

Madam,

We write as a group of specialists whose professional lives have been devoted to different aspects of European archaeology from prehistory onwards. We do so because we learn, to our astonishment, that An Bord Pleanála has sanctioned a four-lane motorway over agricultural land between the Hill of Tara and the Hill of Skreen. Our sense of shock is increased by the news that plans for the M3 include the construction of a floodlit interchange occupying around twenty-five and a half acres (10.6ha) of land a mere 1,090m from the core area of the Hill of Tara.

Tara has a unique position in Irish archaeology and history. It was used as a pagan burial ground and focus of ritual ceremony for over 4000 years from the Neolithic (c 3500 BC) to the later Iron Age (c 400 AD). With the arrival of Christianity, its importance as a religious centre waned. Nevertheless, the earliest historical records show that it remained a centre of ancient sacral kingship. In the early Middle Ages Tara was chief among of the best known royal sites of Ireland. Its royal demesne, which the Vikings attempted to seize in the 10th century, approximated to the modern barony of Skreen. It was later seen as an inspiring place from which to launch political campaigns. There were incidents there in the reign of Brian Ború, during the O'Neill rebellion of the 16th century and in 1798, while in 1843 it was the location chosen for Daniel O'Connell's 'monster meeting'.

Though the greatest concentration of monuments is on and around the summit of the Hill itself, this area is ringed by a number of outlying monuments in the surrounding countryside which show that the Hill belongs to a much wider complex of related ritual and settlement sites. The full extent of this ancient ritual landscape was recently demonstrated by the Discovery Programme. As a result in 1999, Dúchas, the Heritage Service, expanded the zone of protection around the Hill of Tara to a radius of 6 km.

The problem with the proposed route for the M3 is that it runs inside this zone of protection.

In the comparatively short stretch between Dunshaughlin and Kilcarn Bridge (about 14.5km) no fewer than twenty-six areas of archaeological significance have been identified using geophysics. Once the top soil is stripped away further monuments may be discovered. All these will be destroyed by the projected motorway.

Tara is a virtually intact archaeological landscape of monuments with the Hill at the centre. The Skreen side of the projected motorway is part and parcel of this complex. Driving a four-lane motorway through the valley will destroy the integrity of this ancient landscape forever.

Archaeological evidence and historical sources tells us that this landscape is one of prime cultural importance in the history of the Irish nation. We urge the Irish government to revoke the decision by An Bord Pleanála and to choose instead one of the other routes proposed for the M3, four of which will leave the

Tara/Skreen valley untouched. We also urge it to apply for World Heritage status for Tara so that it is preserved for future generations.

LINDSAY ALLASON-JONES Director of Archaeological Museums and Reader in Roman Material Culture, University of Newcastle upon Tyne;

DAVID AUSTIN, Chair of Archaeology, Head of School of Social Sciences, University of Wales , Lampeter;

MARTIN BIDDLE, FBA, Director, Winchester Research Unit; Emeritus Professor of Medieval Archaeology, University of Oxford;

RICHARD BRADLEY FBA, Professor of Archaeology, Reading University;

Dr. EWAN CAMPBELL, Dept of Archaeology, University of Glasgow;

Prof MARTIN CARVER, Dept of Archaeology, University of York;

BARRY CUNLIFFE, Professor of European Archaeology, University of Oxford;

Dr STEPHEN T. DRISCOLL, Dept of Archaeology, University of Glasgow;

Dr NANCY EDWARDS, Reader in Archaeology, University of Wales, Bangor;

Dr JANE HAWKES, School for Medieval Studies, University of York;

Dr RICHARD HOBBS, Secretary, The Roman Finds Group;

LAURENCE KEEN OBE, President, The British Archaeological Association;

Dr ALAN LANE, School of History and Archaeology, Cardiff University;

Dr GARY LOCK, MIFA, FSA, Director, Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford;

Dr NANCY NETZER Director, McMullen Museum of Art and Professor of Art History, Boston College, Boston;

DOMINIC POWLESLAND, Director, The Landscape Research Centre, Yedingham, North Yorkshire;

COLIN RENFREW, (Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn) Director of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research and Disney Professor of Archaeology in the University of Cambridge;

Dr JULIAN RICHARDS, Dept of Archaeology, University of York;

Dr ALISON SHERIDAN, Dept of Archaeology, National Museums of Scotland, Chambers St, Edinburgh

Prof GEOFFREY J WAINWRIGHT, Chairman, Wessex Archaeology.

DAVID M WILSON, Honorary MRIA.