In this article EAMON P. KELLY and TOM CONDIT describe an important archaeological complex on Friarstown Hill, not far from Limerick City. Important in its own right, the complex may have inspired the scribes who refer to a place known as Tara Luachra in the early texts.
The henges

The course of a large circular enclosure which can be traced best on the north, east and south surrounds the hilltop. The enclosure (dims c. 140m N-S, c. 120m E-W) is composed of an inner earthen bank and ditch with an external bank on the outside of the ditch. The area enclosed, currently used as pasture, is domed, with the summit being roughly central to the enclosure. There are no traces of any internal features.

The bank of the enclosure has an overall width of c. 15m on the east where it survives better. At this point the inner bank is 5m wide, standing to a height of 1.5m above the bottom of the ditch and c. 0.3m above the interior. The ditch is c. 4m wide and the outer bank is c. 6m wide, standing to a height of c. 0.5m above the bottom of the ditch. On the south of the enclosure a modern fieldwall runs in an east-west direction across the site. To the south of this wall the rampart survives best, although it is in an area planted with large mature trees. The banks measure c. 8m crest to crest, with the inner bank standing up to 1.8m above the

Location

The hill in the townlands of Friarstown and Friarstown North is located 7.5km south of Limerick City. It is a rounded limestone formation rising to a height of 287ft. The views from the summit are extensive, particularly to the north, east and south. The southern crest of the summit is covered by a plantation of deciduous trees, while the eastern flank of the hill is dominated by a more precipitous slope overlooking Friarstown Abbey on the lower slopes of the hill.

The complex consists of two large hilltop enclosures best interpreted as henges, a series of enclosures of various types and standing stones. The two henges, traceable for their entire circuits, are recorded in the Sites and Monuments Record for County Limerick (SMR nos LI 13:89, 13:94), having been originally photographed from the air in the 1960s by the Cambridge University Committee for Aerial Photography.

Aerial view of Friarstown with field names superimposed (based on map in Limerick City Library).
2.5m-wide ditch. The outer bank, c. 3m wide, stands c. 1.3m above the bottom of the ditch. A series of large trees are planted in a line along the bottom of the ditch. There are no traces of any gaps or entrance features through the bank.

The second henge, located c. 40m to the east of the one described above and larger than it, encloses an area, currently used for pasture, around a secondary summit on the hill at Friarstown North. The enclosure, subcircular in plan (dimensions c. 157m N–S, 165m E–W), is composed of an inner bank and an outer bank with an intervening ditch.

The overall width of the enclosing element, which survives best on the south-east and south-west, is 11.5m. The inner bank is c. 6m wide, standing up to 1.7m above the bottom of the 2.5m-wide ditch. The outer bank, c. 3m wide, stands c. 0.5m above the bottom of the ditch, with a width of 3m. The area enclosed is slightly domed, with a noticeable natural rise at the summit. There are extensive views to the north, east and south, with the Galtee mountain range clearly visible to the south-east. An earthen mound, located close to the perimeter of the enclosure on the north-west, is the remains of a disused limekiln. There are no visible traces of any gaps or entrance features through any section of the surviving rampart.

When first recognised, the hilltop enclosures were considered as belonging to the hillfort category of monuments. However, field inspection shows that both enclosures clearly have a large substantial outer bank and thus are more likely to belong to the henge or ceremonial enclosure group of monuments. The proximity of the two monuments is also reminiscent of a ritual association rather than a defensive arrangement. Their large size indicates that they represent a large community co-operation in both their construction and use. The similarity in appearance of the two enclosures also seems to imply a degree of contemporaneity between the sites, but only excavated evidence may prove this conclusively.

In the woods to the south-west of the smaller henge there are the remains of what is apparently a roadway curving up towards the south-west perimeter of the enclosure. The roadway, traceable for a distance of c. 40m, consists of a roughly level path c. 8m wide, defined on either side by a spread of limestone boulders c. 2m wide.

**Standing stones**

Two standing stones are located beneath the hilltop to the north-east and south-east respectively. The first, located c. 200m north-east of the henges, is a large limestone slab, 1.6m long, 1.2m high and 0.2m wide, orientated c. ENE–WSW. The second is located in the field used for pasture to the south of the larger henge. It too is a large limestone slab, standing in a subcircular hollow depression c. 0.2m deep (4m N–S, 3m E–W). The stone, aligned c. NNE – SSW, is 1.85m high and measures 2.1m at the base, with a width of 0.38m. It is recorded that human bones of 'extraordinary size' were uncovered beneath this stone early in the nineteenth century.
Later enclosures
A series of smaller enclosures, most of which may be of Early Christian or medieval date, 'orbit' the henges on the hilltop. The remains of two of them are built on the outer bank of the smaller henge while others are located on lower ground both north and south of the hilltop.

There are fragmentary remains of a possible enclosure on the north-east quadrant of the smaller henge. This consists of a roughly semicircular arc (length of chord 22m) defined by a bank (4m wide and c. 0.5m high) and very slight traces of a ditch. This enclosure appears to be built on the outer bank of the henge and thus to be later in date. However, as it has been disturbed it is difficult to determine the nature of the site from the visible remains.

