
Management history

2.1 General background

2.1.1 Edward Lhwyd, the Welsh antiquary and scholar, first wrote about the discovery of the entrance to the tomb at Newgrange during his tour of Ireland in 1699. His letters give an account of the entrance passage, the finds in the chamber, and the presence of a standing stone on the top of the mound. He also produced the first detailed drawings of the passage and chamber. His discoveries initiated investigations of the area by a succession of well-known antiquaries and travellers (Thomas Molyneux, 1726; Thomas Wright, 1748; Thomas Pownall, 1773; Gabriel Beranger, 1775).



▲ Gabriel Beranger's watercolour of Newgrange in 1775.
It shows a heap of stones in front of the entrance (Royal Irish Academy).

2.1.2 In September 1885 the tumulus of Dowth was vested in the State under the Ancient Monuments Protection Act (1882). Negotiations to vest Newgrange began in 1882 and it was finally taken into State care in 1898 following a successful prosecution for the defacement of a stone in the chamber. Knowth was taken into State ownership in 1939. In 1967 the State acquired an area of 1.6ha surrounding it and further lands were purchased in 1980. In 1997 the tumulus at Dowth and associated lands were acquired (see Fig. 2).

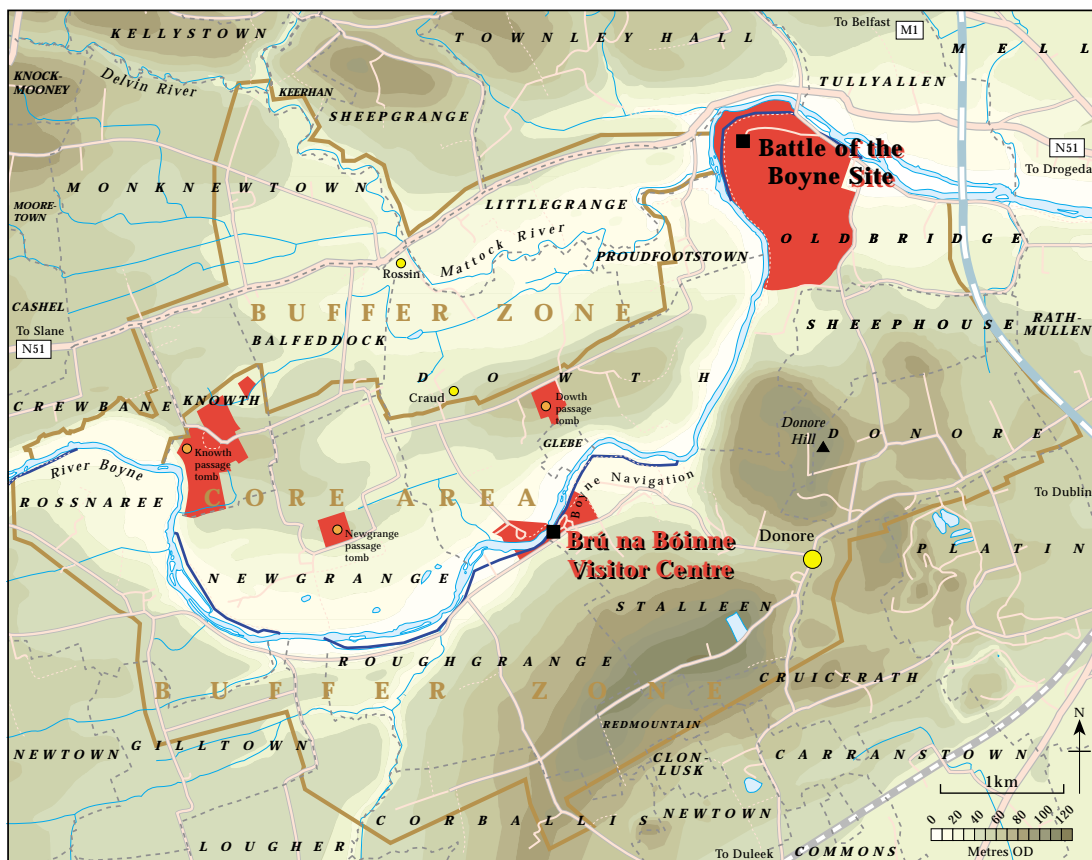
2.1.3 Brú na Bóinne is one of the most intensively excavated areas in rural Ireland. A programme of major scientific excavations began in the 1940s at Knowth with Dr Macalister, while Professor George Eogan excavated there from 1962 to 1998. Professor M. J. O'Kelly undertook excavations at Newgrange passage tomb between 1962 and 1975. These excavations have established the pre-eminence of the passage tomb culture at the site. David Sweetman's excavations at Monknewtown in the 1970s and the environs of Newgrange in the 1980s identified a significant concentration of Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age ceremonial enclosures in Brú na Bóinne.

