

2. Valley bottom and hilltop: 6,000 years of settlement along the route of the N4 Sligo Inner Relief Road

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Illus. 1—Aerial view of archaeological test-trenches along the route of the N4 SIRR (Markus Casey)

Over the Spring and Summer of 2003 archaeological excavations along the proposed route of the N4 Sligo Inner Relief Road & County Extension (N4 SIRR) opened a fascinating window onto the prehistoric landscape of the Cúil Irra peninsula, revealing evidence of settlement stretching back some 6,000 years into the Early Neolithic. Later settlement in the Bronze and Iron Ages was also found along the route and attests to continuous activity in an area already known for its extensive archaeological remains.

It was in 2000 and 2001 that initial investigations were carried out along the N4 route, when an intensive phase of archaeological test excavations revealed the first glimpses of those sites to be later fully excavated in 2003 (Illus. 1). This testing was carried out by Mary Henry Archaeological Services Ltd. In addition to the test trenching, full excavation of an area of prehistoric settlement in Caltragh townland, midway along the route, also took place in 2001.¹ This excavation (Field G) is discussed below, along with the other major excavated

¹ Testing and excavation of Field G carried out by Sébastien Joubert (Excavation Licence Nos 00E0815–9).

sites, investigated by Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd (ACS Ltd) in 2003.² All of the archaeological works were undertaken on behalf of the NRA, Sligo County Council and Sligo Borough Council.

Summary of archaeological discoveries

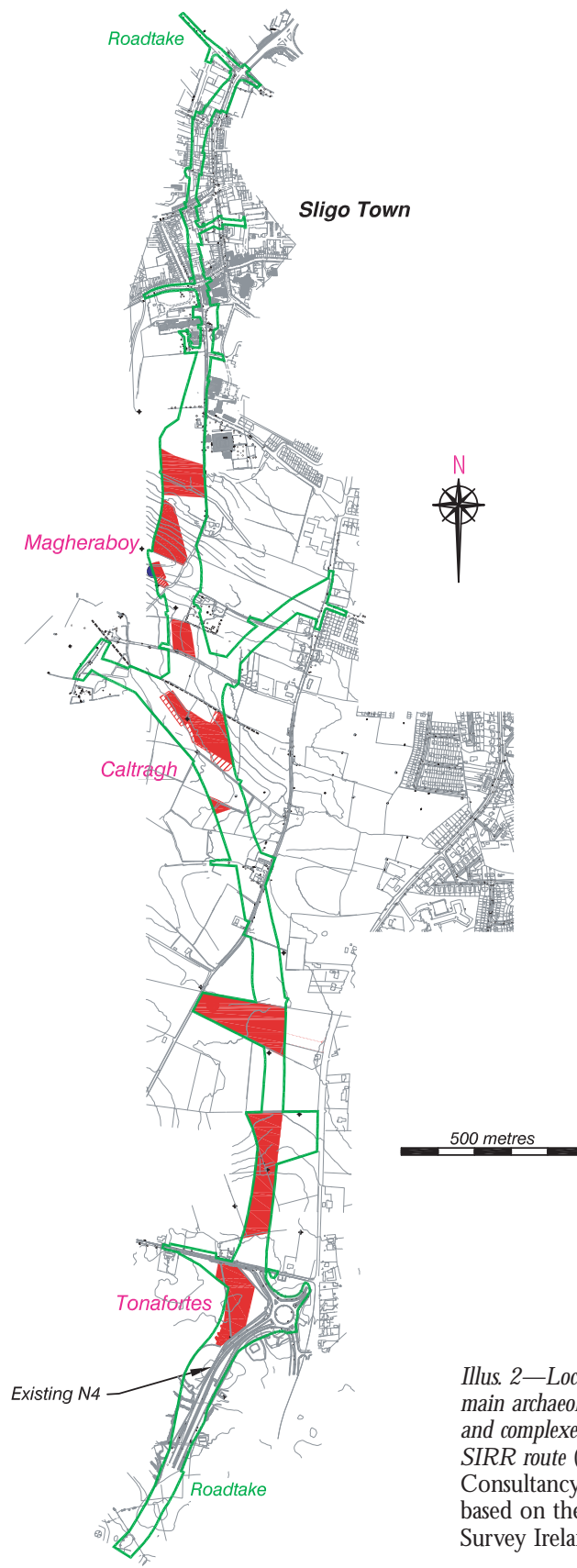
At just under 5 km in length the N4 SIRR is a relatively short road project by current standards. While the subsequent archaeological discoveries are numerous and impressive, given the wider landscape's known archaeological wealth it comes as no surprise that the intensive pre-construction archaeological investigations yielded so much.

