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Where worlds meet. Two Irish prehistoric mountain-top ‘villages’

Stefan Bergh*

Abstract

Mountains and high ground are often venerated as special places. It is their enigmatic quality as high places, their prominence and permanence in both the mental and physical landscapes that draws us to them. In the Neolithic/Bronze Age mountain tops in Ireland were frequently used for ritual purposes, often indicated by the presence of various monuments such as passage tombs, cairns as well as enclosures. In a few instances large cluster of circular

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houses have been recorded in close proximity to these monuments. The two largest clusters, with some 150 houses each are both found on conspicuous, rather inaccessible summits in karst landscapes. This paper presents the methodologies used in recent surveys of these two sites. The role of these seemingly “domestic structures” in highly charged ritual contexts is also discussed.

Montagne e rilievi sono spesso venerati come luoghi speciali ed è *proprio* la loro enigmatica caratteristica di luoghi elevati, la loro prominenza e permanenza nei nostri paesaggi mentali e fisici, che ci attrae verso di essi. In Irlanda, durante il Neolitico e l'*Età del Bronzo*, le cime delle montagne sono state frequentemente utilizzate a scopi rituali, spesso contraddistinte dalla presenza di tombe megalitiche dette ‘*passage tombs*’, da tumuli di pietre detti ‘*cairns*’ e da recinti conosciuti come ‘*enclosures*’. In alcuni casi, estesi nuclei abitativi con strutture a forma circolare sono stati scoperti a distanza ravvicinata da questi monumenti rituali. I due insediamenti di maggiore estensione, con più di 150 strutture ciascuna, sono stati rinvenuti su cime elevate e piuttosto inaccessibili, in un paesaggio carsico. Quest’articolo vuole presentare le metodologie utilizzate nelle recenti ricognizioni di superficie che hanno interessato questi due siti. Inoltre verrà discussa ed interpretata la funzione di queste strutture apparentemente adibite ad uso abitativo entro un contesto di spiccato valore rituale.

Mountains as places

Among the unlimited number of places present in a ‘natural landscape’, the mountain or high ground has always had a special role as places of significances. Mountains are often charged with special meaning and it is the enigmatic quality as high places, their prominence, and their permanence and of course presence, that draw us to them. The role of mountains, and thereby also our relation to them, stretches from the most basic instinct of safety and defence on a small rise or hillock, to large dramatic and often conspicuous mountains of high ideological significance. Mountains as foci for belief systems and ritual routines are well recognised around the world and the concept of ‘sacred mountains’ is well recorded.

What makes mountains such a universal religious vehicle in often very different societies is their symbolic capacity to unite earth with heaven, to bridge the gap between the mundane, living world and the otherworld – the axis mundi. What this union stands for, by what means it is facilitated and maintained, as well as the character and role of what lies beyond the living world, are all aspects that naturally vary widely between different religions and regions¹.

In some cases specific mountains are seen as places of significant events in religious beliefs, such as the holy mountain of Croagh Patrick on the west coast

¹ Hirsch, O’Hanlon 1995; Kraft 2010.

of Ireland, representing Christianity's victory over the pagan beliefs. Croagh Patrick is an important site of Christian pilgrimage and has been the focus for various activities since prehistoric times². Some mountains, even though conspicuous in presence and forming important parts in creation-myths and ideologies, might however have a passive role concerning ritual activities, such as Mount Roraima in South America³.

In some contexts the *summit* of a mountain has been used for rituals and buildings linked to them, as at the peak sanctuaries in Crete⁴. Here it is the summit that counts and the verticality of the mountain is the focus.

In other contexts the mountain as such is left alone and venerated at a distance, but still playing an active part in rituals. Among the Saamis in Lapland the sacred mountains are never climbed, and rituals are often performed at the base of the mountain⁵.

Mountains do not exist in isolation as they are defined by their setting and surrounding topography, and our perception of them is from a lowland perspective. The interplay between a mountain and its surrounding lowland is therefore critical to our understanding of the role mountains might have played in prehistoric societies.

Mountains in prehistoric Ireland

Mountains and high ground have been used extensively in Irish prehistory for a variety of activities initiated by political, religious, social as well as economic reasons. The earliest evidence for people using high ground actively is the Causewayed Enclosures from the Early Neolithic (c. 4000 – 3750 BC), of which there are at least two examples in Ireland, Magheraboy in Co. Sligo and Donegore Hill, Co. Antrim⁶. These first manifest definitions of ritual space by segmented banks and ditches complemented by timber palisades are not located on mountains as such but occupy eye catching hillocks or high ground. They do however underline the importance of high, dominating ground in the ritual and social landscapes of the Irish Early Neolithic.

With the development of the Irish Passage tomb tradition in the Mid Neolithic there is an active veneration of high ground expressed by the many passage tombs that literary were built on mountain tops or in other dominating localities⁷. The locations chosen for the passage tombs are in stark contrast to

² Hughes 2010.

³ De Cora 1957.

⁴ Peatfield 2007.

⁵ Bäckman 1975.

⁶ Mallory *et al.* 2011.

⁷ Bergh 1995; Hensey *et al.* 2013.

other contemporary, ritual monuments such as Court tombs and Portal tombs which are found in much less prominent locations.

Apart from the passage tombs, which mainly belong to the Mid-Late Neolithic (3750 – 2750 BC), there is also a series of undated prehistoric cairns found on mountain tops. This further underlines the importance of mountains and high ground as places for activities linked to various belief systems during most of the later prehistoric period.

