

Title

Movements in prehistory through the landscape around Neiphin Mountain, Co Mayo.

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This paper discusses how monuments such as cairns, megalithic tombs, standing stones and barrows fulfilled different roles within the prehistoric landscape around Neiphin Mountain, Co. Mayo. The topography of this landscape consists of mountain peaks, ranges lakes and marginal land. The restrictive nature of this landscape due to its geography lead the movement of people along defined natural boundaries aided/reinforced/marked by the built monuments. It is suggested that these monuments indicated routeways, of not only 'domestic character' between farmsteads and various resources, but also fulfilled a role in maintaining social and economic contacts over long distances within the north part of Mayo

Introduction

It is the purpose of this paper to present an interpretation of the role the archaeological monuments specific to this landscape played in prehistory. The paper will be aided by GIS applications and photography which will bring more clarity to the discussions that will arise. Extensive field walking was undertaken as part of the research, and this technique was most useful in interpreting the monuments within their landscape. By field walking some possible new archeological sites were identified which went previously unrecorded. There is also a review of the literary and cartographic sources related to the study topic throughout the paper. The use of local knowledge was helpful too in locating the sites that will be discussed later.

Cairns, megalithic structures, barrows and the standing stones are some of the monuments that form part of the Neiphin archaeological landscape. Bradley would view these monuments as fashioning an order or system on the landscape (Bradley 1993, 47-48). There are a number of cairns and megalithic structures in the study area, and by these monuments we can recognize for the first time the concept of deliberately creating a ritual or ceremonial landscape. The focus of the tombs is not on the everyday act of domestic life, but more on the special and sacred taking place at particular times of the year. It is this seemingly organized repetitive nature of human activity in these special places that we can see as a link between the use of megalithic tombs and other kinds of archaeological sites that developed later in prehistory (Cooney & Grogan 1994, 209 – 210). This theory of a 'repetitive nature' was tested in the field within the study area to see if the monuments in the landscape around Neiphin, showed evidence of earlier archaeological sites that would become the focus for the later archaeological monuments. The barrow at Castlehill in the study area for instance, has evidence of large stones used in the construction of the burial mound. These large slabs may have been once the ortostats of an earlier megalithic tomb that were incorporated into the later barrow. If so this could illustrate the continuity and importance between the different sites through the periods in history.



Figure 1- A barrow at Castlehill. Note the larger stones that are in the outer ditch enclosure. These stones may have once being part of an earlier megalithic structure. This illustrates the reuse of the tombs. (© P Walsh).

The approach taken to this narrative about the landscape will be to move away from looking at the monuments in detail and take a more landscape based approach. Bradley's view is that not only were the tombs used as burial chambers and for votive offerings, they also lend themselves to a concept of people moving through a ancient landscape. *"The reason for emphasizing the importance of avenues and alignments, by the use of tombs over distances coerces the movement of the people to pass only along certain routes"* (Bradley 1993, 49). This is the central theme within this paper.

Location

Neiphin Mountain itself is the second highest Mountain in Connaught, rising on the West side of Lough Conn. The Neiphin Mountain range extends from Lough Conn to the east of the study area to Achill Island in the west where Croaghaun Mountain ends in a sheer vertical drop out into the Atlantic Ocean. The mountain range acts as a natural boundary dividing South and North Mayo. The mountain range is located along the westerly point of the line of court tombs that extend from east of the country to the west. The Neiphin landscape is well known for its lake setting, with the larger lakes Lough Conn and Lough Cullin to the West, and the smaller lakes of Lough Levally and Bofeenaun to the South. The landscape is defined by its mountain peaks and lake lands.



Figure 1 is the study area marked in red. Neiphin is situated to the West of the line of court that extend from the east of the country (Map Waddell 98, 79).