Post-medieval urban evidence was revealed by exploratory trenching within the short section of the scheme through Sligo town, while early medieval settlement was discovered in the form of a ringfort, or rath, of c. AD 600–900 date on the outskirts of the town in Magheraboy townland. The strategic advantage of the Magheraboy ridge on which that defended farmstead was built did not go unnoticed by earlier settlers. Iron Age evidence was also discovered on the same ridge, dating to several hundred years earlier than the farmstead. It was much earlier though, some 4,000 years BC, that the full ridge was best exploited with the construction of a large timber-palisaded and causewayed enclosure in the Early Neolithic period. At the northern base of the ridge, in a low boggy hollow, later settlement evidence was found with several Bronze Age *fulachta fiadh*, or burnt mounds. From the vantage point of the centre of the Magheraboy ridge, looking south, one sees the low lakeside valley, now transformed to bogland, in Caltragh townland (Field G), where the 2001 excavations and subsequent work in 2003 revealed the social landscape of a Middle Bronze Age farming community—houses, cremation burials, *fulachta fiadh*—and earlier Neolithic settlement, the place of occupation perhaps of some of those same people who built and used the causewayed enclosure rising above them. At the southern end of the scheme, in the townland of Tonafortes, a large ceremonial henge enclosure was also partially excavated. This was sited in a low setting with the cairned summit of Knocknarea visible through a low notch in the landscape. This henge monument was the only archaeological site known along the route of the scheme prior to the initial 2000 archaeological investigations.

Various other areas along the route revealed sporadic evidence, mostly in the form of pits, of settlement dating from diverse prehistoric periods, but the three-pronged focus of this short article is to be the henge monument in Tonafortes, the Caltragh Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement, and the multi-period archaeology of the prominent Magheraboy ridge (Illus. 2).

² Tonafortes: NGR 168781, 332918; Height 25 m OD; Excavation Licence No. 03E0535. Director: Ed Danaher. Caltragh: NGR 168000, 334330; Height 30 m OD; Excavation Licence Nos 03E05432–4. Directors: Sue McCabe and Steve Linnane. Magheraboy (Medieval enclosure): NGR 16860, 33500; Height 45 m OD; Excavation Licence No. 03E0536. Director: Tara O'Neil. Magheraboy (Neolithic enclosure): NGR 16861, 33500; Height 47 m OD; Excavation Licence No. 03E0538. Director: Ed Danaher.

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Illus. 2—Location map of main archaeological features and complexes along the N4 SIRR route (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd, based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map)



Illus. 3—Aerial view of the Tonafortes henge, visible at top left of photograph (Markus Casey)

The Tonafortes henge

The basket's reed handles creaked with the weight of its earthy load as his father hauled it upwards. Sandy lines marked the grassy outline of the ditch, spread earlier by the design of those elders who stood directorially on the hill above him, superior in age, stature and altitude. His labour was made harder by the continuous slippage of the steep sides of the ditch but a glance the far side of the entrance informed him that there they had dug only half as deep as he had! A day off tomorrow then he hoped, when he could perhaps make the journey up the nearby mountain with her to marvel at the large cairn of stones at its summit.

First discovered from an examination of aerial photographs by staff in the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, this large, circular enclosure measures some 84 m in diameter and is delineated by a wide ditch with traces of both an inner and outer bank (Illus. 3). The site is low-lying, offering good views to the summit of Knocknarea Mountain and its outstanding prehistoric pinnacle, known now as Queen Maeve's cairn. Aerial photographs show the henge clearly and the form of the banks and ditches is also observable on the ground, despite centuries of agricultural activity that failed to completely level the site.

Embanked enclosures—henges—in Ireland are often associated with passage tombs, particularly in the Boyne Valley. Despite the abundance of such passage tombs in Sligo, only three henge monuments, thought to date mostly from the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age

period, are known from the county. With a non-defensive outer bank and a paucity of occupation-related artefacts from the few excavated examples, such enclosures are thought to be largely ritual in function. Certainly, the low physical setting of the Tonafortes enclosure lends credence to this ritual interpretation, with no high-ground defensive advantage. Immediately north of the henge stands a prominent small hillock offering from its low summit a grandstand corporate-box view of the interior of the enclosure. Little light though can be cast by the excavation onto the nature of the activities that may have been enacted at the Tonafortes site. Radiocarbon dating indicates at least that it was built between 2460 and 2140 BC (Beta 199778, see Appendix 1).