What concerns remains of a more domestic character there is a limited number of relatively large clusters of circular house foundations of prehistoric date found on mountain tops. Two of these, Mullaghfarna in Co. Sligo and Turlough Hill in Co. Clare stand out due to the sheer number of houses (c. 150 and c. 140 houses respectively), while some 30 and 20 house sites respectively have been recorded on Knocknashee and Knocknarea, both in Co. Sligo⁸. Additional locations with clusters of more limited extent exist as well. The houses on Knocknarea have been securely dated to the Mid Neolithic and seem to be linked to ritual activity at the nearby passage tombs.

Another type of prehistoric site often found in connection with mountains and high ground are the various types of defensive and strategically located hill forts defined by ramparts of varying complexity. These span the Bronze Age and Iron Age periods (c. 2200BC – 400AD) and probably reflect political and social strategies connected to status, trade and territoriality⁹.

This paper focuses on the two large clusters of houses at Mullaghfarna and Turlough Hill and presents the survey methodologies as well as preliminary results based on ongoing survey work. The surveys form one part of a project, the main aim of which is to further our understanding of the role of high ground and mountains in prehistoric societies, with an explicit focus on how these places formed part of local ideologies and belief systems. The co-existence of ritual monuments and seemingly ‘domestic’ remains such as house foundations at Mullaghfarna and Turlough Hill constitutes therefore important case studies to address several questions pertinent to the project. As no previous detailed record of these two sites existed, the primary objective of the surveys has been to establish a detailed survey record of the archaeological remains, to be able to address questions related to their date, function and role.

⁸ Waddell 2006, p. 40 and 355.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 354.

Mullaghfarna

Local context

The gently rolling drumlin landscape of south Co. Sligo is visually dominated by the limestone Bricklieve Mountains. This mountain range consists of a series of north/south aligned hills and ridges from Lough Arrow in the east to the highest mountains of Keashcorran (359m a.s.l) some 10km to the west. Archaeologically the Bricklieve Mountains are best known for the c. 20 Neolithic passage tombs found on its different summits, which constitutes the Carrowkeel/Keashcorran passage tomb Complex, one of Ireland's the four large passage tomb complexes¹⁰ (fig. 1).

The large cluster of circular house foundations is located on the exposed plateau of Mullaghfarna in the eastern part of the mountain range. The ridge where the plateau is situated has a dramatic topography and constitutes a conspicuous landmark in the region. One of the passage tombs is located on the summit immediately south of the plateau which it overlooks (figg. 2-3).

The plateau measures some 500m north/south with a width of c. 200m in the southern part while tapering off to less than 100m in the north. The plateau is rather inaccessible as it is bounded by steep cliffs on three sides, while the higher ground of the ridge defines it towards the south. The only real access is via a narrow route way, partly cut into the cliff, leading up from the north.

The house foundations seem to be restricted to an area of c. 200x250m at the wider and slightly higher part of the plateau to the south which today to a large extent consists of deeply fissured limestone karst pavement (fig. 4).

Previous research

The house foundations were first recorded by Macalister during his excavation of the nearby passage tombs in 1911¹¹. Macalister identified 46 houses on the ground and suggested that they were the dwellings of the passage tomb builders. No finds from the houses had ever been made to support their date. Nearly 70 years later a survey by Grogan increased the number of house sites to 82¹².

To remedy the lack of dating evidence, trial excavations at three house sites were carried out in 2003. All three sites revealed finds from the Neolithic/Bronze Age including concave scrapers, thumb scrapers, a plano-convex knife,

¹⁰ Bergh 1995; Hensey *et al.* 2013.

¹¹ Macalister *et al.* 1912; Hensey *et al.* 2014.

¹² Grogan 1980.

chert debitage as well as undecorated pottery¹³. A series of ten radiocarbon dates from the excavations together with the finds indicate however activity mainly during the Mid Neolithic (3300-2900calBC) and in the later Bronze Age (1200-900calBC)¹⁴. None of the dated samples came however from sealed contexts.

Linked to the excavations a preliminary survey of the entire plateau was undertaken. This survey was based on handheld aerial photography taken from a helicopter. After the imagery had been rectified it was used in identifying the individual house sites on the ground. This was the first detailed survey of the entire plateau and increased the number of houses/enclosures from 82 to c. 150 (fig. 4).

Surveying Mullaghfarna

In contrast to the two previous surveys, the preliminary survey gave a clear indication not only of the very large number of sites present on the plateau, but also and more important, the complexity concerning the use of space as well as the wide variation both in size and construction of the house sites. One interesting result from the preliminary survey was that there did not seem to be any major rebuilding or overlap between different houses, possibly indicating a general overall plan for the use of the plateau. If this could be verified this would be of great importance to our understanding of the timespan and actual purpose with this large cluster of houses.

The preliminary survey lacked however in detail as the mode of construction of the individual houses could not be recorded and analysed in any detail. The next and necessary step was therefore to create a survey record of the entire plateau where constructional details of each house could be analysed.

Due to the huge number of stones used in the construction of the houses as well as the presence of the rough and varied bedrock often being a part of the house constructions, a ground based survey was not considered a viable option.

To capture the complexity of the remains on the plateau and to enable high detail analysis of their various components, the optimal methodology for a reasonable cost, turned out to be digital photogrammetry. The aerial imagery was captured and scanned by BKS Ltd, Coleraine, while the processing and modelling was made by Anthony Corns and Robert Shaw at the Discovery Programme, Dublin¹⁵.

The vertical analog aerial photography was captured at 1.800ft producing imagery at a scale of 1:1,500. The aerial images were then scanned at 21 µm

¹³ Bergh 2006.