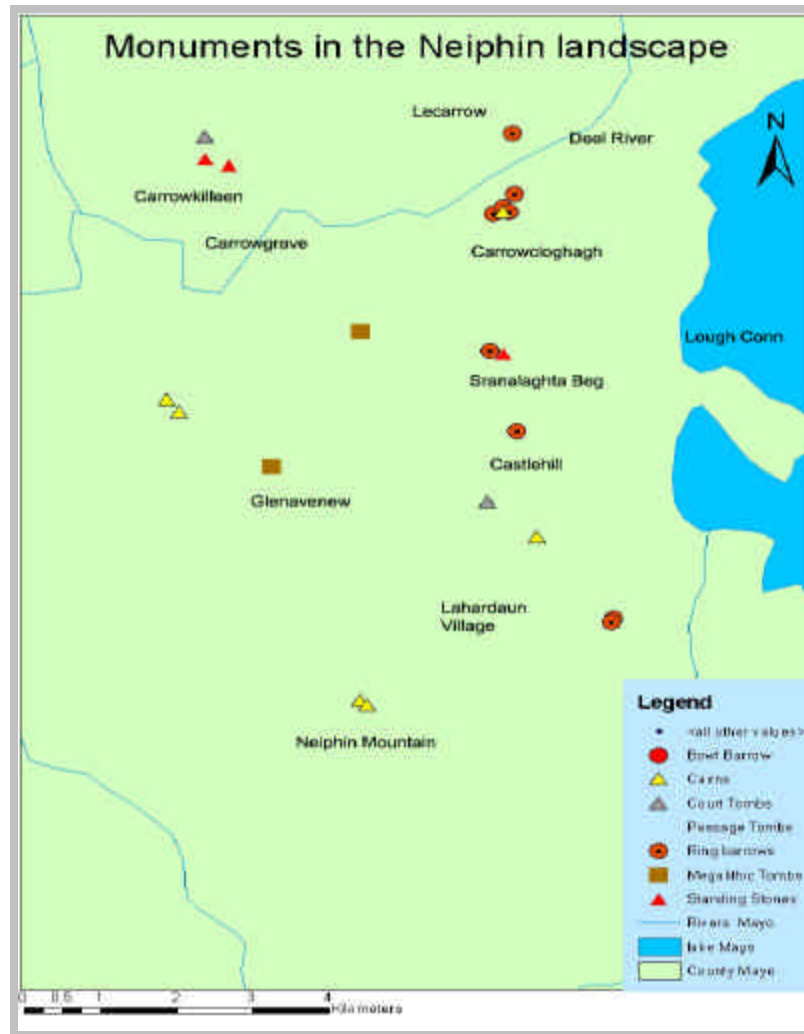


Figure 3 is a GIS map of the archaeological monuments that are found in the Neiphin landscape. (© P Walsh).

Prehistoric Archaeology of the area

Passing through Neiphin mountain range the traveller is moving into North Mayo. North Mayo is well known in archaeological terms for the discovery of the Céide field. The field systems are evidence for extensive settlement are supported by the presence of extensive settlement enclosures and megalithic tombs. These tombs can be divided into four classes: court tombs, portal tombs, passage tombs and wedge tombs. All four main types of megalithic tombs are present in Mayo, but with a strong dominance of the court tomb class.

Barrows are also a feature within the Neiphin landscape. A cemetery mound or barrow at Corrower, southeast of Ballina, consisted of a low circular mound some 13m in diameter and was found to contain nine graves (Waddell 1998, 143). Standing stones are the simplest kind of stone monument in Ireland and comprise a single stone set upright

into the ground and can vary in height from one to six meters. Set within the Neiphin landscape there are up to ten standing stones within the area taken for the study.

