

Gathering Ground: Unearthing 3000 Years of Prehistory at Faughan Hill, Eastern Ireland

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The discovery of a major archaeological complex at Faughan Hill, County Meath, was first reported on in the Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society in 2015. Comprising a series of large hilltop enclosures, probable burial sites, and associated features, the character and scale of the complex marked this out as an important focal centre in a region populated with some of Ireland's largest and most spectacular monument ensembles, not least at the Hill of Tara, 15 km to the south-east. A more complete picture of the site has since been revealed through further geophysical survey followed by test excavations by the Discovery Programme's Tara Research Project. Two trenches excavated across the hilltop enclosures in 2017 yielded evidence of four discrete phases of activity spanning some 3000 years, from the mid-4th to mid-1st millennia BC. During the Middle Neolithic the hilltop was encircled by a fenced enclosure (3635–3380 cal BC) possibly associated with the production of stone tools. At 250 m in projected diameter it is one of the largest enclosures of the 4th millennium known in Ireland. This was superseded in the Late Bronze Age by a far more substantial, 400 m diameter multivallate enclosure (1280–920 cal BC) representing the only excavated hillfort of its type in Meath. The hill was the focus of renewed activity during the Early Iron Age (800–520 cal BC) and later became central to the political ambitions of aspiring, early Uí Néill kings of Tara, achieving particular renown as the burial place of their eponymous ancestor, Niall of the Nine Hostages. Developments at Faughan are illuminated further by a wealth of prehistoric settlement and ritual sites in the surrounding area, as well as early documentary sources, and, collectively, speak to a regional centre and gathering place with long-lived social, symbolic, and political significance.

Keywords: Ireland, geophysical survey, excavation, Neolithic, timber enclosure, lithics, Late Bronze Age, hillfort, regional centres, Tara landscape

In 2013, a major archaeological complex defined by a series of large hilltop enclosures, probable burial sites, and associated features was discovered through geophysical survey at Faughan Hill, roughly midway between the towns of Navan and Kells in County Meath (Dowling & Cahill Wilson 2014; Dowling 2015).¹ The character and scale of the newly identified features marked this out as an important focal centre in a region populated with some of Ireland's largest and most spectacular monument ensembles, not least at the Hill of

Tara, 15 km to the south-east. Based on the results of these initial investigations by the Discovery Programme's Late Iron Age and 'Roman' Ireland (LIARI) project, Faughan became a key research focus within the newly relaunched Tara Research Project (Schot 2016; Schot *et al.* 2016). A more complete picture of the layout and composition of the Faughan complex was revealed through further geophysical survey undertaken in 2016, in collaboration with the Römisch-Germanische Kommission, Frankfurt (Dowling 2017). This was followed in September 2017 by test excavations by the Discovery Programme, with grant support from the Royal Irish Academy. Two trenches excavated across the hilltop enclosures yielded evidence of four discrete phases of activity spanning some 3000 years, from

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Fig. 1.
Faughan Hill, viewed from the north

around the mid-4th to mid-1st millennia BC. The findings from Faughan are considered here alongside a wealth of contemporary settlement and ritual sites in the wider landscape and add significantly to the study of landscape organisation, social identity, territoriality, and power in one of the most archaeologically rich regions of north-west Europe.

LANDSCAPE SETTING

Faughan is a low, rounded hill of limestone and shale (109 m ASL; Fig. 1) c. 1 km north-west of the village of Bohermeen, in west-central Meath. Located at the junction of the townlands of Faughanhill and Durhamstown, the summit of the hill commands extensive panoramic views of the surrounding lowlands, isolated low hills, and higher ridges beyond. Approximately 3 km to the north is the River Blackwater, which issues from Lough Ramor, close to the present Cavan–Meath border, and flows south-

eastwards past Kells towards Navan, where it joins the River Boyne to enter the Irish Sea near Drogheda (Fig. 2). These rivers, overlooked by major passage tomb cemeteries at Loughcrew (*Slieve na Calliagh*) and the Bend of the Boyne (*Brú na Bóinne*), have since the earliest times contributed to the agricultural richness of the region and served as important conduits for the movement of people, goods, and ideas in and out of Ireland (eg, Cooney & Grogan 1994, 42–7, 54–7, 91–4; Newman 1998; 2005; Cunliffe 2001; Bhreathnach 2005, 410–12; 2011, 130–2; Armit 2013; Grogan 2013).

As might be expected, the region is home to an impressive array of prehistoric and later archaeological sites (Fig. 3). Virtually all the surrounding low hills and more distant heights visible from the summit of Faughan are crowned by ancient monuments, most frequently burial mounds and enclosures. Alongside Tara (155 m ASL; Fig. 4), notable foci include the Hill of Lloyd (129 m ASL; Fig. 5), the site of a large multivallate enclosure overlooking the western



Fig. 2. Topographical map of the wider Meath region; inset shows extent of detailed map (Fig. 3)

approach into the Blackwater Valley, near Kells (Dowling 2015, 10–16), and the Hill of Ward (119 m ASL), where recent survey and excavation have revealed a remarkable sequence of enclosures and structures dating from the Late Bronze Age to medieval period (S. Davis, pers comm.). Flanking Faughan Hill to the south is a large expanse of raised bog known as Bohermeen (or Jamestown) Bog, now somewhat reduced by reclamation. The bog forms a natural boundary between what Newman (2005, 367–70) describes as two discrete ‘landscapes’, one centred on the River Blackwater – from Mullach Lough, on the north-east, to its confluence with the Boyne at Navan – and the other stretching eastwards from the Athboy River and focused on the Hill of Ward (*Tlachtga*), about 7.5 km south-west of

Faughan. The large corpus of objects recorded from Bohermeen Bog, which includes Neolithic stone axes, Bronze Age weapons (eg, Colquhoun 2015, no. 10; see also Fig. 28, below) and a Roman bronze patera (Ó Ríordáin 1947, 61–2), may be a further reflection of the past significance of this boundary location. A crannóg identified in the mid-19th century (Wood-Martin 1886, 82) suggests it was also a locus for settlement.

Among the broader range of monuments and sites within the Blackwater Valley, the most significant concentration occurs at Teltown (*Taitiu*), the famed assembly site of the early medieval kings of Tara, 3 km north of Faughan. The complex, which is spread across an area of approximately 4 km² bounded to the south by the River Blackwater, encompasses a variety

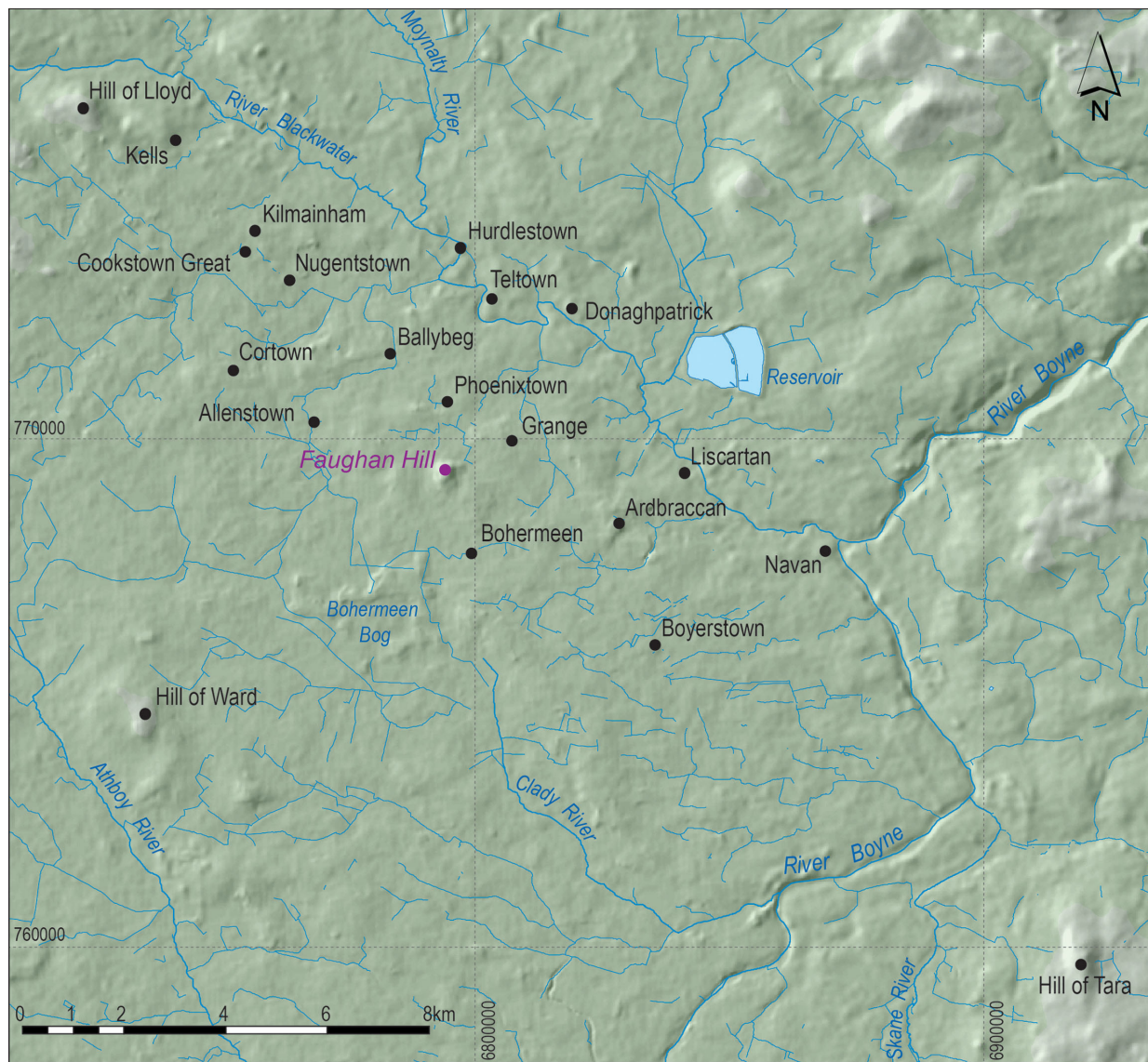


Fig. 3.

Map of Faughan and environs, showing archaeological sites and places mentioned in the text

of enclosures, burial sites, linear earthworks, roadways, and several stones with rock art, as well as the important early church site of Donaghpatrick (Herity 2001, 11–14; Dowling 2011, 219–20; Gosling 2016; O’Brien & Waddell 2018). Although few sites within the complex have been subject to detailed investigation, their form, coupled with the dates obtained from limited excavations at the linear earthworks known as the Knockauns (O’Brien & Waddell 2018) and the impressive multivallate enclosure of Ráith Airthir (Dowling 2011, 219–20), points to sustained activity

in the Teltown area from the Bronze Age onwards. Movement through this part of the Blackwater Valley was likely facilitated by a fording point on the river at Donaghpatrick (MacNeill 1962, 313; Graham 1975, 240), which is thought to have been located along one of the main east–west routeways in early Ireland, the *Slige Assail* (‘Road of Assal’; eg, Ó Lochlainn 1940).

The multitude of prehistoric sites identified between Navan and Kells in advance of construction of the M3 motorway, moreover, provides an important window onto the protracted history of settlement within the



Fig. 4.
View south-east from the summit of Faughan, with Tara visible on the horizon

Blackwater Valley (see eg, McLoughlin & Walsh 2008; Walsh 2021). These include Neolithic and Bronze Age houses, Late Neolithic ritual structures (some associated with Grooved Ware), burnt mounds and burial sites of mainly Bronze Age date, Iron Age metalworking features, and several early medieval settlements. Notable concentrations occur at Kilmainham and Cookstown Great, about 6 km north-west of Faughan, and at the foot of the hill, in Grange townland. A significant number of sites excavated along the road corridor are broadly contemporary with activity recorded at Faughan and are further considered below.

In contrast to the excavated sites, the majority of Recorded Monuments (sites listed in the statutory *Record of Monuments and Places*) in the surrounding environs of Faughan appear to be medieval in date. Enclosures and ecclesiastical sites predominate and include several ringforts, two possible moated sites, and two early church sites, at Ardraccan and Cortown. Outside the Teltown complex, the only extant monuments within a c. 5 km radius of Faughan for which a prehistoric date may be indicated are three prominent mounds (1.5–2.5 m high and 20–28 m in

diameter) in the townlands of Ardraccan, Liscartan, and Hurdlestown.

TOPOGRAPHY & HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

The central position and prominence of Faughan Hill within the Blackwater Valley no doubt contributed to its strategic and symbolic significance. The hill is identified in medieval sources as *Ocha* (or *Ochann*), the traditional burial place of Niall of the Nine Hostages, eponymous ancestor of the Uí Néill. It was also the reputed site of a battle in AD 482 between Niall's descendants and other rival claimants to the kingship of Tara (Morris 1926; Byrne 1973, 77; Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983) – an office the Uí Néill came to dominate from the 7th to early 11th centuries.

A routeway called the 'track of the hosts', which may have formed part of the *Slige Assail*, is mentioned in a 10th century poem on Niall's funeral ceremony (Gwynn 1906, 37). The modern placename, Faughan Hill (Ir. *Mullaigh Fochain*), is translated by John O'Donovan (1836) as 'hill of the provender', suggesting



Fig. 5.

View north-west from Faughan towards the Hill of Lloyd (centre), topped by the 18th century lighthouse folly known as the 'Spire of Lloyd', and King's Mountain beyond

a possibly more recent connection with the production of fodder for livestock or food of some kind.

Faughan Hill is distinguished from other major focal centres in the region by its dearth of upstanding archaeological remains. A well-preserved limekiln on the southern slope is the only certain archaeological feature visible on the hill today. An irregular stone pillar in the adjacent field to the west is of unknown significance; it may be a standing stone but could also have been erected in modern times as a scratching-post. Much of the south-western sector of the hill has been cut away by a modern quarry and, apart from several other, smaller quarries, the only conspicuous features today are the townland boundaries and field divisions that meet near a telecommunications mast on the summit. However, the identification on a 1995 aerial photograph of a series of curvilinear cropmarks on the southern side of the hill suggested that archaeological features may be present (Fig. 6) and

this has since been confirmed by geophysical survey and excavation.

The 1st and 2nd edition Ordnance Survey maps show a wood on the summit of the hill (Fig. 7), which Samuel Lewis (1837, 345) describes as forming part of Allenstown Demesne, a 700 acre (c. 283 ha) plantation with a deer park. The woodland was cleared as part of land reclamation works in the 1960s. This involved the use of a bulldozer to uproot tree stumps and level out disturbed soils across the summit and upper slopes of the hill.² The lands on the hill are farmed by several landowners and are currently under pasture and meadow.

GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

Despite a rich corpus of evidence to suggest an early importance for Faughan, no archaeological investigations had been undertaken there prior to geophysical



Fig. 6.

OSI aerial photo of Faughan Hill (1995), with cropmarks arrowed (© OSI. Reproduced under license no. EN0059212. All rights reserved)

survey by the Discovery Programme in 2013. The investigations, comprising magnetic gradiometry, were conducted with Bartington Grad 601-2 (dual sensor) fluxgate instruments and focused on the summit and the eastern and southern sectors of the hilltop, covering an area of 6.2 ha. An extraordinary array of buried archaeological features was revealed, including portions of two very large enclosures, as well as several smaller enclosures, probable burial monuments, and structures represented by ring-ditches (Dowling 2015, 17–20).