¹⁴ Bergh, Hammar in press.

¹⁵ Corns, Shaw 2009.

resulting in digital imagery with each pixel representing 5cm on the ground.

The Digital Elevation Model (DEM) for the entire plateau was processed through the photogrammetry software PCI Geomatics and interpolated to 0.2m resolution. This gave an impressive overview of the constructions and their context on the plateau, but was not sufficient for detailed analysis. By cropping the data into more manageable blocks and re-processing at the higher resolution of 2cm the models showed constructional details which enabled very detailed analysis of each house site (fig. 5).

One of the advantages with the methodology chosen was the active use of DEM's to understand and interpret the various sites (fig. 6). The DEM proved to be an invaluable tool in analysing the relation between house sites as well as between house sites and the bedrock, by simply manipulating the elevation intervals in the model. By minimising the intervals to only 2-3 cms, minute elevation differences in the bedrock could be traced, which would simply not be observable by the naked eye! This was important as the limestone pavement formed an active part in the constructions of the houses, as a large number of them had their floors cut into the underlying bedrock. After field inspections additional house sites could be identified, and thereby add important information to the detailed overall analysis of the plateau. It has to be noted that the detailed field analysis of the entire site is ongoing and will be completed during the summer of 2015.

The archaeological remains

There are in total some 150 circular house foundations recorded on the plateau and they cover more or less the entire width of the plateau except for an area along the eastern edge. Some of the houses seem to occur singularly; others seem to appear in pairs while very tight clustering also occurs. Even though no discernible pattern can be established as such, there are areas which are devoid of sites and today only consist of the bare limestone pavement. A general feature seems to be that very few houses overlap.

The house sites at Mullaghfarna consist of mostly circular wall foundations ranging in diameter from 6 to 20 m (fig. 7). It is obvious from the size range, but also from the varied construction mode, that they do not constitute a uniform group of constructions. The majority have diameters between 8-13 m and are most likely foundations for small dwelling houses, while a limited number of sites are considerably larger ranging between 17-20 m. The size difference becomes even more evident when the actual area covered is considered, since the majority of houses cover an area less than c. 100m² while the group of larger structures covers areas between 180-220 m². Most sites are circular in plan, but oval and egg shape structures also occur. There is a wide range of construction modes present. Some have actual rubble banks of slabs and smaller stones;

others have the perimeter defined by a single line of slabs either set standing or lying flat, while others again have double lines of slabs set on edge with an infill of smaller stones. It is also worth noticing that c. 50% of the house sites consist of areas quarried into the bedrock while the remainder have been built on top of the original surface of the bedrock.

Besides the circular houses there is also some evidence for linear features, defined by continuous lines of slabs or by slabs set at some distance (fig. 4). These features represent a different level of space definition than the circular houses, possible indicating various types of enclosures maybe for holding animal.

Mullaghfarna – a prehistoric village?

So how are we to understand the many house foundations on this dramatic plateau? Were they the dwellings of the farming community in this area, or a settlement of special high status, or a defensive settlement site used in times of unrest, or maybe something else?

The find assemblage from the excavations, including lithics, pottery and bone, is what might be expected from an ‘ordinary settlement context’ and it is reasonable to interpret the circular house foundations as spaces where people dwelled. The extent and character of the use is however harder to pinpoint. The dates point toward two possible phases of use; the Mid Neolithic and the later Bronze Age. A continued use from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age cannot be ruled out. To understand Mullaghfarna as an ‘ordinary settlement’ from either of these periods is an interpretation that would be hard to sustain considering the existing settlement record from these periods.

‘The Neolithic farmstead’ is an elusive entity in Ireland since the main evidence is the rectangular timber built houses which seem to be restricted to the Early Neolithic period¹⁶. Dwellings from the Mid Neolithic are surprisingly absent from the archaeological record and the few houses from this period are often found in close proximity to ritual monuments and represent hardly the ordinary family home. It is worth pointing out that three of the round houses close to the summit of Knocknarea Mountain, 23 km to the north, have been dated to the Mid Neolithic. Their location as well as their clear relation with the segmented banks enclosing the summit makes it unlikely that they represent ‘ordinary Mid Neolithic farmsteads’¹⁷.

Circular houses are however a dominant feature of the Bronze Age, nearly exclusively occurring as small farmsteads¹⁸. The only known exception is the Bronze Age ‘village’ of 74 roundhouses in Corrstown, Co. Derry¹⁹. The

¹⁶ Smyth 2014; Grogan 1996, 2002.

¹⁷ Bergh 2002.

¹⁸ Waddell 2006.

¹⁹ Ginn, Rathbone 2012.

lowland location was not prominent and the densely clustered houses were not within any type of enclosure setting the place as such apart. This together with the lack of 'high status' finds from the site indicate that Corrstown should be understood as a cluster of domestic dwellings, and as the excavator put it, «of neither high status nor low status».²⁰

A main characteristic of Mullaghfarna is undeniable its spectacular location. The dramatic topography has been actively used and makes a statement of the status of this place. This is further underlined by the nearby passage tombs which have utilised the drama of the landscape in a similar way. The dating evidence from Mullaghfarna shows that the activity on the plateau was contemporary with both the primary use of the nearby passage tombs as well as with their continued use into the Bronze Age. An interpretation of the houses at Mullaghfarna as 'the settlement of the passage tomb builders' is probably however too simplistic for a number of reasons.

From a logistic point of view it is hard to see how the rather inaccessible plateau would have functioned as the ordinary homes for an entire community for any length of time, the daily economic base of which would have been in the lowlands below.

