

A Landscape Survey of the Newgrange Environs: earlier prehistoric settlement at Brú na Bóinne, Co. Meath

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Brú na Bóinne, in Co. Meath, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a prehistoric landscape of international significance and is well known as home to one of the most important Neolithic passage-tomb cemeteries in Western Europe. A number of the monuments have been studied in some detail but only limited evidence for settlement in the area has come to light by chance as a by-product of these excavations. Used in the past as the basis of several models of settlement for the area, this data does not adequately address the nature, distribution and extent of settlement evidence across the wider Brú na Bóinne landscape over the course of the Neolithic. The current study addresses the question of settlement by taking a systematic approach to the landscape of Brú na Bóinne and the new data gathered suggests new ways in which we should be thinking about this important area.

The primary data collection method used during this study was systematic surface collection and all available tilled land in the study area was walked – amounting to 623ha out of a total area of 24km². Over 8,600 worked lithics were recovered and each was assigned an Irish National Grid Coordinate. A GIS model of the study area was used to store and analyse data gathered. An off-site/non-site approach was taken and lithic densities were calculated which revealed a continuous high-density blanket of finds from fields north of the river Boyne while to the south, there were also many areas of significant density the distribution was more patterned. There was significant variation both in lithics densities and in individual field assemblage composition across the study area. The highest densities were recorded in Newgrange townland with the highest field density reaching 92 artefacts per hectare. As well as confirming the high levels of activity on the north side of the river Boyne, survey results revealed that there were also many areas of significant density on the southern side of the river. The most notable of these extend along the southern valley shoulder in locations with excellent views northwards towards the core area and also with good access to what would have been fording points across the river in the Neolithic. There were also significant densities of material extending westwards towards the highest point in the study area (see Figure).

Raw material procurement strategies for the area were examined and it was found that significant quantities of chalk flint were being imported directly from Northern Ireland, the only source of this type of flint in Ireland. While chalk flint was found throughout the survey area, consistently higher densities were found on the northern side of the river. Pebble flint, the most significant

raw material type, was not available in any great quantities within the study area and appears to have been gathered and transported from coastal areas where flint often forms a significant component of shingle beaches. Surface collection work in adjacent coastal areas of counties Louth, Meath and Dublin have repeatedly revealed very high densities of lithic material, with assemblages often containing an important industrial component. Medium-distance and to a lesser extent long-distance movement into and out of Brú na Bóinne appears to have been quite a routine activity, if varying over time. Chert and other materials were also present in small quantities in the assemblages and varied across the ecozones.

Assemblage composition was found to vary considerably across the study area. Procurement and much initial processing of material was taking place outside the study area. However, the assemblages suggest slightly more industrial activity in certain areas of the landscape especially on the northern side of the river. Even greater variation is apparent in the figures relating to production. Retouched tools accounted for high proportions of field assemblages in some zones reaching proportions over 20% in one area. The number of chronologically diagnostic pieces recovered during the survey was low, especially for the Mesolithic and Earlier Neolithic, and it seems highly likely that activity during these time periods is grossly underrepresented by the diagnostics relative to later periods when diagnostics are more abundant. Most artefacts dated to the Later Neolithic date and these were distributed throughout the study area while many others dated to the Beaker/Early Bronze Age period but were found to be almost exclusively distributed on the southern side of the river. Areas of higher density than their surroundings, or concentrations, were identified in the main distribution of material as possible activity foci over time. One hundred and nineteen concentrations were identified and although many are likely to be palimpsests, the composition of many of these individual assemblages point to a strong settlement/domestic character. Magnetic susceptibility survey at the locations of a number of concentrations revealed a close degree of correspondence between the lithics distributions and the magnetic susceptibility data reinforcing the interpretation of the strong settlement character of the individual field and concentration lithics assemblages.

The densities of material recovered during this survey are among the highest recorded so far in Ireland and are also comparable to the results of certain British studies and point to intensive and prolonged use of this landscape over the Neolithic period. However, detailed geophysical survey and excavation holds considerable potential for exploring the nature of the data. While providing only a broad outline of the project and a summary of some of the results of the survey, this fresh data offers a new perspective on the character of activity during the Neolithic in the Brú na Bóinne landscape. It represents a new approach to the region at an appropriate scale, which, while complementing the data from the excavations of the monuments, allows new themes and avenues to be explored.



All premat.dbf

- 1
- 2 - 3
- 4 - 8
- 9 - 13
- 14 - 28

Elevation.shp

- 1 - 10m
- 11 - 20m
- 21 - 30m
- 31 - 40m
- 41 - 50m
- 51 - 60m
- 61 - 70m
- 71 - 80m
- 81 - 90m
- 91 - 100m