While an impact on the site by the road development was unavoidable due to other constraints, it was kept to a minimum and only that portion of the enclosure directly affected by the scheme (approximately 10%) was investigated. The site was excavated by Ed Danaher for ACS Ltd. The strategic excavation of numerous cuttings across the enclosing ditch and banks does tell us something of the history of the site. Some 4,500 years ago, the large enclosing ditch was dug, up to 6 m wide and 2 m deep in places, leaving a causeway of unexcavated soil as the entrance into the enclosure's arena. Interestingly, the ditch terminal to the north of the entrance was substantially deeper than that to the south. Very soon after it had been dug, some portions of the ditch edges and enclosing banks collapsed back into the ditch. Thereafter it slowly filled up with soil and grassed over. It remained so until several hundred years ago when post-medieval ploughing resulted in the partial levelling of the inner and outer banks. At this time, as a consequence of field clearance, large pits were dug inside and around the area of the enclosure and filled with fieldstones collected from the surrounding ground.

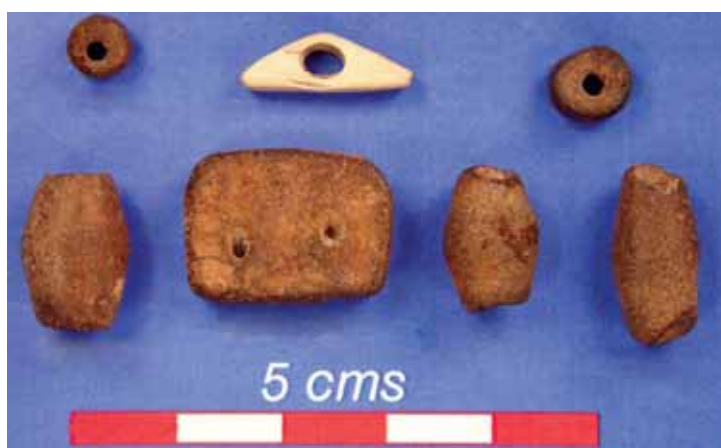
Several deposits of burnt stone material were discovered both south and north of the henge monument. One of these spreads overlay a small trough cut into the subsoil and yielded a radiocarbon date of 2400–2140 BC (Beta 196297, see Appendix 1). Thus it appears that this *fulacht fiadh* is broadly contemporary with the construction of the henge. A small spread of burnt stone material with no trough was also excavated just south of the enclosure; morning-after fiery remains perhaps of activities performed within the henge?

Caltragh prehistoric settlement

She lived with her extended family in three snugly close round houses on the gentle southern slope overlooking the lake some 3,500 years ago. She cooked in a number of fulachta fiadh ringing the edge of the wetland, using the fresh water for boiling with heated stones. Her people hunted the boggy and leafy waters edge, snaring wildfowl and thirsty animals, but they were farmers and worn grain-grinding querns found abandoned in the houses are ample proof of their cultivation and afternoons of toil. Stone tools were manufactured out in the field below the houses, waste flakes being skilfully struck from larger pieces of stone to rest where they fell to be discovered millennia later. Her children had played amongst the fallen stones of walls built by earlier people and one day she died. A daughter, a mother and grandmother, her body was placed on a funerary pyre and was burned. Familiar hands then crushed her bones for reasons now forgotten. Within sight of home a small pit was dug next to that of her long-dead mother and again thoughtful hands placed inside it her remains and a stone bead necklace. Sharpened stakes then placed about the pit edge stood as memorial to her until time withered both grave-marker and memory.



