

A Bronze Age Landscape at Farranastack, Lisselton, Co. Kerry

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Summary

This paper presents the results of excavations outside Lisselton in north Co. Kerry where three Bronze Age pits were discovered that appear to represent the troughs of an otherwise destroyed *fulacht fiadh*. Two further sites – an intact *fulacht fiadh* and burnt mound material – were discovered in the immediate environs and indicate a concentration of prehistoric activities at this location.

Introduction

In 2003, three areas of previously unrecorded archaeological activity were discovered by Eachtra Archaeological Projects (Eachtra) in the course of archaeological monitoring related to the Listowel Regional Water Supply Scheme. The sites were found along the southern slopes of Farranastack Hill (NGR 93053 141185) in Farranastack townland, immediately north of Lisselton village in north Co. Kerry (Figure 1). The most substantial concentration of activity consisted of a series of 15 grave cuts of probable early medieval date (O’Callaghan 2006). Approximately 150m west of this, a small pit containing ironworking residues of medieval date was uncovered (Dowd 2006; Dowd and Fairburn 2005). However, the earliest identifiable activities at Farranastack consisted of three Bronze Age pits (Figure 2) excavated by the writer for Eachtra under licence 03E0171. These appear to represent the troughs of a *fulacht fiadh*, and the excavation results are discussed here.

Description of Excavated Material

A narrow trench was opened by machine across the southern slopes of Farranastack Hill for pipe laying associated with the Listowel Regional Water Supply Scheme. Three sub-rectangular troughs and a curvilinear trench were exposed when the topsoil was removed (Figure 3). These occurred 60m east of a small road which runs north from Lisselton village, 130m west of a small stream, and at a height of

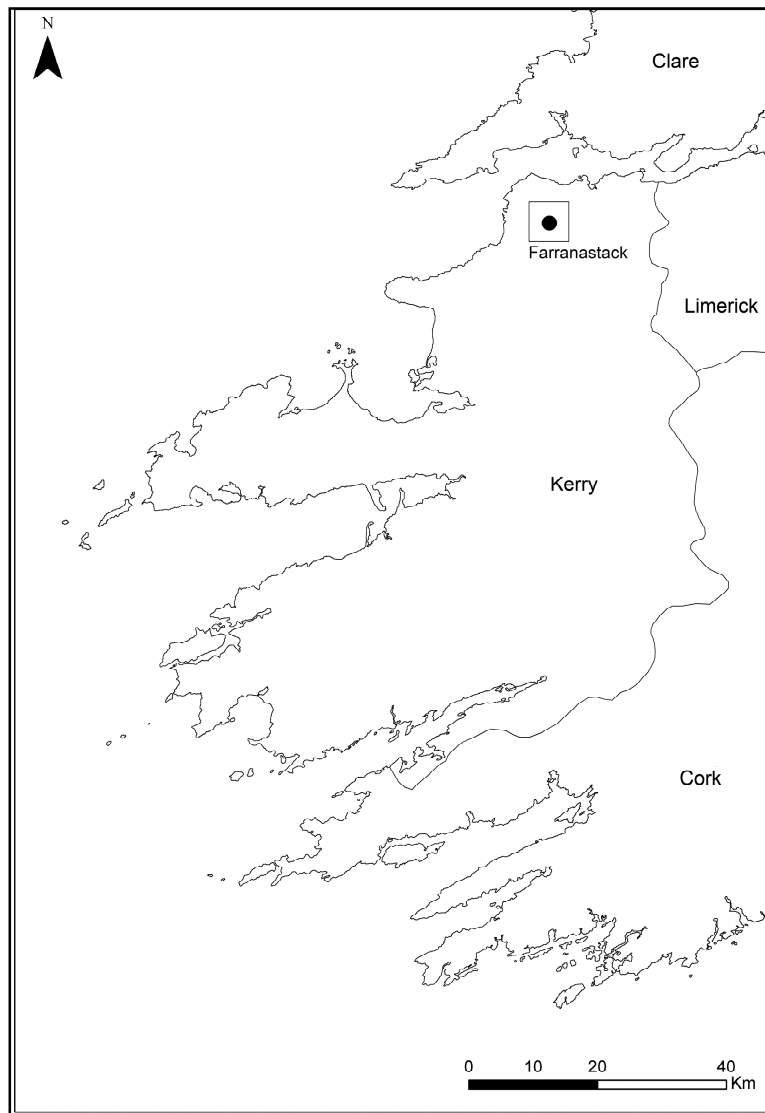


Fig. 1. Location of site.

approximately 130m OD. The archaeology was contained within an area measuring 8m east-west by 5.3m, but it is likely that further associated features lay outside the line of the pipe trench.

