

THE PITFIELDS OF RATHCROGHAN, CO. ROSCOMMON

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THE PITFIELDS OF RATHCROGHAN,

The Rathcroghan complex is an enigmatic landscape at the best of times. The average visitor to the area may come to experience an ancient royal site of Ireland but leave with a deeper understanding of the interwoven physical and mythical landscapes. As at many royal sites, one can trace significant periods of domestic and religious activity through the unique archaeological landscape. Rathcroghan offers something more; it offers the opportunity to engage not only with the physical past of ancient Ireland but also with the mythical past. Cruachan is one of Ireland's ancient cemeteries, the home of Queen Medb, the starting point for Ireland's *Iliad* (*An Táin Bó Cuailnge*) and home to the Morrigan, a triple goddess of battle, strife and fertility, who resides in Oweynagat, which is where an enticing ogham inscription referencing two mythical names from the Ulster Cycle (Freach and Medb) can also be found.

As I child I visited my grandparents who lived beside this cave, and the sense of place has stuck with me ever since. After a decade living in Galway city, I finally returned to Rathcroghan as the Education Development Officer for Cruachan Aí Heritage Centre, Tulske. Since my return to work in County Roscommon there is one question I have been repeatedly asked at the end of a tour of the exhibition rooms: 'What are those rectangular depressions in the aerial photos of Rathcroghan?'

Sadly, there is no straight answer to this question, and the more I have looked into it the more questions I discover. On 13–15 April 2012 there will be an archaeology conference held at Cruachan Aí Heritage Centre. The topic will be 'Rathcroghan, an enigmatic landscape', and it is hoped that the question of these unique rectangular features can be discussed during this time.

Description of features

Dotted across the greater Rathcroghan area and beyond are a series of what appear to be purposely aligned pits. The extent of these pits is best appreciated from the air, as they can be hard to see at ground level. As a general rule they run visually north/north-west, but have also been noted as running north/north-east, sometimes in the same group (Fig. 1). Michael Moore of the National Monuments Service has classified these features as pitfields, defined as 'shallow oblong pits c. 10m x c. 2–3m, with a depth of c. 0.5m, arranged in parallel rows placed c. 20–40m apart'. These pits sometimes retain water, although not all pits in a single group will fill (Fig. 2). The pitfields, according to the archaeology.ie website, only appear in County Roscommon within the wider



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Gary Dempsey describes
subrectangular depressions
on a royal landscape.

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Rathcroghan area. The pits, according to Moore, do not occur outside an area bounded by Castlerea, Bellanagare, Tulsk and Roscommon town, and they do not occur in other counties.

