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5. RAFFIN FORT, CO. MEATH: NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE ACTIVITY

Conor Newman

National Discovery Programme

Introduction

Raffin Fort occupies the summit of a drumlin (350m A.O.D.; N.G.R. 820 828, Raffin Td., Drakestown par., Barony of Morgallion) in north Co. Meath, about 2 miles south of the village of Nobber (Fig. 5.1). In 1988, the field containing the site was bought by the neighbouring farmer who, in the course of removing the field boundary separating the two fields, bulldozed the monument flat. The destruction of the monument came to the attention of the Commissioners of Public Works and they initiated rescue excavations the following year.

There have been five seasons of excavations (1989-1993), and although much work remains to be done, a fairly detailed account of the archaeological sequence can be put forward and preliminary assessment made of the role of the site in the prehistoric period.

The archaeological sequence is complex and spans the period from the Neolithic to the late Medieval Period. Even though the chronology of the site spans many centuries, it is difficult to justify dividing the prehistoric sequence into any other than the most general phases (e.g. Bronze Age, Iron Age, etc) because the stratigraphy suggests continuity. The general phases are not mutually independent. This paper is intended as a summary of the Neolithic and Bronze Age deposits.

Description

Prior to its being bulldozed the site consisted of a circular enclosure, about 65m in external diameter, defined by an internal fosse (hereafter described as the 'main' fosse, possibly dating to the Iron Age) and an external bank. The bank was breached by three gaps, in the east, north-east and south-east, but there was no surface indication of a causeway or undug portion of the fosse. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the south-east gap is the original entrance (a conclusion later confirmed by excavation) and that the remaining two are modern. The interior of the site was split into two levels by an escarpment running roughly north/south a little to the east of centre. This effectively divided the site into two unequal portions, two-thirds to the west

and one-third to the east. A low bank, built along the crest of the escarpment, could be traced traversing the 'main' fosse at its north end suggesting that the escarpment was later than the fosse. Finally, a very low, circular mound (about 3m in diameter and 0.2m high) was observed near the centre of the enclosure. During the last century the monument was converted into a landscape feature by the planting of trees around the fosse.

Bulldozer damage has been confined, in the main, to the upstanding remains, the object of the exercise being to level-off the site. The enclosing bank has been entirely obliterated, including, at least in the excavated areas, any buried sod horizon that may have existed. The fosse too has been levelled off, in part presumably with material from the bank. The interior of the site has also been levelled. The low bank which once marked the top of the escarpment has been scraped away and the hollow of the escarpment behind it filled in. Miraculously, sub-surface archaeological deposits in the interior appear to have survived largely intact.

The unusual arrangement of the enclosing earthworks and the escarpment forbade definitive classification of the monument, though in the Archaeological Inventory of Co. Meath it is described as a barrow.

Siting

Approaching the site from the north, east or south, the visitor ascends a steady incline (with a gradient of about one in five) to the summit about 350 feet above sea level. To the west, the land drops away dramatically (gradient of about one in two or one in three) presenting a fabulous panoramic vista. Its prominent siting and fine prospects were clearly an important consideration in the siting of the monument.

1. Neolithic

Features dating to the Neolithic period have only recently come to light and are not yet fully understood. It is evident that during the Neolithic period the hilltop was enclosed by the digging of a fairly substantial fosse, the