Illus. 4—Caltragh Neolithic stonewall enclosure (Michael MacDonagh)



Illus. 5—Beads found with Caltragh Bronze Age cremation burial (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

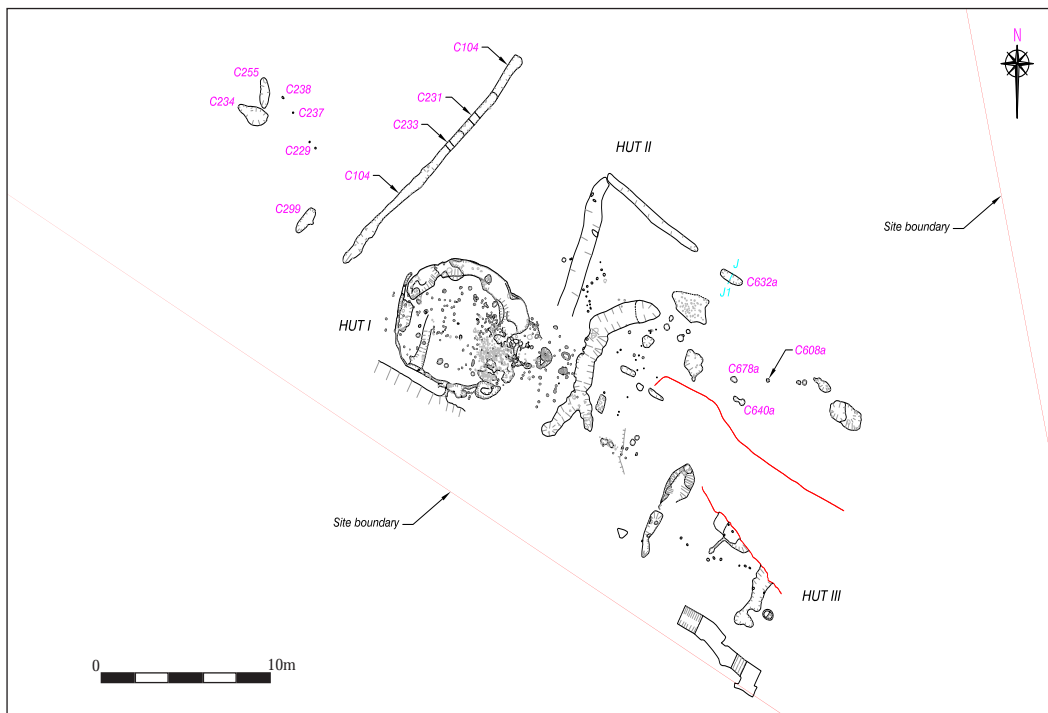
A number of archaeological features were discovered in the townland of Caltragh, midway along the N4 route, in a small valley opening up to an area of wetland. Dating to the Neolithic and Bronze Age, and spanning a period between c 3300 BC and 1000 BC, these features represent continuous settlement and burial/ritual activity in the sheltered valley.

At the valley bottom, excavations in 2001 carried out by Sébastien Joubert for Mary Henry Archaeological Services Ltd discovered the remains of a substantial collapsed stonewall. Over 100 m in length, this wall formed an arcing open enclosure (Illus. 4) facing onto an area of bogland, which would most likely have been open water at the time the wall was built, some time in the Neolithic period, between 4000 BC and 2500 BC. No radiocarbon date was obtained for the construction of this wall, but the deliberate deposition of a number of small, polished stone axes and some decorated animal bone within the fabric of the wall all suggest a Neolithic date. The purpose of the enclosure is unclear—perhaps it served as a cattle stockade, a wall defining an area of some ritual significance, or an attempt for reasons unknown to mark out the edge of the lake.

Other features found in the shallow valley tell stories of burial and ritual practices at about the same time the wall was built. A small pit containing a deposit of cremated human bone and an associated deposit of flint flake tools was excavated in 2001 and radiocarbon-



Illus. 6—Aerial view of Caltragh Middle Bronze Age houses (Ed Danaher)



Illus. 7—Plan of Caltragh Bronze Age settlement (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)



Illus. 8—Artistic reconstruction of the Caltragh Middle Bronze Age settlement by John Murphy (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

dated to about 3300 BC (UCD 0247, see Appendix 1). The much disturbed and ill-defined remains of a possible small megalithic tomb were also discovered in the same area.

