

Burren Landscape and Settlement: Developing a Research Framework

A Heritage Council and Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government INSTAR project (IRISH NATIONAL STRATEGIC ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH)

The Burren Landscape and Settlement Project aims to establish a research framework for Burren archaeology in the context of current heritage management and conservation issues. This will be achieved through a cumulative research dynamic which combines data from five ongoing lead Burren landscape studies. These multi-period works, and associated sub-studies, will be used to trace long-term trends in land-use and settlement on the Burren. The resulting research framework will also identify and define any major gaps in our understanding of the cultural landscape of the Burren, and acknowledge the contribution of modern landowners in the region, exploring their role as caretakers of the Burren heritage resource. The project hopes to collate data from the five lead studies and bring it to pre-publication stage, and to create a research forum for Burren archaeology. It is hoped to make the research data accessible to the widest audience possible, and to identify issues related to future management of the archaeological resource.

This project has identified six key questions to ask of the Burren cultural landscape:

- 1) One of the central questions which this project aims to address is the spatial relationships and interactions between secular and ritual/ceremonial activities in the Burren landscape from prehistory into the early modern period.
- 2) Another core question concerns the rich survival of boundaries and land divisions in the Burren and how those remains can be used to advance an understanding of past land-use and social organisation through time.
- 3) In a landscape which, from the modern onlooker's view, seems remarkably inaccessible, a third central research question asks how people in the past moved in and out of the Burren as well as within that region.
- 4) An additional concern is how Burren archaeology reflects social organisation in different time periods.
- 5) The wealth of Burren archaeology from many different periods also prompts an investigation of the extent to which early cultural landscapes influenced later settlement developments.
- 6) The modern view of the Burren sees it as a marginal place. This project questions the position of the Burren in relation to wider exchange and contact networks.

Five lead landscape studies and six supplementary studies will be used as investigative tools. These will provide a range of analytical methods and theoretical frameworks feeding into the overall aim of the project. See Figure for the locations of the five lead landscape studies.

Lead Landscape Studies

Surveying Turlough Hill (Stefan Bergh – NUI Galway)

The c. 100 hut sites, cairn and enclosure on the exposed summit of Turlough Hill form an enigmatic group of remains without direct parallels in the Burren, or anywhere else in Ireland. Their dramatic and strategic location at the eastern extremity of the Burren, together with the complexity of the remains, indicates that this summit, and any associated activities, possibly had a significance for the entire upland of the Burren. The location at the edge of the Burren, facing the lowlands to north and east raises important questions relating to identity and landscape. The very large number of hut sites on the summit near the large cairn raises further issues relating to settlement, and the interaction between ritual and secular. In a wider perspective, the interpretation of Turlough Hill is central to our understanding of the meaning, role and use of exposed high ground in prehistoric Ireland.

The remains on the summit are undated. The only site in Ireland comparable to Turlough Hill is the plateau of Mullaghfarna in the Bricklieve Mountains, Co. Sligo. This site has produced dates from Neolithic/Bronze Age, and a similar date for Turlough Hill is a strong possibility.

Since the complex has not previously been surveyed, this will be a first and critical step towards our understanding of its role and function. The mapping of Turlough Hill will be based on Photogrammetry, for which digital aerial photography is already available. After the initial processing in Geomatica photogrammetry software, fieldwork needs to be undertaken to verify results. The final stage of the processing will involve the production of interpretative plans of the various remains.

Supplementary Study:

Hill top cairns and associated features in the Burren - F. Coyne (Aegis Ltd.)

Roughan Hill prehistoric landscape (Carleton Jones – NUI Galway)

The Roughan Hill project is now in the analysis stage. Data collected by the project consists of both survey and excavation data. The survey data consists of a detailed survey of approximately 650 acres (containing prehistoric field walls, farmsteads and megalithic tombs) along with excavated data from some of the farmsteads and field walls, and one of the megalithic tombs. This project was undertaken and funded in three separate components:

1) Original survey of 370 acres, excavation of Farmstead 1, small trenches in Farmstead 2, trenches across numerous field walls (1994-95).