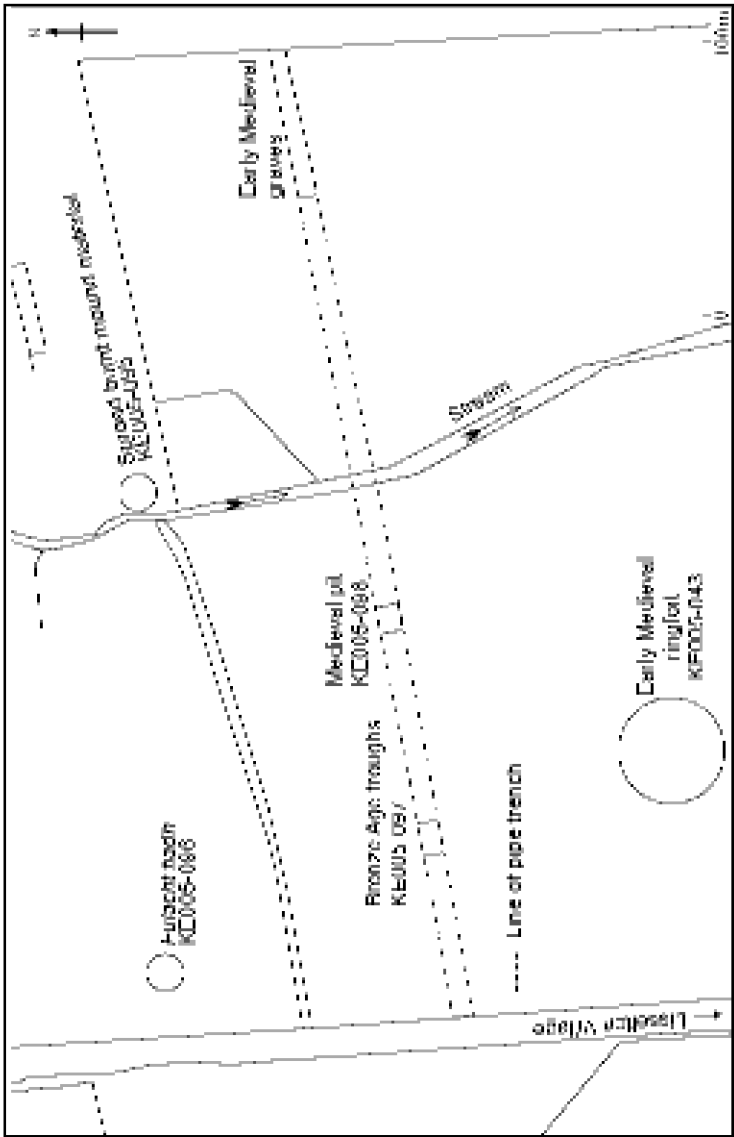


Fig. 2. Sites in the Farranastack area.

