

“Our hidden Neolithic? Following the paper trail...”

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The increasing amount of evidence for timber, rectangular houses in Ireland in the Neolithic period has been well documented (Grogan 1996; Cooney 1999; Grogan 2002, 2004; Armit *et al.* 2003). Less well documented however, are the many other forms of Neolithic activity spread across the landscape. Flint scatters, arcs of postholes and stakeholes, metalled surfaces, ditches, enclosures, hearths and pits continue to be uncovered, almost entirely within the fast-moving commercial archaeology sector (*e.g.* Bennett 2003, 2004, 2006). In order to demonstrate just how varied the Neolithic settlement record is, and to gain an idea of the proportion of house-building activity to other so-called ‘temporary’ settlement activity, the *Excavations Bulletin* was consulted. This publication, also available as an online database (www.excavations.ie), contains summaries of all excavations carried out in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland since 1970. It was thought particularly suitable for a review of Neolithic activity as it records both commercial and research excavations, in urban and rural locations, on prehistoric and historic sites with upstanding and below-ground remains.

The *Excavations Bulletins* from 1970 to 2002 list 129 sites across Ireland yielding Neolithic material. For the purposes of review this activity was grouped into thirteen broad categories (see [Figure 1](#)). Very few of the categories were mutually exclusive, although an attempt was made to represent what appeared to be the main focus of activity at a site. What is immediately apparent is that the Neolithic houses, which feature so prominently in discussions of the period, are only one type of activity among several other, well-represented types of evidence. 25 sites have yielded traces of pits, either isolated or in clusters, and this number does not take into account those pits found in association with houses, within hilltop enclosures or those making up pit circles. Clearly, pit-digging was a common activity in Neolithic Ireland, something which has hardly been recognised in the literature and which does not easily fit into a simple narrative of farmsteads and ancestral tombs. Another notable feature is the amount of structural evidence not termed a ‘house’. Twelve sites are grouped here as ‘undefined structural’, many of which consist of various combinations of postholes, stakeholes, gullies and/or trenches with little resemblance to the ground plans of the rectilinear early Neolithic houses or later buildings. An even more diverse picture is formed when we consider those remains included under ‘occupation layers’, of which there are 24 examples. Other entries in the *Excavations Bulletin* detail a small amount of evidence for activity in caves and on water, and for building dry-stone walls. The relatively low amount of all of this activity recorded is at least partly due to its marginal location, in the modern sense. Hillsides, bog or marshland and lake edges are not areas usually chosen for development and it is likely that these few excavated examples represent a much more widespread exploration

of waterways and sea-courses, organisation of land and activity in caves.

Clearly, the Irish Neolithic settlement record is diverse. Moreover, many different types of settlement evidence appear to be contemporary with one another. [Figure 2](#) shows the incidences of different forms of settlement activity through the Irish Neolithic (activity at 88 of the 129 sites could be dated either to the early, middle or later Neolithic). Significantly, most of the house construction is being carried out in the early Neolithic. Given the large numbers of early houses that are currently being uncovered along linear developments such as pipelines and motorways, it might be expected that similar numbers of later buildings would also be recovered, if they existed. One possible reason for the decrease in the numbers of houses being built in the middle and later Neolithic is that these later buildings were not as solid, permanent or monumental as those constructed in the early Neolithic and consequently left little trace in the archaeological record. Another possibility is that houses of the middle and later Neolithic were not being built in the same location as the earlier houses, or, more precisely, in that lowland, flat or gently undulating terrain preferred for new motorway routes, pipelines and large-scale residential development.

Figure 2 also illustrates that several other forms of settlement activity are contemporary with the early timber houses, *i.e.*, pit-digging, the erection of temporary or lightweight structures and the creation of layers of occupation debris does not appear to replace house-building, but is instead undertaken alongside it. Indeed, most of the examples of pit-digging can be dated to the early Neolithic, although a significant amount of activity also appears to be taking place in the later Neolithic. Relatively speaking, numbers of middle Neolithic pits are low and it may be that a decline in the practice of putting things into the ground is related to the increase in construction of above ground containers, such as passage tombs and Linkardstown-type mounds. However, it should also be noted that the use of caves for deposition of human remains and accompanying material seems to peak in the middle Neolithic (*c.* 3600-3400 BC; Marion Dowd, pers. comm.).

Neolithic groups were clearly not tethered to houses. This may seem a glaringly obvious statement but it is one for which the ramifications have not yet been properly explored. Many of the sites listed in the *Excavated Bulletins* represent a different view of, and commitment to, place than the substantial co-operative efforts involved in preparing for and erecting timber houses, megalithic structures and lengths of field walls. We must begin to engage properly with the full spectrum of settlement remains if we are to provide an accurate picture of life on this island 6000 years ago.