Prompted by these important discoveries, further geophysical survey was undertaken at Faughan in June 2016 by the Tara Project in collaboration with the Römisch-Germanische Kommission and the School of Geography and Archaeology, National University of Ireland, Galway (Dowling 2017). The surveys utilised a range of geomagnetic instruments (Bartington Grad 601-2 and SENSYS 5-channel and 16-channel magnetometer systems) and targeted previously unsurveyed areas on the northern, western,

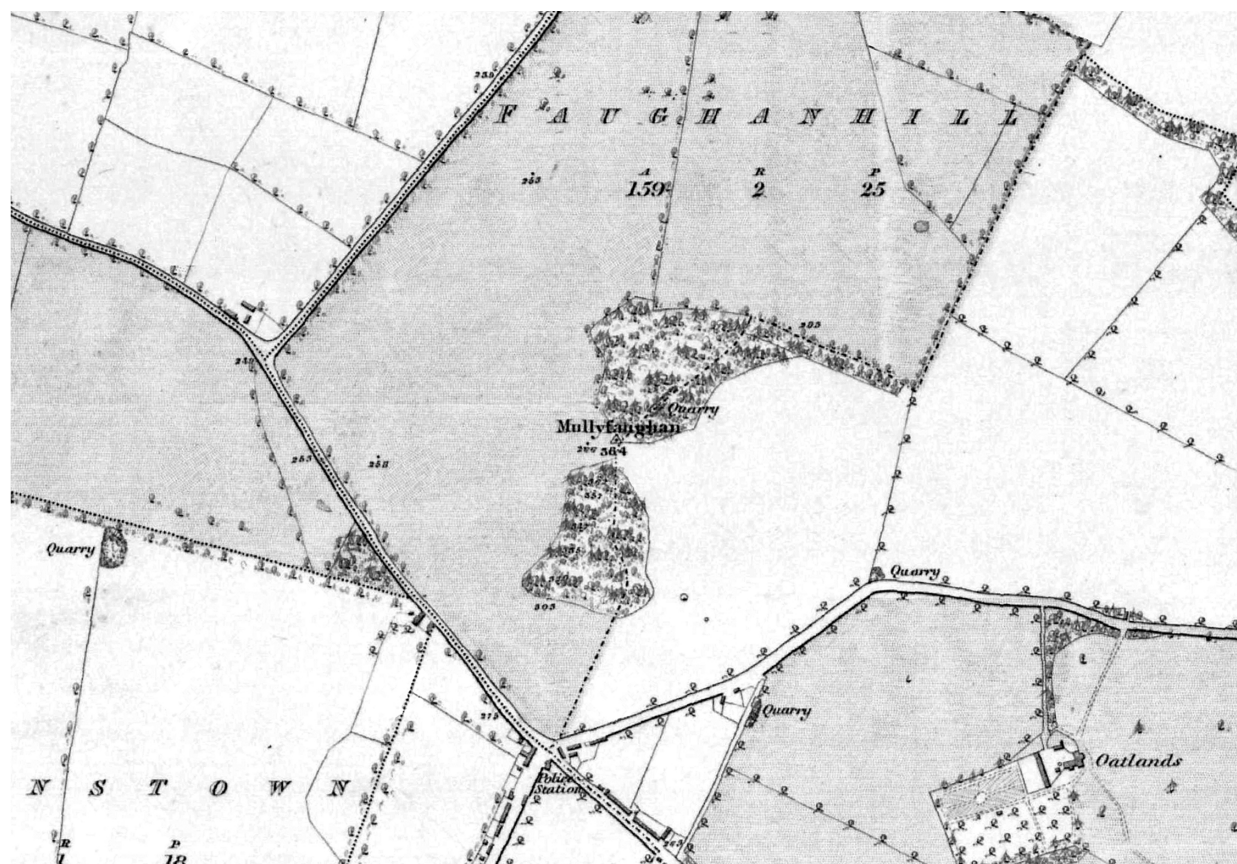


Fig. 7.

First-edition Ordnance Survey map of Faughan Hill, showing extent of former woodland (© OSI. Reproduced under license no. EN0059212. All rights reserved)

and southern flanks of the hill. This brought the total area investigated by geomagnetic prospection to approximately 15.7 ha and served to further underline the extensive scale and multi-period character of the complex (Figs 8 & 9). The following is a summary of the principal archaeological features revealed by the combined surveys.

Multi-ditched hilltop enclosure

The most striking discovery made by geophysical survey is a roughly circular hilltop enclosure measuring around 400 m in overall diameter, which formed the primary focus of the excavations described below. Approximately 60% of the circuit of the enclosure, which is defined by multiple concentric boundaries and encompasses an area of *c.* 12.7 ha, has been mapped. A large section on the west has been cut away by the quarry, while most of the north-east quadrant

is on lands that were inaccessible at the time of survey. Excavation has confirmed that the three principal enclosing elements comprise substantial, partly rock-cut, ditches, 1.5–2 m deep and 3.2–3.6 m in maximum width.

The inner enclosure is demarcated by a single ditch, with a causeway entrance on the east-north-east, and has an internal diameter of 270 m (F3 on Fig. 9). Surrounding it, at a distance of *c.* 50 m, is an outer enclosure defined by two ditches, set 7–8 m apart (F1), inside of which, on the north-east and east, are segments of a narrower ditch or slot trench (F2). Well-defined gaps in the circuits of both ditches, on the east-north-east and west-south-west, likely represent original (causewayed) entrances in the outer enclosure. Those on the east-north-east correspond with the gap in the inner enclosure, which may likewise have had an opposing entrance on the south-west that has been cut away by the quarry. This shared alignment,



Fig. 8.

Results of combined 2013 and 2016 gradiometer surveys (© Discovery Programme/Römisch-Germanische Kommission), overlaid on an orthophoto of Faughan Hill (orthophoto: © OSI. Reproduced under license no. EN0059212. All rights reserved)

coupled with the concentricity of the inner and outer enclosures, suggested them to be contemporary and – based on size and apparent morphological parallels – broadly comparable to a Late Bronze Age hillfort (450 m in diameter) excavated at Rahally, near New Inn, Co. Galway (Mullins 2008; 2009; 2014). Interestingly, these parallels extend to similarities in entrance orientation and movement through these enclosures focused on a north-east to south-west axis, the frequent occurrence of which at later prehistoric and early medieval high status sites suggests a deep rooted symbolic significance (Gleeson 2012).

Possible palisaded enclosure

Traces of another possible large enclosure (F4) were identified just inside the line of the inner hilltop enclosure

ditch (F3), with which it is partly contiguous. It is defined geophysically by a pair of narrow – and in places discontinuous – parallel lineations, which form a broad, irregular arc around the eastern and southern sides of the hilltop, from the inner edge of the enclosure ditch (F3), on the north-east, to the modern quarry. Excavation of a section of one of the linear features has confirmed that it is a slot trench and pre-dates the enclosure ditch by more than 2000 years (see C.110, below). Although not discernible elsewhere, this double slot trench likely represents part of a fenced enclosure that once surrounded the hilltop, the northern sector of which may have been subsumed by the hilltop enclosure ditch or truncated by later activity. The manner in which the enclosure ditch flattens out on the south seems to suggest, moreover, that a deliberate effort was made to accommodate it (and perhaps to avoid some other

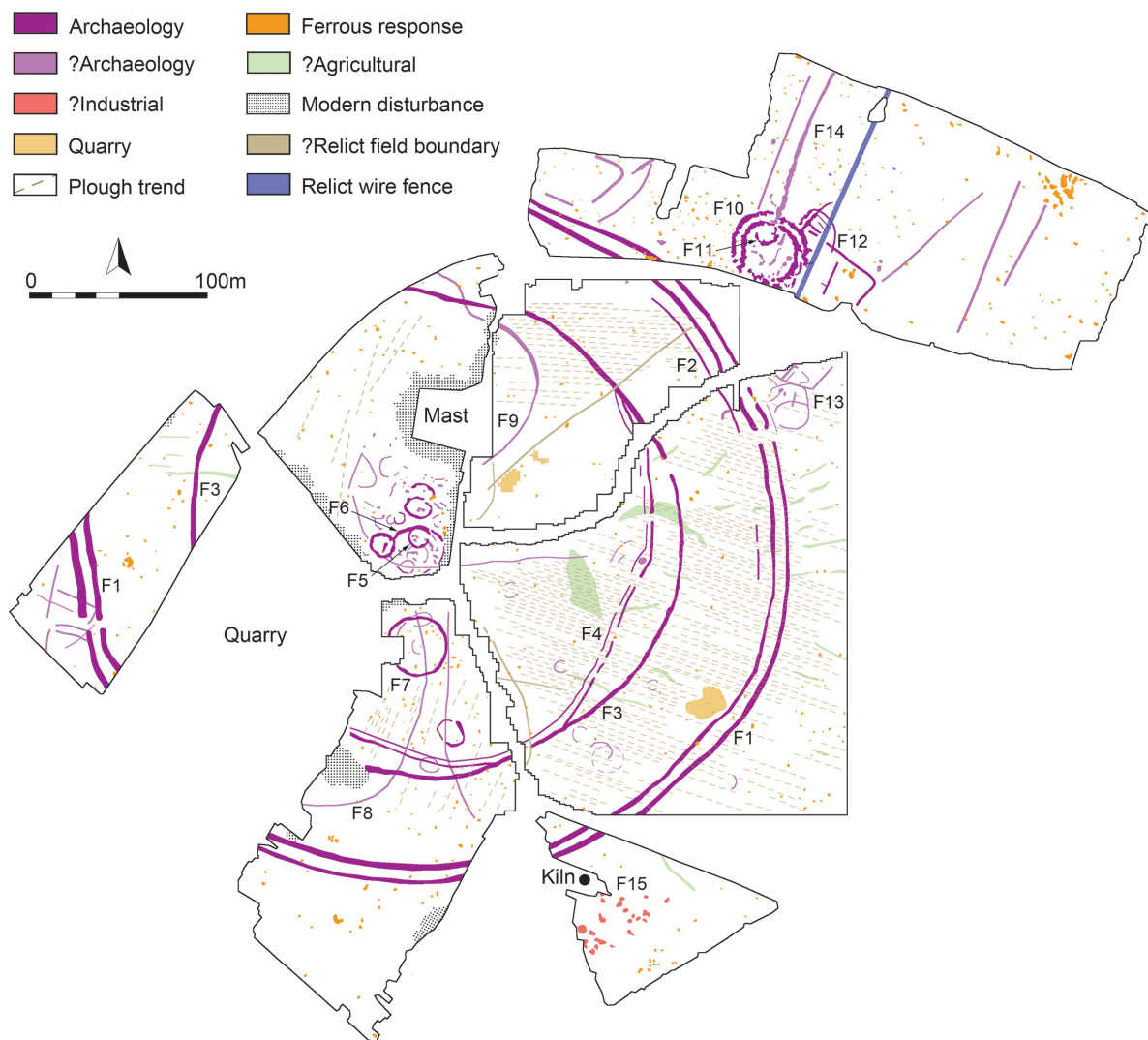


Fig. 9.
Interpretative plan of principal features recorded by geomagnetic survey

feature/s in this area). However, such an interpretation is difficult to reconcile with the lengthy timespan separating the putative fenced enclosure and the hilltop enclosure, which makes it highly improbable that any surface indication of the former survived when the hilltop enclosure was constructed.

Summit features

Most of the remaining archaeological features revealed by survey are concentrated on and around the relatively small, level area of the summit. Notable among them are three well-defined, circular and

sub-circular features measuring *c.* 10–12 m in diameter. These ring-ditches are, in the main, interpreted as funerary monuments – though the uniform circularity of one example (F5) would also be consistent with a wooden structure or building. The interpretation of this feature as a possible house slot trench is perhaps supported by its location inside, and adjacent to, a semi-circular ditch that may define the northern part of an enclosure (F6). One of the ring-ditches also overlaps with the boundary of the latter enclosure which, if projected as a full circle, would have similar dimensions to a 35 m diameter circular enclosure (F7) identified a short distance to its south.

There are faint suggestions of small circular features in the interior of the latter enclosure, which is also bisected north/south by one of a pair of linear features (F8) that splay outwards across the line of the inner hilltop enclosure and continue beyond the limits of the survey. Though not visible topographically, cartographic and aerial photographic evidence suggests that these lineations may terminate at or near the outer boundary of the hilltop enclosure, raising the possibility that they formed some kind of funnel-shaped 'avenue' leading to the centre of the enclosure. However, the lack of a corresponding entrance in the inner enclosure ditch at this point, and their depiction as part of a woodland on the Ordnance Survey map of *c.* 1885 (on which the hilltop enclosure is not marked), may indicate a later date and function for these linear features. Similar uncertainties surround a large, curvilinear feature (F9) in the north-east quadrant of the inner enclosure, which is also shown on historical mapping and survives as a shallow depression, *c.* 1 m in width.

Settlement enclosure & field system

Geomagnetic survey over an area of relatively flat, low-lying ground on the north-east flank of the hill, some 50 m downslope of the hilltop enclosure, revealed the footprint of what appears to be a settlement enclosure and associated field system. The enclosure (F10) is roughly circular in plan and is represented by two concentric ditches measuring about 35 m and 45 m in maximum diameter, respectively. The strong magnetic response of the infilled ditches suggests they may contain significant quantities of burnt material. No clear evidence of an entrance was identified, though this may lie on the east or south where the circuit of the enclosure is less well defined. Several curvilinear features, possible pits, and other traces of activity were recorded in the interior, including the possible foundation trench of a (circular?) building *c.* 10 m in diameter (F11), which adjoins the enclosure boundary on the north. Based on its morphology and evidence for internal structures, this enclosure may comprise the levelled remains of a bivallate ringfort (settlement enclosure) of early medieval date.

Adjoining the enclosure on the east are several linear and arcuate ditch-type features that appear to form part of an associated field system (F12). They extend beyond the limits of the survey and are

potentially related to a group of sub-rectangular and linear features (F13) just outside the north-east entrance to the hilltop enclosure.

Later agricultural activity appears to be signalled, moreover, by a series of north-east to south-west oriented linear features that extend across the northern part of the survey area. One of these (F14) seems to truncate, and therefore post-date, the boundary of enclosure F10 on the north.

Industrial activity

Lastly, a scatter of strong, amorphous magnetic responses (F15) was recorded in the vicinity of the kiln, at the southern foot of the hill. These may derive from burnt/fired material associated with the production of lime mortar in recent centuries.

EXCAVATION AIMS & STRATEGY

The archaeological significance of the features revealed by survey set in motion plans for further work at Faughan, which was facilitated by an excavation grant from the Royal Irish Academy. The investigations were conducted over a 4 week period in September 2017 and involved the excavation of two test trenches on the north-east slope of the hill (Figs 10 & 11).³ The trenches were positioned based on the geophysical survey results and precisely geo-referenced using a differential GPS. Trench 1 comprised a 2 × 15 m cutting across the inner ditch of the hilltop enclosure and the putative fenced enclosure, while Trench 2 was focused on the outer enclosing elements of the hilltop enclosure and measured 2 × 24 m. Both trenches were oriented north-east to south-west, with Trench 2 located *c.* 40 m north-east and downslope of Trench 1 (Fig. 12). The principal objectives of the excavation were to gain an understanding of the site stratigraphy, the architecture and chronology of the enclosures, and the nature of associated activity.

The trenches were excavated by hand and 'single context' methodology was used to investigate and record archaeological features and deposits. Due to the depth of the enclosure ditches, the sides of the trenches were stepped in to prevent possible collapse and, as a result, it was only possible to excavate fully 1 m wide sections through these features. The site stratigraphy and finds were geo-referenced using a total station and photogrammetry software was used to create 3D models of each trench at various stages of



Fig. 10.