2.2 Establishment of the Boyne Valley Archaeological Park

2.2.1 In December 1985, at the instigation of the Royal Irish Academy, a committee consisting of representatives of Meath County Council, the Office of Public Works, Bord Fáilte, the National Museum of Ireland and the Department of Archaeology, University College Dublin, recommended that an Archaeological Park be established in the Boyne Valley. A specialist Landscape and Planning Consultant was commissioned by the Government to undertake a study of the planning issues involved, notably visitor facilities, access and interpretation. This was followed by the establishment of the Boyne Valley Archaeological Park which focused on the passage tombs of Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth.

The aims were:

- To protect this remarkable archaeological area, using the highest planning standards, while at the same time facilitating local residents and local economic activity compatible with such protection.
- To encourage the continuation of archaeological research.
- To cater for the strong tourist potential.



➤ State owned land in Brú na Bóinne.

2.2.2 The State's management regime to date has focused on increasing the number of visitors that can be catered for within the area of the World Heritage Site and on presenting it as a single entity.

This has been done by:

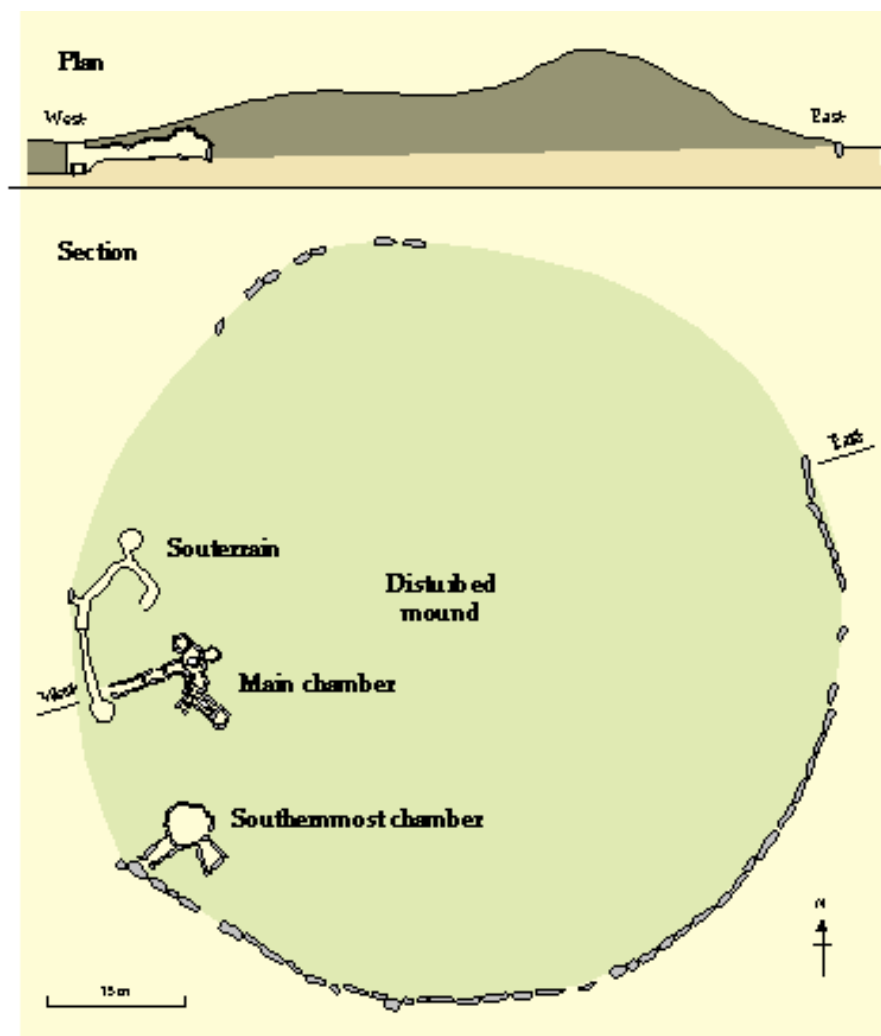
- Establishing a visitor centre at Donore which provides visitor facilities, information and interpretation.
- Presenting the context of the entire site as a single entity rather than as individual monuments.
- Carrying out major conservation work at Newgrange and completing the conservation and presentation work at Knowth.
- Purchase of Dowth in 1997.

