Brú na Bóinne World Heritage Site

Summary Research Framework
A full version of the Brú na Bóinne World Heritage Site Research Framework is available from the Heritage Council, Áras na hOidreachtta, Church Lane, Kilkenny.
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World Heritage Sites are natural and cultural sites of international importance that represent the common human heritage. By signing the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 1991, Ireland pledged to conserve not only the World Heritage Sites situated on its territory, but also to protect its national heritage for future generations. The prestigious label of World Heritage Site is given by UNESCO following nomination by governments. There are now 878 World Heritage Sites in 145 countries.

The Brú na Bóinne World Heritage Site in County Meath contains one of the world’s most significant complexes of Neolithic passage tombs. Today, these prehistoric monuments are nationally and internationally the most well-known aspect of the WHS. The Brú na Bóinne Visitor Centre attracted nearly 250,000 visitors in 2008, and there were 34,107 entries to the annual Winter Solstice Draw for one of 100 places in the Newgrange chamber. On 21 December 2007, over 300,000 people attempted to connect to the first live webcast of the solstice event. This enduring popularity of Newgrange has tended to overshadow the central position that the Brú na Bóinne area as a whole has occupied. From prehistory to the arrival of Christianity and St Patrick, and the power struggles of seventeenth-century Europe, this landscape reflects in microcosm many of the processes that have shaped society on the island and the wider world over the past six millennia.

Figure 1: The Bend of the Boyne, County Meath [Discovery Programme/Meath County Council]
Brú na Bóinne and UNESCO World Heritage Status

The universal value of Brú na Bóinne was recognised in 1993 when it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, only one of three on the island of Ireland. Brú na Bóinne or, to give it its official title, the ‘Archaeological ensemble of the Bend of the Boyne’ was judged to meet three of UNESCO’s six criteria for cultural heritage:

- [i] represents a masterpiece of human creative genius
- [iii] bears a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared
- [iv] is an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history

Specifically, the scale of passage tomb construction within the Bend of the Boyne, the important concentration of megalithic art, as well as the range of sites and the long continuity of activity, were cited as reasons for the site’s inscription.

Brú na Bóinne through the Millennia

The international significance of Brú na Bóinne has been gradually revealed through a process of discovery and research which began over 300 years ago. In 1699, the Welsh antiquary and scholar Edward Lhwyd first wrote about the newly discovered tomb at Newgrange. His accounts initiated investigations of the area by a succession of antiquarians and travellers in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Into the twentieth century and up to the present day, a considerable amount of research has been undertaken, including large-scale excavations at Newgrange and Knowth, analysis of the megalithic art, and extensive

Figure 2: Location of the Brú na Bóinne World Heritage Site [Abigail Walsh, DoEHLG]
field survey of the wider landscape. However we still lack an in-depth understanding of the site’s broad range of archaeological monuments, from the Neolithic passage tombs to the Battle of the Boyne battlefield, and the landscape and communities that shaped them.

People were living at Brú na Bóinne by at least the early Neolithic, c. 4000 BC, when a series of dwellings and possibly a hilltop enclosure were constructed on top of the ridge that the middle Neolithic passage tombs were later to occupy. The Brú na Bóinne passage tombs marked a significant phase of human skill and endeavour, with as many as 40 examples located within the bend in the river, and these contain the largest assemblage of megalithic art in Europe. This desire for large-scale ceremonial architecture continued into the late Neolithic with the construction of vast earthen and timber circular enclosures in the vicinity of the tombs. In contrast, the footprint of Bronze Age communities is far less prominent, although the analysis of aerial photography, geophysical survey and occasional excavation is slowly building up a picture of activity in this period. Likewise, traces of an Iron Age occupation of the area are not immediately visible above ground, but the high-status Roman offerings uncovered at Newgrange, as well as the early first millennium AD burials found around the base of the Knowth mound hint at some sort of presence. The Boyne features prominently in the story of St Patrick and the arrival of Christianity to Ireland. Early annals also list the exploits of the powerful early medieval dynasties of northern Brega, their royal seat close to, if not on top of, Knowth itself. In the later medieval period, Brú na Bóinne lay at the centre of lands held by the formidable Cistercian order operating out of their first Irish foundation at Mellifont. In the following centuries and through Ireland’s turbulent relationship with the English crown, the productive fields, farms and waters of Brú na Bóinne were also claimed by successive generations of Anglo-Norman, Cromwellian and Williamite soldiers of fortune. Its proximity via the River Boyne to the coast, and to Drogheda and Dublin, has given it a central role in many of the economic and political events in Irish modern history — from the industrial boom of the eighteenth century to the defence of the island during WWII, the development of tourism, and even the Northern Ireland peace process.
Why a Research Framework?