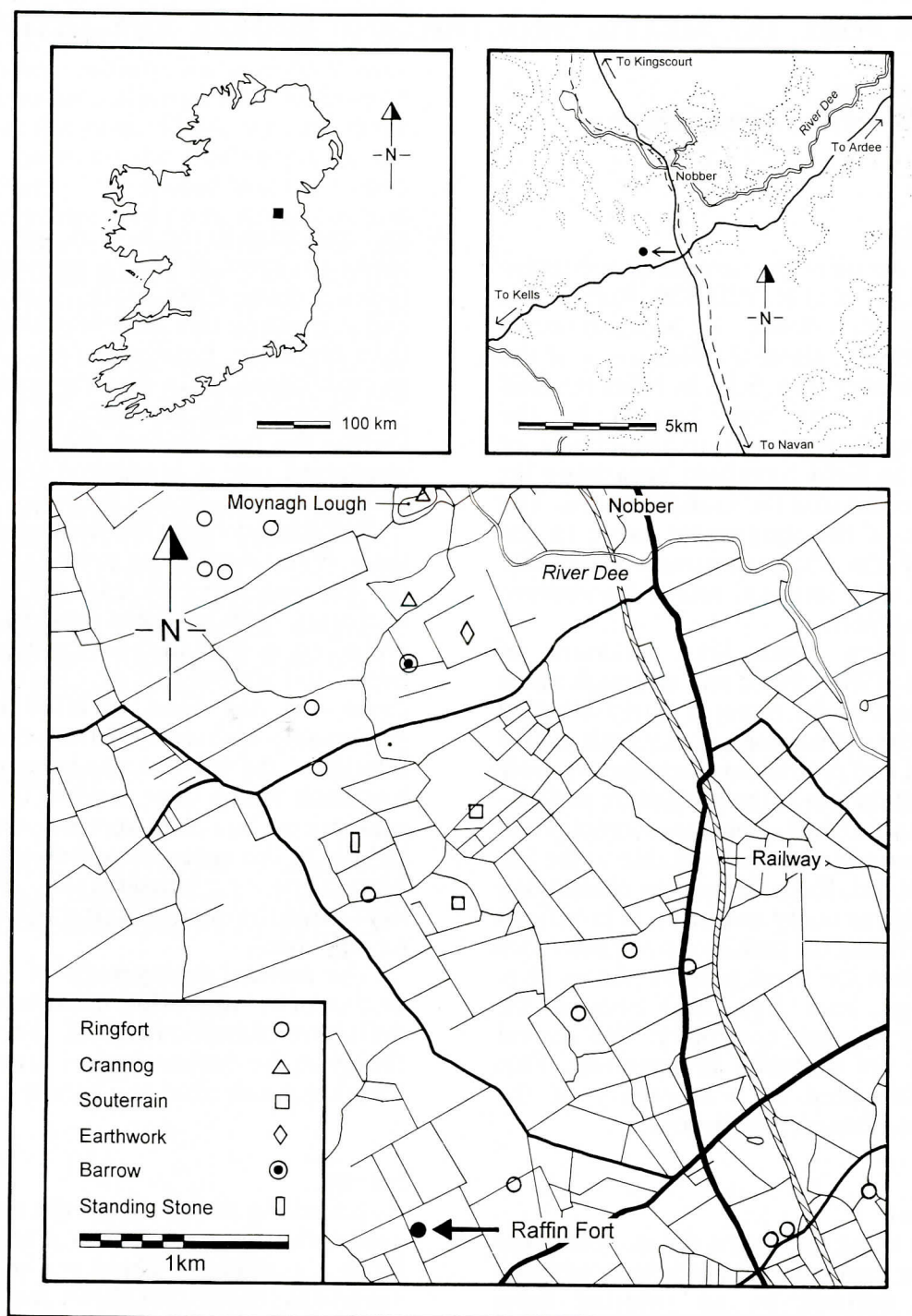


Fig. 5.1. Raffin Fort, Co. Meath: Location map.

ground-plan of which has not been fully uncovered. Sometime after the fosse fell out of use a small rectangular timber building was built. Comparison with Neolithic houses suggests that it too may belong to this period, although this is by no means certain.

The fosse

The fosse, which is V-sectioned (*ca.* 3m wide and 1.8m deep), has been identified in the

south part of the site and can be traced running in a shallow arc east-west, for about 23m. We can only guess as to its original ground-plan, the exposed portion consists of the south side, which is roughly straight, and two relatively sharply curving returns at either end, suggesting that the enclosure is sub-rectangular. At this stage no positive evidence of a bank has come to light, although our contention that the latest layer of fill was used to back-fill the fosse, begs the question of

whether that material derived from a bank as it cannot be easily differentiated from the soil into which the fosse has been dug.

At its west end it was truncated by the digging of the 'main' (Iron Age?) fosse. A little to the east of this point, a primary deposit of charcoal-rich loam with fine, pressure-flake *débitage* was uncovered. The charcoal yielded a C14 date of 4411±43 BP (3309 - 2919 cal. B.C. at 2 σ). To date, no finished artifacts of the calibre suggested by the pressure-flake *débitage* have come to light, but the identification of a Neolithic phase has cast the collection of relatively crude flint blades and scrapers and some saddle querns, in a different light. None, however, comes from what could be confidently described as a contemporary context.

The enclosure at Raffin is an important addition to the small group of Neolithic, hilltop enclosures from Ireland e.g. Donegore and Lyles Hill, Co. Antrim (Mallory and Hartwell 1984; Simpson and Gibson 1989). A section across the fosse at Donegore revealed that while it has a different profile its dimensions are quite comparable to the fosse at Raffin. Some sort of Neolithic activity is attested in many excavations of hilltop sites in Ireland and it is becoming increasingly apparent that hilltop settlement was an important component in the Irish Neolithic landscape. In some cases, however, the evidence is quite nebulous, later use of the sites accounting for the disturbance of these early features (e.g. Dún Ailinne, Co. Kildare (Wailes 1974, 350) and Navan Fort, Co. Armagh (Lynn 1986, 14)).

House

Some time after the Neolithic fosse was back-filled, a small rectangular building was constructed in the southeast quadrant of the site. Part of the foundation trench for the south wall of the building was cut into the fill of the Neolithic fosse and, later, truncated at its west end during the digging of the 'main' enclosing fosse during the later Bronze Age or Iron Age, thus fixing its relative position. The remains consist of the foundation trenches for the north and south walls, set 2.8m apart, and part of the foundation trench for the east wall. The building is at least 6.2m long (the maximum length of the foundation trench of the south wall, east-west).

The only internal feature is a small, shallow, irregularly-shaped pit (70cm N-S and 50cm E-W) that had a fill consisting of an upper layer of stony soil and a lower layer of stone-free smooth loam. Since we have not yet

established a clear habitation surface there is no way of demonstrating that the pit is contemporary with the building. Finally, no artifacts were found either within the building or in the foundation trenches. It should be noted, however, that the excavation is by no means complete.

The narrowness (ca. 35cm wide) and surviving depth of the foundation trenches (ca. 30-40cm), suggest that the walls may have consisted originally of split planks. It is perhaps not without significance that the only two post-pipes evidenced in the foundation trench are round since their alignment with a possible third posthole centrally placed between them suggests that they were once roof-supporting, which, if one assumes is centrally placed, gives the building a maximum length of about 8.6m.

The ground-plan of the building compares quite well with excavated Neolithic houses, even though it is only about half their width. The nearest Neolithic house, and also the most recently discovered, is at Newtown, near Kilmainhamwood about 6km north of Raffin (see Halpin this volume). Two radiocarbon dates of 3971-3706 B.C. and 3936-3697 B.C. make it considerably older than the Raffin building. Apart, however, from having broadly similar ground plans, the way that the wall timbers of the Newtown house were jammed against the outside edge of the foundation trench might also be considered a point of comparison (although the evidence for this at Raffin is admittedly scant). A detailed discussion of this style of building can be found in the report on the house at Tankardstown, Co. Limerick (Gowen 1988, 26-43) and there is no need to reproduce it here. However, the obvious practical advantages of presenting the bark of the timber to the exterior and jamming the propping stones against the flat edge of the timber appear not to have been highlighted and may explain the practice of inserting packing stones from the inside of the walls.

