

Mary Deevy, Project Archaeologist with Meath County Council, outlines the planning background and the archaeological impacts along the controversial route of the proposed M3 near the Hill of Tara in County Meath.

# Archaeology, Tara

## and the M3 road scheme



**T**he perceived impact of the planned M3 Clonee–North of Kells road scheme on the Hill of Tara has been the subject of much debate in recent years. The following is intended to describe the planning background to the route and the results of the ongoing archaeological work.

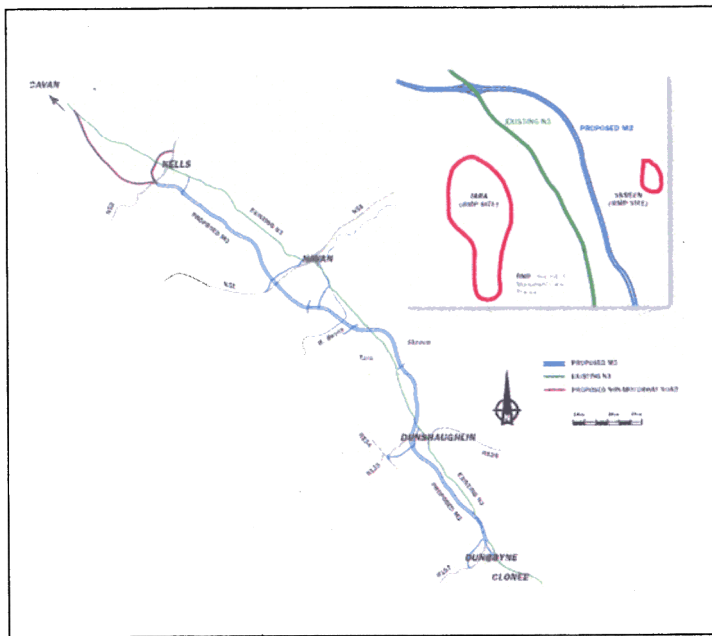
The M3 is a major new road scheme that will realign the N3 to bypass Dunboyne, Dunshaughlin, Navan and Kells in County Meath. The planning process for the M3 scheme began in 1999 with the Constraints Study, followed by the Route Selection Study in 2000–1 and the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), published in 2002. Following a lengthy oral hearing, An Bord Pleanála approved the scheme and it became operative without legal challenge in 2003.

Much of the continuing debate has centred on the choice of

route for the 15km section between Dunshaughlin and Navan. Initially four broad corridors were examined on this section and these were further developed into ten route options:

- one Orange route travelling west of the Hill of Tara;
- three Green route options travelling between the Hill of Tara and the existing N3;
- four Blue route options travelling between the existing N3 and Skryne;
- two Pink route options travelling east of Skryne.

The choice of the preferred route was based on a wide selection matrix, which considered various environmental, engineering and



The design of the scheme sought to minimise the physical and visual impact on the archaeological landscape around Tara by choosing a route to the east rather than to the west of Tara, where the road would be more visible. The road will be set low in the valley between the hills of Tara and Skreen, where the natural topography and the existing hedging will help to screen it from the Hill of Tara. It avoids the important core zone around Tara, lying approximately 1.5km to the east of the limit of the designated RMP area, over 2km from the top of the hill and east of the existing N3. There is no doubt that the planned road will impact on the wider landscape surrounding the Hill of Tara, just as the existing N3 does. This would be true for any route in the vicinity of Tara and it is therefore extremely important that every effort is made to reduce its physical and visual impact.

The landscape architect who assessed the visual impact in the EIS stated at the oral hearing that he considered that the proposed M3 would not visually impinge on the sensitive landscape setting surrounding the National Monument. In addition, An Bord Pleanála made it a condition of their approval that advance planting of landscaped areas on either side of the road should be

economic aspects of each route option. Each of the ten routes had particular advantages and disadvantages. However, the overall preferred route was Blue 2 (B2). This route was first or joint first in fourteen out of the eighteen EIS categories considered, including Landscape and Visual Impacts, Community Impacts, Air Quality, Ecology, Geology, Noise and Vibration and Agricultural Impacts.

