The chamber also stands out, with its rectangular layout, considerably larger size and the fact that it is covered not by a split boulder but by a huge flat limestone slab. This chamber was free-standing and accessible for a certain time, but the entire area inside the boulder circle, including the chamber, was at a later stage encased in a large cairn of stones. This would have made the chamber entirely concealed and inaccessible thereafter.

Listoghil also stands out as the only monument with megalithic art, consisting of faint concentric circles carved onto the south-eastern edge of the roof slab, and a finely pecked hook-like symbol on the inside of the pointed wall stone forming the south-east side of the chamber.

Despite their uniform simple construction, the deposits of bones and the various objects found with them make it obvious that the Carrowmore tombs were part and parcel of the same ritual tradition as the larger and more complex passage tombs in the Boyne Valley or at Loughcrew. The difference might be that Carrowmore in general represents a slightly earlier phase of the passage tomb tradition in Ireland.

Date
The age of the Carrowmore monuments has been a contentious issue ever since a series of radiocarbon dates from charcoal found in connection with the tombs led Burenhult to interpret some of them as having been built around 5000 BC, i.e. in the Late Mesolithic. A recent project has, however, dated a series of antler/bone pins that are highly likely to have been on the cremation pyres with the deceased individuals, indicating that the Carrowmore tombs more likely date from 3700–3200 cal. BC, in the early Neolithic period.
The large site of Listoghil seems to have been built in the century leading up to 3500 cal. BC.

**Carns Hill**

At the eastern end of the Cúil Irra peninsula is Carns Hill with its two flat summits, each crowned by a large passage tomb cairn. The larger of the two, on the eastern summit, has a diameter of some 53m and a height of some 8m. It may have been reused as a raised ringfort in the medieval period. The cairn on the western summit has a diameter of c. 43m and a height of c. 4m. Neither has been excavated. Other than a prehistoric stone row some distance from the western cairn, there are no records of any additional megalithic monuments on either summit of Carns Hill.

**Neolithic Cúil Irra—a ritualised landscape**

The passage tomb people in Cúil Irra clearly created what can be called a ‘ritual landscape’ by placing their monuments in various strategic and eye-catching locations. But this landscape might have had strong ritual significance well before any passage tombs were built, with Knocknarea being a conspicuous ‘persistent place’, a common landmark used in cognitive mapping by people since the region was first populated.

Around 4000 BC we see the first permanent ritual expression in the construction of a large enclosure at Magheraboy. Carrowmore, at the centre of the peninsula, may already have been of ritual significance but without any stone-built monuments, since the monuments there seem to belong to the last three quarters of the fourth millennium BC.

In the later part of the fourth millennium BC we see the building of the huge cairn of Miosgan Meadhbha on Knocknarea and the cairns on Carns Hill, as well as Listoghil in the centre of Carrowmore. In some ways Miosgan Meadhbha represents the ultimate monumental statement, as it physically merges ritual and landscape—the mountain and cairn becoming one.

By this stage Knocknarea had become the focus for intense ritual activity; the extensive banks on the eastern slopes were used for various activities, and probably also for directing access to the summit.

The building of the four large cairns in Cúil Irra signalled a clear change in how rituals linked to the ancestors were performed, and also in the role played by monuments in society.

In the second half of the third millennium BC there were sharp changes in the nature of ritual and belief in Ireland, resulting in an abandonment of many of the older focal points. In Cúil Irra, Carrowmore retained some of its ritual significance, as the area contains a number of later barrows of various kinds, displaying a degree of ritual continuity.

The huge late Neolithic–early Bronze Age henge monument at Lisnaburg, just north of the Garavoge River, is a clear indication, however, that large public rituals seem to have moved beyond the confines of the peninsula. After nearly 2,000 years as a regional ritual centre, the Cúil Irra peninsula seems to have lost its significance in the rapidly changing world of the Bronze Age.

Above: Magheraboy causewayed enclosure: conjectural reconstruction drawing by James Murphy.

