of the presentation of heritage knowledge.

MODULE CONTENT

This is a foundation course in Irish Cultural Heritage Studies. While introducing students to a general understanding of early cultural history, the emphasis is on the importance of academic knowledge of the past as a foundation for the presentation and dissemination of cultural heritage for both a scholarly audience and the general public. This is an assessment of the diverse and exciting aspects of Irish cultural history including archaeology, history, architecture and the arts, the literature of places and the creation and manipulation of history in relation to some of the great prehistoric and early medieval locations in Ireland. The care, presentation and future development of important heritage sites such as Emain Macha, the Hill of Tara, the Boyne Valley (Newgrange) and Clonmacnoise will be assessed in the context of modern scholarly interpretation and the increasing importance of cultural awareness.

FIELD SEMINARS

An essential part of the teaching in this module is on-site, at the great monuments and complexes that form the focus of study.

1. Laraghbryan medieval church
2. The Hill of Tara archaeological complex, Bective medieval abbey and Trim Castle
3. The monastic complex at Clonmacnoise and the Iron Age trackway at Corlea
4. Maynooth Castle

TEACHING AND LEARNING METHODS

This module involves a mixture of lectures, class seminars and independent study but there is a particular emphasis on Field Seminars where teaching takes place at the sites and monuments associated with early Irish cultural heritage.

	<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>		<i>Friday</i>	<i>Other assignments</i>
<i>Week 1 (3–7)</i>	Orientation		Lectures Laraghbryan		Lectures Lectures	
<i>Week 2 (10–14)</i>	Lectures Lectures		Tara, Bective, Trim			Assignment 1: Independent Study Report (Wednesday)
<i>Week 3 (17–21)</i>	Lectures Lectures		Lectures Lectures		Clonmacnoise, Corlea	Assignment 2: Site Report (Wednesday)
<i>Week 4 (24–28)</i>	Maynooth Castle Lectures		Lectures Assignment workshop + presentations			Complete assignments: Assignment 3: Essay Wednesday

¹ See Assignment 1

Case Study 1: late prehistory and the ‘Royal Sites’

Week 1: Introduction (archaeology, history and literature)

Field Seminar 1: Laraghbryan medieval church

Preparation for Field Seminar 2: Hill of Tara, Bective Abbey, Trim Castle

The ‘Royal Sites’—so-called because of the identification in the early medieval period as the pre-Christian residences of provincial kings—have been the subject of intense recent archaeological investigation. This research has revealed a deep history of activity at each of these—Tara, Emain Macha (Navan Fort), Dún Ailinne (Knockaulin) and Cruachain—stretching back in some cases to the Neolithic period before 3000 BC. The principal era of intensive activity is in the Middle Iron Age La Tène period (c. 350–100BC) when impressive religious shrines and sanctuaries, regional ceremonial centres, were erected and maintained at each location. Around 100 BC these sites were systematically,

and apparently synchronously, dismantled and abandoned. The archaeological evidence will be examined in detail including data from excavations, remote sensing and LiDAR survey. Comparative sites from early prehistory and the early Iron Age in Ireland and beyond will be studied. Visits to these sites will be combined with insight into the early medieval texts and stories relating to these important complexes and their attendant landscapes. The place of these later synthetic histories, and the anchor role that these complexes played in the vivid early literature of Ireland, will also be examined.

Week 2 Case Study 1: late prehistory and the ‘Royal Sites’