Suggestions for origins of features

Natural features

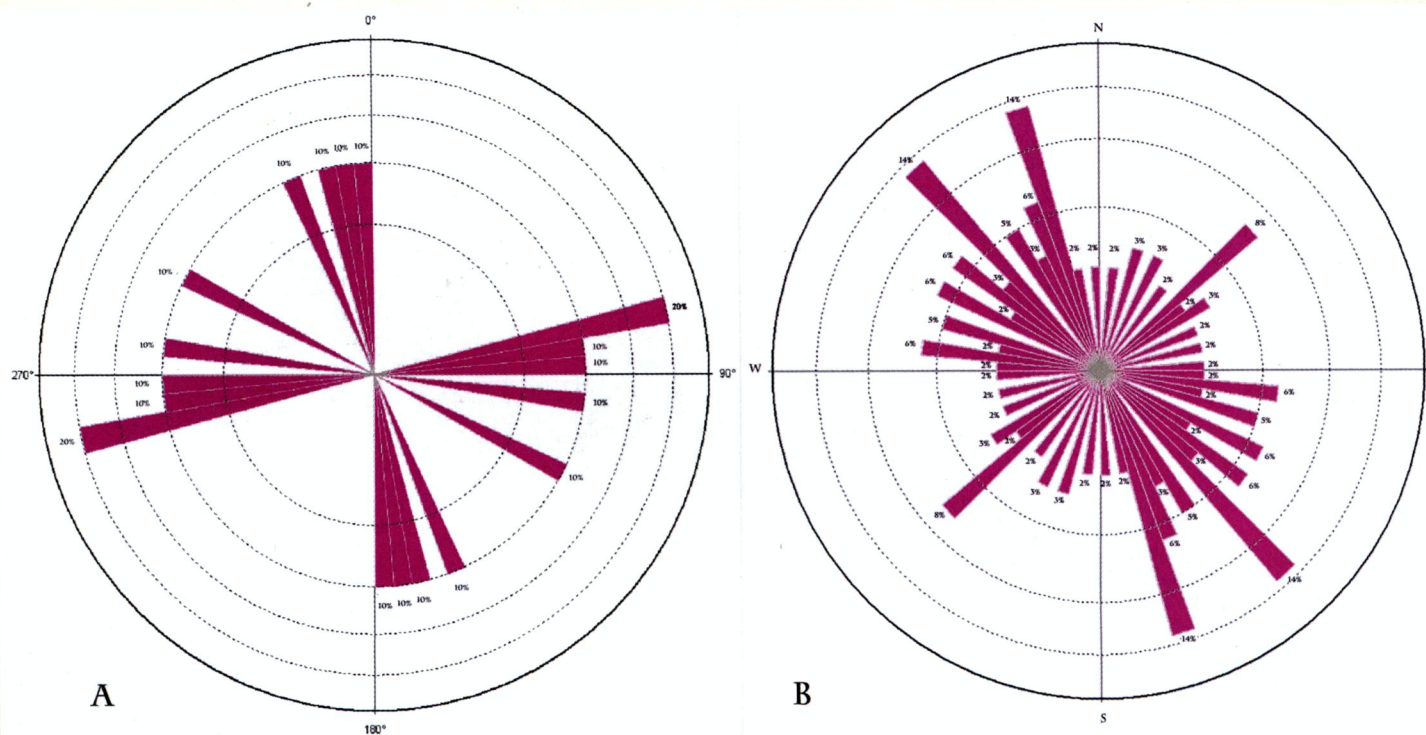
In 1997 Joe Fenwick (NUI Galway, Archaeology Department) and Matthew Parkes (NMI Natural History) published an article on Oweynagat Cave in Glenballythomas, Co. Roscommon, which highlighted the associated karst features of the region. The authors noted a number of 'curious features in the Rathcroghan area which may reflect the structure and nature of the underlying geology' (Fenwick and Parkes 1997).

The strange features they mention are what were later to be classified as pitfields. Despite an apparent regular alignment pattern and a suggestion that these depressions are in some way connected with the unique cultural landscape, a more plausible explanation for the features as 'a reflection [of] the underlying karstic landscape of linear rifts' was proposed (*ibid.*). It was noted that the features 'display a mutually consistent orientation and in some instances occur roughly at right angles to each other'. From this observation the writers suggested a relationship to joints in the limestone as the most likely explanation. It should be highlighted that Fenwick and Parkes noted that further fieldwork is needed to support this theory, as there are not enough exposed sections of limestone to confirm or deny it.

Left: **Fig. 1—View to the south of Rathcroghan Mound, showing pitfield with both north/north-west and north/north-east orientation.** (Photo: Gerry Bracken, reproduced from Cruachan Aí exhibition.)

Below: **Fig. 2—View of the Mucklaghs in winter, showing some water-filled pits.** (Photo: Gerry Bracken, reproduced from Cruachan Aí exhibition.)





Above: Fig. 3—Directional trend of (a) pits and (b) natural joints in the Rathcroghan area. (Image: Kevin Cormican.)

Left: Fig. 4—Eskers to the north-east of Rathcroghan Mound. (Photo: Gerry Bracken, reproduced from Cruachan Aí exhibition.)