The 2003 excavations, carried out by Steve Linnane and Sue McCabe for Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd, also uncovered evidence of Bronze Age human cremations when two more burial pits were discovered. Lined by stakes set, presumably, to mark the burials, each pit contained the cremated remains of an adult individual. Osteological analysis of the burnt bone in one of the pits has determined them to be probably those of a woman, who died aged probably between 40 and 50 years old. Stone beads found in the same pit are the remains of a necklace or bracelet (Illus. 5). It was also determined that the skeleton, after burning, had been deliberately crushed. An adjacent pit contained the remains of another adult of the same age, also accompanied by stone beads, and both burials have been radiocarbon-dated to the latter half of the second millennium BC (Beta 197656 and 197658, see Appendix 1). Another large pit on the northern edge of the valley contained the cremated remains of a juvenile, probably between 13 and 16 years old at the time of his or her death. A saddle quern and grinding stone were found with this burial, more mundane offerings it seems than beaded necklaces, but perhaps of no less significance. A tiny fragment of burnt bone found with the teenager burial belonged to an adult. An accident? Perhaps in the collecting of the young person's burnt skeleton from a funerary pyre a piece of bone left behind from an earlier cremation was also swept up?

Their final resting places lay close to their homes. The pitted and post-holed remains of three circular structures were discovered on the lower slopes of the northern edge of the valley (Illus. 6 and 7). Each structure was formed by a series of roof-supporting post-holes and all had an entrance defined by a four-posted 'porch'. Pits had been dug along the

interior walls of the buildings. These were found to contain a number of saddle querns suggesting that the pits may have been used for storing grain. These three structures have been radiocarbon-dated to the same period as the nearby cremation burials, mentioned above, at around 1600 BC (Beta 194432–5, see Appendix 1).

The availability of water attracted the large number of *fulachta fiadh* built on the edges of the lake during the same period as the occupation of the houses and the deposition of some of the cremation burials. Two of these were built up over the remains of the earlier Neolithic stonewall, and one of these was dated to between 1700 BC and 1350 BC (UCD 0239 and 0240, see Appendix 1). In total, eight *fulachta fiadh* were discovered on the old Caltragh lake edges. While some have been found to be contemporary with the occupation of the houses in the Middle Bronze Age, others were dug earlier, while Later Bronze Age ones were also found here, all indicating that the Caltragh location, sheltered and with fresh water, attracted settlement over a long continuous period.

The discovery of a 'pygmy cup' burial elsewhere in the townland of Caltragh in 2001 during test excavations³ shows that Bronze Age settlement was not solely confined to the valley and lakesides. Located less than one kilometre to the south-east, this cremation burial with its small pottery vessel suggests that Bronze Age settlement was widespread in the area.

The archaeology of Magheraboy

Up all sides of the hill they clambered, greeting old friends as paths crossed again, making their way along the outer edge of the timber fence towards the entrance. Welcome cries greeted him from the small tower above. He skirted the small ditches, fresh soil packed loosely at their bases, covering the offerings laid recently there by some in need or thankful. Small crowds had already gathered inside the enclosure, some with hopeful objects to barter, others to simply catch up on news. The family of an old friend stooped over a small pit. Silent heads dropped as a crude bowl was lowered and pot and pit were filled and covered. He would find out later the reason why.

The archaeological features discovered in Magheraboy townland, on the southern outskirts of Sligo town, span some 5,000 years. The earliest feature is a large causewayed enclosure, dating to the Early Neolithic period, about 4000 BC. Also present on the same large ridge is evidence of Iron Age settlement, dating to about 400 BC, while occupation in more recent times is attested by a medieval ringfort, constructed between AD 600 and AD 800.

The Early Neolithic causewayed enclosure

Undoubtedly, this was one of the most exciting discoveries over the course of the N4 SIRR excavations. It was centred on the summit of a large elongated ridge and measured over 1.7 ha in area, delineated at its northern and southern sides by the remains of a palisade trench (Illus. 9 and 10). Packing stones supported the upright posts which were once set into it and these would have formed a fence believed to have been between 1.5 m and 2 m in height. The construction method of the palisade varied across the site. In some places it was built using upright posts set wide apart with planks laid horizontally between them, while

³ Test excavation carried out by Frank Ryan (Excavation Licence No. 01E0942).



Illus. 9—Aerial view of the archaeological features on the ridge at Magheraboy (Markus Casey)

in other sections the upright posts were set firmly against each other. Some 3 m outside the palisade trench were a number of non-contiguous ditches separated by gaps, or causeways, of undug soil from which the name of the site-type derives. A number of closely-set post-holes straddling the palisade fence on the southern side of the site may represent the remains of a small tower. Radiocarbon dates from sample material recovered from the outer ditch segments indicate that the enclosure was built between 4000 BC and 3800 BC (Beta 186486 and 199984, see Appendix 1).