The exposed plateau is furthermore a rather inhospitable place. Even though the deeply fissured limestone might not have been present in prehistory, it is evident that the bedrock as such would have been exposed at the time, since several of the houses have incorporated the actual bedrock in their constructions. Well aware of applying a 21st century view of 'comfort', the choice of an exposed, inaccessible limestone plateau as a dwelling site does not nevertheless seem like the most 'practical' choice for a farming community.

In comparison with the existing evidence of Neolithic/Bronze Age settlements in Ireland Mullaghfarna has several characteristics that make it unique, which indicates that its significance and role was beyond that of an ordinary farmstead.

The house remains on Mullaghfarna are probably best understood in the context of place and place making. It cannot be ignored that The Bricklieve Mountains with their dramatic topography and high visibility is the place for one of the four major passage tomb ritual landscapes in Ireland. This mountain range was most likely of great significance for group identity and strongly contributed to a sense of place to people in the region.

At its eastern extreme is the conspicuous ridge of Doonaveragh with Mullaghfarna standing out like a sentinel, making it a place apart with its own identity. It is not unreasonable to assume that this also would have been noticed by people in prehistory. From the present evidence, and well aware that ongoing survey work might bring new evidence, I would suggest that Mullaghfarna does not represent a domestic settlement per se, but rather a place used in a particular

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 2012, p. 261.

context linked to the ritual monuments on the summits above. It might have been a place used for temporary settlements during gatherings at certain times of the year, dictated by the ancestor rituals in the nearby passage tombs.

In the Neolithic the ridge formed an integral part of the landscape of the passage tomb builders, actively adhering to the role that landscapes and place played in rituals linked to the ancestors. Its use continued well into the Bronze Age, and would still have been seen as a place apart, but probably with different connotations. It is at this time that we see the development of high status sites often characterised by prominent hilltop location, possibly chosen for defensive reasons, but also for visibility and exposure of status²¹.

Turlough Hill

Local context

Burren is a coastal area in the west of Ireland which is characterised by its spectacular karst landscape. The area measures 15x10 km and is bounded by the Atlantic to the west and north, and by gently rolling lowlands to the south and east (fig. 8). The northern third is characterized by the distinct limestone mountains interrupted by arable valleys in between.

The appearance of the Burren for any traveller coming from the east is a dramatic experience as its eastern mountain range looks like a huge, grey impenetrable screen. The physical presence of this geological barrier is strong and it is inevitable that it always has had strong cultural connotations.

Turlough Hill is part of this eastern range of mountains and has an east/west aligned summit with an overall length of c. 1200 m, which in fact comprises of two summits separated by slightly lower ground (fig. 9). The higher western summit, with an outline reminding of a footplate, constitutes a level, more or less flat area some 300 m long and c. 100 m wide. Some 400 m to the east is a more rounded summit which measures c. 250 m across. The ground on Turlough Hill consists largely of deeply fissured limestone.

The archaeological remains on Turlough hill consist of a large cairn, a low profile multi-vallate enclosure and some 140 circular house foundations, all on the higher western summit, while a large roughly hexagonal stone built enclosure is located on the eastern summit (fig. 9).

The summits of Turlough Hill offer breath taking vistas to the east, north and west while the slightly higher Slieve Carron with its large summit cairn dominates the view to the south.

²¹ Waddell 2006, p. 221.

Previous research

The archaeologically remains on Turlough Hill have surprisingly enough not been subject of any focused research previous to the present survey. The antiquarian Thomas Westropp visited Turlough Hill in 1904 and surveyed the large stone enclosure on the eastern summit²².

Cooney, in his review of Irish Neolithic enclosures includes the large enclosure on Turlough Hill as of possible Neolithic date²³, while Jones makes the important observation that it resembles a Neolithic causewayed enclosure with its large number of entrances²⁴. He also suggests that it might have been a place for ritual gatherings, and the nearby houses might have been used during these temporary gatherings.

Besides Westropp's plan of the enclosure no detailed survey of the archaeology had been done prior to the present project.

Surveying Turlough Hill

The initial phase of the present survey of Turlough Hill was undertaken in 2008²⁵. The overall methodology was identical to that used at Mullaghfarna, described above. The initial phase included the capture of aerial imagery by BKS Ltd, Coleraine and photogrammetrical processing and modelling undertaken by Dr Ronan Hennessy, NUI Galway²⁶.

One important difference to the Mullaghfarna survey was that the main objective at Turlough Hill had to be limited to determine the number and spatial distribution of the house foundations, since most of the houses were to a large degree soil covered and the opportunity for any detailed analysis of constructional features therefore did not exist.

The most important result from the survey was that it could be established that there are at least some 140 round house foundations on the summit (fig. 10). Also important was the confirmation that there were no houses outside the exposed actual summit in the west, even though large flat and more sheltered areas would have been easily available. Another important result was the identification of the multi-vallate enclosure which had not been noted previously, and which added yet another dimension to the prehistoric activity on the hill. Finally, the present survey allowed us to analyse the overall spatial distribution and the various patterns that seem to be present in the placing of the houses.

²² Westropp 1905, p. 224.

²³ Cooney 2002, p. 74.

²⁴ Jones 2004, p. 42.

²⁵ Bergh 2008.

²⁶ Hennessy 2008.