2. The Early Bronze Age

While the dating of activity to Early Bronze Age is still largely speculative, features attributed to this stage are nonetheless of considerable interest. Remains of a stone-packed, palisade trench, ca. 9m of which has been uncovered to date (running roughly north-northeast/south-southwest), were uncovered near the centre of the main enclosure. Not enough of the feature has been exposed to indicate whether or not it curves to

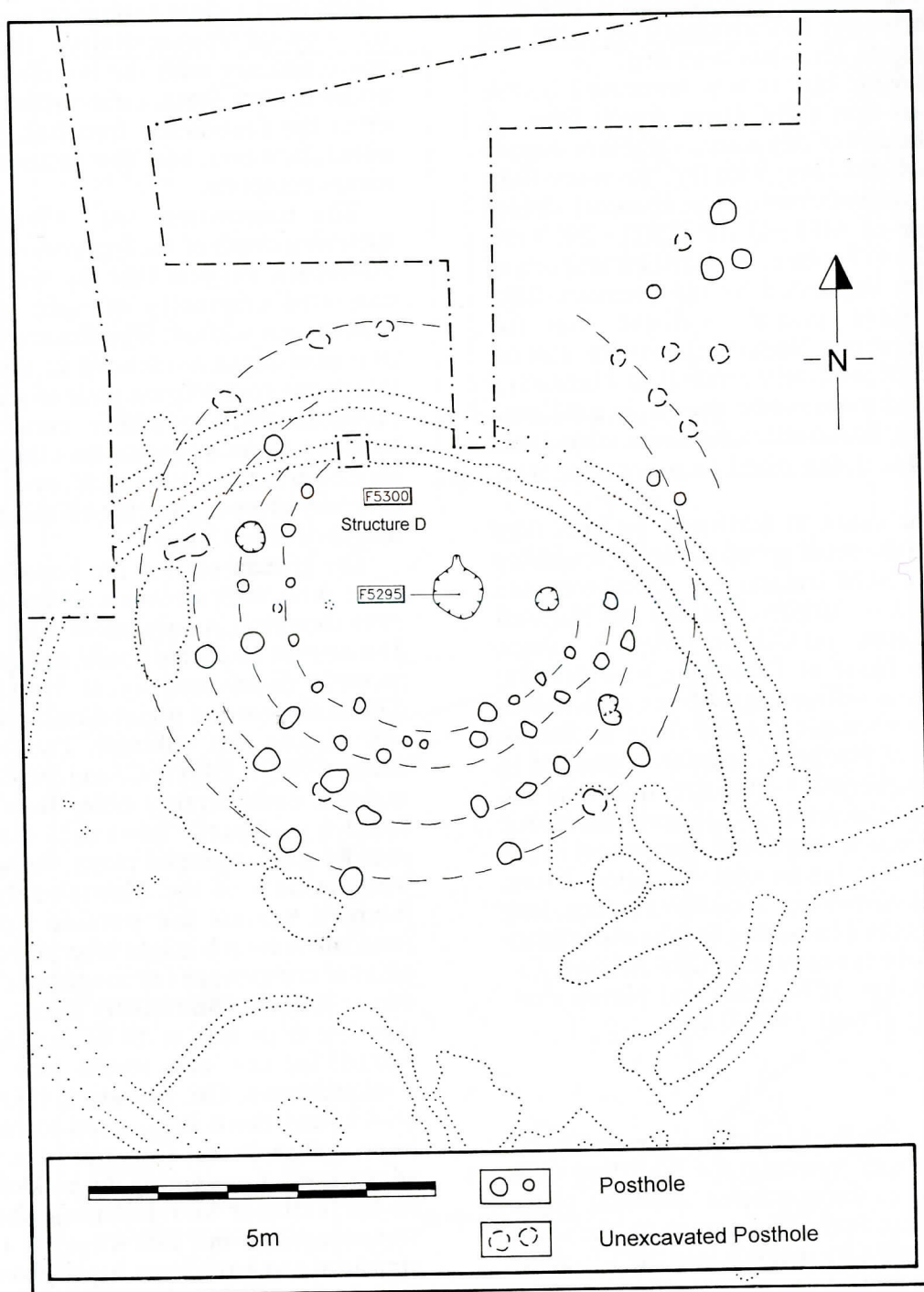


Fig. 5.2. Raffin, Co. Meath: Multi-ringed timber structure.

form an enclosure, though such is likely to be the case. Stratigraphic analysis indicates that it is earlier than the later Bronze Age palisaded enclosure and this appears to be independently corroborated by the discovery in the fill of the trench of a bodysherd from a smooth, well-fired pot of potentially Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age date which is demonstrably different from the Coarse Ware found associated with later Bronze Age deposits.

West of this feature, in the northwest

quadrant of the 'main' enclosure, a multi-ringed timber structure has been partially uncovered (Fig. 5.2). Consisting of at least five concentric circles of free-standing (?) posts arranged radially about a central point, the structure currently measures about 9m in diameter. There is evidence that the posts were graded according to size, the smallest ones comprising the innermost circle and each additional ring made up of posts of increasing diameter (25cm+). A group of post-pipes