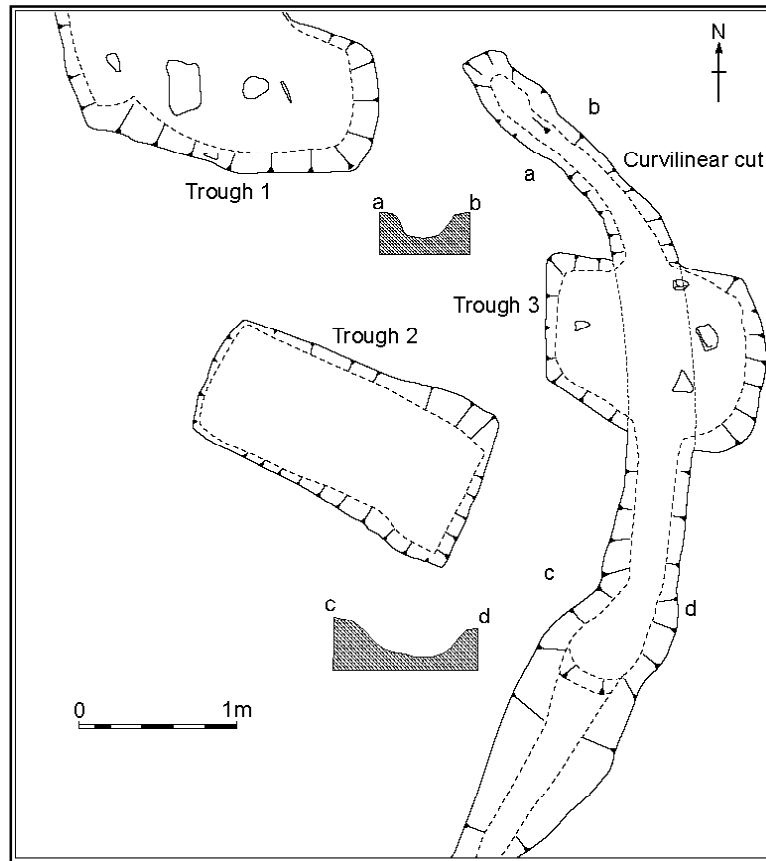


Fig. 3. Site plan.

The troughs were orientated in a general east-west direction. They varied in length from 1.95m to 1.4m, ranged from 0.25m to 0.35m in depth, and were 1m wide. Two flat stones were embedded in the bases of Troughs 1 and 3. All three troughs contained charcoal-rich fills of blackened clays and silts, with between 40 per cent and 60 per cent content of burnt and heat-shattered sandstone stones. It is worth noting that the underlying geology here is Namurian shale, and thus the stone must have been intentionally gathered from elsewhere. Trough 1 contained three fills, Trough 2 had one fill, while two fills were identified in Trough 3. No hearths or mounds of burnt material were found associated with the troughs – features that would be expected at a

fulacht fiadh site. It is worth emphasising, however, that the pipeline trench was very narrow, and further archaeological material is almost certainly located outside its limits. For instance, the northern part of Trough 1 and the southern part of a curvilinear trench ran under the baulk, outside the line of the trench (Figure 3).

A shallow curvilinear trench (0.4m wide x 0.3m deep) truncated Trough 3. It was orientated north-south and was traced for a length of 3.6m. The northern rounded terminal of the feature was packed with unburnt stones. Elsewhere the fill comprised a stony silty loam. The southern end of this curvilinear trench had been removed by track machine, and therefore its full extent could not be established. A substantial area to the west was cleaned, but no corresponding return was encountered. Therefore it would seem that this originally consisted of a semi-circular, rather than a circular, feature. Its function and date are not known, but it may represent some form of channel that directed water into Trough 3.

Archaeobotanical Analysis

Soil samples from fills of each of the three troughs were examined by archaeo-botanist Abigail Brewer for plant remains. The samples were processed by manual flotation and sieved through meshes of 1mm, 500µm and 250µm. One of the samples (Trough 3) was sterile. The other samples produced charred material and were scanned for macro-archaeobotanical remains, but only charcoal was recovered. The charcoal from Trough 2 included one fragment of oak (*cf Quercus sp.*), three pieces of probable willow or poplar (*cf Salix/Populus sp.*), one fragment of hazel or alder (*cf Corylus/Alnus sp.*) and three unidentified pieces. The charcoal from Trough 1 could not be identified to species.

Date

A sample of hazel/alder and willow/poplar charcoal from Trough 2 was submitted for AMS dating and returned a conventional date of 2830 ±40BP (Beta-180810), which calibrates to between 1120 BC and 900 BC (2 sigma; 95.4 per cent probability). The similarity in the morphology and fills of the troughs, in addition to their close proximity, strongly suggest that all three are contemporaneous, representing activities of Middle to Late Bronze Age date. This corresponds with the collective radiocarbon dates from burnt mounds across Ireland where a peak of activity has been noted between 1,000 and 900 BC (Ó Néill 2003/04, 83).