2.2.3 The establishment of the Boyne Valley Archaeological Park is not supported by any specific legislation. However, all monuments in the area are protected under the National Monuments Acts and the area in general by statutory measures in the planning legislation and through the Meath County Development Plan.

2.2.4 The 1996 Boyne Valley Integrated Development Plan established a broad strategy for the socio-economic development of the entire Boyne river valley, setting short-, medium- and long-term priorities. It considered Brú na Bóinne in a far wider geographical and socio-economic context than its immediate environs and recognised its important role in generating sustainable employment for communities in the valley.



General description of Brú na Bóinne



3.1 Location and extent

Brú na Bóinne is in County Meath (NGR O008727; longitude W 6°24' to W 6°30'; latitude N 53°40' to N 53°43'). It is 4.8km west of the medieval port of Drogheda and almost the same distance east of the eighteenth-century village of Slane. The renowned megalithic tombs, which date from c. 3000 BC, belong to the Neolithic period and are classified as passage tombs. They occupy the high ground on ridges in an area densely covered by archaeological remains. The archaeological zone is to a large extent bounded by the River Boyne to the south and to the north by its tributary, the River Mattock (Fig. 1).

3.2 Climate

Brú na Bóinne, which lies within the driest part of the country, has a maritime climate associated with the Gulf Stream which helps to moderate temperatures. The average humidity is high and the prevailing winds are south-westerly to north-westerly. This climate has been favourable to agriculture and settlement from Neolithic times to the present day.



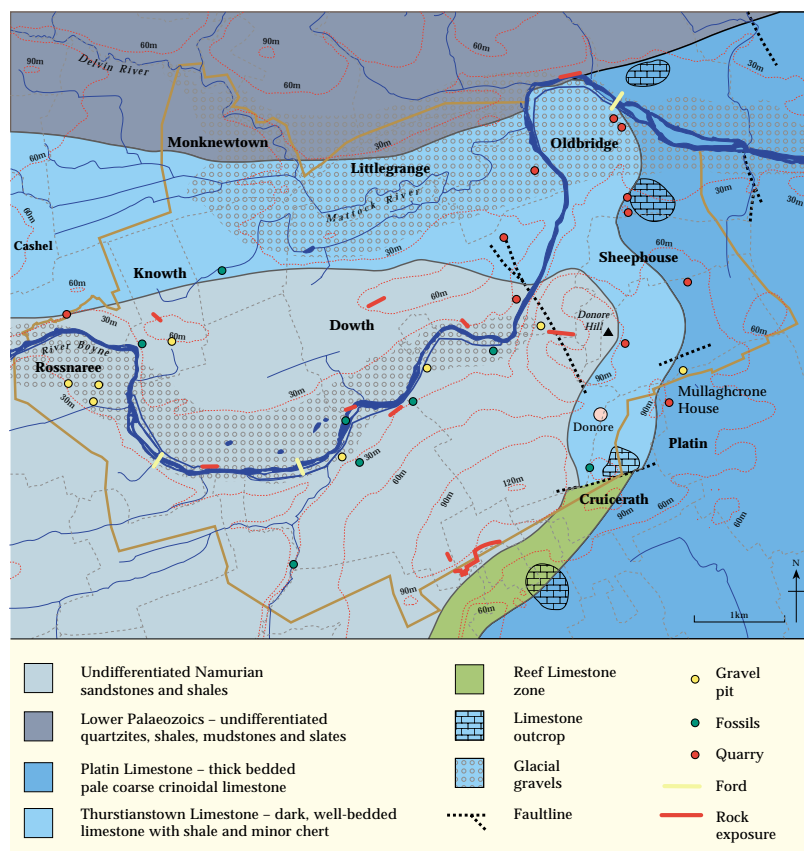
▲ Low-level aerial coverage shows the Bend of the Boyne in 2000. The 'bend' respects a geological obstruction in the course in the Boyne, downriver from the village of Slane in county Meath (Brady, Shipman and Martin).