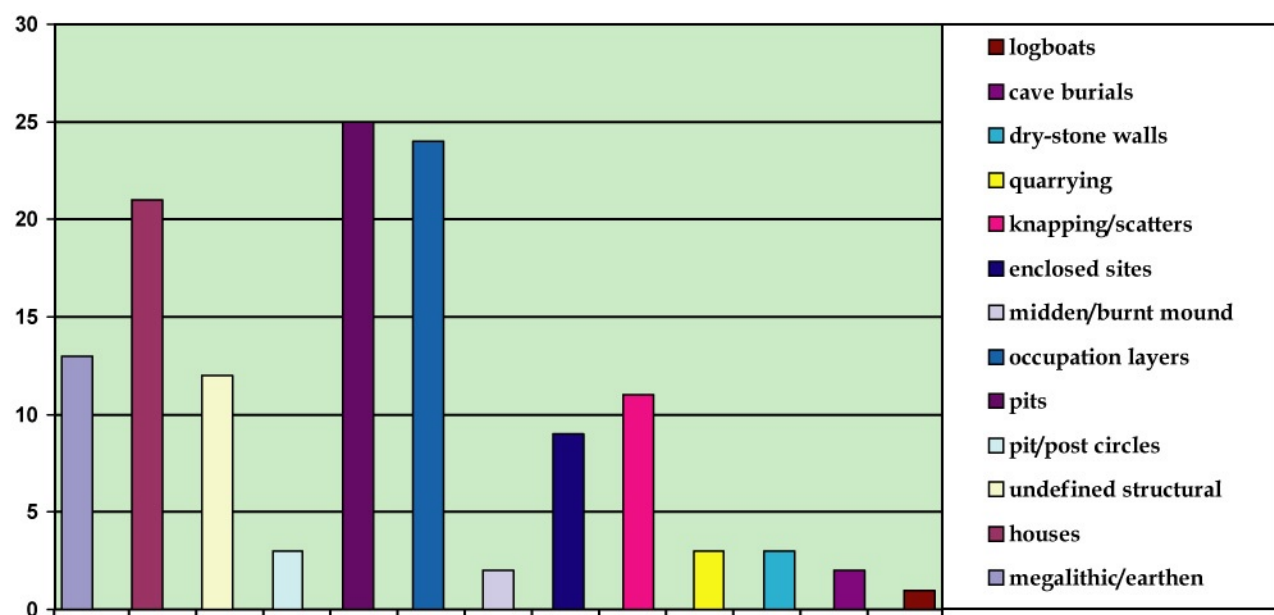


Figure 1: Numbers of Neolithic 'sites' excavated in Ireland between 1970 and 2002

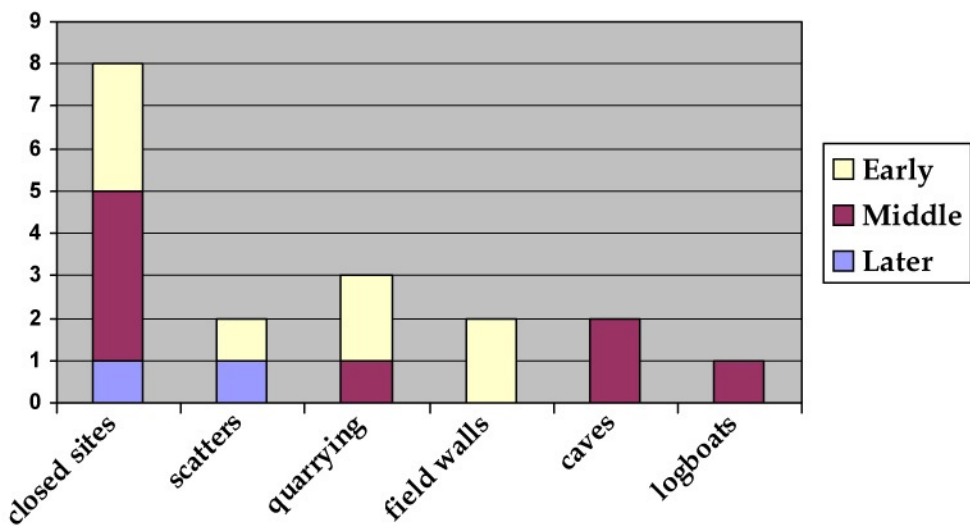
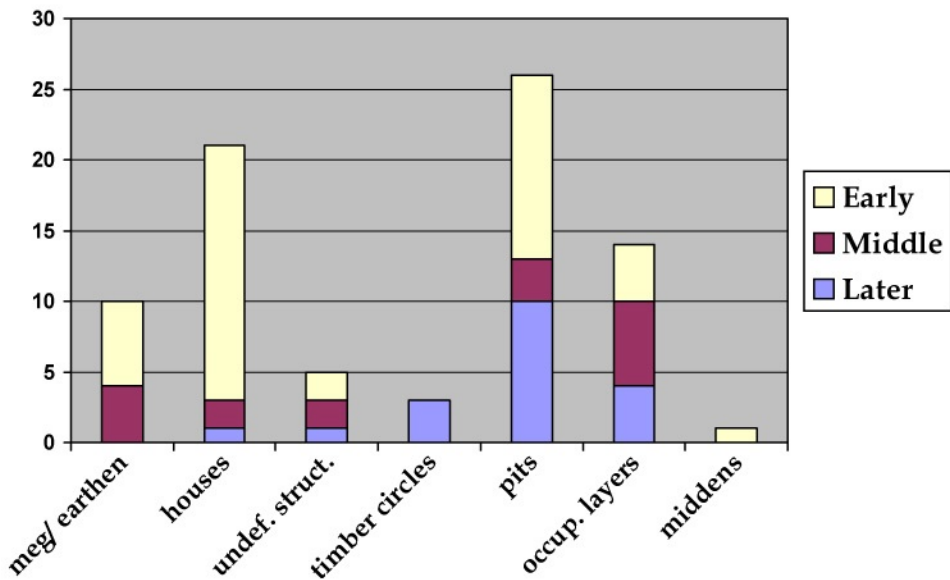


Figure 2: Settlement activity through the Irish Neolithic