Detailed view of geophysical survey results showing location of excavation trenches orthophoto: © OSI. Reproduced under license no. EN0059212. All rights reserved)

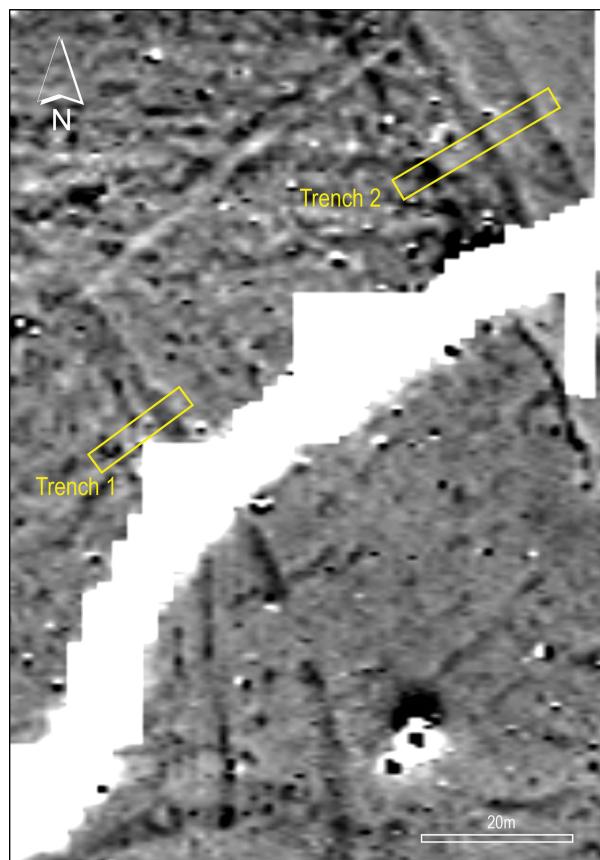


Fig. 11.
Detail of trench locations and features targeted

excavation. An aerial survey of the site and excavation was also carried out by the Discovery Programme using a UAV (drone). On completion of the excavation, the trenches were backfilled by hand and re-instated to leave the top of the trenches flush with the surrounding ground surface.

Finds & samples

Dry sieving was undertaken on site using various sampling strategies to facilitate the recovery of small artefacts and ecofacts. Bulk soil samples were also retrieved from archaeological layers for subsequent processing and environmental analysis.

Bulk soil samples, charcoal, and animal bone from the excavated features were prepared and sent for specialist analysis to obtain suitable material for dating and other relevant data. The faunal assemblage, consisting of a total of 243 fragments of

mammalian bone and teeth, was analysed by Fiona Beglane (Beglane 2018). No human remains were identified. The soil samples were processed using a flotation device and the remains recovered were sorted and identified by Ingelise Stuijts (Stuijts 2018).

The finds recovered during the excavation were dominated by a lithic assemblage comprising 193 artefacts of probable Neolithic date, which were analysed by Killian Driscoll (Driscoll 2018; Figs 15–17, below). Two fragments of possible metal-working waste retrieved during the excavations were examined by Paul Rondelez (Rondelez 2018). A possible whetstone, a single sherd of medieval pottery, and three sherds of post-medieval pottery were also found. The results of specialist analyses are incorporated into the discussion below.

Radiocarbon dating

A total of 11 samples from seven archaeological features was submitted to the 14Chrono Centre, Queens University Belfast for AMS radiocarbon dating. The results are presented in Figure 13 and Table 1. The majority of dates were obtained from short-life samples, including charred cereal grain, animal bone, and wood charcoal from short-lived species/twigs. All calibrated radiocarbon determinations discussed in the text are cited at two sigma (95.4% probability; Reimer *et al.* 2020).

EXCAVATION RESULTS

The excavated features, which include three partly rock-cut enclosure ditches and a stone-packed slot trench, were sealed by soils that have been much affected by natural and anthropogenic processes, particularly in Trench 2 where the soils were deepest. Consequently, it proved difficult to distinguish a distinct B-horizon and cut archaeological features, including the enclosure ditches, were not easily discernible in the soil profile. Moreover, the upper soil layers in both trenches appeared to comprise redeposited material from woodland clearance in the 1960s, which disturbed an early prehistoric horizon on the hill (see below).

The following description of the site stratigraphy is supported by various illustrations, including a site matrix (Fig. 14), finds illustrations (Figs 15–17), plan and section drawings (Figs 18–19 & 22, 23), and photographs (Figs 20, 21 & 24–26). The first digit of



Fig. 12.
Aerial view of Trenches 1 (bottom left) and 2

each context number refers to the trench in which it was recorded.

Upper soil layers

The removal of a thin stratum of humic material (C.101/C.201) and the underlying sod (C.102/C.202) revealed a compact band of gravelly clay (C.103/C.203) *c.* 0.05 m in average thickness. This layer, which extended across much of the excavated area and was heavily stained with iron oxides leached from the upper sod horizon, likely relates to bulldozing undertaken during woodland clearance in the 1960s. The presence of a large number of lithics – mostly flakes but also including a scraper and several blades and cores – within the matrix of C.103/C.203 suggests that the mechanical spreading of soils and gravel

disturbed an early prehistoric horizon that extended beyond the limits of the excavation. Related activity is indicated by C.205, a light yellowish-brown clay *c.* 0.35 m thick and 1.40 m in north-east to south-west extent, which probably represented a backfilled tree throw.

Beneath the topsoils, and sealing the archaeology, was a series of relatively homogeneous soil deposits that exhibited considerable variation in thickness, measuring *c.* 0.15 m in Trench 1 and ranging from *c.* 0.20 m to as much as 0.60 m at the upper (south-west) end of Trench 2. A former ploughzone was indicated in both trenches by a dark, yellowish-brown silty clay (C.104/C.204 & C.227), 0.10–0.40 m thick, containing a large number of lithics, a single sherd of medieval Dublin-type ware, several sherds of post-medieval Brownware pottery, and charcoal flecking, all of which

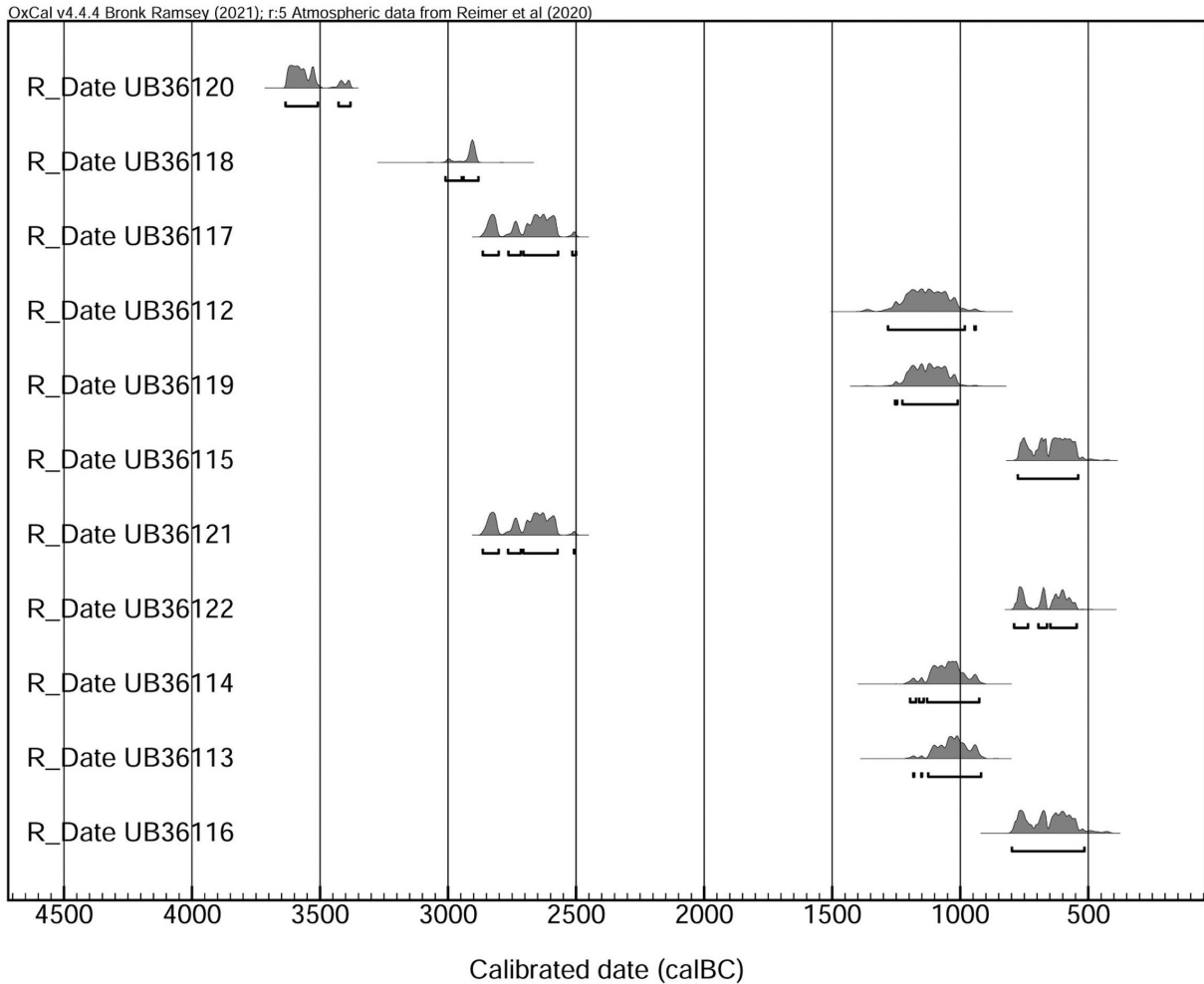


Fig. 13.
Probability distributions of radiocarbon dates from Faughan Hill

were likely displaced and spread by ploughing. C.104 was cut by a modern stone-filled drain (C.105) and sealed all archaeological features in Trench 1. In Trench 2, the ploughzone overlay two soil layers that were only discernible in the south-western end of the cutting. C.206 was a medium yellowish-brown sandy loam that lay directly below C.204 and partly extended over one of the infilled ditches of the outer enclosure (Enclosure Ditch 2) where it was disturbed by an animal burrow. It was flecked with charcoal throughout and contained a number of lithics. Although the interface between C.206 and the underlying layer, C.224, was poorly defined, it was still possible to identify the latter as a distinct horizon characterised by a band of light yellowish-brown sandy loam averaging 0.20 m in depth. It, too,

contained frequent charcoal flecking and a single chert flake, and was disturbed by animal burrows.

The variable thickness of the upper soil layers is likely due to a number of factors, including slope gradient and hillwash accumulation, as well as the spreading of soils through ploughing. Similarly, their relative homogeneity may stem from a combination of ploughing, earthworm mixing, and animal burrowing, possibly compounded by within-soil illuviation and localised colluviation. As a result, it was very difficult to recognise a distinct B-horizon, though C.224 in Trench 2 likely comprised the lower stratum of a sandy loam subsoil, albeit much affected by bioturbation processes.

In contrast, the C-horizon was well-defined. It consisted of a yellowish-grey glacial clay (C.116/

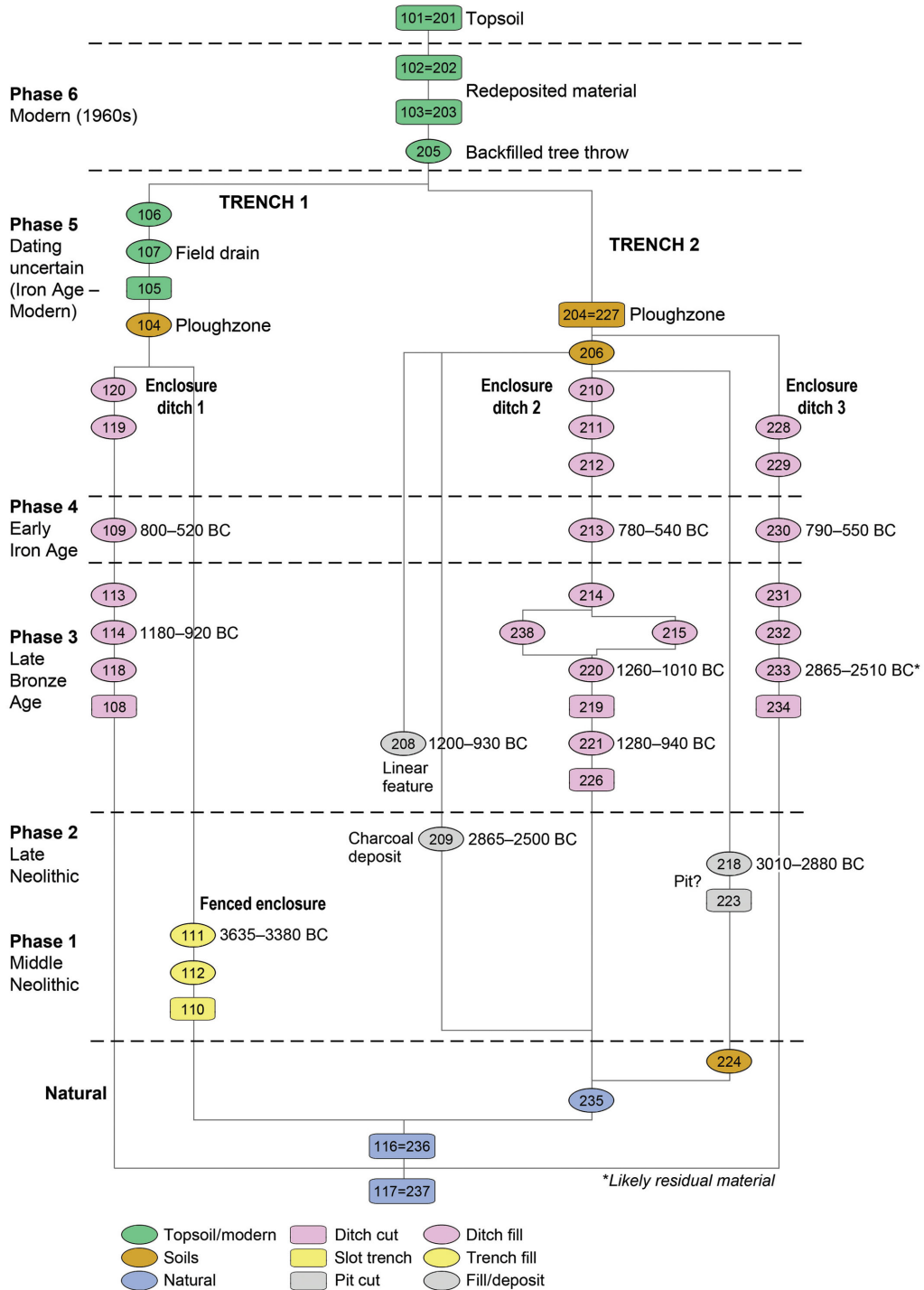


Fig. 14. Stratigraphic matrix and site phasing

TABLE 1: RADIOCARBON RESULTS FROM FAUGHAN HILL

Lab. no.	Context	Material	Radiocarbon age (BP)	Calibrated date range (95% confidence) cal BC
UB-36120	Slot trench fill (C.111)	Charred wheat/barley seed	4754±29	3635–3380
UB-36113	Enclosure Ditch 1, basal fill (C.114)	Large mammal long bone	2859±34	1180–920
UB-36116	Enclosure Ditch 1, mid-level fill (C.109)	Willow charcoal (twig)	2523±42	800–520
UB-36118	Fill of pit-type, feature (C.218)	Oak charcoal (radial)	4304±28	3010–2880
UB-36117	Charcoal spread (C.209)	Ivy charcoal	4102±29	2865–2500
UB-36112	Enclosure Ditch 2 basal fill (C.221)	Large mammal long bone	2930±50	1280–940
UB-36119	Enclosure Ditch 2 lower fill (C.220)	Oak charcoal	2925±37	1260–1010
UB-36115	Enclosure Ditch 2 mid-level fill (C.213)	Blackthorn/sloe charcoal (twig)	2499±27	780–540
UB-36121	Enclosure Ditch 3 basal fill (C.233)	Oak charcoal	4107±28	2865–2510
UB-36122	Enclosure Ditch 3 mid-level fill (C.230)	Blackthorn/sloe charcoal (twig)	2527±26	790–550
UB-36114	Linear feature (C.208)	Blackthorn/sloe charcoal (twig)	2873±36	1200–930

