

# Living Landscapes: An Introduction

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It has long been axiomatic that we know more about the dead in Neolithic Britain and Ireland than about the living. Mortuary monuments and ceremonial enclosures are prominent on the landscape and have received much of the attention of archaeologists. However, recent interests have begun to turn again to aspects of the daily lives and experiences of Neolithic people, concerning which we still know very little. In fact, in contrast to the situation in the 1970s, there is very little agreement over the nature of the Early Neolithic in terms of the subsistence economy, and the nature and scale of its concomitant affects on the environment. Ireland can play a particularly useful role here, as the large number of houses that have been found over the last decade provide focal points for investigating these lived landscapes. But to achieve this potential, it is necessary to bring together a number of different strands of evidence, from the disciplines of zooarchaeology, palaeobotany, and palaeoecology, to biomolecular archaeology and more post-processual concerns with the human experience of landscape. The papers in this seminar address the theme of lived landscapes in the Neolithic from a number of these perspectives, not only from Ireland, but also from Britain and western Europe, reflecting the wider connections that were also a part of the Neolithic world.

Though in some ways very rich, especially in terms of the mortuary monuments and house structures mentioned above, in others the evidence from the Irish Neolithic is rather limited. This is especially the case with human and animal bone, which survives very poorly in the acid soils that dominate the island. Stable carbon isotope analysis of the human remains that do survive, however, show a similar pattern to that documented for Britain (Richards et al. 2003; Woodman 2004). That is, diets in the Mesolithic are varied, and include some individuals who focused almost entirely on marine sources of protein, while Neolithic diets are much more homogeneous, and are consistently terrestrial in their orientation, regardless of whether a site is coastal or inland.

Faunal assemblages are even less well represented in Ireland, but given the paucity of native Irish fauna, and such evidence as does survive, it seems clear that the main domestic species, and in particular cattle, were of great importance from the outset. This is certainly documented in the larger faunal assemblages of Britain. More recently, a novel line of evidence has been used by Mark Robinson (2001) to examine the importance of pastoralism. Looking at fossil insect faunas (Coleoptera), the high proportion of dung beetles at a number of Early Neolithic sites in Britain

suggests the presence of pastures and even in one case corralling. However, data compiled by Whitehouse and Smith (submitted) suggest that the picture may be more complicated and varied, though much depends on the crucial factor of sampling location.

The balance between husbandry and cereal-growing is a difficult one to untangle. Certainly there is evidence for substantial charred cereal remains on some sites, while others have few or none. But the evidence is still scattered, and suffers from the usual problems of recovery methods, limited sampling or sampling bias, compounded by a backlog of unpublished sites. Regardless of where the balance lies between domestic animals and plants, the sheer scale of human modification of the landscape from the earlier Neolithic is attested at the Céide Fields, Co. Mayo. This massive and well-organised field system extends across some 1000 hectares. While thought to be largely intended for herding, both pollen evidence and the presence of ard marks show that arable also featured.

With Ireland's rich endowment of suitable lakes and bogs, the pollen evidence plays an important role in our understanding of past human impacts on the landscape. O'Connell and Molloy (2001) have recently summarised the palynological evidence for Neolithic farming, and emphasise the variability in the degree of clearance that can be seen at this time. They also point to the apparent emphasis on pastoralism, with only limited evidence for cereal cultivation. But there is an issue here regarding pollen sampling locations in relation to archaeological sites. Cereals are not prolific pollen producers, and what they do produce does not travel far. Thus, unless the sampling site is immediately adjacent to fields or processing areas, cereal pollen is unlikely to be found in any significant quantity. Recent analysis of a lake basin at Ballyarnet (Plunkett *et al.* in prep. ), near the large Thornhill Neolithic settlement in Co. Derry makes this point very well. Though located only ca. 1 km from Thornhill, the Ballyarnet cores showed no evidence for a Neolithic impact on the vegetation. Conversely, a small bog bear the Late Neolithic 'ritual landscape' of Ballynahatty, Co. Down, has revealed anthropogenic impact and the probable presence of cereals from ca. 3800 cal BC (Plunkett *et al.* in press). Neolithic settlement, even when relatively considerable (Thornhill is a palisaded site with at least six structures), was very localised, and given the no doubt low population densities, impacts on the landscape would have remained relatively limited. Cereal growing was most likely intensive rather than extensive, more akin to garden horticulture. The possibility of manuring now being investigated (Bogaard *et al.* 2007) would make such plots both productive and sustainable.

If one thing emerged from the seminar, it is the that there is the need for the integration of different lines of evidence to understand how the landscape was utilised, both for practical terms and for providing a better sense of the context of monuments and other 'ritual' sites (again, we do not want to overplay this distinction, but it is one that can be explored). This is very difficult in Ireland (as elsewhere). Areas that preserve some types of evidence do not preserve others, requiring the use of shifting scales of analysis and the challenges that this in turn represents. But

there is little question that the effort will be rewarded.

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