The archaeological remains

The most complex remains are found on the western summit. Halfway along this more or less flat area there are two depressions that divide the summit in two halves. The highest point is in the western half and is occupied by a large unopened cairn measuring c. 18 m in diameter and c. 4 m in height. On the flat pavement in the eastern half there is a low profile multi-vallate enclosure consisting of at least four low concentric stone banks of limestone shingles. This enclosure which is roughly circular has an outer diameter of c. 35 m (fig. 10).

Some 140 round house sites have to date been recorded, ranging in size between 6-11 m in diameter and consisting of near circular foundation walls of limestone slabs. Most of them are built on top of the actual pavement, but some also have been quarried into the bedrock. No evidence of dry-walling has been noted as the walls consist of slabs set on edge either along or perpendicular to the wall line. Most houses have a defined entrance and some are conjoined. The overall trend is that they occur in small groups of 3 to 4 houses.

The houses are not evenly distributed on the summit. Preliminary, some 90 houses have been recorded on the western half, while some 50 houses seem to be present on the eastern half. Four are located on the narrow ridge separating the two depressions in the centre of the summit.

Concerning the distribution within the two halves, the largest amount of houses is present in the areas closest to these central depressions. Small clusters of houses are also present at both ends of the summit. By and large the distributions of the house sites in the two halves seem to be mirrored.

From this general distribution it is evident that there are two large areas in the central/southern parts of the western and eastern halves respectively, which the houses mostly seem to avoid. The large cairn and the multi-vallate enclosure are placed centrally in these areas.

Outside this western summit, the only recorded monument on top of Turlough Hill is the large enclosure located some 400m away to the east. The enclosure has an extraordinary commanding location, overlooking both the extensive lowlands to the east, but also the uplands of the Burren as well as the sea towards the west.

The enclosure has a diameter of some 225 m and consists of a single rampart with a roughly hexagonal ground plan (fig. 11). The rampart is up to 4 m wide and c. 1 m high and has been constructed by limestone slabs of varying size. An extraordinary feature of the enclosure is its c. ten entrances, found in all directions of its perimeter. In the eastern part an elongated natural gorge cuts into the summit, creating a monumental entrance into the enclosure.

The ground that the rampart encloses consists of a more or less flat surface of deeply fissured limestone pavement. The only archaeological remains within the enclosure are a few small circular house foundations along the rampart and the diminutive remains of a circular house foundation close to the inner end of the depression.

Turlough Hill – a prehistoric village?

So how are we to understand this complex of houses, ritual monuments and large enclosure? Even though the house foundations, in a morphological sense, of course are domestic in character, I find it very hard to see their role and function as primarily domestic²⁷. The location on one of Burren's highest and most remote mountain tops make it inconceivable that the houses represent an 'ordinary settlement' for a prehistoric community, the economic base of which would have been found in the lowlands below. The limited record of features such as dividing walls or enclosures indicating activities linked to husbandry do not either lends support to a straight domestic interpretation. It is also worth noticing that, based on extensive fieldwork Turlough Hill seems to be the only place in the Burren where a hill top cluster of houses exists. Another interesting circumstance is that even though large, sheltered areas would have been available immediately south of the summit, all houses have been located on the exposed summit. This hardly indicates a choice directed by domestic needs.

The way the distribution of the houses seems to fall in a western and eastern half, both with its own ritual focus, the cairn and the multi-vallate enclosure respectively, may be a key to how we should understand the role of this place.

This division of the summit may reflect two ritually divergent groups, represented by the cairn and the multi-vallate enclosure. The summit might have been a place where different groups came together at certain times and the houses would have been temporary dwellings used at these occasions.

The large stone enclosure on the eastern summit could in such a scenario have fulfilled a role as a place for actual gatherings where the numerous entrances might indicate access points by different groups of people.

The liminal location of Turlough Hill, on the border between the dramatic Burren and the plains to the east, would have offered both a symbolically charged and at the same time 'neutral ground' for activities shared with groups based outside the Burren landscape.

Considering the date of the remains on Turlough Hill, our hard data is of course very limited but on morphological grounds a date to the Neolithic/Early Bronze Age may be suggested for both the cairn and the house sites. The location among the houses would suggest a similar date for the multi-vallate enclosure. The large hexagonal enclosure has however no direct parallels in Ireland, but its layout with numerous access points might be compared with that of a causewayed enclosure, and a Neolithic date cannot be ruled out.

²⁷ See however Rathbone 2013.

Discussion

The house remains at Mullaghfarna and Turlough Hill are unique in the Irish archaeological record since they constitute by far the largest recorded clusters of prehistoric buildings on the island. The conscious choice of conspicuous high ground for both clusters is likely to reflect an ideology where the symbolic role of high ground was of essence. It is suggested that none of them represent domestic dwellings used on a permanent basis.

The similarities between them, such as shape, construction and number of houses, as well as their hilltop setting is intriguing. However this does not by necessity imply a direct link between the two, beyond that of a shared perception of mountains as places of significance in prehistoric society.

The ritual connotations of the Bricklieve Mountains are undisputed by the location of passage tombs, indicating that this was an area of high significance in the Neolithic. The placing of passage tombs on conspicuous mountain tops is part of a wider regional pattern including the passage tombs on and around the Cúil Irra peninsula some 20 km to the north²⁸. It can therefore be suggested that mountains played an important part in local beliefs and ideologies possibly as the home of the ancestors. The cluster of houses at Mullaghfarna reflects a similar perception and active use of the landscape, and their role should probably be sought beyond that of the domestic daily routine.