There are many examples of crannogs or lake dwellings, which can sometimes be located on natural islands but are often entirely constructed on artificial islands. We can assume that the crannogs were defended homesteads occupied by the wealthy and prestigious in early medieval Irish society, thereby illustrating the importance of this landscape as a place to settle and prosper. The crannog construction would have called for the organisation of a considerable labour force (Edwards 1990, 41). One crannog site in Bofeenaun to the south of Neiphin uncovered several finds during excavation, including a hammer stone, two metal gouges and two furnace bases (Maloney and Keane 1992). In the following four sections the main types of monuments that have been selected for this study will be discussed. This will include a critique of the cairns, the megalithic monuments, the barrows and standing stones. The final section will then present a discussion on the roles these monuments played within the Neiphin landscape.

Cairns

Circular mounds (or cairns) vary greatly in size and are known in most parts of Co Mayo. The cairns are essentially a mound of stones usually covering one or more burials. Sealed within the mounds, there can be chambers or tombs whereby human remains and offerings can be deposited. Sometimes there are cist burials which are box-like structures made of stone slabs. These are of a general Neolithic early Bronze Age date. The burials can be either cremated or unburnt accompanied by decorated pottery, of either food vessels or urns. During field walking no remains of the cairns were located that were identified on the RMP survey. The survey, illustrates evidence of two cairns which once sat on the summit of Neiphin with one more, located lower down slope in Doonbreedia. In addition to the two cairns on the mountain top, there are a further ten satellite cairns recorded along the lower reaches of the mountain. The cairns all seemed to have favoured the elevated ground that Neiphin would have provided. The cairns were dispersed evenly among the townlands which run up to the peak of Neiphin.



Figure 3 The RMP map indicates two cairns resting on the mountain top on Neiphin. It also identified cairns in the townlands as indicated above

The distribution of the cairns located in all of the townlands around Neiphin is interesting. From the RMP map above they seem to be enclosing the mountain. We can assume that the cairns were more than just mounds of stone covering burial chambers. The cairns were constructed here on this mountain location to take advantage of the aspect that this dominant natural feature provided for them. Neiphin therefore was always seen as a special location. Mountain top locations are the greatest indicator that the cairns here would have formed some sort of a ritual function. The isolated location would have aided any ritual performance. Similarly to other mountain top locations the visibility from the site and contact with other sites would have been a prerequisite (Bergh 1995, 143). From the photograph here we can see that there is a clear view to other mountain peaks.



Figure 4 The mountain top at Neiphin with other mountain peaks in view

In many cultures mountain tops are the homes of gods with evidence of peak sanctuaries from the Minoan culture. (Bradley 2000, 100 – 103). The presence of the cairns on this mountain top location could also have been a link with the gods for the cairn builders at Neiphin. The presence of the cairns would have stimulated the creation of myth and legend about a place, and elevates the status of the mountain locally. Places such as mountain peaks, springs rivers and caves suggest a link with the spirit world. All of the landscape features have been recorded in the oral and historic tradition as having a particular significance. (Cooney 2000, 129)

There has been a tendency to relate cairns and passage tombs with agriculture, because the monuments are of a general Neolithic date, and the Neolithic signifies the start of agriculture in Ireland. It is true that the people were settled, better organised and would have had more time for building megalithic tombs. It is over simplistic to say that the cairns are a side effect of farming, in many instances we see that the megaliths and cairns can appear where pastoral farming was not a concern. The mountain peak of Neiphin is a good example of this, where non existent soil and steep slopes are not suitable for any type of farming. It would seem that both the farming and the building of the cairn monuments on and around Neiphin are not related in any practical way. If the cairns are not linked to farming, they may have been a fixed foci on the landscape for an otherwise moving group of people (Cooney 2000, 127).

The Megalithic Monuments

Along the fertile lowlands to the north of Neiphin there are some good examples of megalithic monuments. At Carrowkilleen for example, there is a well-preserved and impressive tomb the largest court tomb monument type of its class in Mayo. The most characteristic feature of the court tombs like this is the open court often U-shaped and lined by slabs or dry stone walling, located at the wider end. This tomb seems to have more than one phase of use and demonstrates its importance within the landscape (Keane 1990, 96). To the north of Neiphin in Eskeragh there are three court tombs while in Ballyduffy there are two court tombs which are in a ruined condition. In Enagh Beg also north of Neiphin there is a portal tomb orientated northeast to southwest. Wedge tombs also appear within this landscape and are considered of having a later Bronze Age date. There are wedge tombs in Carrowgrave south, and Srahyconigaun north of the Deel River as indicated in figure 3. The remains of some megalithic tombs are so badly damaged that they cannot be accurately identified and are recorded as unclassified megalithic tombs.