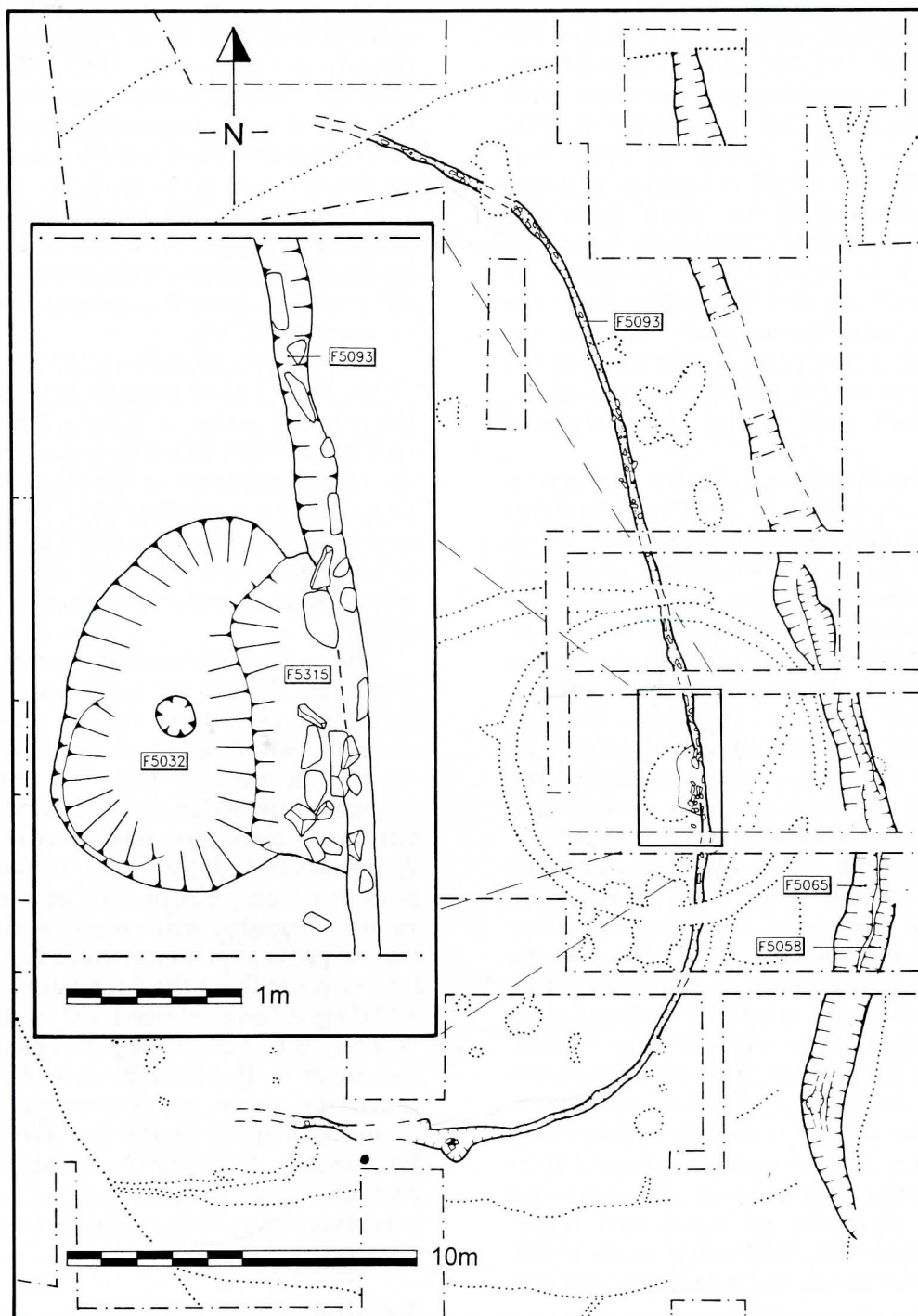


Fig. 5.3. Raffin, Co. Meath: Palisade trench (later bronze Age).

discovered in 1991 are probably part of the same structure, belonging, possibly, to a sixth, seventh and eighth ring. The multi-ringed structure appears to pre-date Building A, radiocarbon-dated to 2565 ± 22 b.p. (804-769 cal. B.C., at 2σ) and, if projected as a full circle of six concentric rings, overlaps with the 'main' fosse and is, therefore, not contemporary with it. The best-known Irish parallel is the 'Forty Metre Structure' at Navan Fort, Co. Armagh. Dating evidence for the

Raffin specimen, however, suggests that it is considerably older than the Navan structure and that it is probably more appropriate to seek comparison with timber henges in Britain, such as those at Mount Pleasant, Dorset and Durrington Walls, Wilts., normally dated to the later Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age.

3. The Later Bronze Age

The next major phase of activity is represented

by the erection of a palisaded enclosure (Fig. 5.3), radiocarbon dated to 2684 ± 113 BP (1100-530 cal. B.C. at 2σ). In plan it was probably sub-rectangular (α . 30m north-south and projected as 23m east-west) and its entrance was in the south. As projected, however, the west half coincides with the north-west quadrant of the 'main' fosse and was therefore probably destroyed when this was dug; it is clear from the point of intersection of the two features at the north end, that the 'main' fosse is later. The palisade trench, in fact, interconnects with many of the major features on the site and is one of the principal linch pins in the stratigraphical sequence.

The palisade was originally set into a narrow trench, which in profile is straight-sided and flat-bottomed (α . 25cm wide and up to α . 45cm deep). Flat wedging stones, used to brace the timbers upright, were jammed into the trench from either side and now survive as two parallel rows of contiguous stones. The stones appear to be largely in their original positions and indicate, therefore, that the palisade probably consisted of contiguous split planks. The entrance is in the middle of the south end of the enclosure, and is evidenced by two formal postholes placed 2.6m apart.

The wedging stones, which characterise the feature, appear to have been graded according to their size and shape. The largest, flattest stones (evidently the choicest) were employed just south of the middle part of the long, east side of the enclosure, where the trench is at its deepest. There were virtually no stones, however, in the southern part of the palisade trench. Notwithstanding the possibilities that (a) they never existed or (b) were robbed out, it would seem to be logical to connect their absence to the fact that in this area the underlying deposits of sand and large, unwieldy stones lie particularly close to the surface and the trench was principally dug into this material.