3.3 Landscape

Brú na Bóinne could be described as a cultural landscape formed by people as well as nature. It is in the lower plain of a river valley in which the watercourse defines a large U-shape and encompasses a series of low knolls to the north and to the south, with steeper ground near Dowth. The large passage tombs are on high ground overlooking the valley, while there are numerous other archaeological sites on the low-lying areas and floodplain closer to the rivers. The floodplain along the north side of the Boyne is rich in wildlife and has been designated a Natural Heritage Area. Multi-ownership has created an attractive mosaic of mixed farmland ranging from intensive arable to permanent pasture. Many of the hedgerows and old field boundaries remain in place, with patches of deciduous woodland. There are the remains of a medieval settlement and an eighteenth-century estate at Dowth.

3.4 Geology and geomorphology

The geology of Brú na Bóinne is characterised by underlying Carboniferous limestone with a low ridge of shale and its derivatives making up most of the core area. Much of the soil is alluvial and highly suitable both for grazing and tillage. The River Boyne, which is 105km long, is one of the main catchment drainage channels to the Irish Sea. At Brú na Bóinne the river is at the lower plain stage; a number of tributaries and streams join it in the core area, which is subject to winter flooding. The physical processes of glaciation and deglaciation, which transformed this landscape during the last Ice Age and created the distinctive Bend of the Boyne, have left their imprint on the landscape in the form of terminal moraines and terraces. This suite of landforms and sedimentary structures is an important physical resource and can aid public understanding of the physical evolution of the area. Fossil-rich rock outcrops, gravel pits and section faces have been mapped (Fig. 3).



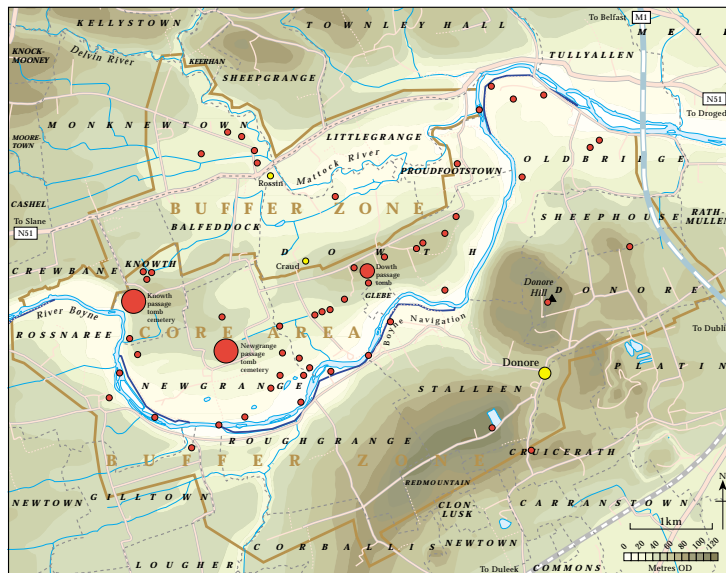
▲ Geological map of Brú na Bóinne.