Megalithic tombs such as the ones mentioned above, could have played a role in the movement of people as Jones suggests that the “*mechanism of movement is linked with the mechanism of ritual*” (Jones 1998, 14). This demonstrates how the ritual can focus on a certain points or features within the landscape and those landscapes without any prominent feature may use the megalithic tombs as points in the locality to move towards, whether they are man made like the megaliths or whether they are natural features (Jones 1998, 14). On the lowlands to the north of Neiphin the flat topography means that there are very few natural landscape features to aid in the movement through the landscape, therefore it was logical for the prehistoric societies to erect monuments along routeways and avenues.

O’Brien argues a strong case for the link between megalithic tombs and trade moved along route ways and contacts established for the exchange of metals and other commodities (O’Brien 2000, 161-174). The search for wealth and resources therefore may have been a factor in the distribution of the megalithic tombs and it seems to provide the motive for the widespread traveling of these peoples. There is an economic incentive for the promise of new agricultural land, metal or other commodities, and we know from recent excavations within the study area, that the production of metal was a concern for the people (Murphy 2006). The over riding evidence however in the sitting and construction of the megalithic monuments within the Neiphin landscape would have been in relation to the fertile soils, and the fishing grounds that Lough Conn and the Deel River would have provided. There was a need to be close to these natural resources for the subsistence concerns of these Neolithic communities.



Figure 5 Megalithic Structure at Cartron viewing south towards Neiphin. (© P Walsh).

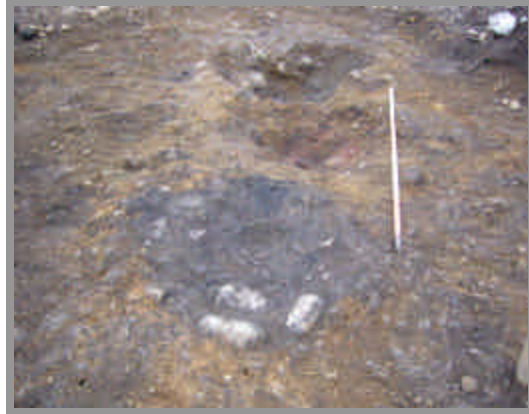


Figure 6 Evidence of bowl furnace pits, for smelting ores in Doonbredia townland, which is in the study area. This shows the significance ores had within the community whereby people would have travelled long distances to extract and work with metals (© ACS Ltd).

Barrows

There are different types of barrows; round or ring barrows are the most common type of barrow, which are sub divided up into five classes, bowl, bell, disc, saucer and pond barrows. It is difficult to put an exact date on the barrows, as Doody explains how some barrow complexes may date from as early as the Neolithic through to the Iron Age (Doody 1992, 22). The barrows in this study for the most part seem to be ring barrows, though the typology of the barrows is not a concern in this paper, what is of interest is their spatial distribution. There are nine barrows, from Knockfarnaght in the south running through to Castlehill, Kilmurray Beg and on to Carrowcloghagh where there is a cluster of four barrows just short of the Deel River. On the other side of the river there is another barrow at Lecarrow. These barrows clearly show a linear trend, and cover a distance of approximately five kilometres. This concept of “intervisibility” would seem to have also been a concern for the barrow builders in this part of Mayo. Interestingly there is a lack of barrows outside this linear stretch of monuments, there are only two located at Errew along the banks of Lough Conn. Therefore there is an obvious desire for the barrow builders to be located along this linear route. The line of barrows is also aligned along a narrow dry ridge. The people obviously favoured the dry ground, away from areas that are liable to flooding, presumably for easy movement along a naturally defined passageway. This ridge is particularly noticeable from Kilmurry beg to the north of Neiphin to Carrowcloghagh south of the Deel river.