Internationally, the publication of a research framework for UNESCO World Heritage Sites is seen as best practice. The greater use of research frameworks was also a key recommendation of the Heritage Council’s 2007 Review of Research Needs in Irish Archaeology, while the development of a ‘relevant research agenda’ for archaeology is an aim of the National Development Plan 2007-13. World Heritage Sites are vast storehouses of information on human and natural history. The knowledge acquired from researching Brú na Bóinne contributes to awareness, appreciation and understanding, all of which are vital ingredients of sustainable management.

The result of a process of public engagement, consultation and peer review, the Brú na Bóinne Research Framework consists of a Resource Assessment, a Research Agenda and a Research Strategy.

Resource Assessment

The Resource Assessment summarises the current state of knowledge of more than 6,000 years of activity at Brú na Bóinne — a more detailed summary of the information given in the paragraphs above.

Research Agenda

The Research Agenda highlights the gaps in that knowledge, presented as a series of research questions — 38 in total. While these questions cover various aspects of Brú na Bóinne’s long history, there are certain gaps in knowledge common to all periods. These include the nature and extent of settlement, the character of the natural environment, the level of people’s interactions regionally, nationally and internationally, as well as the exact date and function of the many archaeological monuments within the World Heritage Site.

Research Questions

People

1. Who were the first people to occupy the Brú na Bóinne landscape? What was the nature of this presence?
2. How were people disposing of their dead in Brú na Bóinne in earlier prehistory?
3. Where did the passage tomb builders live?
4. Who was occupying and using the Brú na Bóinne landscape during the Bronze Age?
5. What was the nature of the Iron Age (including Roman) presence in Brú na Bóinne?
6. How can we make the human (and animal) remains speak?
7. What was the nature of medieval and post-medieval tenant populations? How were they settled within the landscape?
Politics and Power

8. When were passage tombs first built in Brú na Bóinne? What is the sequence of their construction?

9. At what scales did the Brú na Bóinne megalithic complex operate?

10. When and why did the focus of activity switch from the passage tombs to large open-air enclosures?

11. What was the political and strategic significance of this area in the early historic period?

12. What is the evidence for and significance of early ecclesiastical sites?

13. What was the nature of the Viking presence and the associated political changes between the ninth and twelfth centuries?

14. How was medieval Brú na Bóinne connected?

15. Is it possible to chart land ownership in detail from the medieval period to the present day?

16. How can we expand our knowledge of the Battle of the Boyne?

Figure 6: Megalithic art on Kerbstone 15, Knowth passage tomb [George Eogan]

Figure 7: Musketballs recovered during a survey of the Battle of the Boyne site [from Cooney et al. 2001]
Landscape and Environment

17. What is the current status of biodiversity and geodiversity? What actions can be taken to manage, enhance and protect it?
18. How has the Brú na Bóinne environment changed over the last six millennia?
19. When does the transition to farming take place in Brú na Bóinne? What changes does this bring about?
20. How did the plant and livestock economy evolve through prehistory and during the medieval period and later?
21. How can we better understand the River Boyne?
22. What is the archaeoastronomical significance of the Brú na Bóinne monuments?
23. How was land used during the medieval and post-medieval periods? Can we gauge the environmental impact?
24. What is the extent of the aerial photographic resource for Brú na Bóinne?
25. What could be achieved by further geophysical survey?

Legacy

26. What can be revealed through further study of the megalithic art and rock art of the Boyne Valley?
27. The past in the past — what was the role of the prehistoric sites in the later periods?
28. What survives of the place lore and folklore of Brú na Bóinne? What light can it shed on past events?
29. What is the value of material/artefact assemblages from old excavations and surveys?
30. What is the nature, date and condition of the recorded monuments within Brú na Bóinne?
31. What is the built heritage of the area? Is it stylistically representative of the country as a whole or has it any unique characteristics?
32. What impact has conservation had upon the Brú na Bóinne monuments, in particular Knowth and Newgrange?
33. How can existing and future data generated within the WHS be better integrated, managed and archived?

Figure 8: The environmental history of the WHS is recorded in sediments like these, from nearby Thomastown Bog [Steve Davis]
The Living World Heritage Site

34. How do different farming techniques impact on different types of monuments and cultural heritage?

35. How much new residential development has there been in the area in the last 10–20 years and how can it be better managed?