Work carried out by Kevin Cormican during the ArchaeoGeophysical Imaging Project (NUI Galway) on a sample of ten pits and a number of exposed geological joints in the area showed that there are two broad trends for the orientation of the pits, north/north-west (60%) and north/north-east (40%), which is supported by aerial photography. Cormican's survey reveals a similar percentage for the natural joints in the region (Fig. 3). The limited sample survey showed that there is a possible correlation between pits and the underlying geology. As this survey was limited to a small geographical area, and the opportunity to record the underlying karst landscape was limited to exposed sites, a more extensive survey would need to be carried out before any definitive results could be agreed. Kevin Cormican examined aerial photos of the region showing possible glacial features (Fig. 4). His analysis of these images identified the ridges as eskers, a natural glacial feature.

These and other glacial features have been mapped by Catherine Delaney of Manchester Metropolitan University.

Delaney records the pitfields as 'rectangular, steep-sided bedrock depressions' that are present on the surface of the streamlined hills in the region. She suggests that the likeliest explanation is that the depressions were created by the 'plucking of bedrock by overriding ice' and dates them to the creation of the glacial ridges in the area.

Cormican suggests that these sites may have been hollowed out by people following the line of a ridge or escarpment; he also noted that archaeological excavation may not reveal anything substantial about the pits, as the process by which they were hollowed may not have left any archaeological trace. If the features were created through the removal of soil or other elements from the ground, there may be little or no contextual evidence to suggest what was removed or for what reason.

Man-made features

Michael Moore of the National Monuments Service has suggested that these features are man-made and not natural features, proposing a possible post-medieval date,

from the seventeenth century AD onwards. His survey of the area allowed him to record the majority of visible features classified in this unique group. While Fenwick and Parkes (1997) noted that the features are most likely natural in origin, Moore (pers. comm.) notes that 'in the same area they will often run in two different directions'. When questioned on a possible origin of these features, he made the suggestion that these pits may represent

'an attempt to mix subsoil with the topsoil. If you think about it, this answers a lot of the difficulties they present. Whatever came out of them was taken away or spread as there is never a spoil mound at them. The pits are of a fairly uniform size and shape and set equally distant apart. This would result if people were spreading the contents over the ground by shovel.'

This suggestion was offered with the caveat that it is not known whether this is a regular agricultural practice and that it may have occurred on a single landlord's property. The subsoil is mineral-rich and may become beneficial to fertility when mixed with topsoil from time to time.



Above: **Fig. 5—Possible pits on bog island in Derrynaskea, north of Corlea, Co. Longford.** (Photo: Martin Timoney.)

Below: **Fig. 6—Pitfields north of the N5 at Toberrory townland, north-east of Rathcroghan.** Pits shown on glacial ridge top centre and with field boundary centre. (Photo: Martin Timoney.)

In 2009 Martin A. Timoney wrote an interesting article on these features, the product of years of curious interest and recording. His first introduction, and that of many others, to the features was in 1972 through photographs taken by Gerry Bracken. It would seem that until Bracken had photographed the area there was little awareness of these pits. Many cannot be seen at ground level, and even when viewing the landscape from raised ridges and hills the features can be elusive to the human eye, as their visibility depends on light direction and grass growth. Bracken's photography exposed many of these features over the Rathcroghan Complex, where they appear at or close to other monuments. It is these wonderful photos that adorn the exhibition rooms of Cruachan Aí and draw the eyes of curious visitors to the subrectangular pits that weave and dodge archaeological monuments, providing a relative chronology.

From field-walking and the available aerial photography Timoney (2009) estimated the count to be 1,500–2,000 pits. This figure is a refinement of the 2,500 he suggested in 1990. While there are many pits visible from aerial photography, there is

evidence that many more may have been filled in over the years. During extensive work by John Waddell, Joe Fenwick and Kevin Barton in the Rathcroghan area it was reported via a local landowner that 'some field banks were levelled and that a number of hollows or pits were filled' between the 1980s and 1990s (Waddell *et al.* 2009).