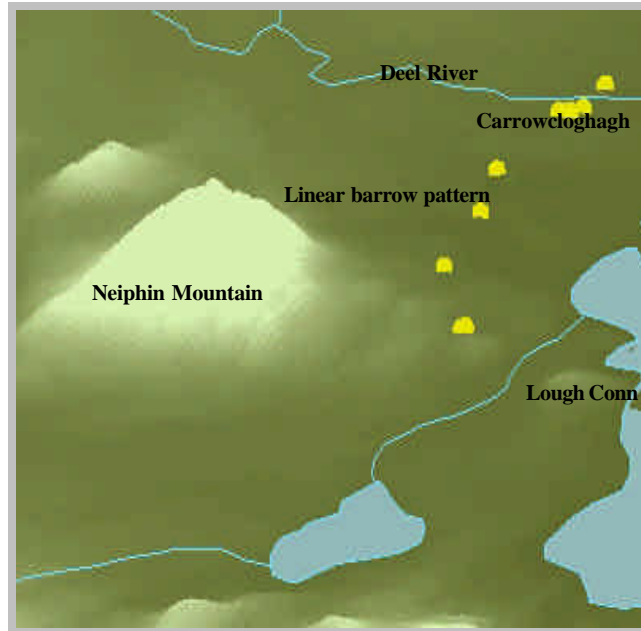


Figure 7 - Opposite is a terrain model of the barrows within the Neiphin landscape. Notice the linear pattern of the barrows until they reach the fording point across the Deel River. Alternatively, the ring barrows may enclose the lake area to the east of the barrows. (© P Walsh).

The barrows which are the cemeteries to the dead can be described as a “pushing away” of the deceased from the main settlements within the community. The barrows therefore tend to be located away from the main areas where the habitation sites might have been and favored the positioning closer to the lake or water course areas (Cooney and Crogan, 1994 129 - 132). Tilly would argue the highly visible barrows attracted other barrows through time, providing the traveller with visual pathways and nodal points (Tilly, 1994 30 & 159). Tilly has used this approach of “intervisibility” between the long barrows in Cranborne Chase near the causewayed enclosure in Hambledon Hill. The barrows taken for this paper are simpler ring barrows than those barrows at Cranborne, there are comparisons to be made however. Like the barrows in the study area, Tilly’s examples are spread out over a long distance. The barrows at Cranborne Chase can be seen from eight to nine kilometres away. They are related to the topographical features in the landscape, rather than to other monuments. Being able to see other barrows from each other was clearly important to them (Tilly 94, 156 - 158).

There have been excavations at Carrowjames in Co Mayo of a cluster of ring barrows by Raftery in the 1940s. Carrowjames is situated within the wider scope of the specific study area. The ring barrows excavated were mostly low of about 50cm in height with some ditches surrounding them. They were clustered more tightly together, so they seem to only function as burial mounds rather than markers of any passage through a landscape (Raftery 1940). The survey of the Ballyhoura hills project undertaken by Martin Doody includes a survey with a range of site types which include barrows and associated earthworks. As mentioned the barrow complexes can date from as early as the Neolithic to the Iron Age (Doody 1992, 22). It is possible that the burial mounds may have once showed a linear pattern, but over such a long time frame and due to continual use there was an addition of more mounds. Therefore, if there was any linear trend they would have become more nucleated with time. There were further excavations carried out by Daly and Grogan of four barrows in Mitchelstowndown West in County Limerick. These examples have a linear pattern but are almost touching each other over a very short