This type of enclosure is found extensively in Britain and on the European mainland, and while other large Neolithic enclosures are known in Ireland the discovery of a causewayed enclosure along the N4 is a rare example of the site-type in Ireland. Various theories have been put forward regarding the function of causewayed enclosures, based on the excavated evidence, but no universal explanation has been accepted. That they were places of ceremonial or ritual activity is one explanation for some of the sites, while others have proposed that they were perhaps cattle marts and/or the meeting places of a scattered community. A link to burial rituals has also been put forward for some, such as Hambledon Hill, in Dorset, England, where fragments of human bone were discovered in the interior and in the enclosing ditch segments (Mercer 1990). In others, large quantities of animal bone have been recovered, indication perhaps of ritual feasting. The soil conditions at the Magheraboy site were not conducive to the preservation of unburnt bone, however, and none was found were it ever present.

The causewayed outer ditch segments were found to respect the line of the palisade trench indicating that these two enclosing elements were probably contemporary. The ditch fills were rich in artefacts dating from the Early Neolithic period: unused flint arrowheads



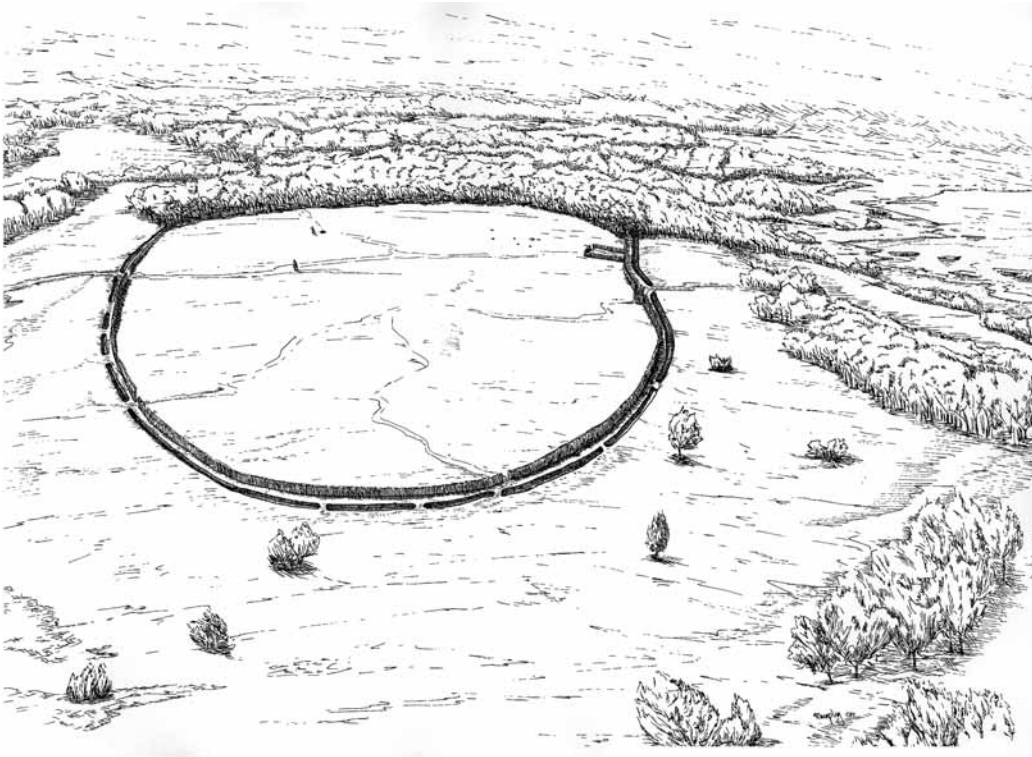
Illus 11—Flint arrowheads found within some of the outer ditch sections of the Magheraboy Neolithic enclosure (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

long period of burial. All the ditch finds and the discovery within contemporary pits in the enclosure's interior of unfired pottery assist in the interpretation of the site as being, at least in part, of ritual significance. A Neolithic lean-to structure was defined by the remains of a slot trench abutting the palisade trench on the southern side of the enclosure. Measuring approximately 14 m by 6 m, the structure has no evidence of any roof supports and its function remains uncertain. Within the large interior of the enclosure were found a relatively sparse number of features. Between 40 and 50 pits produced more artefacts dating from the Early Neolithic, including flint tools such as blades and scrapers, and pottery dating from the same period. Burnt bone found within the fills of these pits has been identified as animal in origin. Some of the pits yielded radiocarbon dates of between 3600 BC and 3400 BC (Beta 196298–9, see Appendix 1).