The dates have been calibrated using OxCal v4.4 (Bronk Ramsey 2021: <http://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/>) and the INTCAL20 calibration curve (Reimer *et al.* 2020)

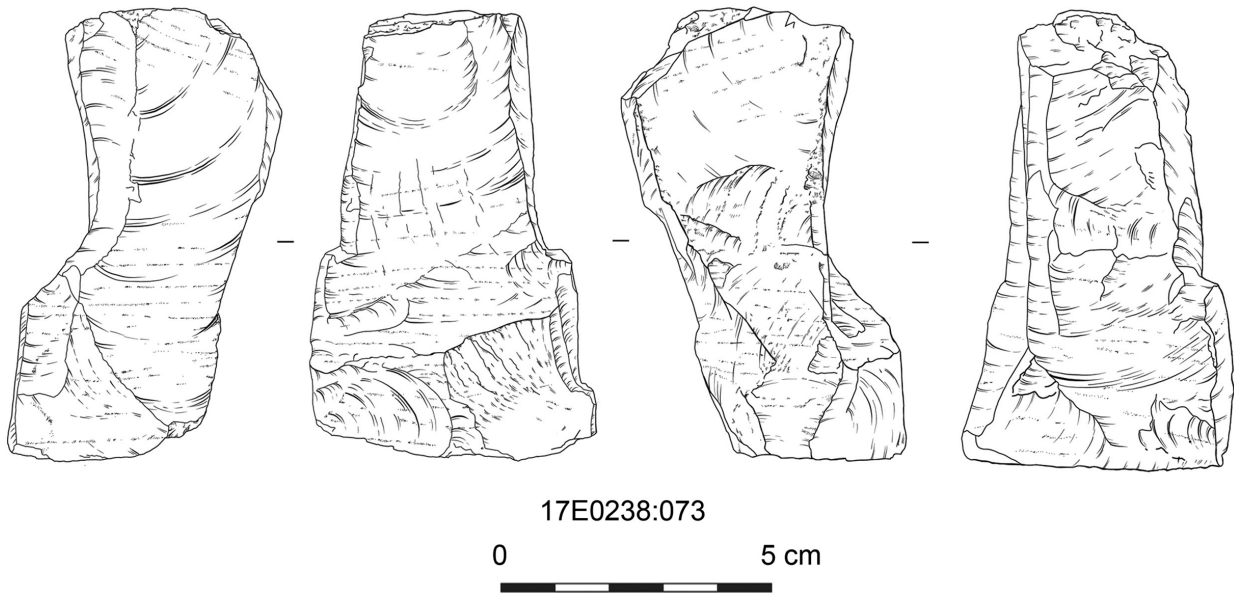


Fig. 15. Chert single platform core from C.203 (drawing: Sara Nylund)

C.236) with frequent gravel inclusions, which was overlaid in the south-western half of Trench 2 by a mottled, greyish-yellow sand (C.235). Where the soils were shallowest in Trench 2, the limestone and

shale bedrock (C.237) was exposed at a depth of 0.20–0.30 m beneath the present ground surface. Here the bedrock comprised an irregular, eroded surface of angular and sub-angular stones

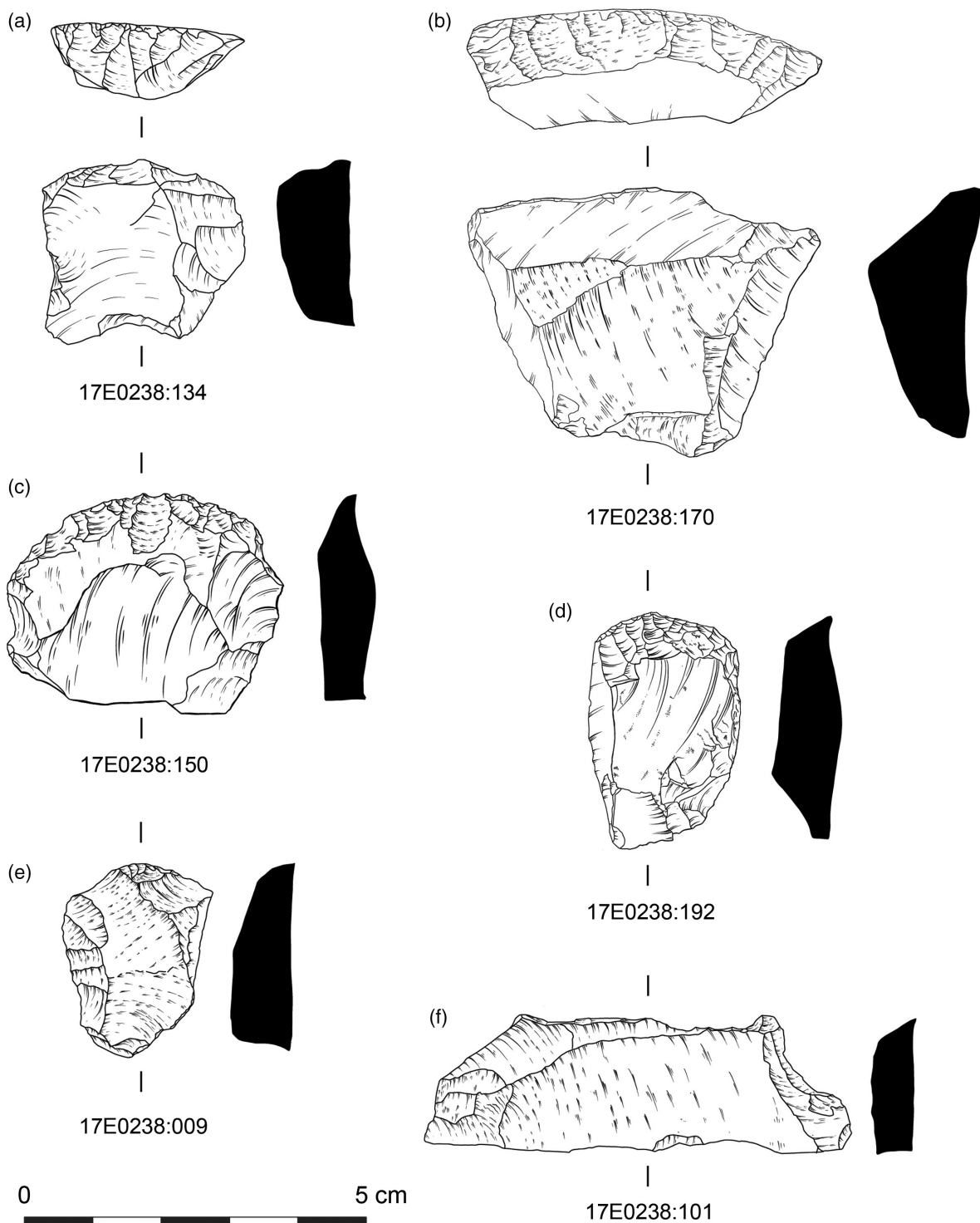


Fig. 16. Selection of stone tools: (a–d) convex end scrapers; (e) scraper; (f) retouched blade (drawings: Sara Nylund)

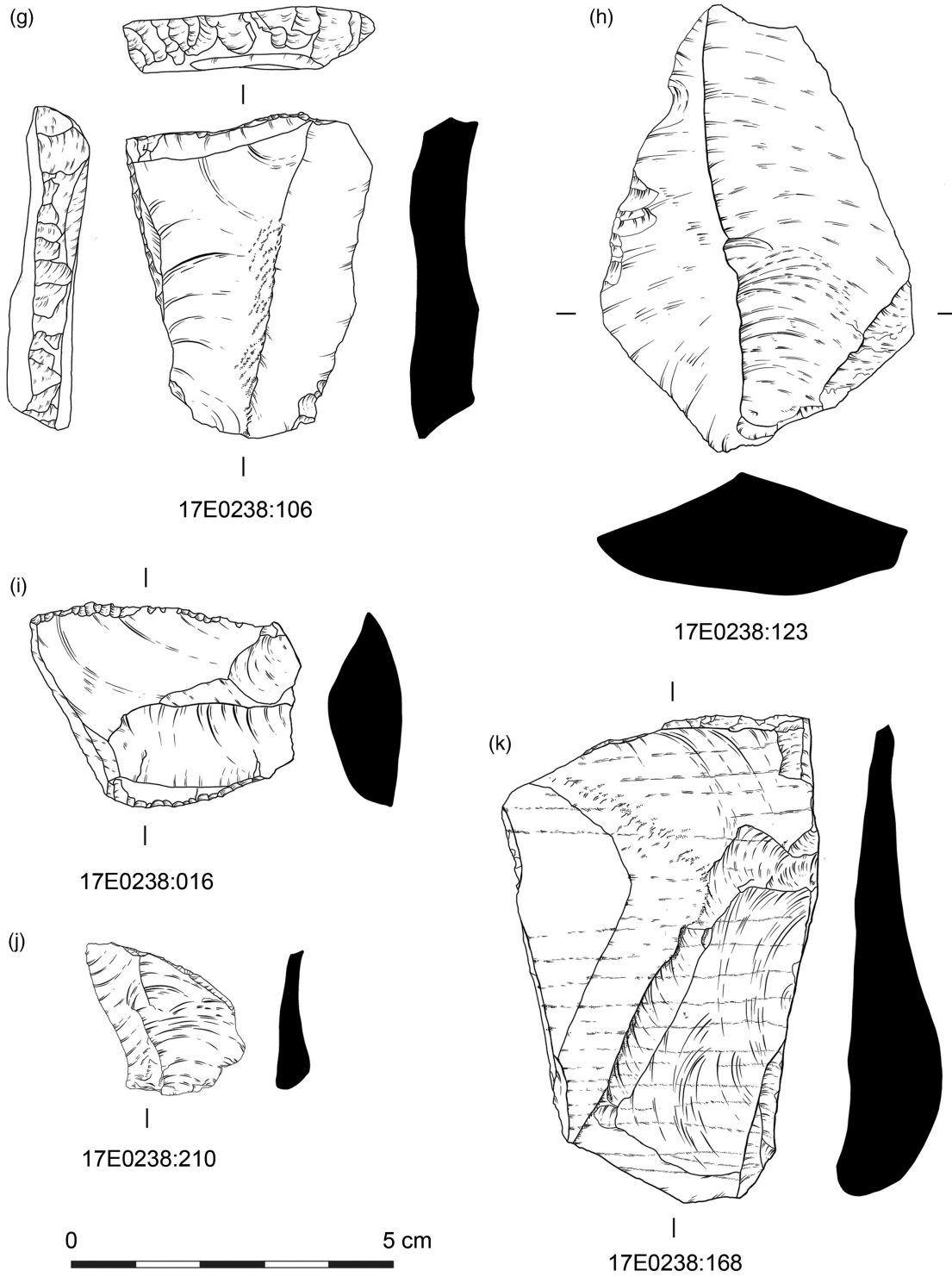


Fig. 17. Selection of retouched (g) and edge retouched (h–k) chert flakes (drawings: Sara Nylund)

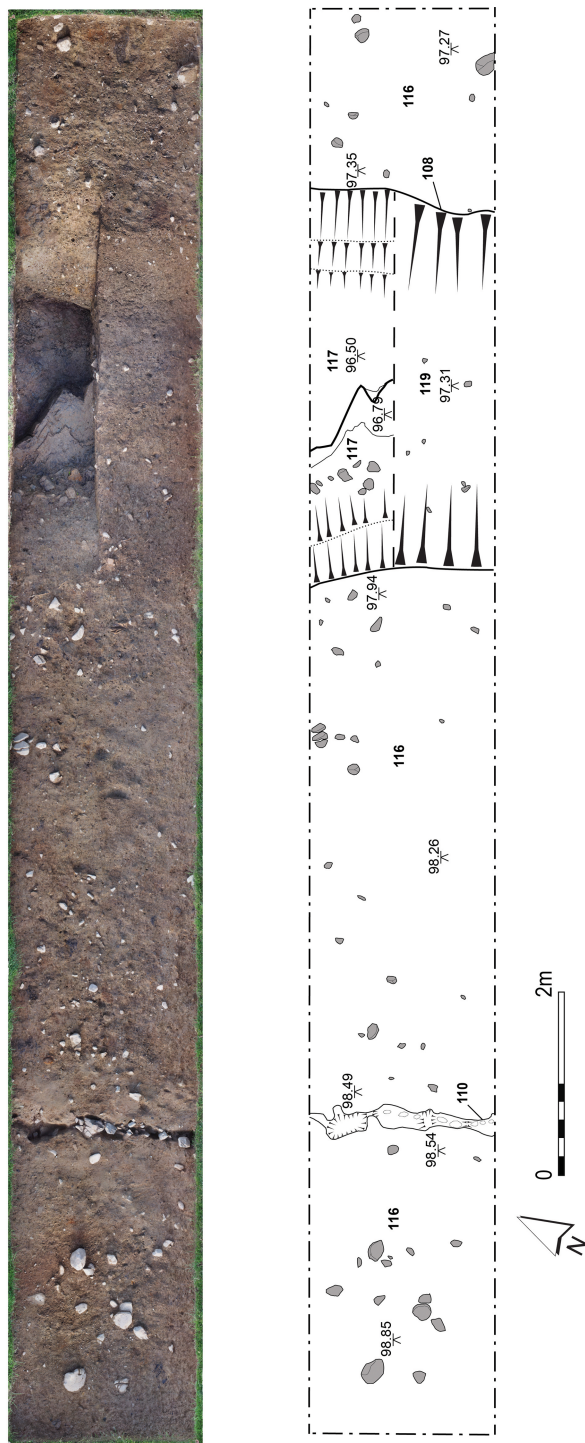


Fig. 18.

Trench 1: post-excitation photogrammetric model and plan

(averaging *c.* 0.10–0.40 m in size), into which the enclosure ditches had been cut.

Trench 1

Slot trench of fenced enclosure: A stone-packed slot trench (C.110) with post settings was excavated in the upper (south-west) part of Trench 1 (Figs 18–20). Oriented north-west to south-east, this feature corresponds with the innermost of two closely spaced linear anomalies mapped by geomagnetic survey (F4 on Fig. 9), which appear to define the eastern portion of a large enclosure surrounding the summit of the hill. No trace of a second slot trench or other feature corresponding with the outer linear anomaly (which is less clearly defined geophysically and may be discontinuous) was revealed by excavation. The excavated segment of C.110 consisted of a sharp, irregular-shaped cut measuring *c.* 0.20 m in width and 0.15–0.20 m in depth. Four groups of 2–3 closely set, rounded post-holes (eight post-holes in total), 0.05–0.08 m in diameter and depth and aligned in a slightly angled pattern, were cut into the uneven base of the slot trench at *c.* 0.10 m intervals (see Fig. 20b). Based on the layout and proportions of the slot trench, it likely supported a relatively modest palisade fence, possibly consisting of angled fence ‘panels’ composed of upright stakes interwoven with wattle.

The slot trench contained a large number of sub-angular stones (C.112), presumably packing material, the largest measuring *c.* 0.15 × 0.20 m (see Fig. 20a). Intermixed with the stones was a moderately compacted yellowish-brown silty clay that contained carbonised cereal (wheat/barley) grain and oak charcoal. Overlying this was a medium-brown silty clay (C.111) interspersed with small stones and a few patches of heat affected clay which likely derived from elsewhere as there was no evidence of *in situ* burning. C.111 also contained a small quantity of charred wheat/barley as well as fragments of burnt hazelnut shell and some oak and hazel charcoal. Three flaked stone tools, all formed on chert, were recovered from the fills: a platform flake and a single platform core from C.111 and an edge-retouched platform flake from C.112.