distance, so it is also unlikely that these barrows create any avenue for travelling through the landscape (Daly and Grogan 1992, 44). At Tara there is a sequence or plan in the placing of the barrows. Newman would argue that there was a hierarchical system involved in the placement of the monuments. The more important burial mounds were placed close to the centre of the hill while the lower status sites were pushed away and became satellite sites to the sanctified centre of Tara (Newman 1992, 86). These outlier sites may have been used to delimit the periphery of the sacred ground. This trend can also be observed from the Salisbury Plains landscape which contains the densest and largest groups of round barrows in Britain. They all seem to be in the limits of visibility from Stonehenge as to create an 'envelope of visibility'. There seems to be no Bronze Age remains only those lining the limits of the further reaches of the Stonehenge complex. This could be interpreted as liminal zones between the landscape of the living and the dead. (Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998, 154). The barrows within the study area could be acting as a liminal line also, enclosing Lough Conn to the east. It is difficult to say whether the barrows create the limits of a settlement or sacred site when there is no evidence for such a place.

One explanation as shown on the RMP map is that the barrows lead to a fording point at the Deel River. In between the cluster of barrows in Carrowcloghagh to the south of the Deel River and the barrow to the North at Iecarrow, there is a fording point indicated. The barrows therefore may have acted as signposts along the route around the base of Neiphin and on up through the fording point in the Deel river. By passing through this fording point there is a symbolic movement across the river and on into North Mayo. North Mayo would have been a well known area in prehistory. We can make this assumption from rich archaeological landscape around Ceide.



Figure 8 - Above is an RMP map indicating the river crossing or fording point found along the route as outlined by the line of barrows. (RMP Sheet #38).

Standing Stones

Standing stones are the simplest kind of stone monument in Ireland and comprise a single stone set upright into the ground and can vary in height from one to seven meters. They can be found all over the country but are especially common in the southwest where around 600 examples are known. The function of standing stones is a mystery though several theories have been put forward including territorial boundary markers and landmarks to assist travelers. In some cases, excavation has revealed cist burials in association with these monuments, adding weight to the theory that standing stones are grave markers (O'Kelly 1989, 228). Standing stones usually occur in isolation. However, some may form part of alignments, which are generally defined as three or more standing stones forming a linear pattern. The dating of standing stones appears problematic. They are associated with the Bronze Age but their construction and uses may indeed range from the Late Neolithic into the Early and Late Bronze Age. It is very difficult to fully establish the stones significance, because individual standing stones today may once have been part of a more complex group of standing stones. One of the most interesting aspects is their association with Bronze Age burials, which appears to support the theory of them being of ceremonial and ritual use (Corlett 2001, 27). Today we may view standing stones in isolation, but they would once have formed part of the overall structure of the Bronze Age landscape, forming part of a largely man made landscape, and possibly being associated with settlement sites throughout the Bronze Age countryside.

Bradley discusses how standing stones are positioned in relation to the topographical features, and are also erected in relation to one another, so they can form short alignments across the landscape. Bradley emphasizes the importance of avenues and alignments by the use of tombs over distances which coerce the movement of the people to pass only along a certain route (Bradley 1993, 45 - 49). While Muir suggests that the standing stones are located on high points which mean that there was a desire to be seen from long distances (Muir 1999, 80). Corlett also discusses the possibilities that the standing stones within the West Mayo landscape could have marked routeways along *Tóchar Phádraig* which still is today a pilgrim route to Croagh Patrick. The standing stones could have marked the route for an earlier pagan pilgrim road (Corlett 2001, 28). Within a wider context standing stones in the Betsileo the highland region in Madagascar are primarily the markers for the dead, and traditionally commemorate a man whose body has not returned to his ancestral tomb. They can also be used to mark the boundaries of different groups or territories. Another interesting role of the standing stones in this region was that they may have been erected to mark important events like winning or losing a battle. (Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998 147 -149). Due to the location of the standing stones in this study area across territorial lands it is not unreasonable to suggest that battles may have been fought here.

