



Tara and the M3 — putting the debate in context

Gabriel Cooney on archaeology, roads and Tara

There has been a lot of concern expressed publicly about the impact of the M3 motorway on the landscape of Tara, arising from the chosen route for the motorway to the east of the Hill of Tara and west of the village of Skryne in the Skreen Valley. This follows the decision by An Bord Pleanála to approve the route after an oral hearing held in the autumn of 2002 and the current archaeological testing of the chosen route.

Public and academic interest is not surprising given the iconic status of Tara as a prehistoric and historic landscape and its key role in modern Irish history and our sense of identity. As Liam de Paor recalled, there was even a plan in the 1940s to locate a proposed new capital of Ireland on the Hill of Tara! In this context one has to acknowledge and appreciate the genuine concerns of local groups like the Meath Archaeological and Historical Society and Save the Tara–Skryne Valley and very well-informed colleagues from a number of disciplines, particularly archaeologists and historians, both in Ireland and abroad. At a human level one should also recognise the sense of loss of quality of life and place that must be strongly felt by people who will be living in proximity to the new road.

At a wider level I share in the widespread sense of frustration and concern about the lack of vision in planning and the poor enforcement of planning laws. In relation to infrastructural planning, it is to be hoped that the requirements of the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) EU Directive, which comes into effect in July, will lead to a better integration of archaeological, environmental and landscape concerns with other socio-economic requirements. In this context I am not convinced that it has ever been established that the long-term social and economic benefits of the network of motorways currently being constructed outweigh the benefits of a similar level of investment in high-speed inter-city rail and bus links. Nor do you have to be a rocket scientist to wonder about the coherency of national forward planning policy when the details of the motorway system, and the National Development Plan, were already in place long before the National Spatial Strategy was published.

So in principle I can agree with the idea that there should not be a motorway near Tara and I would be concerned about its visual appearance and impact on the landscape. But I am writing primarily to contribute to the debate about the archaeological impact of the motorway and to put it in the context of the practice of archaeology in Ireland today. I feel strongly that the way archaeologists work and their part in the development process are not widely understood. As someone who has been actively involved in debates about the protection, management and degradation of archaeology in the landscape since the 1970s I have to state that we have come a long way since those days. Now, as a result of a long, ongoing struggle, with notable successes (for example the establishment of a national database of known archaeological sites) and notable setbacks (such as the breakup of Dúchas), archaeology is embedded in the development process.

In the light of the current debate about Tara, I do think it is valid and

necessary, then, to situate the professional practice of archaeology within the context of wider political and environmental issues. Archaeologists live in the present and therefore are influenced by and work within the administrative and regulatory structures of modern Irish society. As such, however imperfect or flawed a system it is, we have to operate within the planning process as it currently exists. In the case of the M3, the planning process has been pursued over the course of several years, An Bord Pleanála has adjudicated and the motorway is now going to be built. It is in that context and that context alone that I would like to examine the issue of professional practice.

Part of the reason why many archaeologists have been reluctant to enter into public debate on specific issues such as Tara, or indeed Carrickmines, is because of the varied roles that professional archaeologists are now required to play in the development process. Hence there are archaeologists working with the regulatory authorities, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the National Museum; archaeologists who work with the local authorities and the National Roads Authority; the majority who work in the consultancy sector; and archaeologists who work in universities and other research and teaching institutions. Not surprisingly, alongside this complex structural web there are differences of professional opinion within and across these groups.

Official state policy in relation to the archaeological heritage is that there is a presumption towards preservation *in situ*, implying that, where possible, development should not impinge on standing, visible archaeological sites as known in the RMP (Recorded Monuments and Places). In the development process this could be referred to as 'planning stage archaeology', when, if at all possible, visible sites are avoided. In the case of motorways a team of archaeologists are employed by the National Roads Authority (NRA) to ensure firstly that motorway routes impact on known monuments in as limited a sense as possible. As part of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) looking at the impact of a road on an area and its communities, potential alternative routes are assessed by an archaeological consultant as regards the degree of archaeological impact and the possible mitigation implications. The NRA archaeologists then advise on likely scenarios. However, the final decision on route selection takes a range of other impacts into consideration, such as economic costs, social impacts and the natural environment. The route chosen may not be the best from an archaeological perspective but it is now the responsibility of the archaeologist to carry out 'mitigation stage' archaeology.

As part of this process the chosen route is more thoroughly assessed by geophysical survey and archaeological testing. The aim of this work is to identify significant foci of past activity across the landscape which have no surface trace and which otherwise would not be recognised prior to road construction. The next step is to excavate such sites and any

previously known sites along the route prior to the construction phase. These surveys and excavations are carried out under tender by one of the archaeological consultancy firms. A critical point here is that in the 'mitigation stage' the archaeological work should be seen in terms of the creation of knowledge about the past, a process made possible and necessary because of the removal of the physical evidence from the ground. This creation of knowledge by record is the value of archaeology in this context. Regulation of the standard of this work is provided by the statutory regulatory authorities, namely the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the National Museum of Ireland.