A sample of charred wheat/barley from C.111 yielded a radiocarbon date of 3635–3380 cal BC (4754±29 BP; UBA-36120). This is the earliest date in the Faughan sequence and confirms the primary position of the slot

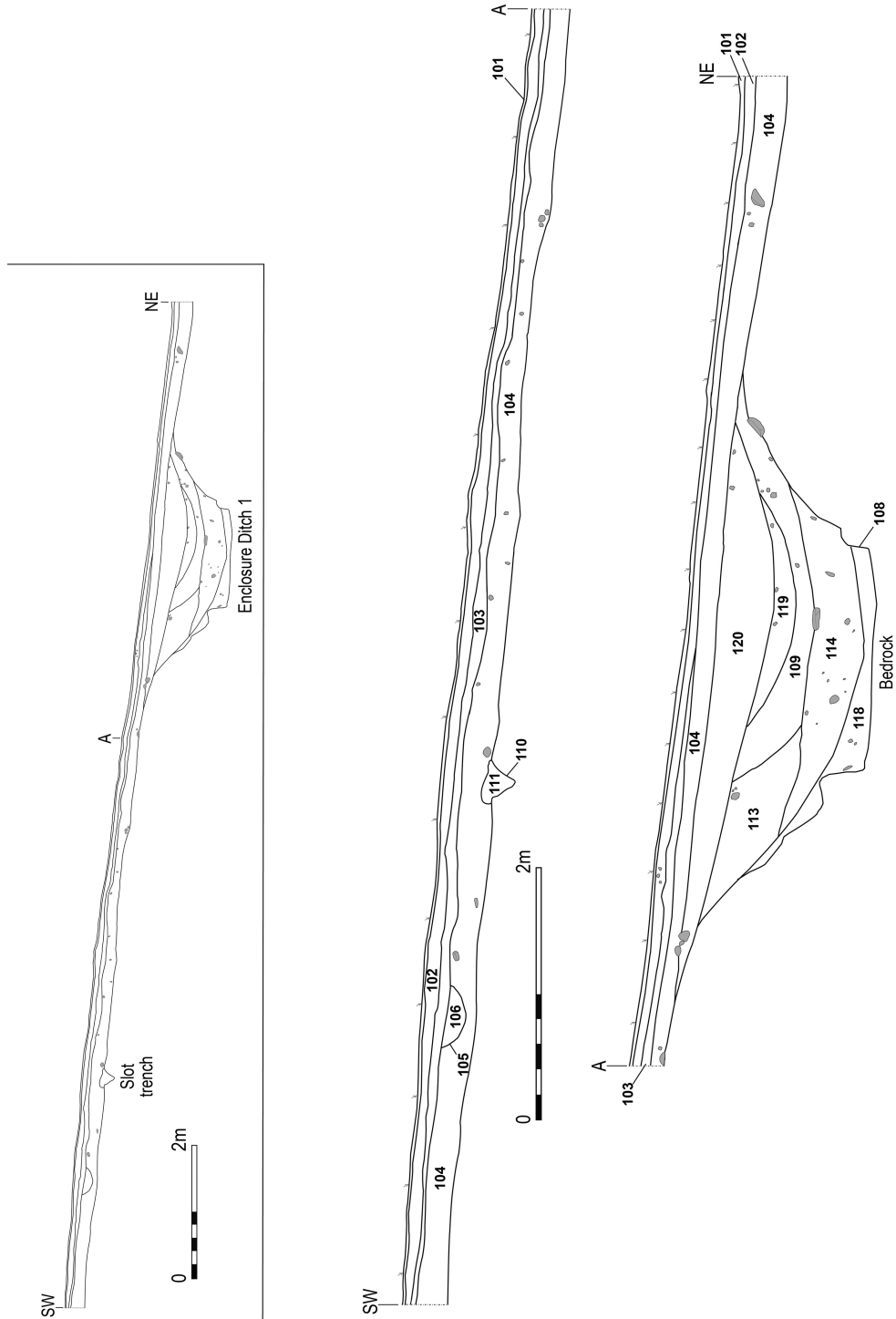


Fig. 19.
Trench 1: south-facing section



Fig. 20.

Slot trench of Neolithic fenced enclosure (C.110): (a) mid-excavation, looking south; (b) post-excavation, from the west

trench/fenced enclosure with respect to the multi-ditched hilltop enclosure, as suggested by geophysical survey. The stratigraphic position of the lithics, particularly within the packing material (C.112), suggests they are broadly contemporary with the slot trench.

Enclosure ditch 1 (inner enclosure): The inner ditch (C.108) of the hilltop enclosure is defined by a broad, U-shaped cut, with a flat-bottomed, rock-cut base and moderately sloping sides (Figs 18–19 & 21). It measured *c.* 3.20 m in width at the top, narrowing



Fig. 21.

Enclosure Ditch 1: (a) animal jawbone in ditch fill C.114; (b) post-excavation view of ditch (C.108), from the south

to *c.* 1.50 m at the base, and was *c.* 1.60 m in maximum depth below the present ground surface. The upper part of the ditch was cut into the glacial clay, while the lower 0.30 m was quarried into the

shale bedrock, on one side forming a step 0.25 m high above the flat base.

Six fills were recorded in the ditch (see Fig. 19). There was no evidence to indicate that the ditch had

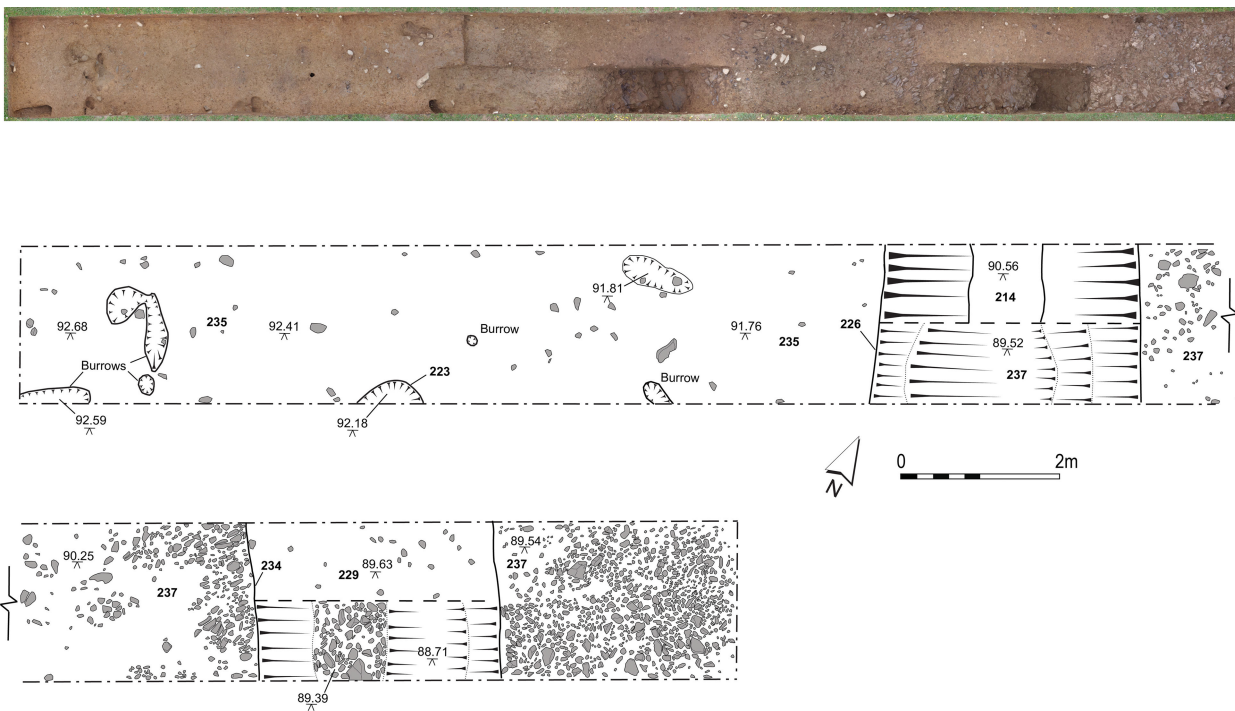


Fig. 22.
Trench 2: post-excitation photogrammetric model (no scale) and plan

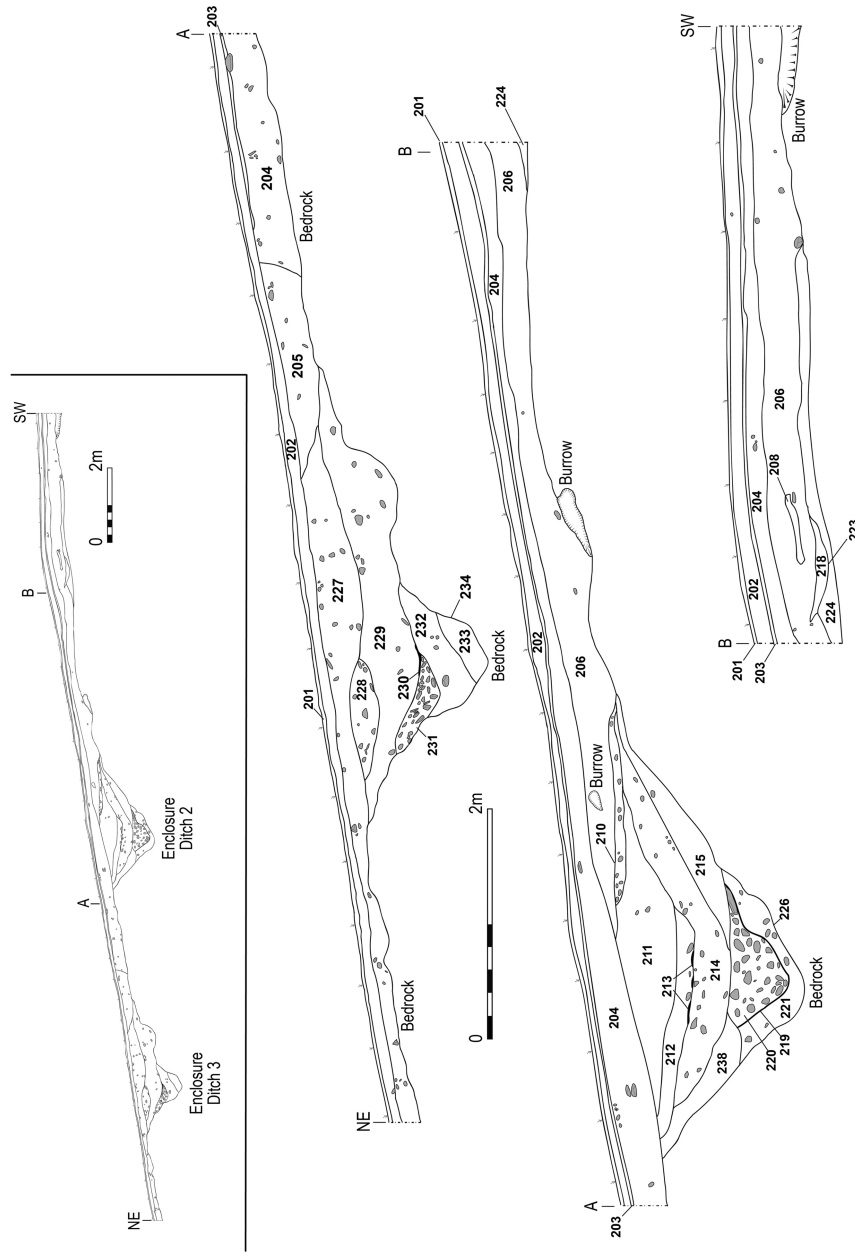


Fig. 23.
Trench 2: north-facing section



Fig. 24.
Enclosure Ditch 2 (C.226), post-excavation, viewed from the east (a) and north (b)

been recut or cleaned out, though the possibility of this having occurred cannot be ruled out. The primary fill consisted of moderately compacted, light orangy-grey silty clay (C.118), *c.* 0.20 m thick, that extended over the base of the ditch and rose *c.* 0.80 m along its outer

(north-east) edge. It contained occasional limestone and shale fragments, a small quantity of oak and ash charcoal, and some animal bone, including fragments of mandible from a medium sized mammal and the partial root of a tooth. This layer may have derived



Fig. 25.
Enclosure Ditch 3 (C.234), post-excitation, viewed from the north (a) and looking east (b)

from ditch-side weathering and slumping, possibly augmented by the inwash of sediment from an adjacent, internal rampart. Overlying C.118 was a light yellowish-brown silty clay (C.114) up to 0.35 m

thick, which may likewise relate to ditch-side weathering and the partial collapse of bank material. It contained a number of small to medium sized fragments of limestone and shale (*c.* 0.05–0.12 m in



Fig. 26.
 (a) Band of dark silty clay (C.208) extending across Trench 2, viewed from the south-west; (b) pre-excitation view of charcoal spread C.209, from the north

size) and a small amount of charcoal (oak, ash, and hazel). C.114 also produced the largest quantity of animal bone in the Faughan assemblage, representing nearly 80% of the total fragment count. Almost all the

identifiable remains were of cattle, apart from six deer teeth. A fragment of cattle/deer bone from this layer yielded a date of 1180–920 cal BC (2859±34 BP; UBA-36113). This broadly corresponds with the dates

obtained from the inner ditch of the outer enclosure (Enclosure Ditch 2), discussed below, indicating construction/use in what is identified in Ireland as the Late Bronze Age.

Further episodes of possible bank collapse and infilling are indicated by the overlying layers, C.113 and C.109. The latter contained a small quantity of oak, blackthorn/sloe, and willow charcoal, as well as some tiny, unidentified fragments of burnt bone. A sample of charcoal from a twig-sized piece of willow from C.109 produced a radiocarbon date of 800–520 cal BC (2523±42 BP; UBA-36116), indicating activity during the final Bronze Age/Early Iron Age. This closely matches the dates obtained from corresponding levels of the outer ditches of the hilltop enclosure (see below).

The uppermost fills of the ditch, C.119 and C.120, were somewhat different in character, comprising moderately compacted layers of light to medium-brown clayey silt containing occasional small stones and flecks of charcoal. These soils may have been deliberately pushed into the ditch to level out the area for agriculture, possibly during the later Iron Age or early medieval period, or more recently.

Trench 2

Enclosure ditch 2 (inner ditch of outer enclosure): The inner ditch (C.226) of the outer enclosure has a steep, V-shaped profile and measured an impressive 2 m in depth below the present ground surface (Figs 22–24). It was 3.60 m wide at the top, narrowing to *c.* 0.50 m at the base. The upper part of the ditch was cut into the glacial clay, while the lower 0.50 m or so was quarried into the shale bedrock.

The ditch was found to contain a total of nine fills (Fig. 23). The basal fill consisted of yellowish-brown sandy clay (C.221) with occasional small stones. It was *c.* 0.20 m in maximum thickness and contained two chert flakes, a few pieces of oak charcoal, and several dozen fragments of animal bone. Meat consumption is indicated by the fragmentary condition of the bones, only three of which could be identified to species (two cattle and one sheep), and by the presence of chop marks on one fragment. A mammal long bone from this layer yielded a date of 1280–940 cal BC (2930±50 BP; UBA-36112). This calibrated range is older, and wider by approximately 100 years, than that produced by a sample from the secondary fill of Enclosure Ditch 1 (see above), but nonetheless implies that the ditches are broadly contemporary.