The evidence from this landscape suggests that the standing stones seem to be aligned along a possible prehistoric route. Similar to the barrows, the standing stones north of Neiphin appear to run in a line. During fieldwork a possible a standing stone was discovered at Massbrook. It is situated along a well known walking route "The Foxford way". The stone indicates the entrance into a mountain pass and forms part of the alignment with the other known standing stones around Neiphin (Walsh 2006). As you move north and follow the line of barrows and standing stones they seem to mirror each other until they reach a crossroads at Sranalaghta North and Sranalaghta South. Here

there is a cluster of sites, including one of the barrows in the neighbouring townland at Kilmurray Beg. It would seem that once the traveller passes through Sranalaghta they can follow the line of barrows which will lead them to the fording point along the River Deel, or follow the course of the standing stones which aligns a possible route to Carrowkillen, the location of the largest court tomb monument of its class in Mayo. Carrowkillen must have been a desired location to visit in prehistory. The tomb here has had later chambers added to its structure which indicates the continued evolving of the site through the periods in prehistory (Keane 1990, 96). The evidence from this area however, would suggest that rather than the megalithic tombs being markers along a certain route, that this megalithic tomb at Carrowkillen for instance was an actual gathering point for traveling Neolithic people.

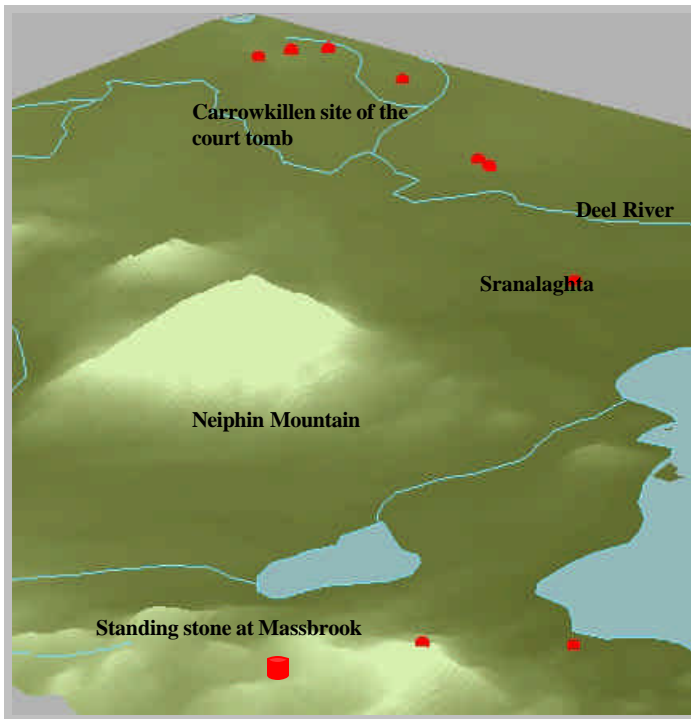


Figure 9 – Recently discovered possible standing found is indicated with the larger red symbol. It marks a passage route through Massbrook Mountain which is to the south of Neiphin. The other known standing stones seem to mark a passage around Neiphin and end with a cluster at Carrowkillen. (© P Walsh).



Figure 10 - Possible standing stone which marks the entrance between two valleys and leads on up to North Mayo at Massbrook. (© P Walsh).

Movement through the landscape

The visible nature of the archaeological features upon the landscape means they must have had significance in prehistory, in both a symbolic and practical manner. Grogans studies of upland passes led him to believe that many of the route ways were not through inhospitable terrain but along “*ribbons of domestic space that would themselves be used on a regular basis by the local communities*” (Grogan 2006, 74). The pathways facilitated the movement and social contact between the separate communities represented by clusters of sites. This gave economic opportunity for the long distance traveller (Grogan 2006, 75). Long distance travelling may have been a concern of the people from this area, as was the everyday access to neighbouring farmlands, to avail of other resources like access to river courses. The passage ways were there also to maintain social contacts or long distance travel for trade and attendance at seasonal or annual gatherings to the known places in the North Mayo.

