

Module: HPHE7001 Heritage in the Political World – Communities and Comparative Aspects.
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UNESCO Heritage in a National Context: Ireland's National Heritage

The island of Ireland contains three World Heritage Sites (WHS).¹ Two are located within the Republic of Ireland (ROI), with the third located in Northern Ireland. This essay seeks to understand the definitions of heritage given by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), including those for tangible, intangible and global heritage. It aims to do so through the lens of Ireland's national heritage as found on the World Heritage List (WHL). The essay will examine the two WHS found in the Republic of Ireland, the tentative list put forward by the Irish Government, the third WHS found in Northern Ireland, and the intangible cultural heritage practices in Ireland.

Heritage is defined as 'cultural legacy which we receive from the past, which we live in the present and which we will pass on to future generations.'² Within this definition tangible heritage is understood to be the physical elements of a past including artefacts, monuments or a group of buildings and sites, that can be moveable, immobile, on land or underwater.³ Intangible heritage is defined as 'traditions or living expressions passed on from our ancestors and inherited by our descendants.'⁴ Global or World Heritage defines those sites which are of outstanding universal value (OUV) and have been inscribed on the World Heritage List.⁵ In order to be classed as having OUV sites must meet one of the ten criteria, satisfy conditions of authenticity and/or integrity as well as have continued processes of protection and management.⁶

The first of the WHS found in the ROI is that of Brú na Bóinne also known as the 'archaeological ensemble of the Bend of the Boyne.'⁷ This site, located 50km north of Ireland's capital Dublin, covers an area of 770ha with a buffer zone of 2,560ha.⁸ It comprises three Prehistoric sites: Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth.⁹ As well as containing three large Prehistoric burial monuments the site also comprises 'Europe's largest and most important concentration of Megalithic art' and a vast

¹ Jessica Smyth, *Bru Na Boinne World Heritage Site Research Framework* [Dublin: An Chomhairle Oidhreachta / The Heritage Council, 2009].

² UNESCO, *Cultural Heritage* (2021) <https://en.unesco.org/fieldoffice/santiago/cultura/patrimonio/> [Accessed 16 February 2022].

³ UNESCO, 2021.

⁴ UNESCO, *What Is Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2022) <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003/> [Accessed 16 February 2022].

⁵ UNESCO, *What Is World Heritage?* (2022) <https://whc.unesco.org/en/faq/19/> [Accessed 16 February 2022].

⁶ Roha W. Khalaf, 'A Proposal To Operationalise The Concept Of Compatibility In World Heritage Climate Change Policy', *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice*, 12, 3-4 (2021), 313-335 (p. 313)

⁷ UNESCO, *Brú Na Bóinne – Archaeological Ensemble Of The Bend Of The Boyne* (2022) <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/659/> [Accessed 19 February 2022].

⁸ UNESCO, *Brú Na Bóinne*, 2022.

⁹ UNESCO, *Brú Na Bóinne*, 2022.

number of other monuments spanning the breadth of Irish history.¹⁰ This site represents a cross section of Irish history both pre and post the introduction of Christianity.

Brú Na Bóinne represents one of, if not the most important cultural landscapes found on the island of Ireland.¹¹ The site was listed on the World Heritage List in 1993.¹² Two of the tumuli found at Brú Na Bóinne, Newgrange and Knowth have been excavated in previous decades resulting in ongoing publications according to Megarry.¹³ UNESCO uses ten criteria to add sites onto the World Heritage List. Prior to 2004 sites would need to meet one of six cultural or four natural criteria, however, following the revised operational guidelines only one set of ten criteria now exists by which sites are selected.¹⁴ Brú Na Bóinne was selected based on three of the criteria; I, III and IV.¹⁵ Criterion I asks that the site represents 'a masterpiece of human creative genius', Criterion III that the site 'bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilisation which is living or which has disappeared', finally Criterion IV asks that the site 'be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.'¹⁶ Brú na Bóinne meets these by representing the largest Megalithic art collection in Europe (I), having social, economic and funerary monuments forming an important ritual centre across a long time-span thus making it one of the most significant archaeological sites in Europe (III), and lastly the passage tombs found at Brú na Bóinne in their finest expression were a feature of outstanding importance in Prehistoric Europe and beyond (IV).¹⁷ All of the criteria focus on the site's placement within a wider European landscape rather than a solely Irish context. It suggests that the significance of Brú na Bóinne is based on its ability to represent a pan-European culture throughout Prehistory and later periods.

