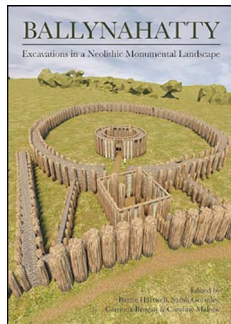




Book Reviews

BARRIE HARTWELL, SARAH GORMLEY, CATRIONA BROGAN & CAROLINE MALONE (ed.). 2023. *Ballynahatty: excavations in a Neolithic monumental landscape*. Oxford: Oxbow; 978-1-78925-971-1 hardback £58.



The site of Ballynahatty, on the south side of Belfast City in Northern Ireland, contains an impressive upstanding Neolithic embanked enclosure, widely known as The Giant's Ring. The site, which also includes a simple passage grave, sits on the edge of a plateau above a river. It has long attracted the attention of antiquarians, archaeologists, tourists and dog walkers alike. In the 1920s, an aerial photograph depicted an internal cropmark; this began a highly successful campaign of aerial and ground surveys over several decades, extending into the surrounding landscape to reveal an extensive archaeological complex. This included the identification of two early third-millennium cal BC (late Neolithic) timber-built enclosures just

north of The Giant's Ring (Ballynahatty 5 and 6). These became the subject of a decade of seasonal excavations and form the focus of this book. This campaign commenced in 1990 under the direction of Barrie Hartwell, former Senior Research Officer in Archaeology at Queen's University Belfast. His acknowledgements refer to the extensive support the project received over 30 years, including the valuable expert contributions that are dotted throughout the book.

The opening four chapters provide context for the site, with a short introduction to the landscape; a summary of antiquarian explorations; the results of various archaeological investigations and surveys over many years; and an assessment of the environmental setting, based on the pollen record derived from coring an infilled lake to the north. Over the following six chapters we are presented with an extensive account of the excavations. Starting with the remains of another megalithic tomb and associated cremated human bone, discovered near the east end of the plateau, as well as two further deposits of calcined bone and a pit. Following this, a 'square-in-circle' structure (timber circle) is detailed (Ballynahatty 6). This comprised a double concentric ring of postholes with an internal four-post setting, a central square setting of 14 postholes and an external U-shaped setting of eight postholes. The remainder of Chapter 5 informs us about the partial excavation of an outer, oval-shaped enclosure (Ballynahatty 5), first identified as a cropmark of paired pits in 1989. Excavation largely focused on the east side of this enclosure, revealing the inner and outer posthole rings and a substantial entrance structure. Finally, a fifth–sixth-century cal AD 'burning pit' is described and interpreted as the remains of a series of pyres. All areas and features excavated are well illustrated throughout, with both technical drawings and colour photographs generously used.

A final section in Chapter 5 outlines some archaeobotanical analysis, and the following four chapters detail the pottery and lithic assemblages, various other artefacts such as stone axeheads, 'balls'/hammerstones and beads and human remains. The latter also incorporates

an important re-evaluation of calcined and unburnt bones recovered in 1855, during an investigation of a destroyed subterranean megalithic chamber to the north-west of The Giant's Ring. All these specialist contributions represent valuable additions to our current knowledge of Neolithic practices in Ireland, particularly the relationships between passage graves and timber circles and the patterns of deposition relating to human remains, Grooved Ware pottery and worked stone. To better aid the reader, however, some details from these specialist chapters could have been incorporated into the accounts of the excavated features presented in Chapter 5. The final chapter in this section assesses the scientific dating from Ballynahatty 5 and 6 and their chronological relationships to comparable sites in Ireland. Using KDE (kernel density estimation) modelling, it is suggested that the timber circle may have stood for 100–150 years and that the building and primary use of both monuments may have spanned only three to four generations, with the children of those who erected the timber circle perhaps responsible for building the enclosure.

The closing part of the book spans three chapters and aims to answer the question 'what does it all mean?'. First, the excavation results are placed into the wider context of the Ballynahatty landscape, providing a chronological summary followed by a more in-depth assessment of the late Neolithic activity. This discusses how the site was likely used to continue the already well-established tradition of displaying and processing the dead. It also details the phased construction of the monuments, the significant resources required to build these structures, and their subsequent destruction, which included burning. An effort is also made to summarise comparable timber circles in Ireland and Britain and examine the connections between the sites of Ballynahatty and Brú na Bóinne (Boyne Valley). While it is acknowledged that the chronological relationships between the timber-built enclosures and The Giant's Ring remain unresolved, it is suggested that there is value in exploring changes in building orientations over time and within the context of the site's natural topography. Indeed, attempts to track this are presented in Chapter 12, where 3D approximations are used to model the site development and investigate astronomical alignments. One output of this work is a series of evocative reconstructions that help bring the excavator's interpretations to life. Complementary to this is the opening of the final chapter, which presents a fictional account of a body being brought to the site and into the 'temple', ultimately to decay and join the ancestors. The remainder of this chapter also offers a more reflective and subjective reading of how the Ballynahatty landscape has changed over the last few centuries; it ends by looking to the future and considering what research questions remain to be answered.

As with any excavation and publication project undertaken over such a long period, it is understandable that some references have since been superseded and other more recent syntheses and discussions are absent. That said, this book was worth the wait and presents a detailed account of an important excavation within a complex Neolithic landscape, and will therefore contribute to all future discussions of Neolithic monumentality in Ireland, Britain and beyond.

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