In keeping with the mountain landscape theme, Bergh for example has undertaken extensive work in Sligo specifically with the mountainscape of Knocknarea. He suggests that the cairns and megalithic structures are there to commemorate, to create a sense of place (Bergh 1995, 141). From the archaeological sites that we have looked at in this article we can make an interpretation of their role within this specific landscape, on and around Neiphin Mountain. From the archaeological evidence around the Neiphin landscape, there appears to be different motivations behind the building of these monuments. The cairns were monuments that are extravagant for just burial sites. Their positioning on the mountain top would have meant that the dead from the community were closer to the gods and cairns were positioned on the height to watch over the fertile farming and grounds around Neiphin. The monuments change the relationship between the people and the land. They create an identity for the local people and create an order or system on the landscape (Bradley 1993; 47- 48). Conspicuous land marks such as knocknarae, Ben Bulben and Croagh Patrick must have had powerful impact on the people, and influenced the construction of the monuments. The same can be said for Neiphin Mountain. The monuments create a place; an eternal sign of the fact that their ancestors are on the land, in an effective and permanent way. Although Tarlow was speaking more of nineteenth century ceremonial monuments, she defines it well by explaining “*The tombs offered an opportunity in mediating and representing the relationship between the living and the dead*” (Tarlow 2000, 218). The presence of the cairns on this mountain top location would have stimulated the creation of myth and legend about a place, and elevates the status of the mountain locally.

The barrows would also seem to have a higher function than merely being earthen mounds covering the dead. They may symbolise a sacred route leading to a water supply that was a crucial resource for the existence of the prehistoric people. At Carrowcloghagh the cluster of the monuments could represent the fording point along the river. This fording point over the Deel River was more than just a bridging point; it marked a symbolic causeway where the traveller crossed from one territory into another.

The megalithic structures in the area seem to be more concerned with locating themselves along the fertile plains rather than being attracted to any linear route. The complex at Carrowkillen could have been a desired location to visit in prehistory, and from this study it seem possible that the standing stones line a route way around the base

of Neiphin leading up to this tomb at Carrowkillen. The location of a possible standing stone at the entrance of the mountain pass in Massbrook could have indicated the routeway for the prehistoric traveller to take when moving through the mountainous terrain of Neiphin. The standing stones and the barrows seem to mirror each other for a certain length of time around the base of the mountain and then meet at Sranalachta Beg. This location could have been once a type of cross roads, where there is a cluster of sites. Once the traveller passes through Sranalachta Beg, they can follow the line of barrows and pass through the fording point at the River Deel, or follow the course of the standing stones to Carrowkillen. These passage ways would have been there to maintain social contact or long distance travel for trade and attendance at seasonal or annual gatherings to the known places in the North Mayo and Sligo region. Therefore the route itself was an essential component upon the prehistoric landscape, and would have been justified by being set out with the ritual burial sites as mentioned.

The Neiphin mountain range itself has been used as a natural boundary to divide territory. These boundaries would have had their origins in the 5th and 6th Century. The ecclesiastical parishes were formally constituted during the twelfth century, after the Synod of Rath Breasail in 1111 and the Synod of Kells in 1152 (O'Hara 1982, 3). This is important because it highlights the study area as being pivotal in territorial division. The natural features within the landscape were seen as important boundary markers, to distinguish between areas. In prehistory too the Neiphin landscape would have been viewed as an area where you were moving from one territory into another. This physical and symbolic movement would have influenced the characteristics of the monuments.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed how the archaeological remains namely the cairns and other megalithic structures, barrows and standing stones perform different roles upon this particular landscape. The paper has considered the possible passage ways that were used in prehistory, for everyday access to neighbouring farmlands, to avail of other resources, access to river courses and ceremonial sites. By taking a phenomenological approach and experiencing the landscape the archaeological sites are no longer isolated monuments but collectively are very active mechanisms within the landscape.

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