Clearly, since only part of the enclosure has been exposed, we cannot be absolutely certain of its original ground plan. The steepness of the slope immediately to the west, however, imposes a natural limit on how far the enclosure could have been extended in this direction suggesting that it was probably originally sub-rectangular and axially symmetric through the entrance in the south.

A number of oval and sub-rectangular enclosures has been dated to the later Bronze Age. At Ballyveelish 2, Co. Tipperary, a sub-rectangular enclosure (estimated to be 47m north-south by 25m east-west) defined by a

small fosse, was excavated during the construction of the Cork - Dublin gas pipeline (Doody in Cleary *et al.* 1987, 22-35). Pottery from the fosse appears to have been domestic, functional ware, suggesting that this was a settlement site. However, it is not susceptible to close typological analysis (Op. cit. see Cleary Appendix VI), and the dating of the site to the later Bronze Age date is based on two radiocarbon dates from the fosse of 2550 ± 130 BP and 2770 ± 60 BP (calibrated to 600 ± 130 bc and 820 ± 60 bc).

Two radiocarbon dates (3100 ± 50 BP and 2810 ± 50 BP) have recently been returned for the primary phase at Carrigillihy, Co. Cork (O'Kelly, 1989, 22) which was excavated in the 1940s, placing it at the Early Bronze Age/Late Bronze Age transition. Here the oval enclosure (24.4m north-south by 21.3m east-west) was defined by a thick stone wall within which stood a similarly-shaped house, also of stone.

The major outstanding question is what buildings, if any, are contemporary with the palisaded enclosure. As it stands at the moment, two structures A and C (these letters do not necessarily follow a chronological sequence), lie within the -projected- enclosure. On stratigraphic grounds, however, Building A appears to be later - its foundation trenches have been cut into the fill of a linear gully running roughly east-west, which in turn truncates the palisade trench. Carbonised timber posts from the foundation trenches of Building A have returned a C14 date of 804-769 cal. B.C. (at 2σ range), suggesting that it too dates to the Late Bronze Age. Clearly, therefore, there are a number of different phases of activity on the site during this later Bronze Age. Building C pre-dates Building A and on these grounds alone is potentially contemporary with the palisaded enclosure.

Building C

Although originally probably circular (measuring α . 6m in diameter), only the northern half of this building could be traced, that is the portion that falls within Building A. What survives of the building is simply the foundation trench for the timber walls, interrupted at the north point by an entrance gap. The composition of the trench, however, differs markedly on either side of the entrance feature. West of the entrance gap the trench is narrow (α . 20-25cm), U-profiled and contains a series of almost contiguous packing stones. East of the entrance gap the foundation trench profile is more irregular and devoid of