Deadline for Assignment 1: independent heritage institution Report—

Field Seminar 2: Hill of Tara, Bective Abbey, Trim Castle

The Hill of Tara is a low, prominent, eminence that is the most iconic heritage site in Ireland with a wealth of associated archaeology, history myth and literature. On the summit are a large number of visible prehistoric monuments (and over one hundred other more obscured sites) ranging from a Neolithic passage tomb (‘Mound of the Hostages’—associated in legend with Niall Noígiallach)—to the ceremonial entrance way—the Teach Midhchuarta (the ‘Banqueting Hall’)—formalised access to the hilltop from the north, a Bronze Age cemetery (2200–1600 BC) that contained over forty elite burials and many barrows (burial mounds surrounded by ditches and external banks; c. 1600–800 BC). Renewed activity in the Iron Age included the creation of the large ‘Royal Enclosure’ (Rath na Ríg: fort of the kings, c. 250 BC) on the hill summit as well as two burials monuments Teach Cormac (Cormac’s house, after the mythical figure Cormac MacAirt) and the Forradh (‘the King’s Seat’). A small Iron Age cemetery (with burials similar to those at Knowth) was followed by series of figure-of-eight shrines, constructed of upright oak posts, at the site of the Rath of the Synods (referring to reputed important meetings of the early Christian Church) and a large circular shrine in the first century BC. The final activity at the Rath of the Synods was a defended residential enclosure surrounded by three concentric ramparts (c. 200–300 AD).

Following the arrival of Christianity in the fifth century the Hill of Tara attracted the attentions of early medieval scholars including Tírechán (‘Life of Patrick’, c. 670 AD). As part of the process of ‘creating’ histories and genealogies of the Uí Neill—the descendants of Niall Noígiallach (‘Niall of the Nine Hostages’), as well as origin myths for the Irish, these monks gave names to the various monuments at Tara (which would have looked exactly as they do now): these ancestral figures, drawn from myth and legend, included Niall, Cormac MacAirt, Laoghaire (reputedly the king of Tara at the time of St. Patrick), Medb (the sovereignty goddess of Tara) and Grainne.

There was a revival of interest in Tara as part of the growth of romantic nationalism in the 19th century and this attracted attention in the 1798 and 1916 risings against British rule as well as providing the venue of a ‘Monster Meeting’ (for ‘Home Rule’) held by Daniel O’Connell in 1943.

Week 3 Case Study 2: early medieval society

Complete Assignment 2: Site Report

Preparation for Field Seminar 3

Field Seminar 3: Clonmacnoise and Corlea

Early medieval society was based around the family (*fine*, a complex multigenerational social and legal unit) and the tribe (about 150 examples) cradled in a number of important social systems

including kinship, clientship, fosterage and formal concepts of honour. For these Ireland is fortunate in having a great deal of both historical documents (such as the Annals, Law Tracts, Genealogies, Hagiographies and a wealth of early literature) and archaeological data. For example, most families resided in ringforts (enclosed and defended farmsteads) of which over 40,000 can still be identified; excavation of many of these has revealed important details of the day-to-day lifestyle, farming economy, craftsmanship and transportation. Students will be introduced to early medieval society through multidisciplinary perspective including archaeology, history and literature which will include the role and status of women.

A specific genre of early Irish literature ('The Death Tales'—royal deaths by wounding, burning and drowning) deals with these issues of secular and religious tension; these stories may well relate back to the Iron Age Bog Bodies—victims of ritual murder that display evidence for multiple fatal wounds. The extraordinarily well-preserved bodies provide important insights into pre-Christian society and socio-political customs.

The great monastery at **Clonmacnoise** (*Cluain Mhic Nois*: 'meadow of the sons of Nos') is one of the most complete religious complexes of early medieval Ireland (c. 400–1200 AD). Although reputedly founded in 548 AD by St Ciarán most of the remains (three high crosses, a round tower, eight churches, and over 600 early medieval graveslabs) date to the period between 800–1100 AD. Clonmacnoise became one of the most powerful, wealthy and influential monastic centres in Ireland. It had a famous school and scriptorium (for the copying and illumination of early manuscripts), and was an important centre for metal craftsmanship and stone carving. Significant persons associated with the monastery include St Ciaran, the later abbots Colmán and Odo, several kings of Tara (including Diarmait *mac Cerbaill*, Flann Sinna, Turlough and Rory O'Connor) and the infamous Dearbhorgaill (Derval). Clonmacnoise was virtually an island surrounded by the River Shannon and its floodplain ('the callows') and peatland. The monastery is on an important 'crossroads': the north-south axis of the River Shannon and the east-west route along a glacial ridge which was an important natural route ('The Pilgrim Road', an *Slí Mhór*) from the prehistoric period. Since the early medieval period Clonmacnoise has been an important centre of Christian pilgrimage and spiritual devotion. There are also the remains of the earliest bridge in Ireland (c. 804 AD) and an impressive early Norman castle (1214 AD).