- This was done as part of PhD research and did not receive any funding beyond the small grants that student volunteers brought with them from their universities.
- 2) Expansion of the survey to 650 acres in 2000.
- This was done with a Heritage Council grant.
- 3) Excavation of the Cl. 153 megalithic tomb (1998-2001).
- Part-funded by the RIA.

The current INSTAR funding applies to tasks related to Component 1 above, as the other two components have received funding from other sources. At this stage in the analysis of the Component 1 data, tasks needing to be addressed are: targeted radiocarbon dating of domestic faunal assemblages to clarify stratigraphy, additional faunal assemblage analysis, additional lithic analysis, additional ceramic analysis, detailed mapping of four prehistoric farmsteads, and manipulation of AutoCad data to produce final maps of the field walls that incorporate OS topography data.

Supplementary Studies:

Coolnatullagh – A Final Neolithic/Early Bronze Age secular and ritual landscape in the eastern Burren – M.Litt. by O. Carey

The Late Bronze Age settlement landscape of the Burren – M.Litt. by C. Hennigar

The prehistoric megalith building society of the Burren: ethnographic insights from the Khasi people of Meghalaya – M.Litt. by D. Burke

The Role of Research in Issues of Management and Conservation: Prehistoric Landscape of the North Central Burren a Case Study (Christine Grant – National Monuments Service)

A number of monuments have recently come to light in the north central Burren that dramatically alter our understanding of the significance of this area in prehistory. This includes a large hilltop enclosure on Cappagh Bháile Hill with its associated cairns and hut sites, a second group of cairns on Aillwee Hill and a newly recorded wedge tomb at Berneens. This highlights the issue of the number of unrecorded monuments on the Burren, how these can significantly alter research and how best to deal with this gap in the record.

This study will look at the monuments in terms of understanding how people used the landscape in prehistory, and the challenges that we face in protecting the archaeological resource from the pressures of modern land use. These challenges include the regeneration of scrub, current farming practice, damage caused through land clearance and the impact of tourism. The expected results will be to identify and quantify the relevant issues.

Ringforts and the Settlement Landscape of the Burren in the First Millennium AD

(Michelle Comber – NUI Galway)

This project studies preserved field systems and their relationship with settlement enclosures. The first year of the project (2005) comprised a general landscape analysis and statistical study of settlement indicators within an area of the Burren, stretching

from Kilfenora in the southwest to Carran in the northeast. This revealed that many of these settlements were deliberately sited to best exploit the most fertile farmland, while others may have been strategically positioned with regard to territorial politics. Year 1 fieldwork consisted of detailed digital ground surveys (using a Total Station), and employed a course of field-walking, descriptive survey and photography (ground and aerial). GIS and Autocad distribution maps were produced.

Year 2 (2006) saw the detailed digital survey (using a Total Station) of a preserved archaeological landscape located between the cashel of Ballykinvarga to the west and Leamaneh castle to the east. Oblique and vertical aerial photography supplemented and expanded the area surveyed on the ground. Extensive field systems and enclosures were recorded in this stretch of land. A number of settlement 'clusters' or farms were tentatively identified.

Year 3 (2008) will see a continuation of this detailed mapping in an area immediately surrounding the cashel of Caherconnell on the northern edge of the study area (using Total Station and GPS). This third year is specifically aimed at tying detailed digital surveying to excavated evidence – that already recovered from Caherconnell cashel (in conjunction with Graham Hull and TVAS Ireland Ltd. in 2007), and potential future excavations at the cashel and in its environs.

The actual field survey is being funded by a Heritage Council Archaeology Grant for 2008.

Cahermacnaghten: investigating Gaelic estates (Elizabeth FitzPatrick – NUI Galway).