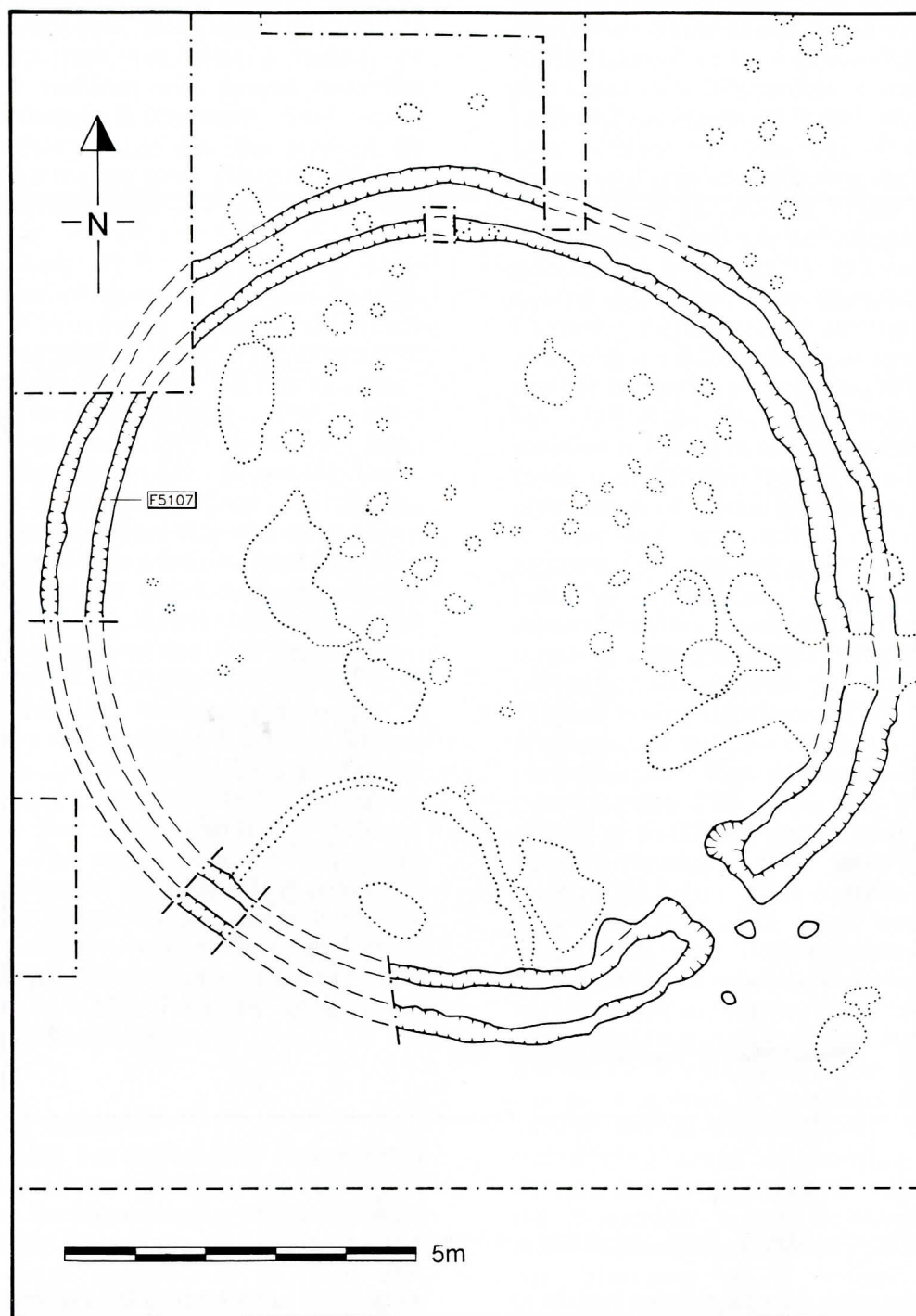


Fig. 5.4. Raffin, Co. Meath: Building A.

packing stones. The narrowness of the foundation trench and the contiguity of the packing stones, suggests that the walls consisted originally of relatively light posts, or planks, set closely beside one another. While there was very little charcoal in the fill of the trench, the ground surface was heat-stained red as a result, perhaps, of the walls having been burned down.

No habitation surface has been identified within this building. A small hearth pit,

however, has been uncovered a little east of its centre and is probably contemporary as its proximity to the wall of Building A precludes its belonging to this structure. The small size of the building, and the probability that it had a hearth, suggests that it is a domestic dwelling. Its *terminus post quem* is provided by the erection of Building A. Charcoal from the hearth pit should provide a radiocarbon date that may go some way towards dating the building itself, with the obvious proviso

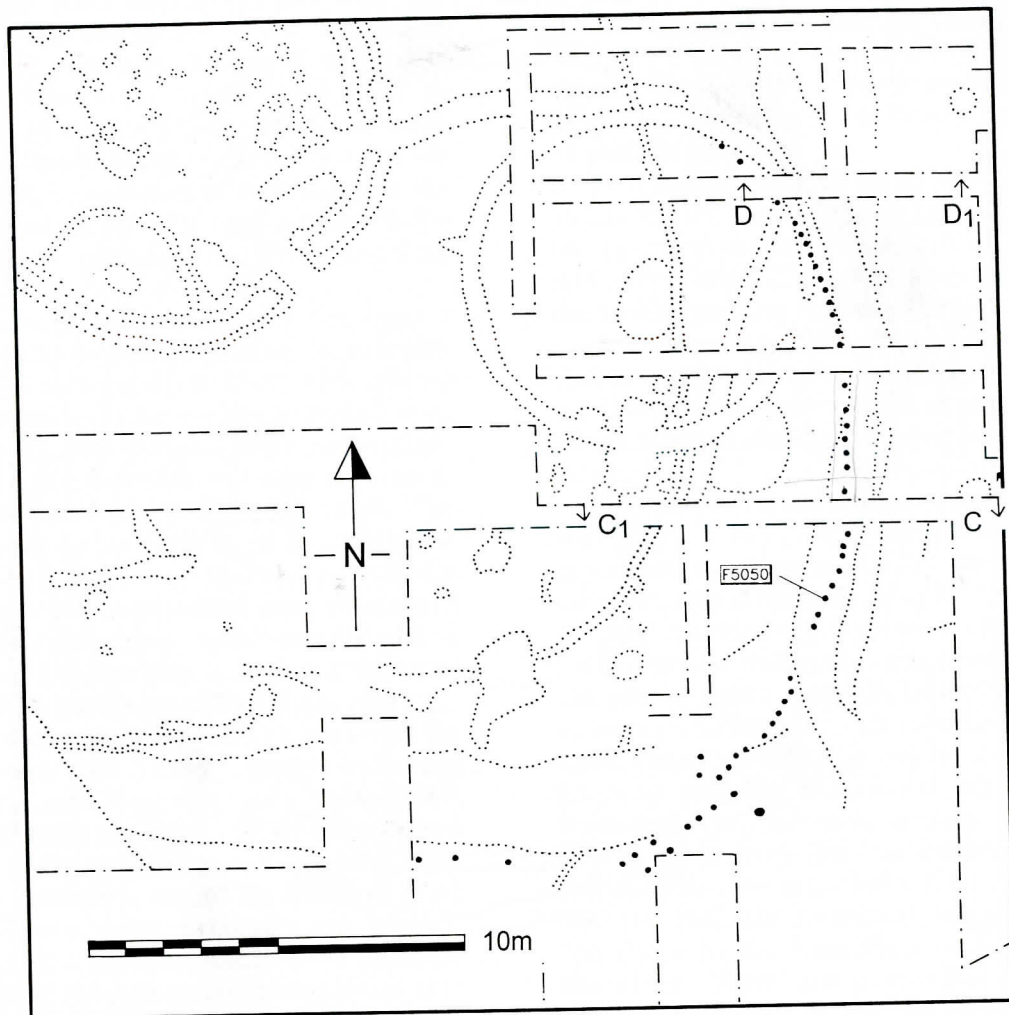


Fig. 5.5. Raffin, Co. Meath: Post and wattle enclosure.

that, at this stage, the two have not been definitively connected.