36. How was the core area of the World Heritage Site defined? Is this designation adequate?

37. What changes in legislation have occurred since 2002 that are relevant to the management of the WHS?

38. How are people accessing, interpreting and enjoying the monuments?

Research Strategy

The Research Strategy, puts forward a plan for addressing these unanswered questions in the short to medium term. Eighteen objectives have been established, all of which recognise the need for the systematic collection and archiving of data for the WHS, as well as the effective dissemination of all current and future research.

The Big Gaps

1. Reconstruction and modelling of palaeoenvironment and landscape development

2. Produce a master chronology for the WHS

3. Understanding settlement

4. Establish the nature and extent of later prehistoric activity

5. Understanding continuity and change in the historic period

The Mega-tombs and Related Monuments

6. The structural sequence, phasing and interpretation of the passage tombs

7. Investigating the essential importance and distinctiveness of the passage tomb complex, past and present

8. Investigating the Great Stone Circle and the sequence of the other monuments in front of Newgrange

Figure 9: One of the few labourer's dwellings left standing in the WHS. The one-roomed cabin to the right is especially rare. [Geraldine Stout]
Integrating Monuments and Landscape

9. Obtaining blanket coverage of the WHS using a combination of remote sensing techniques
10. Understanding land-use change
11. Mapping the Battle of the Boyne
12. Investigating the archaeology of the River Boyne

Other key issues that have emerged during the course of the framework process include:

- The need for a more proactive management presence on the ground that liaises with the local community, the academic community and the local authority, and communicates new initiatives regarding research and management.

- Support for a shift in research focus away from sites and towards landscape, in particular those landscapes that sustained and were closely associated with the Brú na Bóinne tombs.

- The promotion, to include funding, of a vibrant research culture in Brú na Bóinne and for research co-ordination to be within the remit of an agency or body.

- The creation of a research and learning infrastructure within the World Heritage Site, to include investment in a research and education centre at Knowth House and greater web-based learning and information management resources.

- Re-stating the rationale behind the 1989 O’Neill report, which laid out the boundaries of the existing WHS, and putting in place a robust setting and landscape use strategy to ensure that the living landscape of the WHS can be managed in a beneficial way.

Research Infrastructure

13. Create multiple inventories of material relating to the WHS
14. Build a Spatial Data Infrastructure (SDI) that can store, connect and display all current and future information relating to the WHS and make this accessible as a web-based database/interface
15. Develop a setting and landscape use strategy for the protection and management of the WHS
16. Study visitor (local and non-local) expectations and experiences of the WHS
17. Establish a Brú na Bóinne Research Centre and associated education network
18. Create a steering group to implement and progress the framework

Figure 10: Modern visitors to Newgrange [Clare Tuffy]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Questions addressed</th>
<th>Related questions</th>
<th>Priority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The big gaps</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Reconstruction and modelling of palaeoenvironment and landscape development</td>
<td>1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23</td>
<td>8, 17</td>
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<td>2. Produce a master chronology for the WHS</td>
<td>1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 16, 18, 29, 30</td>
<td>2, 20, 26, 27</td>
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<td>3. Understanding settlement</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 23, 26, 29, 30, 31, 35</td>
<td>20, 21, 26, 27</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Establish the nature and extent of later prehistoric activity</td>
<td>4, 5, 6, 10, 18, 20, 27, 30</td>
<td>21, 29, 34</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Understanding continuity and change in the historic period</td>
<td>5, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15, 18, 20, 23, 27</td>
<td>6, 14, 21, 28, 31, 30, 35</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The mega-tombs and related monuments</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. The structural sequence, phasing and interpretation of the passage tombs</td>
<td>4, 6, 8, 10, 30</td>
<td>2, 29</td>
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<td>7. Investigating the essential importance and distinctiveness of the passage tomb complex, past and present</td>
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<td>2, 6, 30</td>
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<td>8. Investigating the Great Stone Circle and the sequence of the other monuments in front of Newgrange</td>
<td>3, 4, 9, 10, 22, 27, 30</td>
<td>5, 6, 29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrating Monuments and Landscapes</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Obtaining blanket coverage of the WHS using a combination of remote sensing techniques</td>
<td>2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12, 14, 16, 21, 23, 24, 25, 30, 35</td>
<td>11, 13, 34</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Understanding land-use change</td>
<td>4, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 34, 35</td>
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<td>Medium</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Mapping the Battle of the Boyne</td>
<td>16, 21, 28</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<td>12. Investigating the archaeology of the River Boyne</td>
<td>1, 9, 11, 13, 14, 16, 18, 21, 30</td>
<td>28, 31</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
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<td>15. Develop a setting and landscape use strategy for the protection and management of the WHS</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<td>17, 33, 38</td>
<td></td>
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<td>All</td>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11: How the research objectives tie into the research questions and how they could be prioritised [after Darvill 2005]