From a purely archaeological point of view, the Pink route east of Skryne was considered the best because of its greater distance and lesser visibility from the Hill of Tara. However, the Pink route had a number of serious drawbacks in comparison to the preferred route. These include more severe community impacts (218 houses within 300m compared to 80 houses on Blue 2), resulting in more severe construction impacts and less favourable noise and air quality impacts. It also had a greater effect on agricultural holdings and a highly visible crossing of the Boyne valley at a new location, in addition to a greater impact on the village of Skryne.

From an archaeological point of view the Orange route west of Tara was completely discounted, largely because of its visual impact on Tara, not only by our archaeological consultants but also by the National Monuments Section of what was then Dúchas—The Heritage Service.

The Council's archaeological consultants, Margaret Gowen and Co. Ltd, in their Route Selection Study of 2000 made the following conclusion in relation to the route that emerged as the preferred route, B2:

'Routes B2, B3 and B4, although they pass between Tara and Skreen, are less likely to disturb later prehistoric material associated with Tara, and are further from Tara itself than the existing N3. If they can be designed to avoid the monuments (RMP) along their routes, these three routes could also be considered viable from an archaeological perspective. Other mitigation, in the form of screening the road from Tara and Skreen, would ensure the minimum impact on the surrounding archaeological landscape.'



Above: M3 Dunshaughlin-Navan Section Route Selection: 10 options examined.

Opposite: Enclosure complex at Dowdstown visible as cropmark in aerial survey carried out before testing.

Above left: Planned M3 Clonee-North of Kells Road Scheme, Co. Meath.

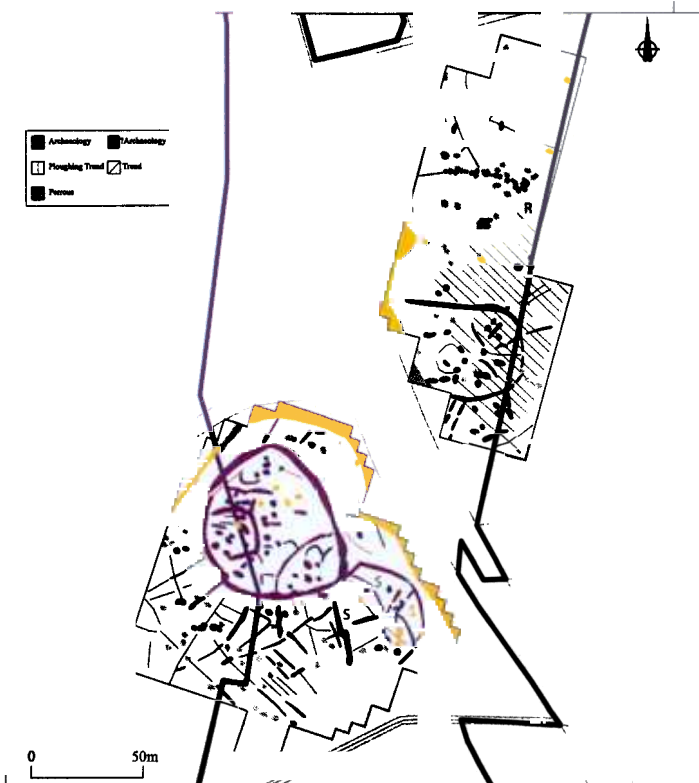
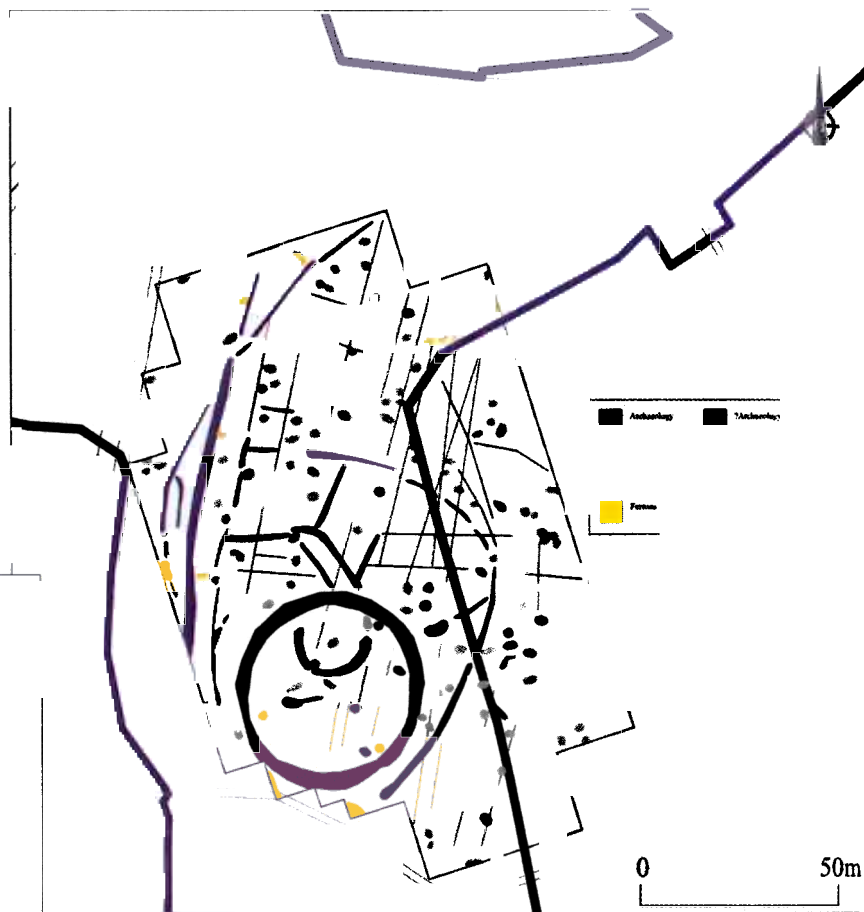


