Turlough Hill – Place-making and Mountains in Prehistoric Ireland

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Abstract

Mountains and high ground are often venerated as special places. It is their enigmatic quality as elevated ground, their prominence and permanence in both the mental and physical landscapes that draws us to them. In this paper the role of mountains in current landscape archaeology is discussed based on their role as places of significance in both “visible” and “invisible” landscapes. The conspicuous mountain of Turlough Hill, in the Burren, Co. Clare has on its summit a unique group of prehistoric remains consisting of some 140 circular houses, a large burial cairn, a multi-vallate enclosure as well as an extraordinary hexagonal stone enclosure. Why did people choose this particular mountaintop as the focus for this extraordinary activity in prehistory? To answer this question, and to elucidate the wider question of the significance of high ground, as well as aspects of place-making, the role of Turlough Hill in prehistory is discussed based on the character of the archaeological remains, but also on the character of the mountain itself and its location in the wider landscape.

Keywords: Landscape Archaeology, Place-making, Sacred Mountain, Liminality, Prehistoric Round House

Introduction

Landscape is a powerful concept and a complex term. The lack of generally agreed definitions reflects the wide range of meaning and approaches that landscape studies offer, and is an indication of both its versatility as well as its strength. This is not the place to develop any extensive discussion concerning the definition of landscape but there are a few comments worth making. In our understanding and use of landscape there is one critical distinction that has characterised different ways of approaching landscape; that is the distinction between “observing” and “inhabiting” (e.g. Hoskins, 1955; Ingold, 1993; Layton & Ucko, 1999; Muir, 1998; Tilley, 1994; Wylie, 2007). Are we looking “at a” landscape, or are we living “in it”? We are of course doing both, but nevertheless, this is an important divide that has had far-reaching implication for landscape studies.

Visible and Invisible Landscapes

In the earlier years, characterised for example by Hoskins’ seminal work (Hoskins, 1955), the “objective” observations and recording of landscape dominated, often accompanied by, close to scientific investigations into their compositions. We can also trace this approach in Muir’s work where landscapes may be reduced to clearly defined structural components (Muir, 1998; 2000). The last 20 years or so have seen a movement towards viewing landscape as a ‘milieu of meaningful cultural practices and values, not simply a set of observable material cultural facts’ (Wylie, 2007: 5). An influential development in this approach has been that of phenomenology where embodiment and dwelling have become key concepts (e.g. Ingold, 1993; Tilley, 2004).

Another important aspect of landscape study, and linked to the distinction between “observing” and “inhabiting”, is that landscape does not only exist as a physical entity out there, as stone, soil, water, vegetation and material culture. Landscape also exists as a creation in our minds (e.g.
Keller, 1997; Muir, 1998). Our perceptions and pre-conceptions of what lies in front of our eyes define landscape. A landscape unfamiliar to us will inexorably be more of an image with few meaningful reference points, while the more familiar we are with a certain landscape, the more meaningful that landscape will be to us. The places and their inter-relations that create a particular landscape can thus to a higher degree be read and understood.

We need therefore to make a distinction between an objective, physical landscape and a subjective, perceived landscape, a dualism which has been aptly described by Wylie as ‘the tension between eye and land’ (2007: 8). Objectively, the river with its different rapids, waterfalls and stretches of calm water in between is only water moving from one point to another. We can all see that and relate in various ways to that. But what we cannot see are the legends and stories linked to the river and their role in local ideologies and beliefs. We cannot see the names that people gave to the rapids, waterfalls and calm waters in between, and just because we cannot see them, does not mean that they were of less importance to people in the past.

The river does not only exist in a physical, objective landscape, as it also is part of a mental, subjective and ideologically charged landscape. This latter, invisible, landscape, which is as real as the former physical landscape, also means that landscapes are about memory and identity (see e.g. Basso, 1996; Rydving, 2002). They are about perceiving as well as about seeing. This dualism between what might be called the physical and the mental landscape is critical to all landscape studies, since it stresses the cultural depth and complexity that landscape involves. From this follows that people both create and are part of landscapes and the term can be understood as the interaction between people and their lived world.

