

Neolithic salmon or beef?

Niall Roycroft
National Roads Authority

The Neolithic seems to have arrived as a lifestyle package. This package climbed out of a boat, dragged itself up the beach and exploded into a brilliance of Neolithic monuments and settlements. So did this package mean all Neolithic communities cleared woodland, settled down and started farming? Not exactly.

Subsistence arable farming is actually very hard, tedious, labour-intensive work. It is much better to have a communal lifestyle balance as reliant on free cattle / livestock herding, helped out with fish and other hunted / gathered foods that balances the arable effort.

The Neolithic package certainly involved an operational, residential base to grow, protect and harvest domesticated cereal crops. By its very nature this base must have been occupied all year round. However, the lifestyle also involved animal husbandry on a fairly significant scale. Cattle, much more than sheep, goats or pigs require a large area of pasture to keep them going. Cattle can exhaust a fairly large grass field in weeks and can completely churn it up within days when it rains. Cattle and pasture must be managed, and it is best to keep cattle on the move. The scale of the almost wholly pasture fields at Céide, Co. Mayo, around 12km², shows how much pasture had to be *managed* in order to support the Neolithic livestock. This grass was not only for summer feed but also winter fodder, since cattle must be brought in and fed before they exhaust and wreck fragile, sodden soils.

Communal effort is the key to the success and strength of the Neolithic Revolution. In a community, specialisms develop and tasks are divided up. Even at an extended family level, one taskforce can be detailed to arable farming, pottery production and hay making; another taskforce can seasonally take the cattle on a summer transhumance journey to fatten them up for autumn slaughter or winter life and spring breeding.

In north County Louth the great territorial range needed by Neolithic people to keep their cattle seems to be visible. The Neolithic burial monuments of the Cooley Mountains / Carlingford Peninsular are well known. All the recognised, major, early settlement, as seen by rectangular houses and burial monuments (highlighted recently on the A1/N1 Newry – Dundalk Link, NRA archaeological excavations) are on the northern, elevated side of Dundalk Bay. The more lightly wooded, south-facing hillslopes and terraces would have been easier to clear and more suitable for crop growing than dense lowland forest. This hill-slope zone would have had fields around the traditionally ‘permanent’ or ‘home’ sites, designed to grow / protect both cereals and winter

animal fodder.

Neolithic monuments stretch down the hill-slopes overlooking Dundalk and a landmark site is now recognised at Balregan on the Castletown River; the (then) head of Dundalk Bay. Further south the known monuments disappear completely. The monumental evidence therefore points to a territorial core for the South Armagh – Carlingford Peninsular area that ends at the liminal (boundary) marker of Balregan.

However, there appears to be a large, very active, periphery zone beyond this core stretching much further south. NRA archaeological work on the M1 Dundalk Western Bypass shows Neolithic sites as far south as Littlemill townland, near Ballybarrack, 6km south of Balregan. It is likely the whole of this periphery area, c. 6km north to south (Castletown River to Ballybarrack) by perhaps 10km east to west (between the Monaghan drumlins and the sea) was used throughout the whole 2000 years of the Neolithic.

None of the five Neolithic sites on the M1 Dundalk Western Bypass, south of the Castletown River (approximately 1 site per 1km of motorway) shows anything but a scatter of postholes, pits, pottery and charcoal. None of them can readily be classed as ‘year-round’ settlements but some of them have pottery that dates to various phases throughout the Neolithic and into the Bronze Age. This suggests these transient-style, probably transhumance-based sites actually had an extraordinarily long period of use. These sites would also naturally form hunting bases for harvesting seasonal, particularly autumn, woodland bounties (nuts, berries, fruit, mushrooms, wild boar etc).

Interestingly, the distribution of Neolithic ‘Megalithic Art’ in County Louth is almost wholly confined to this periphery area. Decorated rock outcrops and panels are clustered between the Castletown River (Tateetra) and Ballybarrack. Perhaps this ‘art’ is acting partly as territorial markers. Perhaps these stones also acted as ritual foci for ensuring the bountiful renewal of the *natural* ‘transhumance’ environment - as opposed to the *managed* ‘home’ environment of the permanent farming areas north of Dundalk Bay.

Woodland clearings in north County Louth could very quickly be extended to become a 60km² open patchwork of trees and grass: an environment very suitable for cattle (and no need to grub / burn out thousands of huge tree boles). It is therefore possible that beef was the main reason for much Wild Wood demolition in north Louth.

Meanwhile in adjacent County Monaghan, something fishy seems to be going on. The Early Neolithic settlement at Monanny, found on the N2 Carrickmacross Bypass, is sited adjacent to a salmon-rich stream. Nearby to Carrickmacross, there are also a couple of megalithic burial monuments. Salmon, eels and trout are still fairly prolific in this stream and it could be that

Neolithic settlers in Monaghan were targeting fish resources as an added bonus of permanent settlement. Given a free range of choosing a site to live, an annual crop of fat salmon would have been very welcome (as it is still is today).

Salmon spawning must take place far upstream for new fish to develop enough before they reach the sea. Large adult fish are also much easier to catch when they run into shallow water. Both aspects mean gravelly tributaries at the heads of lengthy rivers are ideal spots to lay claim to a salmon stretch. In a drumlin county with no shortage of water, only a few river tributaries in County Monaghan reach the sea and it is only these tributaries that have Neolithic burial monuments (and therefore, presumably Neolithic settlements).

One particular monument cluster lies to the west of Monaghan town, on tributaries to the River Finn (part of the River Erne system) and also coincides with a high ground mass with fairly sheltered valleys. This is likely to be a deliberate targeting of salmon spawning streams.