A much better-preserved site is located on the south-west perimeter of the smaller henge, again located on the henge's outer bank. It consists of a raised circular platform defined by an earth and stone bank and ditch. The site, currently planted with oak and sycamore trees but otherwise extremely well preserved, has a diameter of c. 40m. The interior of the site has a hollow appearance rising up gently to meet the bank. On the east the bank, which measures c. 5m across at the base, stands c. 3.5m high above the bottom of the 3m-wide ditch. On the west the bank has a basal width of 5m and stands up to 3m above the bottom of the ditch, which is c. 1.4m deep.

This site, with its steep sides and broad ditch, is likely to be a medieval ringwork, an earthen platform which accommodated a wooden castle in its interior dating to the eleventh or twelfth century. Its location on the bank of the henge indicates that its builders were aware of the henge which crowned the summit of the hill. Perhaps even in the medieval period the former ritual significance of the hill and its monuments was still appreciated.

Two other enclosures are located to the south of the fox covert in the same field. One appears to be a ringfort with a bank and outer ditch, while the more northerly of the two may be the remains of a prehistoric barrow.

The abbey
To the east, beneath the easternmost of the two henges, are the remains of Friarstown Abbey, around which there are traces of low earthworks likely to be associated with a medieval settlement around the abbey. Again, like the ringforts, the location of the abbey seems to consciously avoid interfering with the henges on the hilltop.

The placename evidence
Ireland is renowned for its huge variety of townland names, many of which are of considerable antiquity. Less well recorded are infinite numbers of individual field names, many of which refer to the use of a particular field, its owner, its location, its description, and yet other names which may be remnants of its former significance, long forgotten.

In the case of Friarstown a manuscript map of the estate of Vere John Urquhart Hunt survives which records the local field names around the hill, many of which formed the property of Friarstown House, located on the northern slopes of the hill. Most of the names recorded are in English with only two fields bearing an Anglicised version of an Irish name, Parknastallia and Fintinna. Mr Con McNamara has also informed us that Parknastallia is known to him as 'Pdraignastallia', invoking a connection with St Patrick. Local folklore also has it that bones discovered beneath the standing stone were the bones of St Patrick himself.

Among the names are the Water Field and the Rushie Field at the waterlogged foot of the hill on the west. The Burnt House Field may refer to a large well-preserved limekiln located within it. The Abbey Field is the location for the remains of Friarstown Abbey itself. The Middle Field is the name of the field which
Standing stone to south-east of hill.

encloses the summit of the hill. However, and most interesting of all, the hill itself is termed Friarstown (Tara) Hill. Tara Hill is still the name applied to the hill by the local inhabitants. Con McNamara again gave us local names for one of the ringfords on the south of the hill—Knocknagraine, 'the Hill of the Sun'.

Conclusion
Three principal phases of activity appear to be reflected in the distribution of monuments on and around the hill. The henges represent prehistoric ceremonial activity possibly as early as the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (c. 2500 BC). The erection of Early Christian ringfords around the hill seems to indicate that the hilltop still bore some ritual/political significance in the first millennium AD.

The sitting of the abbey there in the medieval period also indicates that the former ritual aspects of the hilltop were appreciated.

A highly emotive name such as Tara when associated with a significant prehistoric ritual landscape such as that at Friarstown gives rise to interesting speculation concerning the location of Tara Luachra, mentioned in the Mesca Uladh, the mythical tale of the attack of the drunken Ulstermen on Tara of the Rushes.

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Tara Luachra
The presence of the name Tara in County Limerick invites interesting speculation with regard to the position of a place named in the Mesca Uladh as Tara Luachra (Temair Luachra—Tara of the Rushes). The Mesca Uladh, translated as the Intoxication of the Ulstermen, relates a comical story of how Cú Chulainn and his colleagues make a wrong turn when travelling from Dún na Bend to Dún Dealgan and end up in a snow storm in County Limerick. The story, which deals with the theme of tribal warfare, appears to explain an attack by the Ulstermen on Cú Roi, a king of Munster according to mythology.

On recognising that they were no longer in Ulster, Cú Chulainn explains to his colleagues that he knows where they are and goes on to describe that they are located on Knockainey; he provides a brief outline of the important places in the vicinity, including Cenn Abhrat, Sliabh Cán, Sliabh Éblinne and Lind Luimní, Oenach Sen Clocháin and Tara Luachra.

Scholars have analysed in detail the subtleties of the text in order to determine the location of Tara Luachra. Some favour its location in Kerry or Cork across the county boundary while others place it west of Knockainey. Ancient topography is of course a hazardous task, particularly when one bears in mind the complicated nature of the original texts themselves and the consequential errors that can arise should one name in a series be misidentified. Nevertheless the presence of a ritual complex on the hill at Friarstown and the possibility that the name Tara Hill is an authentic survival of its ancient name raises the likelihood that authors of the Mesca Uladh had this hill in mind when they placed Cú Chulainn and his intoxicated friends in County Limerick.

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