Fig. 1. The visible and invisible landscapes of the river. Ångermanälven, Lapland (photo: Stefan Bergh).
Prehistoric Landscapes

As far as landscapes in prehistory are concerned, an important focus is to try to understand how people perceived their world, or at least suggest how they might have perceived it through an understanding of the landscapes they lived in. The material aspect of these landscapes, as outlined above, do stand a reasonable chance of being understood, while the possibilities of understanding the meaning and symbolism that people attached to landscapes over time are, of course, more limited. Nevertheless we can, based on the archaeological remains, sometimes define various parts of a physical landscape as having been designated for certain aspects of daily life such as cultivating the land, dwelling, movement, burial, deposition and ritual. Then in conjunction with an examination of the possible role and impact of the natural topography, its social role and maybe its ritual connotations, this would be a first step towards an understanding of how people may have constructed and perceived their landscape in prehistory.

Among the places often imbued with special meaning and symbolically charged, were visually distinctive places such as rivers, lakes, mountains or other conspicuous features in the physical landscape. These places were part and parcel of the common experience and were often given names and thus where also included in people’s mental landscape. They were the foci for stories, myths and legends and thereby constituted important parts of the “invisible landscape”. Many were also part of a greater regional nexus of sacred landscapes, and thereby created a wide framework for religious beliefs and rituals (see e.g. Basso, 1996).

One central aspect of this interplay between people and the natural landscape is that it strongly influences people in their daily routine as well as in the construction of their cosmologies. The character of the natural landscape would have had a profound impact on their world views and religion, as well as on the formation of their relationship with that landscape.

The creation of places of significance or of special meaning would to a certain degree therefore unavoidably have been dictated by the surrounding landscape. Different terrains contain different types of places and features, thereby offering different prerequisites regarding places linked to the creation and maintenance of belief systems.

This does not imply that similar terrains would have created similar belief systems! The important point is that people created their worldview and sacred cosmology in the “context” of their physical environment. The character of the sacred places is therefore dependant on the natural landscape. In a landscape dominated by lakes and rivers, it is more likely to find rituals and beliefs linked to water deities than in a strictly forested environment. On the open, and seemingly featureless steppes of Mongolia, small low-lying features like marshy areas or bushes were seen as having powers and meaning [Humphrey, 1995], while the mountainous landscape of north Scandinavia mountains with a conspicuous topography played a central role in the Saami religion (Manker, 1957).

Mountains as Places

Among the unlimited number of places present in a natural landscape, the mountain or high ground has always had a special role as a place of significance. This applies not only to well-known and conspicuous mountains like Kilimanjaro in Kenya or Uluru in Australia, but also to the more insignificant hills or high ground that might not catch the eye with similar immediacy. The role of mountains, and thereby our relationship to them, embraces many very human feelings extending from the instinctive desire for safety and defence offered by a small hill to the ideological and ritual charge of a sacred mountain.

There are a wide range of qualities that set mountains apart from lowlands, besides the fact that they constitute a break from the sometimes monotonous horizontality of the latter. The prominence of a mountain and their interruption of the ordinary topography and/or daily routine can make it the focus for various connections with the otherworld or religious activities. Mountains are often seen as being the home of the Gods, the
centre of the spiritual world, places of ancestors or the dwelling place of various mythical characters (e.g. Barnatt, 1998; Bernbaum, 1997; Bradley, 2000; Corlett, 1998; Coyne, 2006). One common aspect of the frequent occurrences of mountains in sacred cosmologies and beliefs is that they create a symbolic link to the sky, and thereby sometimes are seen as the axis mundi (e.g. Humphrey, 1995).

Since mountains often are easily recognised in a landscape and thereby create a presence to a degree that other natural features might not do, mountains could also be linked to identity. Among the Saamis, each family had special relations with certain mountains which were the foci for offerings and rituals (Bäckman, 1975; Virdi-Kroik, 2007). Another aspect of the role that mountains can assume is that of “authority”, since a place on the summit inevitably dominates its surroundings and – perhaps significantly – any activities there may not be visible from the land below. So while its presence is felt, only a few might have access to detailed knowledge of the place and its content. This concealment of knowledge is a common way of achieving authority, as it creates uncertainty among those not allowed to participate while also mystifying the action and place. A third and slightly different aspect of a mountain in contrast to a more accessible place in the lowland concerns getting there. Reaching a place on a mountain involves an active decision to ascend the mountain to reach the top – one does not come upon a mountain summit by accident! A place in the lowland can be by-passed at close range. This also brings in the aspect of liminality, since mountain tops often are liminal in relation to daily life and could offer a strong sense of isolation. This quality might in some circumstances have been a very important part of the role of the place on a mountain, as communications with the Gods or vision questing may have required isolation from the daily routine.

Sacred Mountains

What makes mountains such a universal religious vehicle in often very different societies is their symbolic capacity to unite earth with heaven, to bridge the gap between the mundane, living world and the otherworld. What this union stands for, by what means it is facilitated and maintained, as well as the character and role of what lies beyond the living world, are all aspects that naturally vary widely between different religions.

Some mountains may play parts in creation-myths and ideologies, but might have a passive role by not being the focus for rituals or monuments linked to rituals. An example of this is Mount Roraima in northern Brazil, which is seen by the indigenous people as the stump of a mighty tree that once held all the types of fruits and edible plants known to man (De Cora, 1957).

In some contexts, such as the Minoan Peak sanctuaries in Crete, the summit of a mountain has been used for rituals and buildings linked to them (Peatfield, 2007). The verticality of the mountain is the focus. In other contexts the mountain is not climbed, it is left alone and venerated at a distance. Among the Saamis in Lapland the sacred mountains are never climbed, and you should talk quietly when close to them so to not disturb the inhabitants of the otherworld who live in the mountain.

Mountains do not however exist in isolation, since our understanding of their role is from a lowland perspective. The interplay between the mountain and its surrounding lowland is therefore critical to our understanding of the role mountains might have played in prehistoric societies.

It is evident that mountains have had an important role to play in the sacred landscapes and cosmologies in various parts of the world. As has been pointed out by Bradley (2000: 104ff), the creation of monuments could bring additional symbolic value to an already significant place, such as a mountain. In Ireland a variety of cairns are found on summits and the Irish passage tombs are in this context a clear representative of this custom, as many of them are located on mountain summits (Bergh, 1995; 2002). In many of these cases the visual impact of the built monument was important in various ways, but their existence on the summit would also have strongly enhanced the visual im-
impact and presence of the mountain itself. In other cases the visual impact would have been of less importance and any construction on the summit of relatively modest size would probably not have been intended to make a statement visible from a great distance.

Relatively often the rituals linked to a mountain are represented by various types of constructions on the very summit or elsewhere, but as exemplified by the Saamis above, it is evident that a mountain also could be a ritual focus or/and a part of the sacred geography without having any physical remains on it.

**Turlough Hill – A Place Apart**

Mountains and high ground were actively used in Ireland for domestic as well as ritual purposes from the Neolithic all through to Medieval times, and beyond. In the Neolithic period passage tombs were often built on conspicuous mountain tops or in commanding places on high ground, creating prominence and presence with strictly ritual connotations indicating a strong ambition to create a visual and physical presence. Later in prehistory high ground was used as the location for “hill-forts”, which can be defined as defensive structures on a hill, but which represent a far more complex and multi-layered activity than often recognised (Waddell, 2011: 354). However, there is also evidence of what might be considered as “domestic” as well as “ritual” remains in extreme upland locations.
In some extreme upland locations both “domestic” and “ritual” remains are found together, where a strong visual impact seems to have been of less importance. In these cases, the presence and identity of “the place” seems to have directed the choice of location, as the remains are not visible from the lowland below. One of these places is the highly conspicuous summit of Turlough Hill in the Burren, Co. Clare.

Local Context

The Burren is a coastal area in the west of Ireland which is characterised by its truly spectacular karst landscape. The area measures 15 x 10 km, is mountainous in its northern third and is bounded by the Atlantic to the west and north, and by gently rolling lowlands to the south and east.

The appearance of the Burren for any traveller coming from the east is a dramatic experience as its eastern mountain range looks like a huge, grey impenetrable screen. The physical presence of this geological barrier is very apparent and it is inevitable that it always has had strong cultural connotations.
Turlough Hill is part of this eastern range of mountains and has an east/west aligned summit with an overall length of circa 1400m, and is comprised of two actual summits separated by slightly lower ground. The higher western summit, with an outline resembling a huge footplate, constitutes a level area some 570m long and circa 180m wide at 280masl. Some 400m to the east is a more rounded summit which measures circa 250m across. The ground on Turlough Hill consists largely of deeply fissured limestone karst pavement.

The summits of Turlough Hill are truly exposed and offer breath-taking vistas to the east, north and south while the slightly higher Slieve Carron about one km away dominates the view to the south.

The Archaeological Remains

The archaeological remains on Turlough hill consist of a large cairn, a low profile multi-vallate enclosure and some 140 circular house foundations; all on the higher western summit, while a huge roughly hexagonal stone built enclosure occupies the eastern summit.

Halfway along the flat western summit there are two depressions that divide the summit into two halves (fig. 3 and 4). The highest point is in the western half and is occupied by the cairn measuring circa 18m in diameter and circa 4m in height. The cairn is most likely a burial cairn dating to the Neolithic-Early Bronze Age.

On the flat pavement in the eastern half there is a low profile multi-vallate enclosure consisting of at least four low, partly concentric and seemingly segmented stone banks of limestone shingles. This roughly circular enclosure has an outer diameter of circa 35m, however the ephemeral state of its remains makes it hard to ascertain its exact layout, and hence its role and nature. Concerning its construction and layout it has very little in common with the domestic architecture of the nearby house foundations. There are no known parallels to this enclosure in Ireland, but its con-

Some 140 round house sites have to date been recorded, ranging in size between 6-11m in diameter and consisting of near circular foundation walls of limestone slabs. Most of them are built on top of the actual pavement, but some also have been quarried into the bedrock. No evidence of dry-walling has been noted as the walls consist of slabs set on edge either along or perpendicular to the wall line. Most houses have a defined entrance and some are conjoined. The overall trend is that they occur in small groups of three to four houses.

The houses are not evenly distributed on the summit. Preliminary, some 90 houses have been recorded on the western half, while some 50 houses seem to be present on the eastern half. Four are located on the narrow ridge separating the two depressions in the centre of the summit.

Concerning the distribution within the two halves, the largest number of houses is present in the areas closest to these central depressions. Small clusters of houses are also present at both ends of the summit. By and large, the distributions of the house sites in the two halves seem to be mirrored.

From this general distribution an interesting pattern is identifiable where the houses can be seen to avoid the areas around the cairn and the multi-vallate enclosure, creating two ‘house-free’ zones, one in each half of the summit.

Outside this western summit, the only recorded monument on top of Turlough Hill is the large hexagonal enclosure located some 400m away to the east. The enclosure has an extraordinary commanding location, overlooking both the extensive lowlands to the east, the uplands of the Burren as well as the sea towards the west.

The enclosure has a diameter of some 225m and consists of a single rampart with a roughly hexagonal ground plan. The rampart is up to 4m wide and circa 1m high and has been constructed by limestone slabs of varying size. An extraordinary feature of the enclosure is its approximately ten entrances/gaps through the rampart, located in all directions of its perimeter. The majority of
the entrances are found along the south, west and north sides. An elongated natural gorge cuts into the summit from the east, creating a monumental entrance into the enclosure from this direction. Once again this enclosure has no direct parallel in Ireland but its structure is evocative of a causewayed enclosure and as such a Neolithic date cannot be ruled out.

Turlough Hill – Ritual and Domestic

What brought people to build this extraordinarily large number of houses and the adjacent ritual monuments on this completely exposed mountain top at the edge of the Burren? Why did they choose this particular summit and not any of the others nearby!

Some 140 houses is a considerable number of houses indicating an extraordinary undertaking for very special reasons. One must therefore consider if this is a prehistoric village where people actually lived, and if so, why settle on a mountain top far away from the lowlands below?

It is undoubtable that the house foundations represent domestic structures insofar as they are the remains of houses most likely built for dwelling. Nevertheless, considering their location it is hard to believe that their main role and function
would have been strictly domestic. Their location on one of the Burren’s highest and most remote mountaintops makes it inconceivable that the houses represent an “ordinary settlement” for an entire prehistoric community, the economic base of which most likely would have been found in the lowlands below. The very limited record of features such as dividing walls or enclosures, indicative of activities linked to husbandry do not either lend support to a straight domestic interpretation. It is also worth noting that, based on extensive fieldwork; Turlough Hill seems to be the only place in the Burren where a hill top cluster of houses exists (Bergh, 2008).

Another interesting circumstance is that large, and more sheltered areas, would have been available immediately below the summit but all houses have been located on the extremely exposed summit. Again, this hardly indicates a choice directed by domestic needs based on practical considerations, even though the term “practical” admittedly is interpreted from a twenty-first century perspective.

When seen in the context of other prehistoric houses in Ireland, Turlough Hill is nearly without parallel, since most circular houses from the Neolithic and Bronze Age occur in small groups of two-four, and normally in proximity to the farmed land (Smyth, 2014; Waddell, 2011) There are however two other large cluster of prehistoric house foundations recorded in Ireland. One is on the exposed plateau at Mullaghfarna, Co. Sligo where circa 150 circular house foundations/enclosures dating the Neolithic/Bronze Age are present (Bergh, 2004; 2006; 2015; Hensey et al, 2013; Macalister, Armstrong & Praeger, 1912). The other instance is at Corrstown, Co. Derry where 74 tightly clustered houses in a lowland setting have been dated to the Bronze Age (Ginn, 2011; Ginn & Rathbone, 2012; Rathbone, 2013).

The Significance of Place

The presence of the cairn and the multi-vallate enclosure on the summit is of interest as they are both centrally placed within the two natural halves of the summit. The distribution of the houses within these two halves indicates that they are directly related to the two ritual monuments as they are obviously respecting the cairn and the enclosure by being built at some distance from the two. This partitioning of the summit into two might be a key to how to understand the role of the entire complex.

Considering the locations and inter-relationship between the monuments and the houses it is reasonable to suggest that they were all in contemporary use. Against this background, it may be suggested that the two ritual monuments on the summit reflect two ritually divergent groups, each with their own type of ritual monument. The summit might have been a place where different groups came together at certain times and the houses would have been temporary dwellings used on these occasions. The large stone enclosure on the eastern summit could in such a scenario have fulfilled a role as a place for actual gatherings where the numerous entrances might indicate access points for different groups of people into a common space.

Just the presence of two types of ritual monuments is not enough to support an interpretation of two socially different groups, as a combination of various monuments is far from unusual on prehistoric sites. What really makes Turlough Hill different however is its explicit liminal location at the physical edge of the characteristic Burren landscape.

The location of Turlough Hill, on the border between the dramatic Burren and the plains to the east, may have offered both a symbolically charged and at the same time “neutral ground” for activities shared with groups based outside the Burren landscape.

Turlough Hill cannot be identified as an entity to an outsider approaching from the east as it merges with the surrounding heights and is just not discernible. From “the inside” of the Burren, from the plains of the valley west of Turlough Hill as well as from Bell Harbour to the north, it has a very strong and spectacular presence. Considering
the very dramatic topography in this part of the Burren where the limestone mountains create an abrupt break with the rolling land of the valleys, this is no small feat.

From both the north and the south the rather steep and extensive slopes crowned by the long flat summit communicates an intimidating and unapproachable presence. From the extensive valley to the west however the hill looks completely different as it tapers off into a narrow grey ridge that dramatically “disappears” into the green low-lands below. Further up the valley to the south the full extent of the hill can be appreciated, with the flat summit breaking the skyline like a spectacular sentinel.

There are an abundance of high ridges and mountain ranges in this part of the Burren but there are few if any as isolated and clearly defined mountains as that of Turlough Hill.

What further strengthens the characteristics of this particular hill is the flat and well defined summit with lower slopes consisting of a series of horizontal plateaux separated by steep escarpments. Above the final escarpment the flat summit can be appreciated in its entirety due to its limited size and level surface. The sense of place is very strong and is further accentuated by the unbroken 360 degree panorama of the surrounding landscape. Few, if any, of the Burren mountains would offer a similar type of summit, since they either consist of undulating ground, or if flat, are often of considerable size and would be hard to comprehend as a well-defined place.

Turlough Hill has a set of topographical features that give it a rather unique and clearly recognisable character in the mountainous Burren landscape. It is not just “any” mountain – it is a mountain with its own identity that undeniably attracts attention. It is highly probable that this
would also have been recognised by people living in this landscape in prehistory. It would have been a place of great significance and the extraordinary set of monuments on the hill is a strong testimony to this. The cluster of houses on the summit, together with the various ritual monuments, would have been directly linked to the meaning that people ascribed to this place. The more precise understanding of this meaning is to be sought in the often elusive, invisible landscapes that people created and inhabited.

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