3.5 Archaeological resources

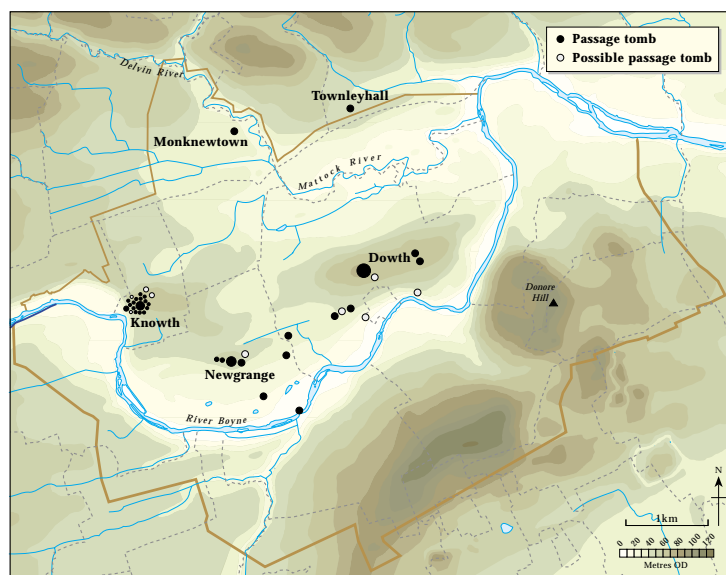
Brú na Bóinne's famous archaeological remains are comprehensively identified in the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) of County Meath (1996), which lists and maps all known archaeological monuments and sites (Fig. 4, Appendix 1), and in the Archaeological Inventory of County Meath (1987). These documents form the basis for the 'Recorded Monument' designation under the National Monuments Acts 1930 – 1994 and for their legal protection. There are 93 Recorded Monuments in the site, including the following main types:

3.5.1 Passage tombs.

During the Neolithic period (3800 BC – 2500 BC) a group of people united by a religious belief and a spiritual vitality, that had taken hold of much of the western fringes of Atlantic Europe, settled in Brú na Bóinne. Their ideological identity and the hierarchical nature of their society was expressed in their burial rites, which involved constructing burial chambers within an artificial mound, depositing a particular set of grave-goods with the burials, and embellishing their tombstones with art. These stone-kerbed tombs, the oldest surviving monuments in Brú na Bóinne, dominate the ridge tops and south-facing slopes which run between the rivers Boyne and Mattock. In all, thirty-one definite and nine possible passage tomb sites have been identified (Fig. 5).



▲ Recorded Monuments in the core and buffer zones of Brú na Bóinne.



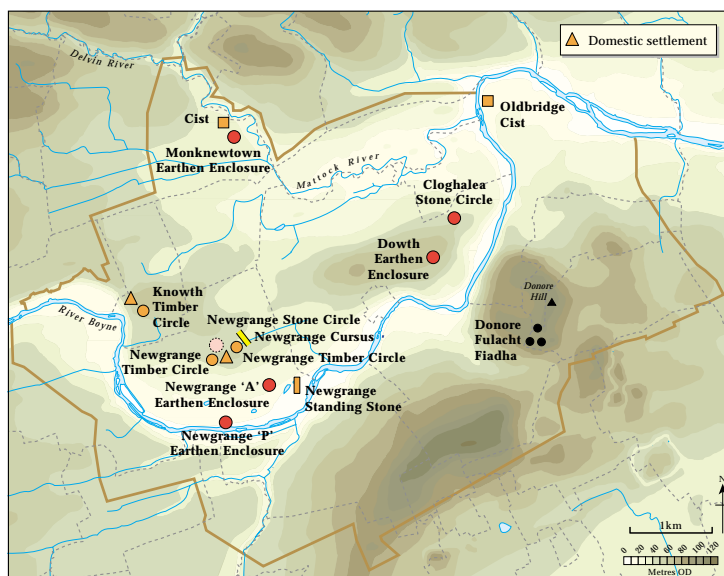
▲ Passage tombs in Brú na Bóinne.