The Iron Age trackway at **Corlea** was construction in late 148 BC or early in 147 BC. It is made from oak planks 3–3.5m long and around 0.15m thick laid on rails around 1.2m apart. The road was at least 1.6km long. It is estimated that the sleepers alone amount to 300 large oak trees, or one thousand wagon-loads, with a similar volume of birch for the rails. These wooden trackways across bogs are very common and over one hundred other, smaller examples, were found in the Corlea area. Part of the trackway was conserved and placed back in its original location in a special building. The Corlea Trackway appears to have been constructed in a single year, and suggests comparisons with the early

medieval tale *Tochmarc Étaíne* (The Wooing of Étaín), where king Eochu Airem sets Midir tasks such as planting a forest and building a road across a bog where none had ever been before at a place called Móin Lámraí

Week 4 Case Study 2: early medieval society

Complete Assignment 3: Essay

Field Seminar 4: Maynooth Castle

ASSESSMENT

Assignment 1 Independent Visit to a Cultural Heritage Site or Institution: 25%

Students will make an independent visit to at least one cultural heritage institution (from an approved list that includes three venues of the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin, the National Gallery of Ireland [all free], St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin Castle, Trim Castle [entry fee]) and respond to a questionnaire dealing with their impressions and assessment of the cultural experience. They can attend as individuals or in groups; sites visited by students in the course of other field trips (such as Castledermot) may be accepted for this assignment.

Assignment 2 Site Report: 25%

Students will prepare a short written paper (less than 1000 words) on an aspect of the Cultural Heritage of the Hill of Tara, Bective Abbey or Trim Castle.

Assignment 3 Essay: 50%

This (1500 words) will be on one of a number of topic options dealing with an aspect of the Cultural Heritage of the 'Royal Sites' or early medieval society.

All written assignments must be submitted before the end of the course.

Some core reading:

- Bhreathnach, E. (ed.) 2005 *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara*. Four Courts Press/ The Discovery Programme, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.
- Grogan, E. 2008 *The Rath of the Synods, Tara, Co. Meath: excavations by Seán P. Ó Ríordáin*. UCD School of Archaeology, Wordwell, Dublin.
- Johnston, S. and Wailes, B. 2007 *Dún Ailinne: Excavations at an Irish Royal Site 1968–1975*. University Museum Publications, Philadelphia.
- Kinsella, T. 1969 *The Tain*. Translated from the Irish Epic Tain Bo Cuailnge. Dolmen Press, Oxford University Press, Dublin.
- Koch, J.T. and Carey, J. 2000 *The Celtic Heroic Age. Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales*. Celtic Studies Publications 1, Andover and Aberystwyth.
- Lynn, C.J. 2003 *Navan Fort. Archaeology and myth*. Wordwell, Bray.
- McCone, K. 1990 *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*. An Sagart, Maynooth.
- Mallory, J.P. 2013 *The Origins of the Irish*. Thames and Hudson, London.
- Mitchell, G.F. and Ryan, M. 1997 *Reading the Irish Landscape*. Town House, Dublin.
- Ní Bhrolcháin, M. 2009 *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature*. Four Courts Press, Dublin.
- Raftery, B. 1994 *Pagan Celtic Ireland. The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age*. Thames and Hudson, London.
- Schot, R., Newman, C. and Bhreathnach, E. 2011 *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship*. Four Courts Press, Dublin.
- Waddell, J. 1998/2010 *The Prehistoric Archaeology of Ireland*, Galway University Press, Galway.
- Waddell, J. 2014 *Archaeology and Celtic Myth*. Four Courts Press, Dublin.
- Waddell, J., Fenwick, J. and Barton, K. 2009 *Rathcroghan: archaeological and geophysical survey in a ritual landscape*. Wordwell, Dublin.
- Waterman, D.M. 1997 *Excavations at Navan Fort 1961–71* (compiled by C.J. Lynn). Her Majesty's

Stationary Office, Belfast.

ENDS