Turning to Turlough Hill the archaeological remains found here are relatively common, as circular house foundations, cairns and various enclosures are relatively common the uplands in Ireland. But the quality and character of the remains, as well as the fact that they are all found on the flat, exposed summit clearly indicates that this was a place out of the ordinary (fig. 12). The cairn, the multi vallate enclosure as well as the large stone enclosure are all monuments that can be linked to various ritual activities, and it is probably in that context that the large number of houses should be understood, rather than in a strictly domestic milieu.

To anyone that has climbed the hill and spent some time on the summit, it is apparent that this is not a place for ordinary domestic duties. An interesting characteristic of Turlough Hill is therefore this strong focus on the very summit. The more sheltered plateaus just below seem to have been avoided, while it obviously was important to concentrate all activities to the very top. What this represents is hard to pinpoint, but with reference to the sometimes obvious emphasis on the verticality of a mountain by locating activities to its summit, as mentioned earlier, 'controlling the summit' would have had strong symbolic connotations. It should in this context be noted that even if there are a large number of mountains in the Burren, there are few if any with such a well-defined and easily recognisable summit as that of Turlough Hill. It was therefore not

²⁸ Bergh 2002.

just any mountain – it was a place with its own identity, which might have been one of the reasons why it was chosen for this intense activity in prehistory.

The large cluster of prehistoric houses at Mullaghfarna and Turlough Hill are probably not to be understood as large prehistoric ‘villages with a view’. They are rather to be seen as part of activities linked to mountains as special places, places that reach the sky and where worlds meet.

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Appendix

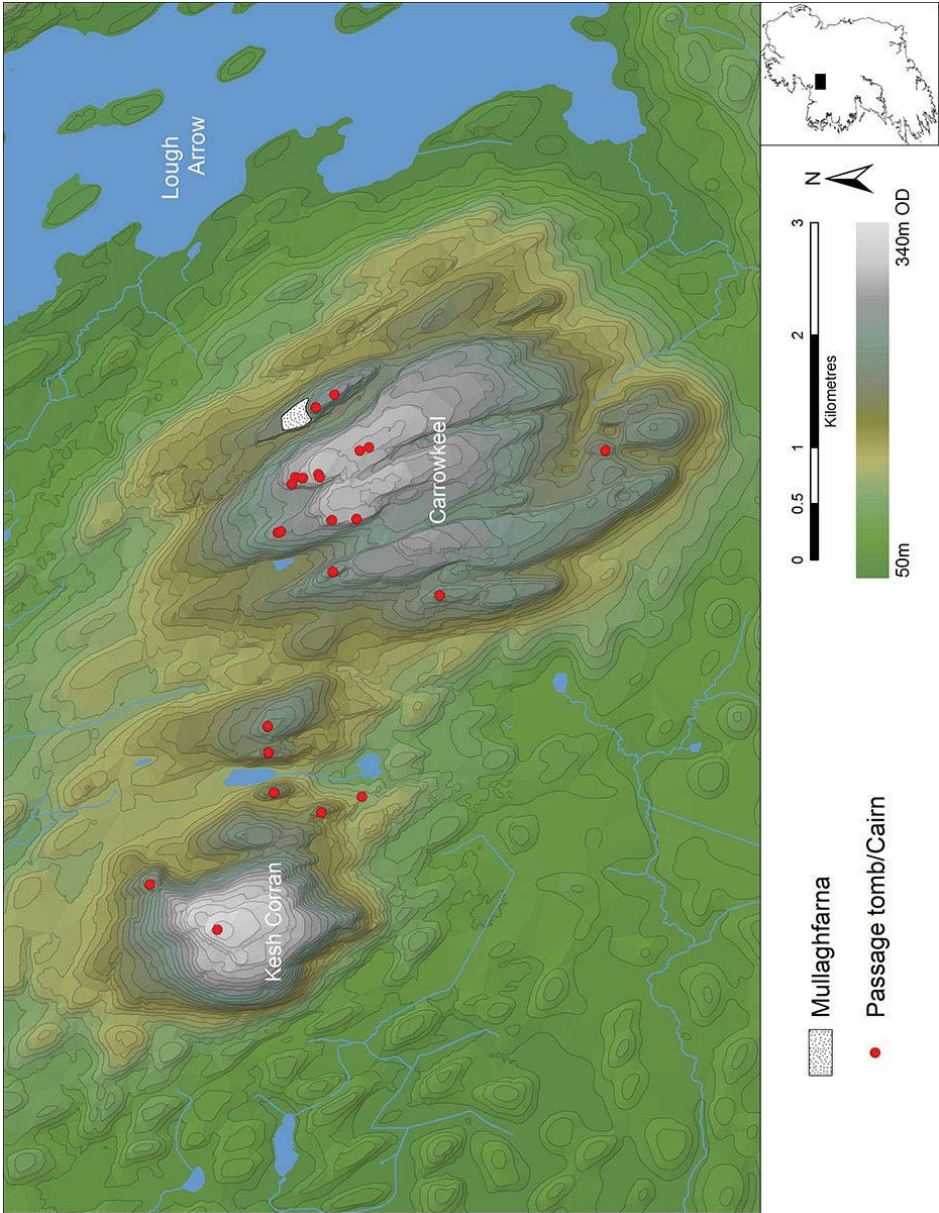


Fig. 1. The Bricklieve Mountains, Co. Sligo. The Carrowkeel/Keshcorran Passage tomb complex with settlement at Mullaghfarna indicated (Map by Noel McCarthy)



Fig. 2. Doonaveragh ridge, The Bricklieve Mrs. Co. Sligo. The Mullaghfarna settlement is located on the plateau in centre of image. Note passage tomb cairn on summit above plateau. From northeast (Photo Stefan Bergh)