The second Irish World Heritage site is that of Sceilg Mhichíl or Skelling Michael, a unique early religious settlement located within the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁸ It is an extremely isolated Early Medieval island monastic site, located off the coast of Iveragh Peninsula, County Kerry.¹⁹ Sceilg Mhichíl comprises a monastery, its cells, oratories, and isolated structures beneath the island's southern peak.²⁰ While its foundational date is unknown, the monastic compound was dedicated to St Michael between the mid-10th and mid-11th centuries.²¹ The boundary of the World Heritage

¹⁰ UNESCO, *Brú Na Bóinne*, 2022.

¹¹ William P. Megarry, *Historical Landscape Characterisation of the Bru Na Bóinne World Heritage Site County Meath* [Navan: Meath County Council, 2012].

¹² Megarry, *Historical Landscape Characterisation*, 2012.

¹³ Megarry, *Historical Landscape Characterisation*, 2012.

¹⁴ UNESCO, *The Criteria For Selection* (2022) <https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/> [Accessed 19 February 2022].

¹⁵ UNESCO, *Brú Na Bóinne*, 2022.

¹⁶ UNESCO, *The Criteria For Selection*, 2022.

¹⁷ UNESCO, *Brú Na Bóinne*, 2022.

¹⁸ UNESCO, *Sceilg Mhichil* (2022) <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/757> [Accessed 21 February 2022].

¹⁹ UNESCO, *Sceilg Mhichil*, 2022.

²⁰ UNESCO, *Sceilg Mhichil*, 2022.

²¹ *Ibid*, 2022.

site follows the edge of the 29.9ha island buffered against the Atlantic Ocean.²² Unlike Brú na Bóinne, Sceilg Mhichíl was listed based on two UNESCO criteria. Criterion III, a unique or exceptional testimony, comprises Sceilg Mhichíl's uniqueness as an isolated Christian monastic site with parallels visible across North Africa, the Near East and Europe.²³ The second criterion that Sceilg Mhichíl was listed under consists of Criterion (IV); an outstanding type of building, 'represented by the early religious settlement's specific siting on a pyramidal rock in the ocean, preserved through its remarkable environment.'²⁴ As part of the management scheme required by UNESCO the government of Ireland has produced two management plans; one in 2008 and again in December 2017.²⁵ Sceilg Mhichíl represents a testimony to the ingenuity of humanities' past²⁶. Its isolated location, as well as its remoteness adds to its universal value however, it has only been listed on the World Heritage list under its cultural value rather than any natural criteria despite the vast number of protected sea-bird species found on the island.²⁷ The site is however protected as a site of Special Protection Area under council directive 79/409/EEC, instigated on the 2nd April 1979.²⁸ This suggests that while the natural value of Sceilg Mhichíl is understood to be important, it is the cultural value of the site that is seen to be paramount to the Irish government.

According to UNESCO, a tentative list should be produced by state parties in order to propose potential sites for inclusion on the World Heritage List. As such these sites must meet the criteria for Outstanding Universal Value as well as meeting the required levels of authenticity and integrity.²⁹ Since ratifying the convention for the Protection of World Cultural and Natural heritage (1972) in 1991, Ireland has produced two tentative lists; one in 2010 and more recently in 2021.³⁰ The first list which was produced in 2020 proposed seven cultural sites for inclusion on the World Heritage List: Early Monastic Sites, The Burren, The Céide Fields and North West Mayo Boglands, The Historic City of Dublin, The Monastic City of Clonmacnoise and its Cultural Landscape, The Royal Sites of Ireland: Cashel, Dún Ailinne, Hill of Uisneach, Rathcroghan Complex, and Tara Complex, and finally the Western Stone Forts.³¹ None of these sites were accepted onto the list in 2010 and changes were made in the 2021 tentative list reducing the number of sites proposed to six which included two trans-national sites. The sites proposed in the 2021 list includes two of the sites proposed in 2010: The Burren landscape and the Royal Sites. However, the Royal sites put forward in 2021 include in addition the site of Navan Fort or Eamhain

²² Government of Ireland, *Sceilg Mhichil World Heritage Property Management Plan 2020-2030*, <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/126d7-sceilg-mhichil-world-heritage-property-management-plan-202030/#> [Accessed 21 February 2022], (Published 17 December 2021)

²³ UNESCO, *Sceilg Mhichil*, 2022.

²⁴ UNESCO, *Sceilg Mhichil*, 2022.

²⁵ Government of Ireland, *Sceilg Mhichil World Heritage Property Management Plan 2020-2030*, 2017.

²⁶ National Monument Service, *Sceilg Mhichil* [video] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXo_JXNeIYA [Accessed 23/02/2022]

²⁷ Dep. Environment, Heritage & Local Government, *Sceilg Mhichil Natural Heritage* (2010), <https://www.worldheritageireland.ie/sceilg-mhichil/natural-heritage/> [Accessed 23/02/2022].