## TARA AND THE M3

Right: Circular enclosure with annexes identified by geophysical survey (GSB Propection) at Baronstown.

Below: D-shaped enclosure with annexes and adjacent U-shaped enclosure bisected by existing N3, identified by geophysical survey (GSB Propection) at Roestown, north of Dunshaughlin.

Opposite: Enclosure complex identified by geophysical survey (GSB Propection) at Dowdstown adjacent to the River Boyne.



### Environmental Impact Statement

Archaeological investigation carried out as part of the Environmental Impact Assessment included desk-top survey, field survey and geophysical survey. These investigations showed that over its whole 60km length the route impacted on just two known sites recorded on the state's Record of Monuments and Places. While this official record lists some 150,000 sites nationally, it is widely acknowledged that this figure represents just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the number of unidentified archaeological sites that lie invisible beneath the ground.

For this reason an extensive archaeological geophysical survey was carried out along the Dunshaughlin–Navan section of the road. This was the first time that geophysical survey was used to prospect for new archaeological sites as part of an EIS on a road scheme in Ireland. The results of this survey, carried out by GSB Propection, were spectacular in their clarity. Six definite new sites were identified and the road was moved to avoid three of them. The geophysical survey also identified 23 areas of archaeological potential, which may or may not be archaeological sites but which warrant further investigation. The field survey identified fifteen possible archaeological sites, none of which were located on the Dunshaughlin–Navan section.

The EIS recommended test excavation of all sites, possible sites and areas of archaeological potential identified in the EIS. Meath County Council further made a commitment at the oral hearing that the whole route would be tested and that this would be

undertaken where possible in order to mitigate the visual impacts of the development.

An issue of concern raised by some commentators has been the proximity and visual impact of the grade-separated junction at Blundelstown, which will be 1.2km from the edge of Tara (RMP), over 2km from the top of the hill. The impact of this junction was considered as part of the EIS. The mainline will be positioned at the level of the existing N3, low in the valley and not visible from the top of the Hill of Tara. The existing N3 will be raised on a bridge and will only be as visible from the Hill of Tara as the existing road where it slopes into and rises out of the valley. Landscaping and planting of native woodland will be provided as a specific mitigation to reduce the overall visual scale of the structure and its traffic.

carried out as early as possible so that any sites to be affected could be excavated in advance of construction.