The Cahermacnaghten field project is a social archaeology of the estate lands of a Gaelic family in Medieval and Early Modern Burren. By focussing on a particularly well preserved estate landscape, the INSTAR project objective is to establish a methodological approach to and a blueprint for future investigations of land denominations and prevailing settlement patterns, settlement arrangements and settlement forms within the Burren in the period *c.*1300 to 1650. Since the Gaelic occupiers of Medieval and Early Modern landholdings inherited a lived-in landscape that carried cultural accretions of past societies, and because their estates were products of relentless shaping and re-shaping of landholdings through time, an understanding of the influence of earlier settlement footprints on later developments is an allied aim of this study.

To date, the project through close study of the modern townland of Cahermacnaghten, has determined that the Burren townlands are not reliable representatives of the landholding matrix in use in this region in the Medieval and Early Modern periods and perhaps earlier still. Named denominations in the Burren included the *seisre*, *leith sheisre*, *ceathrú mír* and *sessiagh*. For the field archaeologist these property divisions can to a greater or lesser degree be identified on the ground. Furthermore, cashels and raths, denoted as *cathair* and *lios* in the Burren, frequently occur within known *leith sheisre* and smaller divisions and may be interpreted as the centres of individual landholdings.

In addition to work on land denominations and their physical boundaries at Cahermacnaghten, elements of the settlement and farming landscape of the townland have been recorded using a combination of:

- a) Walk-over survey (funded by the Royal Irish Academy 2005, 2006)
- b) Photogrammetric aerial survey and 3D laser scanning (funded by the IRCHSS 2006-7).
- c) Excavation (funded by the Royal Irish Academy 2007)

The results of these projects culminated in reports, for each year's activity, to RIA and IRCHSS and are available for viewing

To take this knowledge to a level at which it can be usefully applied to reading and interpreting Medieval and Early Modern Burren generally, the realisation of the Cahermacnaghten data through digital mapping and terrain modelling is now required.

Supplementary Studies:

Lislarheen: a transplantation settlement – PhD by E. Campbell

Cahermacnaghten: routeways and movement in a native landholding – R. Clutterbuck (independent archaeologist, IAI & IPMAG)