Building A (Fig. 5.4)

This double-walled building has a maximum diameter of about 12.5m. The foundation trenches are approximately 20-30cm wide and vary from 30-50cm deep; they are a consistent 70cm apart mid-point to mid-point. Flat bracing stones are found scattered throughout, though without apparent pattern. A series of round depressions, occurring about 20cm apart, was found along the bottom of the foundation trench in the north quadrant and

may have been caused by the butts of posts, suggesting that the walls were originally wattled. The entrance is in the south-east, immediately in front of which is a triangular arrangement of three stout post-pipes. One of these occupies the middle of the entrance gap and narrows considerably access to the interior. The foundation trenches were evidenced on the surface as parallel bands of reddened soil, suggesting that the building was burned down. Some carbonised wall timbers that were found in the foundation trench seem to confirm this interpretation and have returned a radiocarbon date of 804-769 cal. B.C. (at 2σ). There is no evidence of a hearth within

this building and the interior surface seems to be remarkably free from contaminants. It seems likely, however, that a surface of redeposited material was spread over the interior because it became clear upon excavation that most of the post-pipes of the multi-ringed structure were 'plugged' with soil that was indistinguishable from this surface deposit.

To the east of Building A we have uncovered part of circular (?) enclosure (Fig. 5.5), about 20m in diameter (about 160° of arc has been exposed to date). It consists of relatively small stakes (avg. *ca.* 5cm diameter) set a consistent 33cm apart. Preliminary evidence of an entrance (?) feature has been found in the southeast. It would seem reasonable to conclude from the regular spacing of the posts that this was originally a wattled fence. Taking into account the C14 dating of Building A, which demonstrates that it pre-dates Building B (which is dated to the Iron Age), in spite of the fact that the two buildings have stratigraphic parity, it is possible that the wattled enclosure is contemporary with Building A and that the two were originally conjoined. This cannot be proven without tracing the stake-holes of the fence up to (but not beyond) the walls of Building A. The comparison, however, with the ground-plans of the Phase 3(ii) conjoined buildings at Navan, which share the same dimensions as the two enclosures at Raffin, and the larger, Rose Phase, figure-of-eight structures at Dún Ailinne makes the proposition quite compelling.

Concluding remarks

This discussion has deliberately concentrated on the Neolithic and Bronze Age activity at Raffin since the identification of these phases has added an important dimension to the archaeological component of this site. Notwithstanding the possibility that later activity may have disturbed or even erased many of the internal features relating to the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, the excellent state of preservation of the enclosing elements suggests that, in contrast to Navan Fort and Dún Ailinne where the evidence is quite nebulous, here we have an excellent opportunity to describe the nature of this activity. Considerable continuity at these 'royal' sites, from the Neolithic to the Iron Age and later, is attested, but the poor survival of early prehistoric features has frustrated any attempts to fully explore the implications, e.g. whether there is there continuity of ritual

significance and what this might tell us of social behaviour and cultural continuum? At Raffin there may be a possibility to address this issue in a comparable context since our preferred interpretation is that, as at Navan and Dún Ailinne, the site was of considerable ceremonial importance during the Iron Age¹

Although excavation of the multi-ringed timber structure is not yet complete, it seems reasonable to suggest that it was built for ceremonial rather than domestic purposes. Current analysis of the stratigraphy would place it in a pre-Dowris phase context implying that the site had ceremonial significance *before* the Iron Age. This begs the question of whether the enclosures and buildings ascribed to the later Bronze Age are also in some way ceremonial, or at least high status structures. It is tempting, and indeed conventional, to explain the apparent absence of habitation material in Building A and the dearth of domestic debris around the site in general, in terms of ceremonial activities that by their nature did not generate this type of material. Without taking into account soil processes in general, and soil development at Raffin in particular, this type of explanation could be over-simplistic. We know very little about the effects of sod development on the occupation strata of abandoned, rural domestic dwellings, what might be termed A-horizon archaeology, and how to tackle such contexts. The possibility that soil regeneration might dissipate an archaeological feature (e.g. a hearth) needs to be considered and addressed. One possible solution, which, regrettably, was not used at Raffin, would have been to carry out geomagnetic or magnetic susceptibility survey before excavation in the hope of identifying areas of burning that might demonstrate the presence of a hearth (now in the A-horizon) which would otherwise go undetected during de-sodding. In other words, the absence of a hearth and other anthropogenically-derived contaminants could be more apparent than real. The fact that Raffin started as a rescue excavation meant that the identification of sod was by no means straightforward and, as a result, this layer was scrutinised perhaps more closely than is normally the case. For what it is worth, we can say that there is evidence that sod development is mature and that it appears to be free of archaeological material. The

¹ Radiocarbon dating of the human cranium from a skull burial (excavations 1992, 52) to the Iron Age (1975±50 b.p.; 100 B.C. - A.D. 120 cal. 2σ) has lent considerable support to this thesis.

