

Tuam's true origins are shrouded in the mists of time. Even before the Celts came to Ireland, Tuam was a place of settlement and a prehistoric natural crossroads of Connacht. The ancient name of the town is veiled in mystery though it appears to have come from a burial site of a person of high standing during the Bronze Age. Perhaps because of its shape, this burial mound was known as Tuaim Dhá Ghulann or the 'Mound of Two Shoulders'. This pagan ritual site of reverence was to lead to the later development of a monastic town, inextricably linked to its founder, Saint Jarlath. The area around Tuam was part of the tuatha or chieftainship of Conmaicne Cinéil Dubháin, (roughly similar to the Barony of Dunmore), of which Jarlath was the chieftain's son. Not long before his death in 540 AD, Jarlath headed east from his monastery at Cloonfush, at the urging of his pupil Saint Brendan, to create a new monastery wherever his newly built chariot wheel should break; destiny meant it was only a stone's throw away in Tuam.

Little remains of Tuam's early history, perhaps because of Viking raids in the 9th century which probably lead to the loss of annals or records of the past, until the King of Connacht Aedh (Hugh) O'Connor made it his military base in 1049 by building a castle and so started the most prestigious phase of Tuam's history. In 1118, the resolute Turlough O'Connor became high king of Ireland making Tuam the de facto capital of Ireland while at the same time, he oversaw the promotion of Tuam as both an ecclesiastical and Gaelic royal centrepiece. He developed numerous places of worship within the town and symbols of power such as several high crosses, including the tallest in Ireland, the Hiberno-Romanesque majesty of a cathedral at the current site of St. Mary's Cathedral with a magnificent processional cross, now known as the Cross of Cong as one of its treasures. His son Ruairí, the last native high king of Ireland, further bolstered Tuam's prestige culminating in 1164 with the building of the 'wonderful castle'.

Tuam's strategically important location within Connacht facilitated its development as a significant commercial centre with fairs and markets being central to its status, with one fair's patent dating from 1252. The radial, wheel-like layout of the town, reflected by the heraldic symbolism of Jarlath's broken wheel, converges on the market square. Tuam's fortunes waned somewhat in the post-Norman period and many of its treasures were lost or demolished, though a turret of O'Connor's castle remained a powerful symbol of Tuam's past as it was used as the site of investiture for the Borough of Tuam's Sovereigns from 1613 onwards, as the town re-emerged from the doldrums. The recent opening of the M17 motorway has directly connected Tuam with Limerick and Dublin and today, Tuam's location as a natural crossroads within Connacht continues to allow tremendous opportunities for people to work and live locally, in a vibrant, enterprising, and outward looking town.

Old Tuam Society



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