Fig. 3. Donaveragh ridge, The Bricklieve Mts., Co. Sligo. The Mullaghfarna settlement is at the far end of the plateau to the left, at the base of the higher part with the passage tomb cairn visible on its summit. Access to the plateau by steps cut into bedrock at far left. From north (Photo Stefan Bergh)

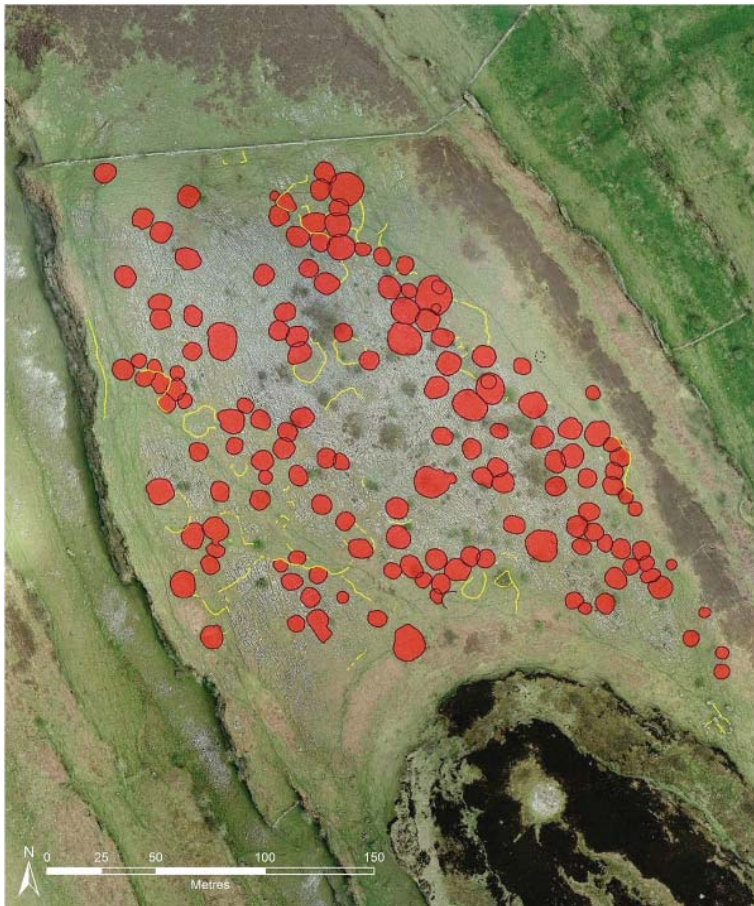


Fig. 4. Mullaghfarna house cluster. Houses/Enclosures in red. Various linear features in yellow (Image by Dag Hammar)

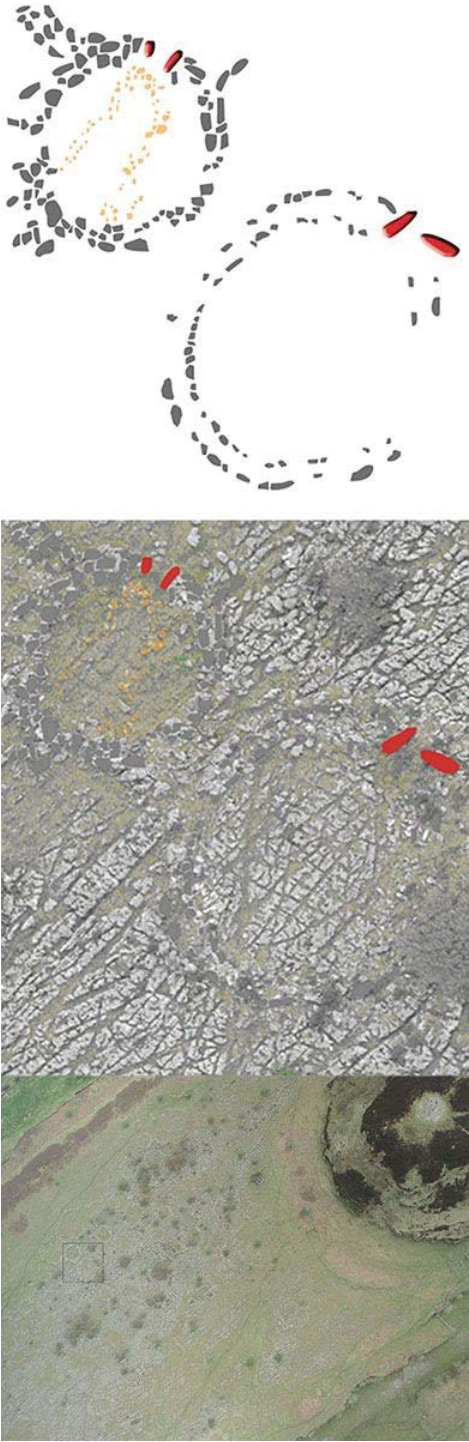


Fig. 5. Mullaghfarna. The 1:1,500 orthophotos provides the main record of the site and with its high resolution it can easily be enlarged (note boxed area) to reveal necessary information of individual house sites. The orthophotos is then, together with optimised DEM and field observations, used to create interpretative plans of each individual house site, as shown to the right