The basal fill (C.221) covered the base of the ditch and extended 1.10 m and 0.60 m up the inner and outer sides, respectively. It seems to have been truncated by an irregular, V-shaped (re)cut (C.219). This was filled with rounded and sub-angular stones (0.15–0.20 m in average dimensions) intermixed with dark brown silty clay (C.220) which contained some oak charcoal, a fragment of unidentified animal bone, two chert flakes, and a chert blade. This deposit was up to 0.50 m thick and may incorporate revetment material and sediment from an adjacent rampart. A sample of oak charcoal from this layer produced a date of 1260–1010 cal BC (2925±37 BP; UBA-36119), possibly suggesting that cleaning of the ditch ceased a short time after it was dug. However, given the potential for an age discrepancy due to old wood, clarity on the timing of these events is lacking.

The three overlying fills – C.238, C.215 and C.214 – were quite homogeneous in character, consisting in each case of largely sterile, light greyish-brown clay that differed only slightly in hue. Each of these layers contained frequent small stones and shale fragments, with some larger stones also recorded in the upper level of C.214. The latter also contained a chert flake and a single fragment of unidentified animal bone. An episode(s) of infilling appears to be indicated, potentially involving the spreading of bank material into the ditch.

Thereafter, the upper part of the ditch remained open for a time, allowing a lens of dark brown silty clay (C.213), *c.* 0.05 m thick, to accumulate. C.213 contained a small quantity of oak, blackthorn, ash and hazel charcoal, mainly derived from twig-sized wood (the hazel charcoal was indeterminate). As with the other enclosure ditches, a final Bronze Age/Early Iron Age horizon is indicated at this level, in this instance by a sample of blackthorn charcoal which produced a date of 780–540 cal BC (2499±27 BP; UBA-36115).

The uppermost fills of the ditch may represent levelling-up deposits (as in Enclosure Ditch 1), possibly introduced to even out the ground surface for agricultural purposes. These combined layers were up to 0.70 m thick, and included C.212, a dark brown silty clay, and an overlying layer of lighter brown clay (C.211). The latter contained occasional stone inclusions and charcoal flecking, as well as three chert flakes. Overlying C.211 on the north-west was a thin, gravelly band of brown silty clay (C.210) which may represent disturbed remnant bank material.

Enclosure ditch 3 (external ditch of outer enclosure): The outer enclosure ditch (C.234) was cut into the bedrock and was U-shaped in profile. It had steeply sloping sides, rising on the inner (south-west) face to form a broad ledge (*c.* 1.20 m wide), *c.* 0.70 m above the base of the ditch (Figs 22–23 & 25). The exposed bedrock on the upper, outer face of the ditch was heavily eroded. The ditch measured 3.40 m in width at the top, narrowing to 0.40–0.50 m at the base, and had a maximum depth of *c.* 1.50 m below the present ground surface.

A total of six fills were identified in the ditch (see Fig. 23). The basal fill, C.233, comprised dark brown silty clay with frequent small, rounded stones that accumulated along the bottom and lower inner edge of the ditch. Several larger stones (*c.* 0.10–0.15 m in size) also occurred near the bottom of this layer which, apart from a tiny fragment of oak charcoal, was archaeologically sterile. It is likely that this fill relates to primary erosion from the sides of the ditch and putative internal bank (see below), together with some inwash of silt, though the absence of any fine silt at its base raises the possibility that the ditch may have been cleaned. The single charcoal fragment recovered from C.233 produced a date of 2865–2510 cal BC (4107±28 BP; UBA-36121). This is highly anomalous considering the overall dating and stratigraphic evidence, as well as the similar form and layout of the three enclosure ditches, all of which suggests them to be contemporary with one another. As such, there is strong reason to suspect that the charcoal from C.233 is intrusive, and probably the result of contamination from a Late Neolithic horizon represented by several nearby features (see below).

Overlying C.233 was a layer of sterile greenish-grey clay (C.232), *c.* 0.30 m thick, containing frequent small- to medium-sized stones and shale fragments. The composition of this layer and the fact that it appears to have spread from the inner side of the ditch suggest that it derived from bank material. Above C.232, and likely representing collapse from the eroded outer ditch face, was a *c.* 0.20 m thick layer of shattered limestone and shale fragments (C.231) intermixed with sterile grey clay.

This was followed by the accumulation of a lens of dark brown silty clay (C.230), *c.* 0.03 m thick, containing a small amount of charcoal (oak, blackthorn, and unidentified bark) and a single cattle/deer tooth. Charcoal from a twig-sized piece of blackthorn in this fill

yielded a date of 790–550 cal BC (2527±26 BP; UBA-36122), which corresponds closely with the dates obtained from mid-level deposits in the other enclosure ditches.

Thereafter, the rapid infilling of the ditch appears to be indicated by C.229, a compact, light greyish-brown silty clay, *c.* 0.50 m in maximum thickness, containing numerous shale fragments. This layer extended across the entire width of the ditch, sealing all the underlying deposits, and may be associated with the levelling of the internal bank. A small lump of black fayalitic slag with adhering vitrified clay, indicative of metalworking, was found close to the surface of C.229, which was otherwise devoid of archaeological material. Overlying this layer was a roughly wedge shaped accumulation of dark brown silty clay (C.228) containing frequent rounded stones averaging 0.10 m in diameter.

Linear feature (possible palisade): No evidence of a cut feature corresponding with the putative palisade trench (F2 on Fig. 9) mapped by geophysical survey inside Enclosure Ditch 2 was identified in Trench 2. Rather, this magnetic anomaly was found upon excavation to coincide with a diffuse band of dark brown silty clay (C.208), 0.50–0.60 m in width and *c.* 0.06 m thick, that extended roughly north–south across the cutting, approximately 7.5 m inside Ditch 2 (Fig. 26a). It contained occasional flecks of charcoal and was visible in both section faces as a discrete layer within soil horizon C.206 (see Fig. 23). A sample of blackthorn charcoal from C.208 produced a date of 1200–930 cal BC (2873±36 BP; UBA-36114), placing it firmly within the Late Bronze Age. Although evidently related in some way to the enclosure boundary, its precise nature is unclear; it may, for example, be the remains of a truncated feature, such as a palisade.

Possible pit: Approximately 0.10 m below linear feature C.208 were the remains of a possible pit that extended beyond the southern edge of the excavation cutting (see Fig. 22). The exposed remains comprised a semi-circular cut (C.223) measuring *c.* 0.90 m north-east to south-west and 0.10 m in maximum depth, which was filled with charcoal-stained soil (C.218). A sample of oak charcoal from this fill was dated to 3010–2880 cal BC (4304±28 BP; UBA-36118); however, as this derived from radial wood, there may be an age offset due to the ‘old-wood’ effect.

Charcoal deposit: A short distance to the north-east of C.223 was an irregular spread of dark brown silty clay (C.209) containing a significant concentration of oak and ivy charcoal (Fig. 26b). It extended over an area measuring 1.20 m in maximum (north-east to south-west) length by *c.* 0.08 m in thickness and was partially contained within a natural depression located 2.50 m inside the line of Enclosure Ditch 2. Ivy charcoal from this layer produced a date of 2865–2500 cal BC (4102±29 BP; UBA-36117).

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE & SITE PHASING

The test excavations at Faughan yielded valuable information on the morphology, character, and dating of key elements of the archaeological complex first brought to light by geophysical survey. The excavated features and deposits attest to four discrete phases of prehistoric activity, during what is considered in Ireland to fall within the Middle Neolithic, Late Neolithic, Late Bronze Age, and Early Iron Age (see Fig. 14). Other, as yet undated, features recorded elsewhere on the hill, such as the enclosures and ring-ditches revealed by geophysics, may be variously earlier, contemporary with or later than these phases.

Phase 1: Middle Neolithic

A stone-packed slot trench with post settings dated to 3635–3380 cal BC is the earliest recorded feature at Faughan. The size and layout of the slot trench suggest it supported a relatively insubstantial fence composed of upright wooden stakes interwoven with wattle. It is unclear whether the fence originally enclosed the entire hilltop, or its eastern and southern sides only; the geophysical evidence leaves open the possibility that part of its circuit was truncated by later activity.

Three pieces of worked chert from the slot trench are among a small number of lithics retrieved from archaeological contexts and the only ones likely to be *in situ*. The assemblage is composed primarily of flaked stone tools (flakes, blades, cores), with medium- to large-sized flakes and blades predominating (see Figs 15–17). Four convex scrapers – including a fine flint example (Fig. 16: d) – were also found, though none of these came from primary contexts. All but ten of the lithics were formed on chert, which may have been sourced locally. The remaining lithics comprise siltstone, sedimentary rock, flint, and volcanic rock. The chert raw material and the relatively large size of the flakes and blades from Faughan find

broad parallels in the Late Mesolithic and Neolithic assemblage from Clowanstown 1 (Warren 2009; Driscoll 2018), about 20 km south-east of Faughan.

The distribution of lithics across the excavated area gives an indication of the wider extent of Neolithic activity on the hill, of which the production and use of stone tools may have formed just one component. That such activity took place in the relative shelter of the fenced enclosure is perhaps suggested by the occurrence of a single platform core, as well as two flakes, in the slot trench. It is notable, however, that most of the lithics recovered from archaeological contexts were found some distance from the fenced enclosure. Of the ten flakes recovered from the hilltop enclosure, nine came from one of the outer ditches, compared to just one example from the inner ditch (ie, adjacent to the slot trench). The most likely explanation for their presence in 13th/12th century BC and later contexts is that the lithics derive from a Neolithic surface into which the ditches were cut. Such a surface seems to be represented just inside the boundary of Enclosure Ditch 2 by a sandy loam layer (C.224) overlying the natural. A single chert flake was retrieved from this layer, which was cut by a possible pit of Late Neolithic date. A further insight into the spatial patterning of Neolithic activity on the hill is provided by the almost 100 lithics recovered from a levelling layer (C.103/C.203) associated with the clearance of woodland from the summit in the 1960s, which clearly resulted in the displacement downslope of a significant quantity of cultural material.

In addition to the lithics, the slot trench also contained a few charred wheat/barley grains and fragments of hazel shell and a small quantity of wood charcoal. Apart from the nutshell fragments and cereal grain from the slot trench, no other potential food remains (eg, animal bone) were recovered from any Neolithic features. The presence of cereals, however, may signal arable farming in the locality and places Faughan among a growing number of sites to provide definitive evidence of cultivation in the centuries following the earliest sustained appearance of cereals in Ireland around 3750 cal BC (eg, McClatchie *et al.* 2014; Whitehouse *et al.* 2014).

Phase 2: Late Neolithic

Two of the excavated features at Faughan, a charcoal deposit and a possible pit, testify to activity during the

later Neolithic. Both lay outside the circuit of the earlier fenced enclosure, near the outer boundary of the later hilltop enclosure. The first of these features (C.209) resulted from the burning of oak, including gnarled wood, and is the only substantial deposit of charcoal encountered during the excavation. Ivy was also represented in the charcoal deposit and dated this activity to 2865–2500 cal BC.

Only a portion of the second feature (C.223) was excavated and the possibility of it being something other than a pit – eg, the terminal of a ditch – cannot be discounted. It contained a single fill, suggesting it may have been dug and backfilled within a relatively short space of time. Oak charcoal from the fill produced a date of 3010–2880 cal BC. Allowing for a potential age offset due to the use of old wood, this feature could be contemporary with the above charcoal deposit, about 3 m to its north-east. These features may relate to wood clearance, among other possibilities.

There were no finds associated with either of these features and the lithics assemblage from the site contains no obvious Late Neolithic components that might shed further light on this phase of activity.

Phase 3: Late Bronze Age

Considerably more substantial than the Neolithic features at Faughan is the 400 m diameter enclosure encircling the hilltop. The enclosure can be broadly classed as a hillfort and is the only excavated example of its type in Co. Meath. Sections excavated across the concentric enclosure boundaries demonstrated that all three ditches are partly rock-cut and appear originally to have been accompanied by internal earthen banks, at least one of which (Ditch 2) may have had a stone revetment. Three dated samples from the basal/lower fills of Ditches 1 and 2 suggest a construction date in the later Bronze Age, possibly in the 13th or 12th century BC. In contrast, oak charcoal from the basal fill of Ditch 3 produced an anomalously early date (2865–2500 cal BC). The most likely explanation is that this charcoal is intrusive and derives from a local, Late Neolithic horizon represented most clearly by a charcoal deposit of identical date (C.209, see above) located *c.* 10 m west of the ditch.

A linear band of charcoal-flecked sediment (C.208), *c.* 6 m inside and concentric with Ditch 2, provided the only hint of the putative palisade recorded by geophysical survey. It contained a mixture of oak,

blackthorn, ash, and hazel charcoal, nearly all of which derived from twigs less than 10 mm in diameter. This material may represent the remains of a brushwood fence that was supported at intervals by upright posts, the settings for which possibly lie outside the (2 m wide) excavation cutting. Its circuit is only evidenced geophysically in two places on the east side of the enclosure, the longer stretch running in tandem with the ditches for *c.* 90 m to the north of the entrance. Though its full extent and significance remain to be established, the dating of this feature to 1200–930 cal BC shows it to be broadly contemporary with the hillfort ditches.

Meat consumption is indicated by the fragmentary nature of the faunal remains from the site. These include 20 fragments that could be identified from cattle, six from red deer, one from sheep/goat, and three from cattle/deer. All but one of the 243 fragments in the assemblage came from the basal/lower fills of Ditch 1 (n=207) and Ditch 2 (n=35) and therefore represent activity associated with the primary use of the enclosure.

Phase 4: Early Iron Age

A hiatus or period of reduced activity, possibly spanning several centuries, seems to be indicated between the primary use of the enclosure and Phase 4 activity by infill layers incorporating probable bank material in all three ditches. Above these layers, short-life samples from an equivalent level in each ditch produced very similar dates: Ditch 1: 800–520 cal BC; Ditch 2: 780–540 cal BC; Ditch 3: 790–550 cal BC. The charcoal from this phase derived from the burning of several wood species, which could relate, among other things, to the clearance of trees and scrub from the partly infilled ditches (Stuijts 2018). In this context, the presence of willow in the inner ditch (Ditch 1) is of interest as it may signal a transition to locally wetter conditions at this time.

A piece of black fayalitic slag from Ditch 3 suggests that metalworking may have taken place in the vicinity of the outer enclosure boundary, possibly during the 1st millennium BC. It came from an infill layer, thought to comprise levelled bank material, that overlay the 8th–6th century BC ditch fill. The slag is characteristic of waste produced by early bloomery iron smelting, but it can also occur as a result of iron smithing or copper production processes (Rondelez 2018). This widens the potential date range for

metalworking activity, which may be significant considering the presence of a possible high status, early medieval ringfort and field system just 50 m north-east of the hilltop enclosure.

A second possible waste fragment, consisting of shiny, grey, vitreous material, was recovered from a gravelly clay layer (C.103) associated with recent woodland clearance. It could derive from a variety of high temperature activities, including metalworking.

THE WIDER CONTEXT & SIGNIFICANCE OF FAUGHAN

The investigations at Faughan mark an important step in advancing understanding of the chronology, architecture, and evolving role of the site and its significance within the wider landscape. The hill commands panoramic views of the surrounding lowlands, overlooking the east–west corridor of the river valley to the north and an expansive tract of bog to the south. The range of Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Iron Age material recovered from the bog indicates that it began to develop in early prehistory and may have been accorded special significance as a boundary. It is now clear that Faughan Hill itself was a significant focal point within the Blackwater Valley from at least as early as the mid-4th millennium BC and a place that people returned to, periodically or for longer durations, at various times in prehistory and into the medieval period.