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Fig. 7—Pitfields north towards Rathcroghan from Glenballythomas townland. (Photo: Martin Timoney.)

Timoney's research of these features includes possible pitfields outside of Moore's boundaries. He notes two such records from the Sites and Monuments Record team in the late 1990s. Tom Condit discovered some pits to the south-west of Boyle at this time, in Lissredrea townland. Timoney includes these pits with the Rathcroghan pitfields, while highlighting that the twenty or so features are 'somewhat different in that they are arranged in "angled pairs" rather than straight lines' (Timoney 2009, 139). He also includes a pitfield listed by the Recorded Monuments and Places manual at Barrinagh to the south of Garraghanlaghan (a place-name also recorded as Barrinagh, Garranlahan and Borrinagh Granlahan), which does not appear on archaeology.ie. Upon inspection of this website, Michael Moore has reclassified this site as redundant, noting 'on an undulating landscape. Said to have been covered in pits with no upcast by an informant, but the location was not certain. There is no evidence of pits at this location' (SMR, R0032 -010). Lastly, Timoney 'hesitantly' includes two pits on a bog island in Derrynaskea, Co. Longford, which he recorded from the air and has not seen on the ground (Fig. 5).

Possible dating

The initial suggestion that these sites may be natural is countered by evidence drawn from the context of surrounding monuments and features. Moore has already proposed a post-medieval date for the features. Timoney is more cautious, highlighting the context in which the pits are to be found. There are a number of instances where the depressions

cross archaeological monuments and thus should post-date those sites (Fig. 6). There are also instances where modern field banks (of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although some may be considerably older) cross the features, and so the pits pre-dated these. While it may not be possible to date the features precisely, there is evidence from Timoney's work on aerial photos to suggest that these pits appear on man-made features and on natural drumlins, which may rule out any theory of natural origins.

Possible purpose

As with the dating of these sites, it may never be possible to uncover the purpose for which they were created. There are many local suggestions, such as a source for clay or rocks, the collection of water, the storage of potatoes, drainage, flax pits, damaging fields owned by a landlord, military reasons or the production of lime (Timoney 2009). Another suggestion noted by Timoney is that soil might have been removed and offered as material for the construction of some of the major archaeological monuments in a ritual manner.

Suggestions from visitors to Cruachan Aí range from the practical to the bizarre. It has been suggested that these pits may be the archaeological remains of temporary camps or huts, the soil being removed from below and then a temporary floor placed on top of the pit to prevent dampness. A suggestion was even made that these sites may have been used during druidic rituals and the sacrificing of bulls!

Possible future work

The significance of these enigmatic pits may never be fully understood without detailed mapping, geophysics, excavation and soil-testing, and while there is merit in studying the geological landscape, it should also be remembered that Rathcroghan is a spiritual landscape with many archaeological features covering a substantial time-period from the Neolithic to medieval Roscommon. Timoney (2009) notes the ideology of Professor Peter Woodman, 'that we do not know everything, or even near it, and we should keep the material that we do not understand, perhaps even more so than that we can understand'.

While there has been intermittent interest in these sites over the years, they have not been extensively studied within the Rathcroghan area. In order to gain a greater understanding of these sites an archaeological survey of a number of pitfields should be conducted. The area north and south of Rathcroghan provides ample opportunity to examine these features, through both non-invasive and excavation methods. The sampling of sites both to the north and to the south of the N5 at Rathcroghan would provide a good spread of sites and topographical contexts.

An opportunity to discuss these sites and the wider Rathcroghan archaeological landscape will be provided at the Rathcroghan Conference on 13–15 April 2012 at Cruachan Aí Heritage Centre, Tulsk, Co. Roscommon. ■

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