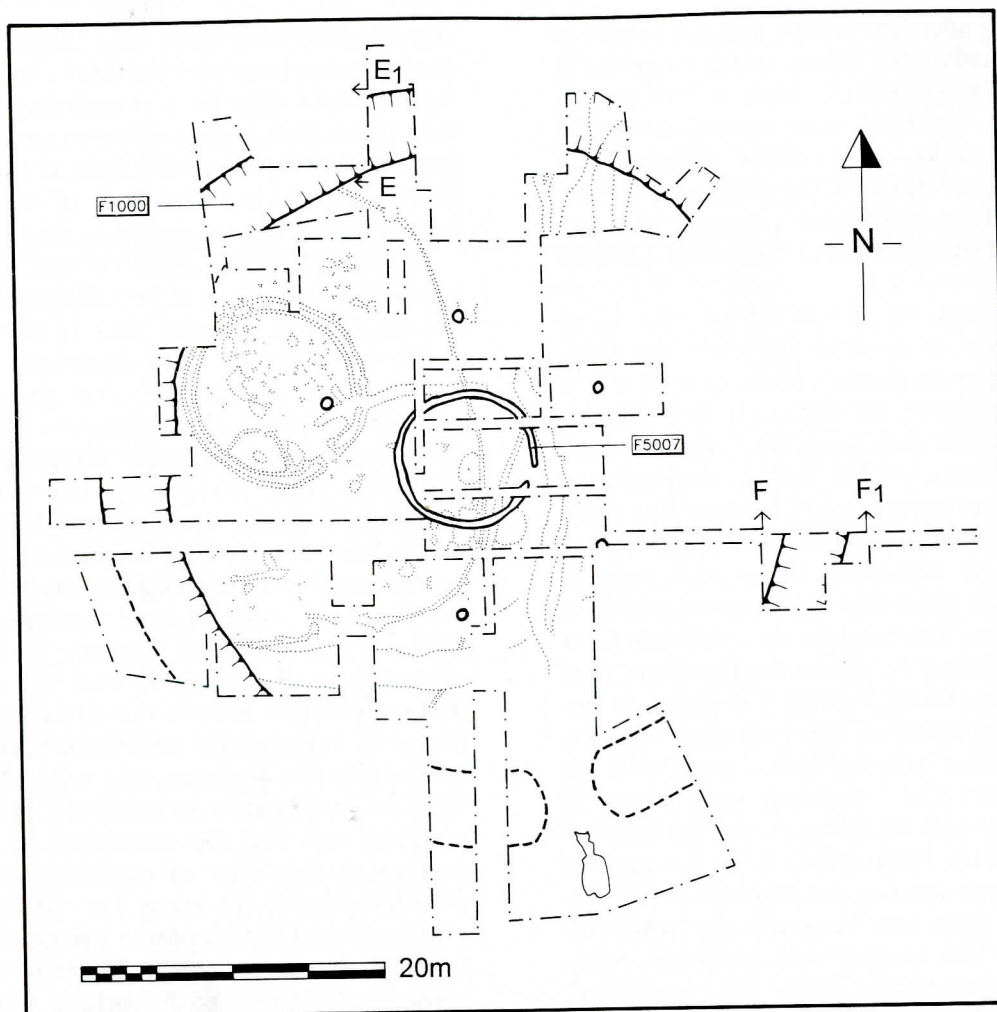


Fig. 5.6 Raffin, Co. Meath: Plan of Iron Age features and 'main' fosse.

circumstantial evidence at Raffin makes the conventional explanation more attractive. Nevertheless, evidence of domestic activities does not in itself preclude ritual activity or potency.

Both possibilities, domestic and ceremonial, have been explored in the interpretation of the Phase 3(ii) and 3(iii) ring-slots at Navan (Lynn 1986, 15; 1991, 54-55). Indeed, Lynn observes that the excavator, Waterman, was not entirely happy to describe the ring-slot enclosures as domestic dwellings in view of future developments on the site (1986, 15). Comparing these structures with the Rose Phase building at Dún Ailinne, Lynn has suggested that the latter was a large-scale, and therefore ceremonial, version of a typical high-status Iron Age house as exemplified in Phase 3(ii) at Navan. Notwithstanding the problem of reconciling the dating of the two structures (see Cooney and Grogan 1991, 37), the comparison is indeed valid and of considerable interest. The Phase 3(ii) structures at Navan, however, were preceded by an equally interesting structure, Phase 3(i),

that has received relatively little attention in the archaeological literature. Dated to about the 8th century B.C., this structure consists of a circular enclosure about 45m in diameter, created by the excavation of a broad (5m), but quite shallow (1m), fosse. Four or five metres inside the the line of the fosse was a ring of large postholes, a little over 4m apart, for holding large, upright posts (Lynn 1986, 14). The interpretation of this as a stockade (implied in the nomenclature, but not discussed) seems a trifle pedestrian, especially when the problem of spanning the large, 4m gaps between the posts is taken into consideration as well as, of course, the subsequent history of the site. An alternative interpretation is that this is a timber henge or circle which might be compared with the Mauve Phase at Dún Ailinne (Wailes 1990, fig. 2), the larger, northern circular enclosure pre-dating the Rath of the Synods, at Tara (Cooney and Grogan 1991, 37, fig. 8) and the timber circle surrounding the Iron Age building at Raffin (Fig. 5.6). Evidence from these three sites has demonstrated the existence

of large, probably ceremonial, timber circles and should encourage us to consider, as Lynn has (1991, 55), that timber henges are a legitimate, and I dare say common, expression of ceremonial architecture in late pre-historic Ireland. According to this interpretation, the Phase 3(ii) and (iii) ring-slots at Navan are sandwiched between two purely ceremonial sites, and the conventional view, that they are domestic (possibly high-status) residences, would imply a fairly fundamental change in religious or political practice. During the Later Bronze Age/Early Iron Age (depending on what chronology one is prepared to accept) convention may have permitted residence on this ground, but both before and after this time residence may have been forbidden.

The sequence at Raffin, however, seems to be the reverse of that at Navan. Building A appears to be sandwiched between a multi-ringed henge monument and an Iron Age timber circle respectively. There are two ways of explaining this phenomenon, which although on one level are unrelated, on another are closely connected. Either, we are simply witnessing that the metaphysics of late prehistoric religious experience could be expressed architecturally in only a limited number of ways (e.g. circles on the tops of hills) and hence these are re-curring, though culturally unrelated expressions, or else this metaphysics embraced a variety of doctrines and procedures which are reflected and articulated in the creation of any one of a range of different types of sacred spaces. Multi-ringed timber spaces may have been created to facilitate particular procedures and figure-of-eight structures to express or fulfil others. Likewise, simple single-ring post circles, perhaps surrounding a smaller circular building as at Raffin and Mauve Phase Dún Ailinne, were created to express still other nuances. In this situation there need be no convention prescribing a particular sequence to which one is obliged adhere. This explanation would accommodate the difficulties involved in comparing obvious architectural comparisons between sites that are not contemporary and the seemingly extraordinary continuity evidenced at these sites.

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