The Magheraboy causewayed enclosure is an important discovery and, given the site's rarity in the archaeological record, sheds some new light on the Early Neolithic period in Ireland. A gathering place for a dispersed community? A market place? A place for ceremonial offerings and festivities? All of the above? Excavation cannot provide definitive answers to all of the questions from such a distant past but the questions themselves are challenging and exciting.

Iron Age activity at Magheraboy

A number of pits found on the ridge date to the Bronze Age and settlement continued at Magheraboy into the Iron Age. A small, circular structure, radiocarbon-dated to between 370 BC and 30 BC (Beta 186485, see Appendix 1) was discovered on the more western



Illus. 12—Artistic reconstruction of the Neolithic causewayed enclosure at Magheraboy by John Murphy (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

part of the ridge. Measuring approximately 4 m in diameter with a small entrance at the north-east, it was constructed by means of placing a base plate, or foundation, of horizontal timber planks in a circular bedding trench upon which the walls of the hut would then have been built. These planks were charred, or superficially burnt, before they were placed in the foundation trench, probably in order to slow their decay. It was from surviving pieces of these timbers that the radiocarbon date was obtained.

Early medieval settlement at Magheraboy

The latest period of settlement at Magheraboy, bar a modern bungalow, is represented by a medieval ringfort, located close to the highest part of the ridge to take advantage of the defensive and commanding position (Illus. 13) and within the interior of the much earlier and larger Neolithic causewayed enclosure, discussed above. Radiocarbon dating indicates that the enclosure was built between AD 570 and AD 880 (Beta 197654, see Appendix 1). It is circular, measuring some 37 m in diameter. The site was not known prior to its discovery during the test excavations in 2001 because the earthworks had been ploughed out and levelled in the past. Only half of the enclosure lay within the roadtake and was excavated. A similar upstanding enclosure is located approximately 100 m to the east, outside of the area affected by the road.

A U-shaped ditch, approximately 1.3 m deep, defined the enclosure and the stratigraphy within that ditch indicated that it had silted up gradually over a period of time. Large amounts of stone formed the upper fills of the ditch. These are probably the remains of an



Illus. 13—The medieval ringfort at Magheraboy, showing stones of the collapsed stonewall lying within the ditch (Michael MacDonagh)



Illus. 14—Artistic reconstruction of the medieval ringfort at Magheraboy, in use between the 6th and 9th centuries AD, by John Murphy (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

inner stonewall that collapsed into the ditch, presumably as the site fell into disuse or was abandoned and later ploughed. From one of the fills of the ditch a medieval ring pin was discovered. A number of post-holes and pits, and a metalled stone surface found within the interior were also excavated. These represent evidence of occupation activities and the faint traces of the houses that would have stood there (Illus. 14). Other radiocarbon dates obtained from excavated material from the site yielded dates up to about AD 1000 (Beta 197650–2, see Appendix 1).

Conclusions

Often development-led excavation teases us with only a small keyhole view of a particular archaeological site. With adequate time allowed to carry out large-scale archaeological works in advance of construction, projects such as the N4 can grant much larger perspectives. A bay window onto prehistoric society and community is offered—a rich tapestry of farming, cooking and eating, dwellings, craft, burial and ritual. That the Cúil Irra peninsula was intensively settled in prehistoric times was known well before the N4 excavations. The presence of so many upstanding monuments in the wider landscape is clear testament to this. What the excavations have shown though is the potential of what lies beneath the sod, of which no trace is visible above ground. The information retrieved from these excavations and the planned publication of more detailed excavation reports with a wider discussion of the N4 discoveries should prove a valuable contribution to the study of prehistoric archaeology in the region.

Acknowledgements

To all those involved in the N4 SIRR archaeological excavations and post-excavation programme, thanks are offered, especially to Ed Danaher of ACS Ltd and to the other ACS Ltd N4 directors—Stephen Linnane, Sue McCabe and Tara O’Neill—and to those of Mary Henry Archaeological Services Ltd—Sébastien Joubert, Mary Henry and Frank Ryan.