Neolithic beginnings

The earliest recorded activity at Faughan is represented by a fenced enclosure (3635–3380 cal BC) that coincides chronologically with the period defined as Middle Neolithic I (MNI), *c.* 3640–3400 cal BC (eg, Cooney *et al.* 2011; McClatchie *et al.* 2014; Smyth 2014; Whitehouse *et al.* 2014; McLaughlin *et al.* 2016). It is the earliest dated hilltop enclosure in Meath and, at over 250 m in projected diameter, one of the largest enclosures of the 4th millennium BC known in Ireland. Most enclosed sites of the period were situated on hills, ridges, or in other conspicuous locations in the landscape and were defined by or included timber palisades as a boundary element (eg, Sheridan 2001; Cooney 2002; Varndell & Topping 2002; Whittle *et al.* 2011; Cummings 2017). Palisades formed an integral component of the Early Neolithic causewayed enclosures at Donegore Hill, Co. Antrim (Mallory *et al.* 2011) and Magheraboy, Co. Sligo (Danaher 2007; Cooney *et al.* 2011), as well as the

near contemporary hilltop enclosure at Hughstown, Co. Wicklow (O'Brien 2017), and are represented in greater numbers by timber enclosures without accompanying banks or ditches. In most cases, the palisades appear to have been substantially more robust than the fenced boundary at Faughan, though the modest dimensions of the palisade trenches at Donegore (*c.* 0.5 m wide and 0.6 m deep) prompted Sheridan (2001, 174) to describe them as ‘more like fences than stockades, with an estimated height of only 1.5m’. A similar interpretation was put forward by Danaher (2007, 95) for the concentric palisade inside the single, segmented enclosure ditch at Magheraboy. Although the excavated portion of the slot trench at Faughan measured only 0.2 m in maximum width and depth, given the high probability of truncation from later activity and ploughing, these dimensions are unlikely to provide a reliable indicator of its original size. Despite this, the estimated overall size of the Faughan enclosure (*c.* 5.2 ha) is considerably larger than those at Donegore (*c.* 3.5 ha) and Magheraboy (*c.* 2 ha). The floruit of the Faughan enclosure, moreover, may have overlapped in part with the primary use of these causewayed enclosures, which is estimated to have ended in the 36th or early 35th century BC (Bayliss *et al.* 2011, 216–22; Cooney *et al.* 2011, 572–3, 582–5).

Palisaded enclosures without accompanying banks or ditches (as seemingly evidenced at Faughan) are more numerous and include examples at nearby Knowth and (possibly) Tara, and further afield at sites such as Tullahedy, Co. Tipperary. At Knowth, two curving palisade trenches set 8–11 m apart and located immediately west of the main passage tomb, were tentatively proposed by Eogan (1984) to represent successive enclosures with estimated diameters of *c.* 70 m and 100 m respectively. Although not directly dated, both palisades predate the main passage tomb mound and five smaller passage tombs, and the outer palisade trench cut across a subrectangular structure dating to *c.* 3780–3380 cal BC (Eogan 1984, 215–43; Eogan & Roche 1997, 44–5; Smyth 2014, 27).⁴ As at Faughan, stone tool production appears to have taken place in the area of the palisades, though whether this represents contemporary activity is unclear.

Excavations at Tara in the 1950s likewise revealed the arc of a ditch or trench (0.6 m deep and traced for approximately 18 m) that extended beneath the edge of the cairn and mound of the Neolithic passage tomb

known as the Mound of the Hostages (*Duma na nGiall*) (O'Sullivan 2005, 23–7; see also Newman 1997, 75). It, too, is suspected to form part of a large (palisaded?) enclosure, and an early date for this feature has been confirmed by three radiocarbon determinations obtained from charcoal from the fill, which cluster in the period 3500–3000 cal BC (O'Sullivan 2005, 26–7; Bayliss & O'Sullivan 2013, 32, 35–9). Bayesian modelling of the site chronology suggests that the ditch began to infill by 3325–3150 cal BC (Cooney *et al.* 2011, 654; Bayliss & O'Sullivan 2013, 35–9).

At Tullahedy, a single palisade traced intermittently for a length of *c.* 96 m partly enclosed a settlement situated on an esker that was surrounded on the east and south by water and mire (Cleary & Kelleher 2011). The settlement remains consisted of three rectangular houses with associated hearths, two further structures, and numerous pits. Dating evidence suggests the site to be broadly contemporary with the enclosure at Faughan, with the primary phase of activity at Tullahedy spanning the period 3670–3460 cal BC (Schulting 2011).

Several other palisaded enclosures of known or potential Neolithic date have also come to light through geophysical survey at hilltop sites that, like Faughan, acted as prominent foci within their respective landscapes from an early period. The earliest recorded hilltop enclosure at Rathcoran, Co. Wicklow, was defined by an oak palisade supported by a bank with internal ditch. Dated to 3760–3525 cal BC, the palisade enclosed an area of 7.2 ha and appears from test excavation to have been variously represented by single and double lines of posts (Hawkes 2018; 2020; 2021). At Uisneach, Co. Westmeath, two successive, circular palisaded enclosures measuring 23 m and 35 m in diameter, respectively, occupied the highest point of the hill (181 m ASL). Part of the circuit of the smaller enclosure underlies a probable (unclassified) megalithic tomb and is likely to be the earliest recorded feature within the multi-period ceremonial and funerary complex there (Schot 2011, 99–101). A significantly larger hilltop enclosure, defined geophysically by what appears to be a discontinuous, possibly segmented, palisade trench, was identified at Dún Ailinne (Knockaulin), Co. Kildare (Schot & Dowling 2008; Johnston *et al.* 2014). The enclosure delimits a roughly oval area some 390 m in maximum diameter and was laid out at

an angle to the contours of the hilltop, 'tilting' to the north-east. This aspect of its design is strongly reminiscent of British, and some Irish (eg, Donegore Hill), Neolithic causewayed enclosures, which were frequently positioned to 'face' in a particular direction (eg, Oswald *et al.* 2001, 91–106; Whittle *et al.* 2011). This may have implications for the dating of the palisaded enclosure at Dún Ailinne, which is known from previous excavations to encompass several Neolithic features (eg, a possible burial pit containing a Linkardstown bowl) and was truncated in the 1st millennium BC by an internally ditched hilltop enclosure extending over 13 ha (see Johnston & Wailes 2007).

As the above sites illustrate, there is considerable variation in the size, morphology, and siting of Early/Middle Neolithic enclosures in Ireland. Such diversity is also evidenced in Britain and other parts of north-west Europe where, in addition to causewayed enclosures, there also existed a range of other sites circumscribed by ditches, banks, palisades, and/or fences arranged in various configurations (eg, Bradley 1998; Varndell & Topping 2002; Whittle *et al.* 2011; Last 2021). The polygonal ground plan and morphology of the Faughan enclosure are without direct parallel among the recorded Neolithic sites delineated, either solely or in part, by palisades. This may well be expected, for though they share distinctive attributes, the form of each enclosure was uniquely adapted to its topographic setting, cultural milieu, and the strategies of the individuals or groups that created them.

The hilltop siting and scale of the enclosure at Faughan, for example, suggest that it was a communal focus whose conception and use involved a larger social group than just a few individual families. Although it is not yet clear whether the site was occupied periodically, perhaps for specialised and/or seasonal activity, or on a more permanent basis, current evidence lends greater support to the former interpretation. A note of caution is required, however, as Neolithic settlement (and burial) remains could be represented among the array of features identified by geophysical survey, the majority of which are in the summit area, within the bounds of the fenced enclosure. Insofar as can be inferred from the limited excavation, activity on the hill during this period included the production and use of stone tools and there is also evidence to indicate cereal cultivation nearby. No animal bone, pottery, or

objects other than the flaked stone tools from the slot trench were identified in Neolithic contexts, though this is most likely a reflection of the limited size of the area investigated rather than the nature or intensity of past activity.

Evidence of settlement in the wider environs of Faughan between the mid-37th and early 34th centuries BC is scant. Prior to the present investigations, the only dated features coinciding with this phase of the Middle Neolithic were a single pit (3655–3525 cal BC) in Grange townland (Kelly 2011, 5–6; Walsh 2021, 64–7), *c.* 1.3 km north-east of the hill, and a rectangular, trench-built house (3700–3530 cal BC) at Cookstown Great, near Kells (McLoughlin 2010a, 35–7; Walsh 2021, 52–9).⁵ Both overlap chronologically with the earlier part of the date range for the fenced enclosure at Faughan (3635–3380 cal BC). Sherds of a broad rimmed bowl from Phoenixtown (Lyne 2010; Walsh 2021, 76) augment the evidence for Middle Neolithic activity in the immediate surrounds of the hill and three stone axes from Bohermeen bog might also date from this period.⁶

The dearth of contemporary settlement evidence in the wider environs of Faughan is reflective of a broader pattern for the Middle Neolithic in Ireland. One of the dominant trends recognised during this period is a marked decrease in settlement visibility following the apparent ‘boom’ of the preceding centuries (Early Neolithic II: 3720/3680–3640/3620 cal BC), a period distinguished by a so-called ‘house horizon’ typified by rectangular, post-built structures (McLaughlin *et al.* 2016; see also Cooney *et al.* 2011; Smyth 2014). This Early Neolithic ‘boom’ is exemplified by the wealth of settlement sites excavated along the M3 motorway corridor between Navan and Kells, which runs through the valley between Faughan Hill and the River Blackwater, whose course it closely follows. The evidence attests to an established presence in the area from the early 4th millennium, with the greatest concentration of Early Neolithic settlement remains, including some half a dozen rectangular houses, located to the southeast of Kells, in the townlands of Kilmainham and Cookstown Great (see Fig. 3; McLoughlin & Walsh 2008; Walsh 2021, 50–78).

Like Faughan, where renewed occupation in the Late Neolithic is signaled by a charcoal deposit and possible pit, many other sites in the area that acted as

foci in earlier centuries also saw activity during the third millennium BC (Walsh 2021, 80–93). Among the most significant are two adjacent sites at Kilmainham, where a date range of *c.* 2900–2500 BC is indicated for several ritual structures associated with Grooved Ware, including a timber circle (Walsh 2011; 2021, 83–6; Whitty 2011). Grooved Ware was also found in association with a structure (2865–2485 cal BC) at Phoenixtown (Coughlan 2010; Walsh 2021, 80), while the remains of a later structure (2575–2475 cal BC) were identified nearby at Grange (Duffy 2010; Walsh 2021, 102, 139). Several lithics from Ardbraccan (Mossop *et al.* 2009) provide a further hint of Late Neolithic activity in the Faughan area, as might two examples of rock art in the Teltown complex.⁷

Evolution of a regional centre: Faughan in later prehistory

The next major phase of activity recorded at Faughan coincides with the later Bronze Age and is represented by a hilltop enclosure that was far more formidable in scale and design than its Neolithic predecessor. The perimeter earthworks, consisting of three partly rock-cut ditches with evidence of former internal banks, were positioned along the upper hillslope and circumscribed a roughly circular area some 400 m in overall diameter, with opposing entrances on the north-east and south-west. This multivallate enclosure represents an important addition to the varied group of prehistoric earthworks commonly described as ‘hillforts’, of which approximately 100 examples are currently recorded in Ireland (O’Brien 2017; O’Brien & O’Driscoll 2017). This is a significant increase on the 40 hillforts identified in the early 1970s by Barry Raftery, who proposed a threefold classification comprising univallate sites (Class 1), widely spaced multivallate enclosures (Class 2) and inland promontory forts (Class 3) (Raftery 1972; 1976; 1994, 38–48). Most encompass areas of 1.5–10 ha (Grogan 2005b, 113; O’Brien 2017), with a small proportion of Class 1 and Class 2 hillforts, including that at Faughan, exceeding this size.

The dating of Irish hillforts has until recently been based on a very limited sample of sites. Investigation of the well-known Class 2 hillforts at Rathgall, Co. Wicklow (Raftery 1971; 1972; 1976; 1994, 58), Haughey’s Fort, Co. Armagh (Mallory 1991; 1995;

Mallory & Baban 2014), and Mooghaun, Co. Clare (Grogan 2005a, 131–246), for instance, provided dates ranging from the 14th–9th centuries BC for their primary occupation (see also O’Brien 2017). Subsequent excavations at Rahally, Co. Galway, suggest that the construction of the multivallate hillfort there began during the same period, possibly in the 11th or 10th century (Mullins 2008; 2009; 2014). Understanding of the chronology and development of this distinctive enclosure form has since advanced considerably as a result of a large-scale project on Irish hillforts by William O’Brien and colleagues at University College Cork, which commenced in 2004. Excavations undertaken by the project at ten hillforts (including eight Class 2 examples) across southern Ireland have doubled the total number of sites investigated and are particularly important in establishing a refined timeline for the construction and use histories of Irish hillforts. Collectively, the evidence indicates that hillforts are predominantly a phenomenon of the Middle and Late Bronze Age in Ireland, with a few examples built during the 14th–13th centuries and a significantly larger number dated to the period *c.* 1200–900 BC (O’Brien 2017; O’Brien & O’Driscoll 2017). A longer chronology of development is signalled, however, by Early Neolithic dates from Hughstown, Co. Kildare, and Spinan’s Hill, Co. Wicklow, which suggest an early ancestry for multivallate and univallate forms of ‘hillfort’ that may also encompass causewayed enclosures (O’Brien 2017, 6–14). This is supported by similar early dates recently obtained from the hilltop enclosure at Rathcoran which, like the above two sites, forms part of the Baltinglass group on the Wicklow/Kildare border (Hawkes 2018; 2020; 2021; see also O’Driscoll 2019).

The dating of the Faughan enclosure is in keeping with the Bronze Age chronology indicated for the majority of excavated Class 2 hillforts in Ireland, with three dates from the lower ditch fills suggesting a likely construction date in the 13th or 12th century BC. Of the 20 or so hillforts investigated to date, that at Rahally is, as noted previously, the closest in form to the enclosure at Faughan. The low hill at Rahally (104 m ASL) was encircled by four concentric enclosing elements, comprising a double outer ditch and two single internal ditches which appear originally to have been accompanied by stone-revetted earthen banks (Fig. 27; Mullins 2008; 2009; 2014). A direct parallel for this juxtaposition of closely spaced and

widely spaced boundary elements is presented by the double outer and single inner enclosures at Faughan, which may pre-date the hillfort at Rahally by a century or more. Evidence of occupation at Faughan prior to the construction of the hillfort, and again in the period *c.* 800–540 cal BC, when the ditches had partly infilled, reflects a pattern of recurrent activity also attested at other sites, including Haughey’s Fort and Rahally. Other Irish hillforts appear to have had shorter life histories, which in some cases ended dramatically. Excavations at Clashanimud (Co. Cork), Toor More (Co. Kilkenny), and Rathnagree (Co. Wicklow) demonstrated that the hillfort defenses were destroyed by fire in what has been interpreted as deliberate and highly symbolic acts of destruction most likely perpetrated by rival, external groups (O’Brien *et al.* 2018; see also O’Brien 2016; O’Brien *et al.* 2014–2015).

The imposing nature and siting of hillforts clearly mark them out as dominant foci and ‘visual expressions of power’ within their respective landscapes (O’Brien 2017; O’Driscoll 2017). While security and defensibility were undoubtedly important considerations in their design, the past few decades have seen a shift in emphasis from viewing hillforts as primarily military or defensive structures to interpretations that embrace a wider range of functions. Much of the recent discourse on the diverse roles these ‘central places’ had – as elite residences, centres of specialised production and trade, and as places of gathering and ceremony, among others – has been focused in Britain and the Continent where there is a considerably longer history of study of such sites (eg, Ralston 2006; Armit 2007; Lock 2011; Harding 2012). As Raftery (1994, 48–57) was among the first to note, however, the evidence from Rathgall and Haughey’s Fort, in particular, suggests a similar range of functions for at least some Irish hillforts.