Discussion

There is a strong probability that the three pits discovered at Farranastack represent unlined troughs of a ploughed-out *fulacht fiadh*. They resemble troughs associated with *fulachta fiadh* of Middle and Late Bronze Age date, which tend to be sub-rectangular and rectangular in shape (Cross May, Murray, Ó Neill and Stevens 2005, 218). The Farranastack troughs would have been filled with water, possibly from the stream c. 130m to the east. Stones that had been heated on a hearth would have been added to the troughs, gradually bringing the water to the boil. Indeed the silty nature of the fills in Trough 1 suggested that it held water for some time. The burnt stone and charcoal contained in the troughs may reflect their last usage, after which they were not emptied. Usually the burnt and heat-shattered stones would have been cast to one side, resulting in the characteristic horseshoe-shaped mound that characterises a *fulacht fiadh*. In the present case, no evidence of a mound survives above ground, and no trace was encountered during excavation. However, agricultural activities and/or land reclamation are likely to have destroyed such evidence, though traces may survive in the unexcavated areas outside the pipeline trench. Alternatively, these troughs may only have been used on one occasion, and thus no mound accumulated.

Evidence similar to that at Farranastack has been found during excavations related to the N8 Cashel to Mitchelstown road scheme – at Lissava and Marlhill, both in Co. Tipperary (McQuade, Molloy and Moriarty 2009, 92-94). At Lissava, Site 99.2 consisted of an Early Bronze Age trough, pit and several stake-holes, but there was no sign of a hearth or mound. Several *fulachta fiadh* occurred in close proximity to the trough. Site 147.1 at Marlhill consisted of four Middle Bronze Age pits, each containing charcoal and burnt stone. These were again located within a wider complex of contemporaneous settlement and burial activities (*ibid.*, CD file). Likewise, the three troughs at Farranastack did not occur in isolation. An intact *fulacht fiadh* (KE005-096) was discovered by Laurence Dunne of Eachtra in 2003, just 110m north-north-west of the troughs, while a spread of burnt mound material (KE005-095) – charcoal-rich soil and heat-shattered stone – was discovered in the 1980s approximately 170m north-east of the troughs (Figure 2). The latter was uncovered in the course of ploughing and was located beside the small stream; it may represent a burnt mound or the disturbed remains of a third *fulacht fiadh*.

The two or three *fulachta fiadh* at Farranastack suggest repeat

prehistoric activities at this location. The excavated troughs reflect Middle to Late Bronze Age activities, and it is likely that the two other sites are also of Bronze Age date, considering that the majority of Irish examples date to this period (Brindley, Lanting and Mook 1990). Because burnt mounds and *fulachta fiadh* are the most common prehistoric sites in Ireland, and the archaeological site types most frequently encountered in commercial development-led projects, there is often a tendency to underplay their significance. However, in instances like Farranastack where there were previously no known prehistoric sites, these new discoveries are very important. They indicate that prehistoric people carried out activities on the southern slopes of the hill that required quantities of hot water, activities such as cooking, fulling, tanning, bathing, washing, dyeing textiles or brewing. The settlements and domestic sites of the people who constructed and used these *fulachta fiadh* are likely to await discovery in the immediate environs, as suggested by studies in Clare, Tipperary and Limerick where *fulachta fiadh* were located in proximity to habitation sites (Grogan 2005, 41-42; McQuade *et al.* 2009, 119). Thus, though these excavations were relatively small in nature, they have contributed to our knowledge of Bronze Age life and activities in this part of the north Kerry landscape.

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Note About Author

Dr Marion Dowd is a lecturer in prehistoric archaeology at I.T. Sligo. She specialises in cave archaeology and has directed several excavations in caves across Ireland, and has published on the topic. Hailing from the Dingle Peninsula, Marion worked for Eachtra Archaeological Projects in Kerry for a number of years, and studied in U.C.C. before moving to the north-west.

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