While the system is not perfect it has made the resolution of impacts on the archaeological resource a central component in the planning process of motorway routes. What is important to remember is that the purpose of archaeological survey and excavation is to increase our understanding of the past, regardless of whether such work is being carried out as part of a research programme or as a result of development. Excavation is only a technique, an approach to recover data; it is the interpretation and publication of the results of excavation that add to our knowledge and understanding of the past. The credibility gap that is beginning to emerge about the value of archaeology is because we have not been successful in communicating to decision-makers and the wider public the extent to which archaeological work carried out on road schemes and other developments has greatly increased our knowledge and fundamentally changed our understanding of many periods in the past. Getting this information out into the public domain is a crucial issue facing the profession. If we do not communicate new knowledge about the past then of course the question can be validly asked — what is the value of archaeology?

In the case of the M3 there was a preliminary archaeological assessment of the six potential routes for the 14.5km section between Dunshaughlin and Navan and a detailed Environmental Impact Assessment of the chosen route. Whether or not we think that the archaeological and landscape implications were given enough weight in consideration of this route, the overall conclusion of the EIA was that the option chosen would have the least impact on the local community compared to the alternatives. The results of the geophysical survey (105ha of magnetic scanning and 26ha of detailed survey) carried out as part of the Environmental Impact Assessment indicated the presence of thirty areas of archaeological potential, including six major archaeological sites. As part of the EIA the road was moved to avoid three of these; the other sites, and the couple of previously known sites, are currently being assessed as part of the testing phase. This involves putting a test trench along the centre of the road-take, with trenches off this central spine to the edge of the road-take at 20m intervals. This means that about 10% of the area of the motorway will be tested. This obviously is useful in testing the accuracy of the geophysics, as in the case of the prehistoric ring-ditch at Ardsallagh, north of Tara, which was covered in the national media at the end of April, and in revealing new sites.

Some of the objections being raised about the route arise from the fact that so many potential archaeological sites have been recognised along it as a result of the assessment. It needs to be emphasised that these sites have only been recognised because of the survey carried out as part of the assessment of the route. There was no surviving trace of them above ground as continuous agricultural usage of the landscape over time has gradually degraded them to a stage where they only survive below the surface. Any motorway, road or other large development in the Tara area

would potentially impact on such sites which have no surface expression but which would be located and defined through appropriate survey methodologies. If the route was shifted elsewhere then a similar argument could be advanced. There is no doubt that the presence of a motorway anywhere in the geographical vicinity of Tara will have an impact on the integrity of the landscape, as does the existing National Primary Road, the N3, which runs through the Skreen Valley and which of course was never tested for its archaeological impact.

The decision on the motorway route has been taken. What is now crucially important is that we use this opportunity to add to our archaeological knowledge of Tara and those other areas along the route of the motorway. All the archaeological work must be carried out to the highest standards and to best practice. This means, for example, that consideration should be given to a greater level of testing along the route, perhaps with a higher percentage of sampling in areas that might be more likely to have been foci of activity in the past. The public should have ongoing access to information about the work. Critically, the pledge of preservation by record has to be carried through by full excavation of sites. There also has to be rapid publication of the results, accessible to the wider public as well as the professional communities, so that we can see the value of archaeology in adding to our knowledge of Tara and its wider landscape.

As a post-script, and to widen the debate, it seems to me that a significant problem is that neither State institutions, environmental organisations and campaigners, academic commentators nor archaeologists have focused on the key issues of preservation *in situ* versus preservation by record. Let us take preservation by record. This was in some senses the key to the Carrickmines débâcle. Whatever about the background debates about the routing of the M50 in this area, the large portion of the site that was on the route of the motorway should have been fully and properly excavated, and it remains to be seen whether this was done. Similarly, in relation to the exciting recent discovery of the Viking site at Woodtown on the route of the Waterford bypass, the only realistic and best archaeological solution at this stage, as pointed out by Dr Pat Wallace, Director of the National Museum and by the Heritage Council, is the total excavation of this internationally significant site. Preservation *in situ* under a motorway is quite simply not preservation. The NRA should be congratulated and should be proud to have found this major piece of Irish history and should support the full excavation of this site.

Now the other side of the coin is that the State has clearly articulated as a first priority that there will be preservation of archaeological sites *in situ*. But in this regard it has effectively taken a 'do-nothing' approach. With the rapid pace of landscape change and development, that is a recipe for continuing degradation of the resource. The number of archaeological monuments in State ownership or guardianship is lamentably small. The impetus for the purchase of additional monuments, which in terms of safeguarding the archaeological heritage would represent excellent value for money, should not be hindered by the division of responsibility for National Monuments between the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Office of Public Works. There has been little or no discussion about the real protection of archaeological landscapes, a key issue in the Tara debate. However, we are very pleased to show off the couple of World Heritage landscapes that we have.

In looking to secure a place in the future for Ireland's past, I would suggest that it is these broad issues and principles that need to be debated so that we can come up with better solutions when individual, major issues arise. The more people who actively contribute to that debate the better. ■