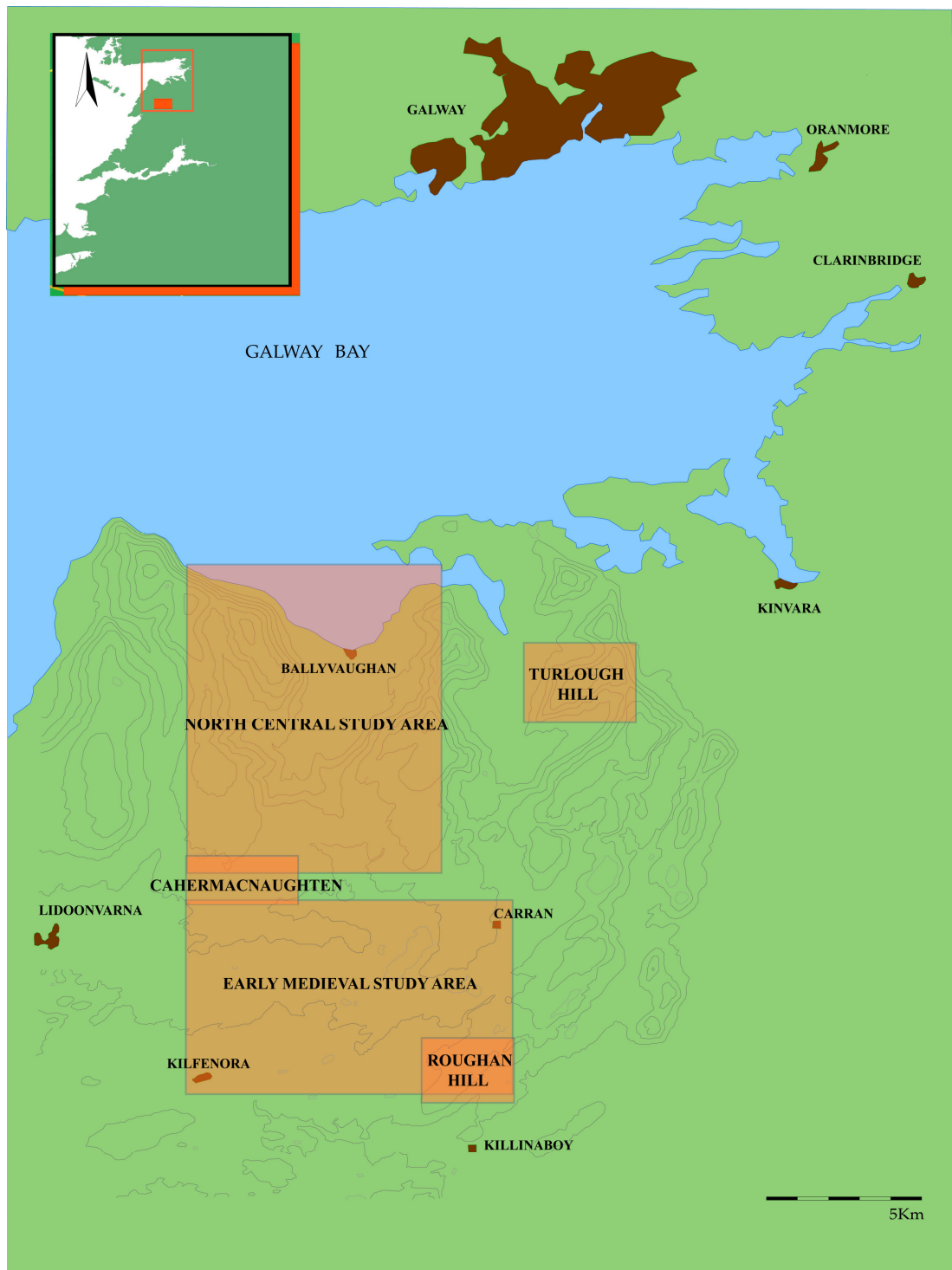
Relationship of the project to existing research

To date, individual scholars have explored and published on disparate aspects of the Burren's archaeology from Westropp's and MacNamara's antiquarian investigations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the early excavations of Hencken at Poulawack (1935) and Cahercommaun (1938), to modern archaeological scholarship such as E. Plunkett-Dillon's study of field walls (1983, 1985), B. Gibson's work on the late prehistoric and early historic landscape (1988, 1990, 1995, 2007), S. Ní Ghabhláin's studies of Burren churches (1995, 1996, 2006), C. Jones's work on the prehistoric landscape (1996, 1998, 2003), Brindley and Lanting's (1992) radiocarbon-based reassessment of Poulawack, the reassessment of Cahercommaun carried by the Discovery Programme (1999), M. Fitzpatrick's excavations at Cahermore (1999, 2001), and J. Eogan's excavations at Coolnatullagh (2002). More popular syntheses have also been produced by J. O'Connell and A. Korff (eds.) (1991) and C. Jones (2004).

State-sponsored work has included the first volume of the Megalithic Survey by R. de Valera and S. Ó Nualláin (1961), the excavation of Poul nabrone by A. Lynch (1988), and the 'Assessment of Landscape Change and Effects on Archaeology and an Assessment of Habitat Survey in the Burren, Co. Clare' recently commissioned by the Heritage Council (ERA Maptec *et. al* 2006 – including C. Grant).

The Burren INSTAR project proposes to engage with this canon of Burren archaeological literature and to develop a cohesive research framework for Burren archaeology into which past, current and future field projects can fit.

Plans for Dissemination of project results include a public seminar in December in Ballyvaughan, titled - 'Burren Landscape and Settlement: Developing a Research Framework', ongoing project publicity including local society and national public lectures, local and national media, and a project website. It is also intended to publish the proceedings of the seminar in 2009/10.



Location of five lead landscape studies.