▲ An aerial view of dowth henge, an amphitheatre built 4,000 years ago for community worship.

3.5.2 Henges.

Within a few centuries of the building of the passage tombs (2000 BC) there was a renewed phase of monument-building in Brú na Bóinne. The peripheries of the larger passage tombs became a focus for intense ritual activity. Large ceremonial enclosures (hengés) for great public assemblies were constructed from stone, timber and earth. Ritual monuments constructed at Newgrange include a timber circle (or wooden henge) to its south-east, a smaller, possibly roofed timber circle to the west, and a free-standing stone circle which encircled the actual passage tomb. A similar Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age revival can be seen at Knowth. Here a timber circle was placed near the entrance of the eastern tomb. These structures form a remarkable concentration of henge monuments (Fig. 6).



▲ Henge monuments in Brú na Bóinne.

3.5.3 Fulachta fiadh and cist burials.

There is some evidence of the existence of permanent communities south of the River Boyne in the Middle Bronze Age (c. 1400 BC). The most tantalising is the recent discovery of fulachta fiadh, the remains of ancient cooking sites in the form of mounds of burnt stones with pits, in a natural high basin above the south bank of the Boyne at Sheephouse. Two cist burials (burials in stone boxes) have been discovered at Oldbridge. A small community may have lived here three and a half thousand years ago (see Fig. 6).



▲ The ringfort at Knowth is located in a field below the passage tomb cemetery, at the edge of a ravine above the Boyne.

3.5.4 *Ringforts and souterrains.*

In the early medieval period (c.AD 432 to c.AD 1169) Brú na Bóinne formed part of the petty kingdom or tuath of Brega ruled by the Aed Sláine dynasty, which rose to prominence in the late sixth and early seventh centuries as high kings of Ireland. It had its royal centre at or near the passage tomb at Knowth. This was a strictly rural settlement dominated by the dispersed protected farmsteads known as ringforts associated with a farming economy. There are upstanding ringforts at Knowth and Newgrange, and levelled examples appear as crop-marks in Giltown, Oldbridge and Sheephouse. Subsequently, souterrains (subterranean structures constructed with drystone walling and capped with large stone lintels) were built as refuges in the area. The souterrains found in Brú na Bóinne have beehive chambers, a form found in an area roughly corresponding to the kingdom of Brega (Fig. 7).

3.5.5 *Granges.*

In the twelfth century the Cistercians introduced a revolutionary scheme of land management into Brú na Bóinne which had previously been pioneered in Europe. Their rule demanded that each abbey be self-sufficient and their estates were accordingly divided into farms (granges), each with its own nucleus of buildings, worked directly using lay brothers as labourers. Medieval monastic farms were probably located at Newgrange, Sheepgrange, Roughgrange and Littlegrange. Grange buildings were revealed during excavations on top of the passage tomb mound at Knowth. A series of low-lying enclosures north of the passage tomb cemetery at Knowth may be additional remnants of this medieval farm system. They are confined to three fields bordering a stream that runs into the Mattock.



▲ Medieval church at Dowth.

3.5.6 Medieval manorial village.

Early Anglo-Norman land division (c. 1200 – 1450) resulted in manorial villages becoming by far the most common rural settlement form in medieval Meath. A manorial village is primarily an agricultural settlement without borough status but containing a church and usually a castle and mill. Dowth, the only manorial village in the Brú na Bóinne area, is well documented and clear evidence of it survives today. The parish church and towerhouse are still upstanding, and are associated with a sunken roadway and an early field system (Fig. 8).

► Medieval settlement in Brú na Bóinne.