The development of the hillfort during the later 2nd millennium has been linked more widely to the rise of warrior aristocracies and a strengthening of regional identities (eg, Harding 2000, 271–307; O’Brien 2017, 1–2, 53; O’Brien & O’Driscoll 2017), in a climate where, to borrow from James (*in press*) ‘social competition, conflict, coercion, and domination may well have been factors as significant as bonding, cohesion, and willing collaboration in “building communities”’. An insight into the context of hillfort use and the role of Faughan during this period is provided by several bronze weapons from the adjacent bog, which include a leaf-shaped sword of Ballintober

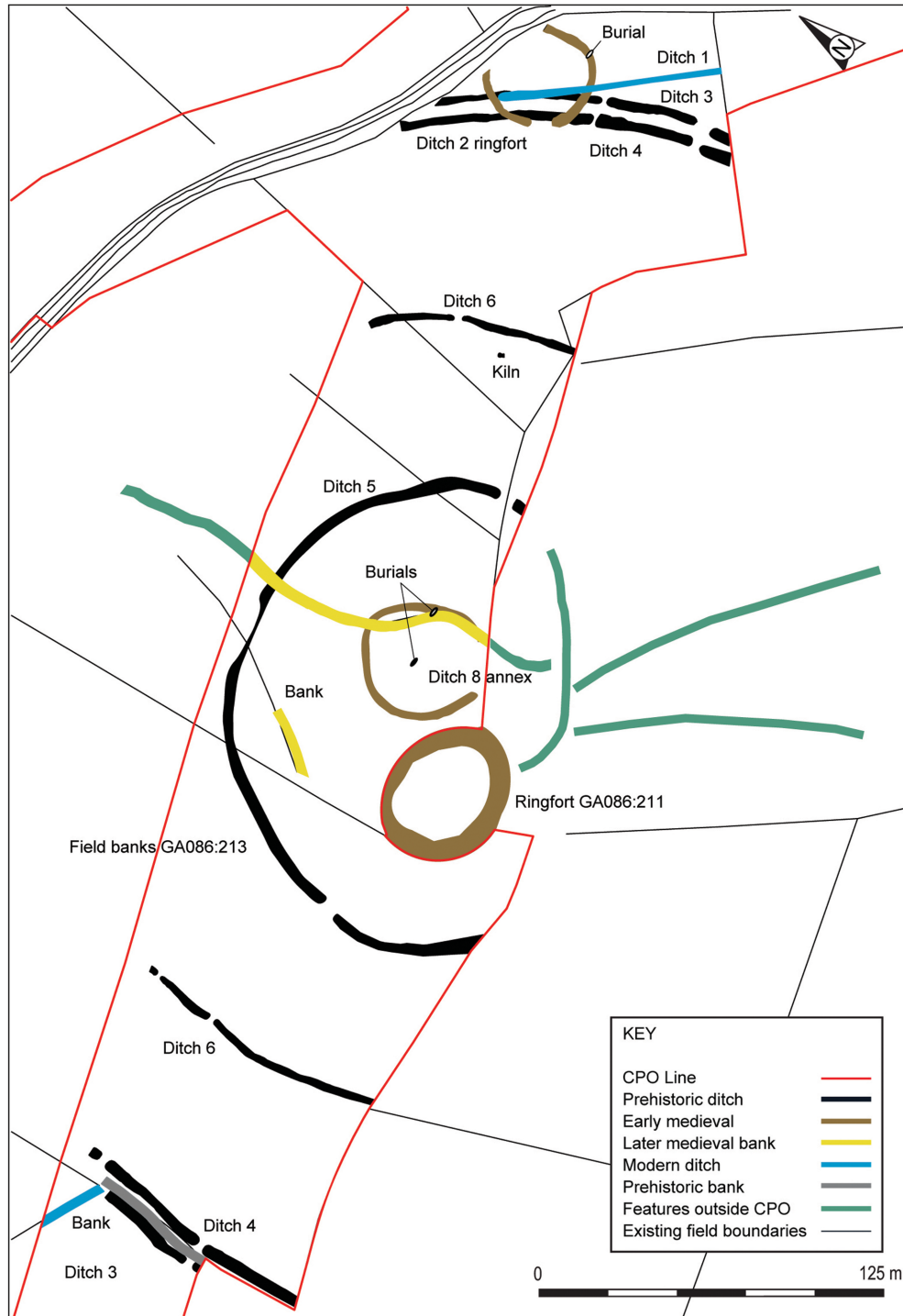


Fig. 27.
Rahally hillfort, Co. Galway: site plan (after Mullins 2014, illus 4.5.4)

type (NMI 1271:Wk004; Colquhoun 2015, no. 10) and a rapier (Fig. 28). Direct evidence of the communities for whom the hillfort was a central focus is scarce however, though the 14th–9th century BC dates obtained from a ring-ditch and cremation pit at Grange (Kelly 2010; Walsh 2021, 138–9) and developments at the Knockauns at Teltown (O’Brien & Waddell 2018), provide tantalising glimpses of life (and death) in the shadow of Faughan at this time. Further insights are offered by the post-built structures and related settlement evidence from Kilmainham (Bayley 2010; Walsh 2011) and Nugentstown (Lynch 2010a), as well as burnt mounds and associated features (c. 1200–1000 BC) at Boyerstown (Clarke 2008), Ardbraccan (Mossop & Ruddle 2009), Ballybeg (Lynch 2010b), and Cookstown Great (McLoughlin 2010b; see Walsh 2021 for the most recent discussion of these sites). Kilmainham, in particular, stands out as a significant locus of activity during the later Bronze Age, as in earlier periods. Conversely, knowledge of developments at Tara during the Late Bronze Age is poor; there are no radiocarbon dates and few recorded finds from the site spanning the period c. 1500–900 BC (among them a rapier and a spearhead: see Newman 1997, 218–21), though this may simply reflect the limited scale of the excavations undertaken there to date.

In terms of defining regional centres of power and collective identity, the occurrence of large multivallate enclosures of known or suspected Late Bronze Age date on other prominent heights in the wider surrounding landscape, namely the Hill of Ward (7.5 km to the south-west) and the Hill of Lloyd (10 km to the north-west), is highly significant. The enclosure on the Hill of Lloyd has not been excavated, though Late Bronze Age activity in its interior is attested by a pit or ditch-type feature containing burnt animal bone (mainly pig) dated to c. 1000 BC (Neary 2003). Closer to Faughan, at the Hill of Ward, recent excavations produced Late Bronze Age dates (c. 1200–800 BC) for a large, sub-circular enclosure defined by three closely set ditches, originally identified by geophysical survey. The enclosure, which has overall dimensions of c. 200 × 220 m, partly underlies the upstanding, multivallate monument referred to as *Tlachtga* and is suggested by the excavator to have had a ceremonial function (S. Davis, pers. comm.; Davis *et al.* 2017). Although there is still much to learn



Fig. 28.
Bronze rapier from Bohermeen Bog (NMI 1970:215;
©National Museum of Ireland)

about the nature and range of activities that took place at each of these sites, the evidence now emerging corroborates the view (Newman 2005, 367–8) that Faughan and the Hill of Ward formed the principal focal points of two discrete landscapes separated by Bohermeen Bog, and that this occurred during the later Bronze Age, if not before.

The deep history and prehistoric importance of Faughan, now confirmed by a small scale research excavation, also lends further weight to the idea (Dowling 2015, 20–1) that it was once the dominant focus within a region or territory whose orbit extended north of the River Blackwater to encompass the Teltown area. Indeed, as previously noted, the historical and symbolic links intimated between Faughan and Teltown in early documentary sources are likely rooted in later prehistory, and it is quite possible that the emergence of Teltown as the pre-eminent assembly (*óenach*) site of the Uí Néill kings of Tara was predicated on the earlier significance of Faughan as a communal focus and gathering place (Dowling 2015, 20–1). Notwithstanding the later prominence of Teltown, moreover, Faughan remained central to the political and territorial ambitions of the Uí Néill, achieving a particular renown as the burial place of their most distinguished ancestor, Niall of the Nine Hostages.

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NOTES

¹Faughan Hill: ITM 679281, 769378; *Record of Monuments and Places* (RMP) nos ME024-022001–022006.

²Information kindly supplied by landowner.

³Excavation license no. 17E0238.

⁴The dating of the subrectangular structure is based on charcoal (BM-1076) from an internal pit. Bayesian modelling suggests the pit probably dates to 3790–3620 cal BC (posterior density estimate, 95% probability): Cooney *et al.* (2011, 590, 594).

⁵Middle Neolithic activity associated with hollow scraper production is indicated in the adjacent townland of Nugentstown: see Lynch (2010, 22 and appx 2.2 (E. Nelis)).

⁶National Museum of Ireland: NMI 1929:1705, NMI 1929:1706 & NMI 1941:399.

⁷Rock art: RMP nos ME017-031004 & ME018-031. Citing its affinities with passage tomb art, Cooney (2000, 16) notes that the rock art tradition in Ireland may have originated in the Late Neolithic and continued into the Early Bronze Age. See also O’Connor (2006) and Valdez-Tullett (2019).

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RÉSUMÉ

Collecter le sol: découvrir 3000 ans de préhistoire à Faughan Hill, Irlande de l'est, par Ger Dowling et Roseanne Schot

La découverte d'un complexe archéologique majeur à Faughan Hill, comté de Meath, a été signalée pour la première fois en 2015 au sein de cette revue. Avec sa grande enceinte multiple en sommet de colline, ses probables sites funéraires et structures associées, le caractère et l'échelle de ce complexe en font un centre important au sein d'une région qui compte déjà certains des monuments les plus grands et les plus spectaculaires d'Irlande, dont le site de Tara, situé à 15 km au sud-est. Une image plus complète du site a depuis été révélée grâce à de plus amples prospections géophysiques et des sondages réalisés dans le cadre du Tara Research Project du Discovery Programme. Deux tranchées de fouille implantées en 2017 dans l'enceinte ont permis de mettre en évidence quatre phases d'activité distinctes sur une période de 3000 ans, entre le milieu du 4^e millénaire et le milieu du 1^{er} millénaire av. NE. Durant le Néolithique moyen, le sommet de la colline a été encerclé par une enceinte palissadée (3635–3380 cal BC) possiblement associée à des activités de production d'industries lithiques. Avec ses 250 m de diamètre, il s'agit d'une des plus grandes enceintes connues en Irlande pour le 4^e millénaire. Au cours de l'âge du Bronze final, elle a été supplantée par une enceinte bien plus substantielle, à multiple fossés, d'un diamètre de 400 m (1280–920 cal BC), représentant la seule enceinte fouillée de ce type dans le comté de Meath. La colline a connu une nouvelle phase d'activité durant le début de l'âge du Fer (800–520 cal BC) et a pris par la suite une position centrale dans les ambitions politiques des premiers rois Uí Néill de Tara, gagnant une renommée particulière en tant que lieu de sépulture de leur ancêtre éponyme, Niall des Neufs Otages. Les phases suivantes à Faughan sont marquées par l'établissement dans ses alentours de nombreux habitats préhistoriques et sites rituels, ainsi que par de premières sources écrites. De manière collective, le site représente un centre régional et un lieu de rassemblement avec une importance sociale, symbolique et politique sur le temps long.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Sammelgebiet: Die Freilegung von 3000 Jahren Vorgeschichte in Faughan Hill, Ostirland, von Ger Dowling und Roseanne Schot

Über die Entdeckung eines bedeutenden archäologischen Komplexes in Faughan Hill, Grafschaft Meath, wurde erstmals 2015 in diesen *Proceedings* berichtet. Der Charakter und das Ausmaß der komplexen Überreste, die eine Reihe von großen Höhenbefestigungen, wahrscheinliche Grabstätten und damit verbundene Befunde umfassen, machen diesen Ort zu einem wichtigen Zentrum in einer Region, in der sich einige der größten und spektakulärsten Monumentenensembles Irlands befinden, nicht zuletzt im 15 km südöstlich liegenden Tara. Seitdem konnte ein vollständigeres Bild des Komplexes durch weitere geophysikalische Untersuchungen und anschließende Probegrabungen im Rahmen des Tara-Forschungsprojekts des Discovery-Programms gewonnen werden. Zwei Grabungsschnitte, die 2017 über die Ringwälle gelegt wurden, erbrachten Hinweise für vier verschiedene Nutzungsphasen, die sich über einen Zeitraum von etwa 3000 Jahren erstrecken, von der Mitte des 4. bis zur Mitte des 1. Jahrtausends v. Chr. Während des Mittelneolithikums (3635–3380 cal BC) wurde die Hügelkuppe von einer umzäunten Anlage eingenommen, die möglicherweise mit der Herstellung von Steinwerkzeugen in Verbindung stand. Mit einem projizierten Durchmesser von 250 m ist sie eine der größten

aus Irland bekannten Befestigungen des 4. Jahrtausends. Sie wurde in der Spätbronzezeit (1280–920 v. Chr.) durch eine weitaus größere Anlage mit einem Durchmesser von 400 m ersetzt, die die einzige ausgegrabene Höhenbefestigung dieser Art in Meath darstellt. Der Hügel war während der Frühen Eisenzeit (800–520 v. Chr.) der Mittelpunkt erneuter Aktivitäten und wurde später zum Zentrum der politischen Ambitionen der aufstrebenden, frühen Uí Néill-Könige von Tara, und er wurde vor allem als Grabstätte ihres gleichnamigen Vorfahren, Niall Noígíallach (Niall der neun Geiseln), bekannt. Die Entwicklungen in Faughan werden durch eine Fülle von prähistorischen Siedlungs- und Ritualplätzen in der Umgebung sowie durch frühe Schriftquellen weiter erhellt und sprechen insgesamt für ein regionales Zentrum und einen Versammlungsort mit langlebiger sozialer, symbolischer und politischer Bedeutung.

RESUMEN

Aunando la evidencia: desenterrando 3000 años de prehistoria en Faughan Hill, este de Irlanda, por Ger Dowling y Roseanne Schot

El descubrimiento de un gran complejo arqueológico en Faughan Hill, condado de Meath, fue dado a conocer inicialmente en estos *Proceedings* en 2015. El carácter y escala de los complejos restos documentados, que incluye una serie de grandes recintos en altura, probables yacimientos funerarios y estructuras asociadas, remarca el carácter del sitio como un importante centro principal en una región ocupada por algunos de los conjuntos de mayor entidad y espectacularidad de Irlanda, no solo en la colina de Tara, a 15 km del suroeste. Un panorama más complejo del yacimiento ha sido revelado gracias a una prospección geofísica, seguida por una serie de excavaciones de valoración desarrolladas por el Proyecto de Investigación Tara del Programa Discovery. Las dos trincheras excavadas cortando los recintos en altura en 2017 revelaron la evidencia de cuatro fases discretas de actividad durante 3000 años, desde mediados del IV a mediados del I milenio BC. Durante el Neolítico medio la cumbre estuvo rodeada por un recinto (3635–3380 cal BC) posiblemente asociado con la producción de herramientas líticas. Con un diámetro de 250, se trata de uno de los recintos más grandes del IV milenio documentado en Irlanda. Esto fue sustituido en el Bronce final (1280–920 cal BC) por un recinto con varias defensas de 400 metros de diámetro que representa el único castro excavado de este tipo en Meath. La colina fue objeto de una nueva actividad durante el final de la Edad del Hierro (800–520 cal BC) y posteriormente llegando a ser el centro de las aspiraciones y ambiciones políticas, de los primeros Uí Néill reyes de Tara, obteniendo un renombre particular como lugar de enterramiento de su antecesor epónimo, *Niall of the Nine Hostages*. Las novedades en Faughan se destacan además por la riqueza de asentamientos prehistóricos y yacimientos rituales del entorno, al igual que por las tempranas fuentes documentales, y, colectivamente, se puede considerar un centro regional y lugar que reúne una larga pervivencia con significado social, simbólico y político.