²⁸ Dep. Environment, Heritage & Local Government, *Sceilg Mhichil Natural Heritage* (2010).

²⁹ UNESCO, *Tentative Lists* (2022), <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/> [Accessed 23/02/2022].

³⁰ UNESCO, *Ireland* (2022), <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/ie> [Accessed 23/02/2022].

³¹ UNESCO, *Tentative Lists* (2022).

Mach located in Northern Ireland.³² The other four sites proposed in 2021 were Inisceiltra, County Clare, the Trans-Atlantic Cable Ensemble (a trans-national proposal alongside Canada), The Passage Tomb Landscape of County Sligo, and Glendalough Valley, County Wicklow.³³ Both of these tentative list's focus on the cultural heritage of Ireland with only minor reference to natural heritage.

The convention for the Safeguarding of The Intangible Cultural Heritage was created in 2003.³⁴ Since signing the convention Ireland has had four elements inscribed on the ICH list; Uilleann Piping (2017), Hurling (2018), Irish Harping (2019), and Falconry, A Living Human Heritage (2021).³⁵ Intangible Cultural Heritage is important to a state party not only for its physical manifestation, but also the transmission of knowledge and skills from one generation to the following generation.³⁶ These elements of intangible culture have been put forward because they are seen as representing key components of Irish cultural expression. Many of these intangible elements are intrinsically linked to the physical cultural heritage listed on the World Heritage list. For example, the national sport of Hurling is linked to the creation of the Giants' Causeway, located in Northern Ireland, as well as the mythology surrounding the tentative royal sites at Tara and Navan Fort.³⁷

There are however issues with the world heritage listing represented on the island of Ireland. For example, within the boundaries of Ireland there are currently three world heritage sites; two sites located in the Republic and one, The Giant's Causeway, located in Northern Ireland. This means that for the people of Ireland their cultural heritage is divided based on modern geo-political boundaries. This division limits the ability for these sites to adhere to Article 6 of the Convention that 'such heritage constitutes a world heritage for whose protection it is the duty of the international community as a whole to co-operate.'³⁸ Furthermore, the requirements for continued management of a World Heritage site has also come under questioning, particularly at the Sceilg Mhichíl WHS.³⁹ Gibbons argues that the Office of Public Works who are in charge of Sceilg Mhichíl have caused damage to the site by using or allowing inappropriate conservation methods including extensive rebuilding as well as not producing sufficient documentation expected of a WH site.⁴⁰

³² An Roinn Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta/Dep. Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *World Heritage Ireland – Tentative List* (2022), <https://www.worldheritageireland.ie/tentative-list/> [Accessed 23/02/2022].

³³ An Roinn Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta (2022), *World Heritage Ireland – Tentative List* (2022)

³⁴ UNESCO, *The State Parties To The Convention For The Safeguarding Of The Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), <https://ich.unesco.org/en/states-parties-00024> [Accessed 23/02/2022].

³⁵ UNESCO, *Ireland And The 2003 Convention* (2022), <https://ich.unesco.org/en/state/ireland-IE> [Accessed 23/02/2022].

³⁶ UNESCO, *Ireland and the 2003 Convention* (2022).

³⁷ Colm, 'Hurling, Its Ancient History', *Irish Archaeology*, 3 September 2011 <<http://irisharchaeology.ie/2011/09/hurling-its-ancient-history/>> [Accessed 27 february 2022].

³⁸ UNESCO, *Convention Concerning The Protection Of The World Cultural And Natural Heritage* (1972) <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>> [Accessed 27 February 2022].

³⁹ Michael Gibbons, 'Restored To Death? Skelling Michael's World Heritage Status Under Threat', *History Ireland*, 15.3 Ireland and Slavery (2007), 5-6 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27725616>> [Accessed 27 February 2022].

⁴⁰ Gibbons, 'Restored To Death?' 5-6.

In conclusion the sites ascribed to the World Heritage list for Ireland represents distinctive elements of Irish history. The Prehistoric nature of the peoples present on the island prior to the coming of Christianity is demonstrated by Brú na Bóinne while Sceilg Mhichíl represents the influence of monastic Christianity in Ireland. These two key periods in Irish history are further represented by the sites put forward on the tentative list. However, the World Heritage List in Ireland is also marred by controversy, particularly in the face of geo-political divisions on the island represented by the separation of the third WHS at The Giant's Causeway. The intangible aspects of Irelands' past also spans the history of a nation only divided in more modern times.

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