### An Bord Pleanála approval

The inspector appointed by An Bord Pleanála to conduct the oral hearing concluded in his report:

‘Having regard to all of the evidence given at the Hearing and the cross-examination on the archaeology impacts in the Tara/Skreen area presented at the Hearing and to the details set out in the EIS, I am satisfied that the route as proposed would not have a significant impact on the archaeological landscape associated with the Hill of Tara, as indicated by the area designated as the core zone on the RMP Map SK 500. I also consider that the route proposed will not impact significantly on the archaeological landscape associated with the Hill of Skreen.’

### Archaeological investigation

Since the EIS, further geophysical survey, aerial survey and topographic survey have been carried out. Extensive testing on the whole route, carried out by Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd and Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd, took place between March and December 2004. Each phase of investigative work has added clarity to the picture of how much archaeology exists in the path of the route—principally adding completely new sites but also eliminating some areas previously thought to be sites or possible sites.

### Testing results to date

The results to date, in terms of both numbers and types of sites, are very consistent with those from similar schemes nationwide. Approximately 150 archaeological sites have been identified on the whole route, which covers an area of approximately 700ha. Twenty-five per cent of these sites (38) were identified on the Dunshaughlin–Navan section of the route (which is also 25% of the scheme in area). Looking more closely at the 6.5km of the road in proximity to the Hill of Tara, which in area represents 11% of the scheme, the numbers are still average, with seventeen sites representing 11% of the total.

The most significant of these seventeen sites is a large enclosure complex at Baronstown. It consists of a circular enclosure, 40m in diameter, with external annexes. This is a previously unknown site identified by the EIS geophysical survey. Its date and function are as yet unknown; its shape and size could indicate a large early medieval ringfort, or perhaps a prehistoric enclosure or ritual site. The only diagnostic artefact was a find of possible Bronze Age pottery, but this came from a feature not stratigraphically related to the enclosures and may indicate earlier activity on the site.

The remaining sixteen are a mixture of smaller sites, including three burnt mound sites. One site is a small pit-kiln of as yet unknown date, possibly used for drying corn. Nine sites consist of a series of pits and ditch lengths of as yet undetermined date and function. The last three sites are the remains of early modern structures—a house, a national school and a post office.

Arguably some of the more interesting sites on the Dunshaughlin–Navan section have been found further away from the Hill of Tara: for example, two early medieval settlements in Roestown just north of Dunshaughlin (approx. 6.8km south of Tara) and Dowdstown (approx 3.5km north of Tara), or two burial sites—a small prehistoric burial site at Ardsallagh (approx. 5km north of Tara) and a small possible early medieval burial site at Collierstown (approx. 2.8km south-east of Tara). Further details on the testing results can be obtained at [www.nra.ie](http://www.nra.ie).

### The future

The archaeology being revealed on road projects throughout Ireland is changing the face of Irish archaeology, bringing to light previously unknown data and artefacts. The next phase of archaeological work will involve a series of further investigations, including geophysical survey, ploughzone assessment and full archaeological excavation of the sites. These investigations will generate a significant corpus of new data. One of our challenges as highlighted in the recent 2020 Archaeology Foresight Consultative Forum is to feed this information to the academic community and the public as early as possible to ensure that it will be used to create new knowledge about the past.

In order to fully interpret the data, transforming information into knowledge, the investigations will be informed by an overarching archaeological research framework, which will aim to place the new archaeological sites into their archaeological, palaeoenvironmental and historical context. To achieve this aim, archaeological, historical and palaeoenvironmental research projects will be carried out in tandem with the archaeological excavations. The results of the work will be integrated and communicated to the archaeological and wider community at regular intervals, culminating in a series of publications on completion of the project. ■

