



Book Reviews

MONUMENTAL BEGINNINGS; THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE N4 SLIGO INNER RELIEF ROAD, BY ED DAHANHER

NRA Scheme Monographs 1, 2009. 183pp, 70 colour and b&w figs, 13 tabs + CD. ISBN 978-0-9545955-4-8 pb (€ 25)

NEAR THE BEND IN THE RIVER; THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE N25 KILMACTHOMAS REALIGNMENT, BY PENNY JOHNSTON, JACINTA KIELY & JOHN TIERNEY

NRA Scheme Monographs 3, 2009. 201pp 95 colour and b&w figs, 7 tabs. ISBN 978-0-95445955-8-6 (€ 25)

These two well produced volumes, as their subtitles suggest, represent the results of archaeological investigations in advance of and during the construction of new road schemes in the Republic of Ireland. The first volume in particular deals with some spectacular prehistoric archaeology including the Magheraboy causewayed enclosure shown by radiocarbon dating to be the earliest such enclosure in Britain and Ireland. The volumes are directed towards an interested lay audience. The chapters provide the archaeological narratives and concisely written discussions. For the specialist, the CD included in the back of each volume provides the more detailed excavation data. The CD sections are cross referenced in the hard text.

The volumes are arranged rather differently. *Monumental Beginnings* starts with an introduction to the project in Co Sligo in the north of Eire and a chapter on the landscape. Chapter 3 deals with that most iconic of Irish Bronze Age site types, the *fulachta fiadh*. Linked by their trough and burnt stone spreads, these sites nevertheless exhibit variations in their forms such as Magheraboy 1 and 2 where the former has a circular trough and the latter a rectangular one while at Caltragh 6 the trough seems to have been associated with a drain. The parallels for these sites are discussed as is their mention in the early Irish texts and their functions are postulated from cooking or brewing sites to steam baths and wood bending tanks.

Subsequent chapters deal with the archaeology on a more regional level with sections given to Tonafortes, Caltragh and Magheraboy. The last-named site occupying two chapters dealing with the Neolithic and later archaeology respectively. At Tonafortes, excavation focussed on two *fulachta fiadh* already described and a circular ceremonial enclosure marked by a ditch with internal and external banks, the outer of which was the more substantial. Dating the enclosure proved problematic with samples from primary ditch fills providing a number of statistically different dates the oldest of which dates to the start of the Bronze Age. This perplexes the author who would have preferred to have had late Neolithic dates however given the range of later dates now emanating from British henges, this reviewer has no problems with the Tonafortes date (though admittedly it would have been better had the results had greater consistency).

At Caltragh, a much denuded broadly rectangular stone setting was interpreted as the remains of a possible megalithic tomb utilising natural earth-fast boulders. The site has no obvious or close parallels but two deposits of cremated human bone provided a mid to late 4th millennium date suggesting that it may belong to a hybrid class of megalithic monument and be broadly contemporary with the nearby Carrowmore passage graves. Also in this area, was a dry-stone-walled semicircular enclosure that separated the dryland from the boggy lakeside area. The wall overlay a Neolithic land surface, had stone axes deposited within its makeup and was sealed by early Bronze Age burnt mounds. Five Bronze Age cremations were also located, two of which were associated with highly unusual carved stone beads. Three Middle Bronze Age round houses were also found in this area and were defined by bedding trenches and internal stake arrangements.

The causewayed enclosure at Magheraboy is, arguably, the most fascinating and important part of this volume. Like many other sites in Britain, Magheraboy does not sit on top of a ridge but rather on the slope perhaps to better command views to and from sites such as Knocknarea. It is just over a hectare in area and is defined by an internal palisade and outer interrupted ditch. An internal rectangular timber enclosure similar to some Scandinavian sites, was attached to the palisade on the south side. The ditches seem to have been used for the deposition of cultural material principally Carinated Bowl, flint, chert and porcellanite artefacts and fragments. The construction of the enclosure seems to have started at the very beginning of the Neolithic in Ireland and Britain at 4150-3935cal BC and activity at the site may have lasted for several centuries including periods of internal pit deposition. The later features at Magheraboy (chapter 7) comprise Grooved Ware pits, a small penannular Iron Age structure and a ringfort that cuts the causewayed enclosure.

The volume is clearly written, readable and full of interesting information. It is clearly based at a general readership with the majority of specialist reports and data included on the CD. This is no bad thing and saves the general reader from skipping through pages of data. The illustrations are well chosen and well produced with an excellent use of colour. The absence of scales on some artefact illustrations is frustrating but again the data can be found on the CD. I am a little puzzled by the photograph of the Pygmy Cup from Carraroe on the front cover but which does not seem to feature in the report.

Monograph 3, (what happened to monograph 2?), *Near the Bend in the River*, (The Mahon, not the Bend of the Boyne) deals with the other end of the Republic of Ireland, in Co Waterford, and the chapters are arranged more thematically. Like *Monumental Beginnings*, Chapter 1 introduces the project and area whilst Chapter 2 deals with the prehistoric archaeology from Neolithic through Beaker to Bronze Age. Chapter 3 is devoted to our old friends the *fulachta fiadh* (no fewer than 9 were encountered). Chapter 4 examines medieval metalworking sites whilst Chapter 5 discusses post-medieval settlement. Chapter 6 sees some of the specialist reports plucked from the CD and the volume is drawn to a close by the discussion in Chapter 7. Clearly from the point of view of members of this *Society*, chapters 1-3 and 7 are the most relevant.

After the introduction to the project and the area, aided by some superb colour photographs, Chapter 2 deals with 14 area of prehistoric occupation, doubtless windows into a much more widespread distribution. The Neolithic occupation is fairly small scale comprising a pit group with Carinated Bowl, and a second pit and hearth site associated with Impressed Ware and corresponding middle Neolithic 14C date. Two other pit and hearth sites were dated by Neolithic flint types and a sherd of Beaker. The two Beaker settlements at Craigheshoneen and Ahanaglogh are examples of rare Beaker-associated settlements comprising a house plan and other structural evidence and make a welcome addition to this small but important corpus. Structural evidence of the late Bronze Age from Cooltubbrid East is also somewhat enigmatic though a circular feature can be determined. Also hiding here, however, is another Carrinated Bowl assemblage and it is perplexing as to why this was not separated out into the otherwise clear chronological structuring of the chapter.

The *fulachta fiadh* in Chapter 3 mainly span the Bronze Age in date, each site, as with those in the preceding chapter, receiving a summary yet well illustrated account. Chapter 7 places these new discoveries in their regional settings. The chronologically arranged discussions are brief and concise and less wide-ranging than in *Monumental Beginnings*.

These two volumes, then present clearly the results of the investigations to a wide audience. They are attractive volumes containing, with the benefit of the CDs, much important and invaluable data. Perhaps greater consistency in the use of scales on photographs (particularly artefacts in *Monumental Beginnings*) might be encouraged and, as with fiche in the 'good old days' I have concerns about the chances of separation of the CD from the volume especially as in my volumes, the CD sleeve had been inserted upside down. But these are quibbles and the series deserves to be a success.

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Review submitted: January 2010

The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor