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THE CENTRAL LOWLANDS OF IRELAND – AN EMPTY HEART(LAND) ?

By PATRICK O'FLANAGAN

Published distribution maps of pre-Bronze Age field monuments and artifacts give the impression that before the arrival of the Bronze Age peoples (represented by Wedge Graves and Beaker pottery, etc.) the Central Lowlands of Ireland were avoided. That is to say, that they had not been settled during Mesolithic or Neolithic times. This viewpoint is still accepted by many who regard this "avoidance" as due to "natural causes." The Central Lowlands were, after all, a 'Central Plain' (Butler, 1922). The use of this descriptive title has given rise to much confusion. The term 'Central Plain' connotes a centrally located plain, characterised by its uniform low-lying nature. Such an interpretation led FitzGerald to describe it as a "negative area" (FitzGerald, 1925). In reality, the Central Lowlands of Ireland[1] are by no means a homogenous plain: they vary in height between sea-level and 400 ft. above this limit; on the fringes of the Lowlands many uplands are found, for example Slieve Arra, Slieve Aughty, Slieve Bernagh, Slieve Ardagh, and the Bricklieve and Curlew Hills. Low, long, linear hills of limestone which break the line of the Lowlands are common. Also, the impact of glaciation, has been strikingly variable within the Central Lowlands. Compare, for instance, the area between Ballyhaunis and Charlestown, Co. Mayo, with its numerous eskers, kames and other sand and gravel deposits, with the area just to the North-West of Ballinasloe, Co. Galway, where glacial deposits are rare. There are also major differences in the depth of the drift on both sides of the Shannon, for instance in the area cited above beside Ballinasloe, where drift is thin or absent, and near Moate, Co. Westmeath, where drift depth can exceed six feet. The discontinuous distribution of blanket bog adds diversity to this mosaic. Besides, there is no evidence to suggest that the Central Lowlands in pre-Bronze Age times presented real structural or natural barriers to settlement. The nature and distribution of forest in the prehistoric period would have acted as a factor influencing settlement, but is enough really known about it on a regional scale between 6000 B.C. and the 16th century A.D.?

The fact that the Central Lowlands of Ireland have been "neglected" in accounts of prehistoric settlement evolution can, in part, be traced back to the earlier environmentalistic approaches of Mackinder (1902), Fox (1932), and FitzGerald (1925). Their methods of interpretation were restricted by their pre-conceived approaches, as they sought to categorise behaviour from a geophysical basis.

Economic and technological influences seem to have been the most important localising factors for any colonizing group, but such influences are seldom mirrored in the distribution maps of prehistoric objects. The distribution of sites dating to the Mesolithic seems to be an exception to this. These sites seem to be always associated with water (river/lake/sea). This is clearly seen around the core area of occupation, that is in Co. Antrim, adjacent to the occurrence of flint. It seems unlikely that any of these Mesolithic sites were permanent habitation-sites. They were seasonally occupied sites, the seasonal use extending perhaps intermittently over a few centuries or more, as at Glenarm (Movius, 1937) and at Cushendun (Movius, 1940). It seems that by the end of the Mesolithic period in Ireland the Mesolithic peoples had spread out from their original core area of occupation (i.e. Co. Antrim) to other regions of Ireland, one of these being the Central Lowlands. Mitchell, in a recent article, has shown the extent of the late Mesolithic penetration of the Central Lowlands, notably around the Inny basin, Co. Westmeath, Lough Gara, Co. Sligo, and Crossakeel, Co. Meath (Mitchell, 1970).

As has already been mentioned, the available published distribution maps of items dating to the Neolithic period in Ireland present blanks in the Central Lowlands. The distribution map of Court Cairns is an obvious example (De Valéra, 1962) Do the sites on the map represent only the areas occupied by the tomb-builders? Were the Central Lowlands and Munster avoided? There are only a handful of these tombs found south of a line between Dublin and Galway, viz, Ballynamona Lower,

Co. Waterford (Powell, 1938), Shanballyedmond, Co. Tipperary (O'Kelly, 1958), Ballyganner North, Co. Clare (De Valéra and O Nualláin, 1964), Tirgoneen, Co. Clare (information from Professor M. V. Duignan, University College, Galway), and Farnoge, Co. Kilkenny (De Valéra and O Nualláin, 1962). Yet finds of pottery in the early Neolithic tradition come from such counties as Dublin, **e.g.** Feltrim Hill (Hartnett, 1964), and Dalkey Island (Liversage, 1968), as Westmeath, **e.g.** Knockast (Hencken and Movius, 1934), and also from Co. Limerick, **e.g.** Lough Gur (O Ríordáin, 1954). No Court Cairns have been found yet in these counties[2], and Portal Dolmens are rare there. Thus a distribution map of Court Cairns does not present us with an adequate picture of the distribution of the cultural group that is partially represented by these tombs. Finally, the map only hints at settlement and population density on a local scale as these tombs were being built over a period of more than a thousand years.

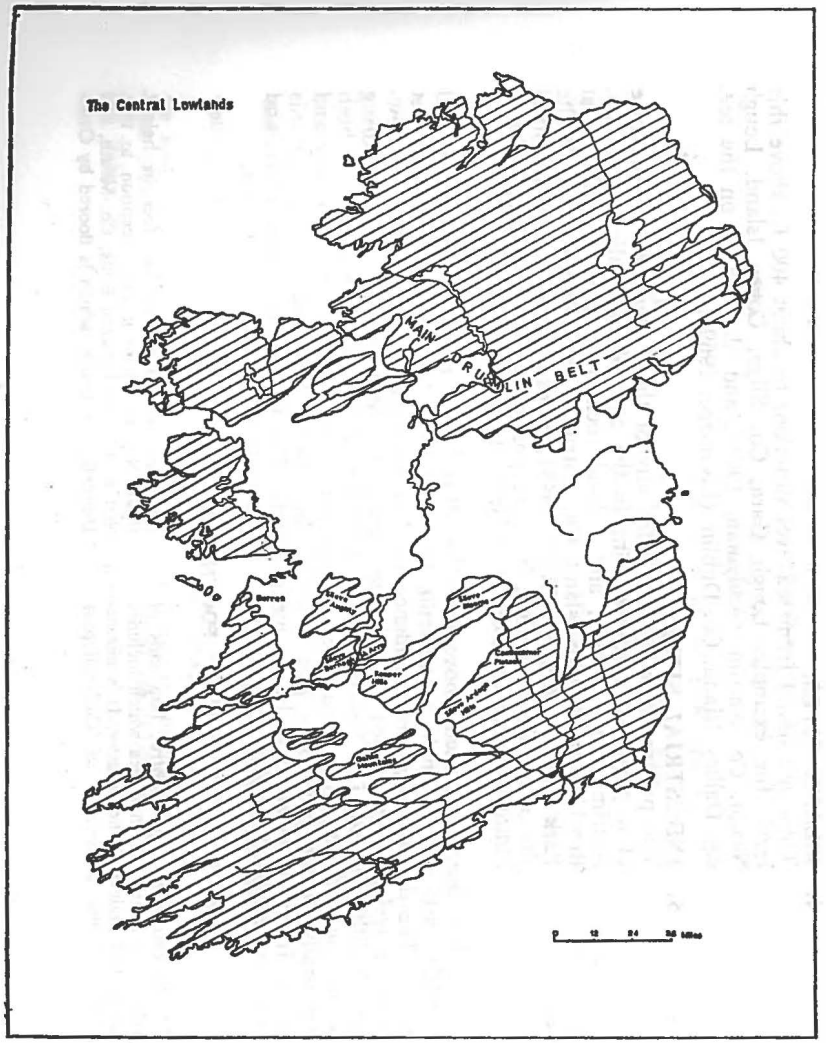
The map showing the distribution of Passage Graves tells us even less about the areas of the country which were occupied by their builders, or about the particular type of settlement associated with them (O Nualláin, 1968). Many of the Passage Graves are sited in almost inaccessible areas, for example on the summits of the Dublin-Wicklow mountains, and upon the flanks and the summits of the Sperrins, also on the Bricklieve Hills of south-east Co. Sligo. It is unlikely that the Passage Grave people ever settled in these situations on a permanent basis. On the other hand, many lowland sites were chosen for the erection of Passage Graves, for example on the Bend of the Boyne between Slane and Drogheda, and also around the area to the north-east of Cong on the Galway-Mayo borderland. Moreover, the finds from Bracklin, Co. Westmeath (O Ríordáin, 1961), Jerpoint West, Co. Kilkenny (information from Michael FitzG. Ryan, National Museum of Ireland) and Lislea, Co. Monaghan (Coffey, 1904), show the presence of Passage Grave people in areas which include parts of the Central Lowlands where no Passage Graves have yet been discovered. (See also Case, 1961, fig. 28.)

Although no overall distribution map of the Portal Dolmens has yet been published, their siting in low-lying lands (for example that near Athlone, at Mihanboy, Co. Roscommon—see English, 1969) has been suggested as implying a movement of the settlement frontier into more low-lying land towards the close of the Neolithic period (Herity, 1964). Yet even if it is accepted that the Portal Dolmens date to the final phase of the Neolithic period in Ireland, then a move into these ill-defined lowland areas had already taken place at an earlier phase of the Neolithic, as has been suggested above.

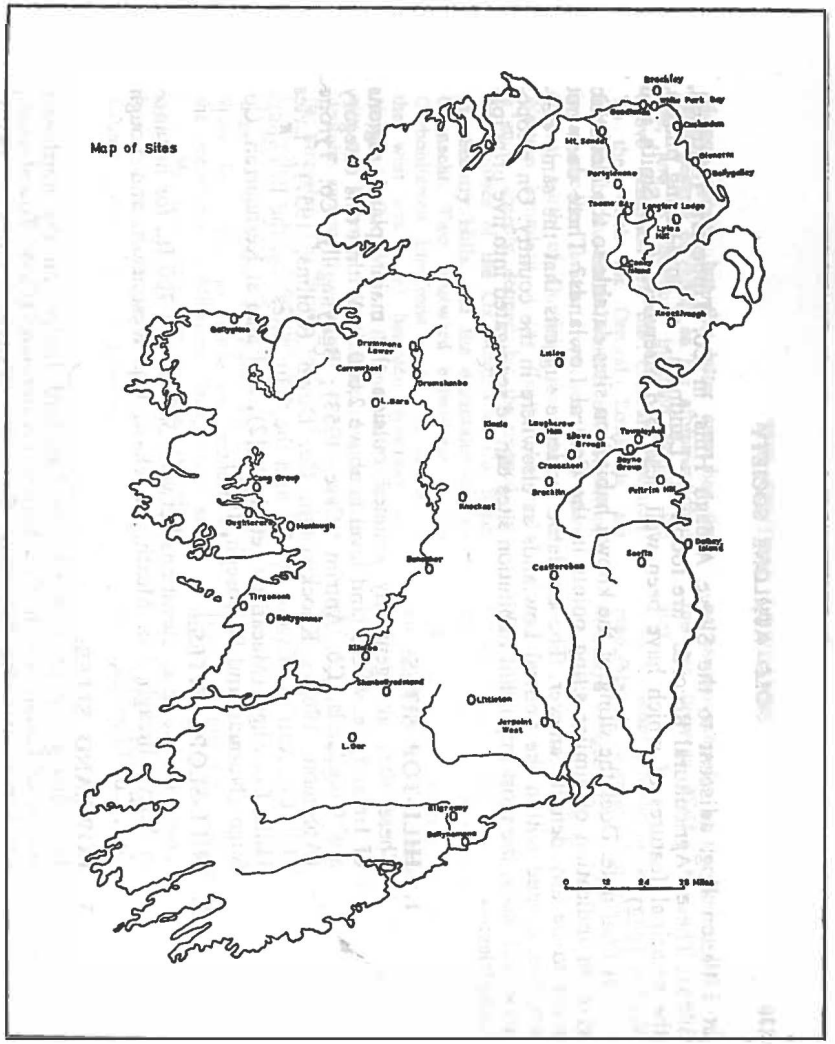
To add to this, some of the known Neolithic settlement sites were situated within the Central Lowlands or upon its fringes, and it seems clear that the Neolithic peoples were capable of using the heaviest soils in the country, either for arable or pastoral purposes. The habitation sites at Townleyhall, Co. Louth, for instance, are situated in such a heavy clay area (Eogan, 1963), as are the sites at Slieve Breagh in the same county (De Paor and O hEochaidhe, 1956), and also Knockast, Co. Westmeath. The Late Mesolithic/Early Neolithic sites have to be taken into account here also, for instance, at the Kinale Crannogs 1, 2 and 3, beside Granard, Co. Longford, the Lough Allen site (see Map 2), and the site at Crossakeel, on the River Blackwater, in Co. Meath (Mitchell, 1970).

The numerous finds of Bann Flakes, polished stone axes and other objects along many inland river valleys in the Central Lowlands prompted Mahr (1937) to identify a complex which he termed the "Riverford Culture." The assemblages of material found in these contexts are not really diversified enough to warrant their being identified as a culture, and their dating is not at all precise. They come from a variety of sites in the Central Lowlands and occasionally elsewhere, yet all of them have one thing in common, that is, an association with water.[3] They seem to represent some form of seasonal activity of the Neolithic population. Large concentrations of finds of this material come from Castlereban, Co. Kildare, also from Killaloe, Banagher, Athlone and Drumshanbo, all on the banks of the River Shannon, and also from Menlough and Oughterard, on opposite sides of Lough Corrib. The presence of this complex gives added weight to the idea of Neolithic settlements in the region.

Evidence that the Central Lowlands were occupied during the Neolithic comes from another source also, **i.e.**, from Palaeo-Ecology. This is well seen, for instance,



Map 1.



Map 2.

(Based on Ordnance Survey by permission of the Government. Permit No. 1918).

at Littleton Bog, adjacent to the Slieve Ardagh Hills, in Co. Tipperary (Mitchell, 1965). These "Agricultural Records" are found in "Landnam," or land-taking phases, the principal features of which have been well described elsewhere (e.g. Smith and Willis, 1962).

A final note. Does the siting of the known habitation sites datable to the Neolithic give an indication of similar siting points in the Central Lowlands? There does not seem to be any definite answer. The available evidence suggests that the same possibilities existed within the Central Lowlands as elsewhere in the country. On a topographical basis, the most important habitation sites can be segregated into five principal categories:—

1. **HILL-TOP SITES:**
   These sites are generally situated outside the main upland regions of Ireland, i.e. where land level is above 2,000 ft. Within this category are Goodlands, Co. Antrim (Case, 1953); Ballynagilly, Co. Tyrone (ApSimon, 1969); Knockiveagh, Co. Down (Collins, 1957); Lyles Hill, Co. Antrim (Evans, 1953); and the "Hut Sites" on the Bricklieve Hills, Co. Sligo (Macalister, et al., 1912), and also at Keshcorran, Co. Sligo (Norman and St. Joseph, 1969).

2. **HILL-SLOPE SITES:**
   These are found at elevations between 300 ft. and 700 ft., for instance at Slieve Breagh, Co. Meath, Knockast, Co. Westmeath, and Lough Gur, Co. Limerick.

3. **LOWLAND SITES:**
   Into this group fit such sites as Langford Lodge, on the north-east shores of Lough Neagh, Co. Antrim (Waterman, 1965), Townleyhall, Co. Louth, and also Kilgreaney Cave, Co. Waterford (Movius, 1942).

4. **ISLAND SITES:**
   These are found from sea-level situations to about 400 ft. above this level, for example, Lough Gara, Co. Sligo, Coney Island, Lough Neagh, Co. Antrim (Addyman, 1965), and also islands on the sea, e.g. Dalkey Island, Co. Dublin (Liversage, 1969).

5. **INDUSTRIAL SITES:**
   The primary locating factor for any of these sites was the presence of a particular resource, flint in the case of Ballygalley Head, Co. Antrim (Anon. 1958), and a local rock outcrop of porcellanite at Brockley on Rathlin Island, Co. Antrim. The Sandhills site at White Park Bray, Co. Antrim (Evans, 1945), seems to have been an industrial site of a different nature; it seems possibly to have acted as a distributional centre for axes manufactured on Rathlin Island.

It has been suggested above that the distribution maps of Mesolithic and Neolithic artifacts and field monuments have not been interpreted to their fullest degree. The direct and indirect evidence cited above suggests that the Central Lowlands of Ireland were settled towards the close of the Mesolithic period and during the Neolithic period, i.e., between about 4000 and 2000 B.C. The density of both occupation and settlement would have varied quite considerably, both spacially and temporally during pre-Bronze Age times in the Central Lowlands, but during this period Ireland's 'Heart' was by no means empty. The Central Lowlands of Ireland await an intensive research programme to throw further light on the situation.

FOOTNOTES

1. In this paper the Central Lowlands of Ireland are defined as that area which includes the central region of the country. It is characterised by the occurrence of Carboniferous limestone not exceeding 500 feet in height. (Map No. 1). There is one exception to this, that is the area between Kells, Co. Meath, and Dundalk, Co. Louth, which is floored by Ordo-

vician deposits, but this latter area has the same general elevation as the aforementioned one, and is therefore included within the above definition of the Central Lowlands. To the North the Central Lowlands are bounded by the main Drumlin Belt, stretching in an arc-like fashion from near Sligo town to just north of Dundalk, Co. Louth. The Western boundary of the Central Lowlands is more sharply defined by the rugged upland masses of the Ox Mountains, Co. Sligo, the Sheefry Hills, and the mountains of Iar-Connacht. Two westward extensions of the Carboniferous limestone reach the sea along the west coast: (a) between Westport and Newport, Co. Mayo; (b) between Galway city and Kinvara. The presence of a localised drumlin swarm in the former area has altered its character. The Burren region of Co. Clare, although of the same lithology, is regarded as separate from the Central Lowlands because of its greater elevation. To the South-West the Central Lowlands are bounded by the occurrence of Millstone Grits, Shales and Coal Measures, and also by the Armorican structure of Cos. Kerry and Cork. In the East the Dublin-Wicklow mountains form a distinct contrast to the Lowlands; however, an eastern extension of the Lowlands reaches the sea between Dublin Bay and Dundalk Bay.

In no sense can the delimiting lines on the map (Map 1) be regarded as making a definite boundary between the Central Lowlands and the surrounding regions—they only are intended to provide a general guideline. The boundary, in reality, is a zone of transition, where the principle traits of the Lowlands become slowly diluted as the Lowlands merge into its surrounding regions.

2. Unless one accepts the much destroyed site in Grange, near Lough Gur, Co. Limerick (on the opposite side of the road from the Great Stone Circle). This has been referred to as being possibly a Court Cairn by Prof. M. J. O'Kelly, in a typescript entitled "Guide to the Field Monuments of the Lough Gur Area," prepared for the 1964 Summer Excursion of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. (I am grateful to Mr. Etienne Rynne for drawing my attention to this.)

3. Possibly indicating that this tradition may have been inherited from the earlier Mesolithic peoples?

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Abbrevations:

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JCHAS	**Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society.**
JRSAI	**Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland.**
PPS	**Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society.**
PRIA	**Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy.**
UJA	**Ulster Journal of Archaeology.**

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