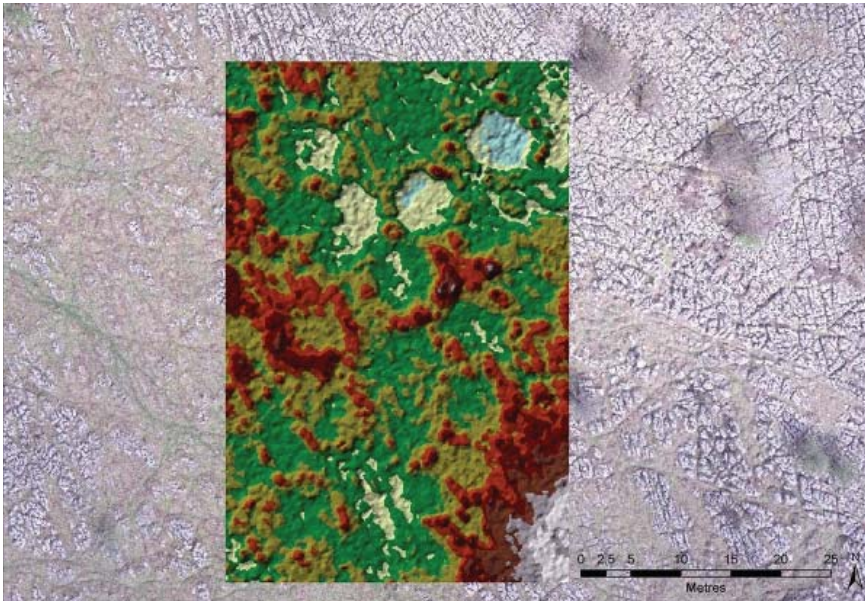


Fig. 6. Mullaghfarna. High resolution DEM revealing various constructional features of house sites. Light coloured areas to the right indicate house foundations quarried into the bedrock



Fig. 7. Mullaghfarna. Oblique image showing various house foundations and the complex karst geomorphology (Photo by Stefan Bergh)

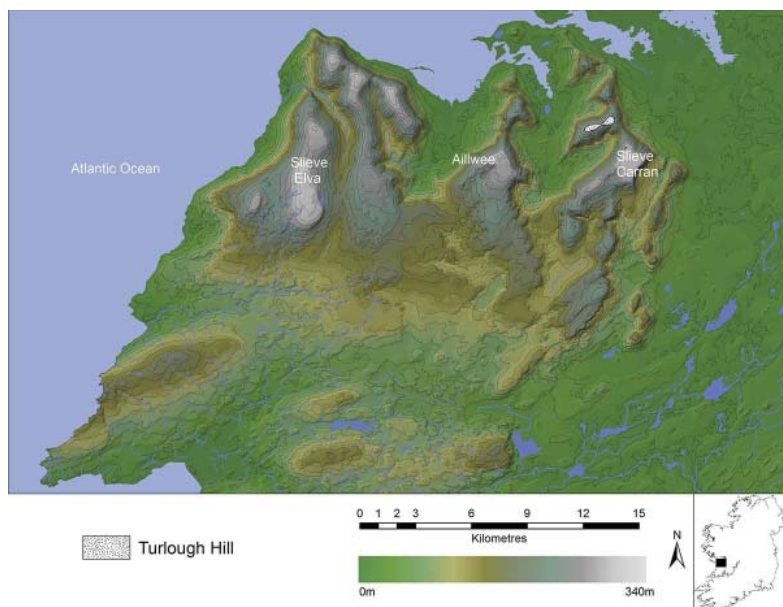


Fig. 8. The Burren, Co. Clare, with location of Turlough Hill indicated (Map by Noel McCarthy)



Fig. 9. Turlough Hill, aerial view (from Bing maps). Actual summit to the left, lower eastern summit with large enclosure in upper right hand corner. Inserts: circular house site with cairn in background and rampart of large enclosure (Photos by Stefan Bergh)



Fig. 10. The summit of Turlough Hill with cairn, multi-vallate enclosure and house foundations indicated. Note that survey information is preliminary as the current survey continues to progress (Image by Stefan Bergh and Dag Hammar)

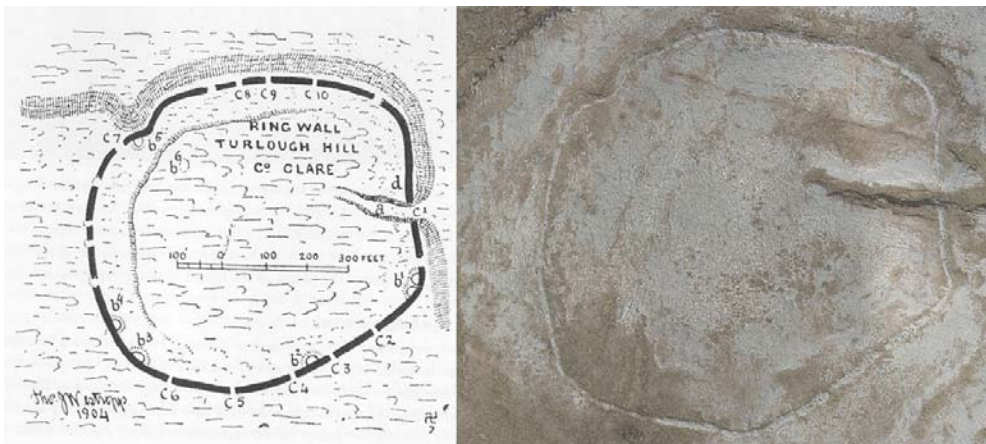


Fig. 11. Large stone enclosure on Turlough Hill. Plan and vertical aerial image. Note large number of entrances (Plan by Westropp; Photo by BKS Ltd)



Fig. 12. Summit of Turlough Hill, from south-east (Photo Stefan Bergh)