Cover: Carrowmore 51 (Listoghil). Note that the cairn is a reconstruction. In the foreground is the small chamber of Carrowmore 53, with its entrance facing into the cairn and the centre of Carrowmore. In the background, to the right, on the four heights of the Ox Mountains each has a passage tomb on the summit, defining the southern extent of the Cúil Irra passage tomb complex (Photo: Stefan Bergh)
NEOLITHIC
CÚIL IRRA
—KNOCKNAREA /CARROWMORE/CARNS HILL
Introduction

On the Atlantic façade of north-west Sligo, the undulating lowlands of the Cúil Irra peninsula lie between the rugged heights of the Ox Mountains to the south and the imposing Dartry Mountains with Ben Bulben to the north. Cúil Irra, with the conspicuous flat-topped Knocknarea Mountain at its western end, was one of the major cultural and ritual centres in Neolithic Ireland, between c. 4000 and 2500 BC, and is home to one of the four large passage tomb complexes in Ireland, the others being Brú na Bóinne and Loughcrew, Co. Meath, and Carrowkeel-Keashcorran in south Sligo.

Neolithic Cúil Irra

The first evidence for human activity in the area belongs to the earliest phase of the Neolithic, around 4000 BC. No remains of what could be considered Neolithic farmsteads have yet been found in Cúil Irra, but the first evidence of significant woodland clearances dates from just after c. 3750 BC, indicating that farming communities were established in Cúil Irra at that time.

The earliest monument in the region is the causewayed enclosure on the prominent ridge at Magheraboy, just west of Carns Hill. Some 140m in diameter, its outer perimeter was defined by a substantial timber palisade and a line of segmented ditches, though the interior was largely devoid of archaeological features. Finds from the ditch segments include Carinated Bowl pottery, leaf-shaped arrowheads, various scrapers of flint and chert, stone axeheads (some made of porcellanite from Antrim) and quartz crystals.

The initial phase of activity at Magheraboy may date from as early as c. 4000 BC, and such sites represent the earliest large-scale communal undertakings. A causewayed enclosure seems to have functioned as a focal point for the community, bringing people together for activities that included feasting, the exchange of goods and ritual deposition.

Passage tombs

Of the roughly 250 passage tombs in Ireland, some 70 are to be found in Cúil Irra and its hinterland, predominantly in three distinct clusters: on Carns Hill in the east, at Carrowmore in the centre and on Knocknarea Mountain to the west. The greatest quantity by far is to be found at Carrowmore, where originally some 50 were built. On Knocknarea there are some seven passage tombs, dominated by the very large cairn of Miosgan Meadhbha, while two large cairns, one on each of the twin summits, are found on Carns Hill.

Outside these three main locations, one passage tomb is located in Abbeyquarter North, today serving as a roundabout in a housing estate close to the Garavoge in Sligo town, while another is a partly ruined monument with a cruciform chamber in Barnasrah, just north of Carrowmore.

Outside the Cúil Irra peninsula proper there are six passage tombs on different summits in the Ox Mountains, four just east of the Collooney Gap, and the other two on Croaghaun and Doomore to the west.

Other Neolithic sites

Recent excavation of the large, rectangular megalithic chamber at Primrosegrange, south of Knocknarea, revealed many inhumed burials, early Neolithic leaf-shaped arrowheads and other finds. Charcoal from the chamber was dated to just after 4000 BC, showing that it was in use at the same time as the causewayed enclosure at Magheraboy.

In addition to Primrosegrange, there are two Neolithic court tombs on the peninsula: one with a two-chambered gallery in Killaspughrone, partly covered by sand-dunes, and a small central court tomb in Cummeen.

A slightly more unusual location of Neolithic activity is represented by human bones discovered in two caves on Knocknarea.
Knocknarea

The clear-cut limestone mountain of Knocknarea forms a most conspicuous landmark in the Cúil Irra region, and was probably an important focal point since the arrival of the first settlers.

The first small passage tombs on the flat summit were probably built in the first half of the fourth millennium BC, physically marking out the ritual significance of the place. A few hundred years later, the sacred space was demarcated by a complex system of banks along the eastern flank of the mountain. At this stage the cairn known today as Miosgan Meadhbha (the legendary burial place of Queen Maeve) was probably also built on the summit and most likely covers a passage tomb. Its construction effectively transformed the entire mountain into a monument, with a huge visual impact on the entire region. The cairn, some 60m in diameter and 10m in height, forms the central part of a group of at least five passage tombs on this elevated ground.

It appears that the smaller passage tombs on the summit were explored by the local landlord, R.C. Walker, in the early nineteenth century, and in one of them, among the burned bones, he found ‘small round beads without any hole in them’—probably small stone balls, not uncommon among the remains deposit-ed in passage tombs. The large cairn has never been excavated, though Walker had some intention to do so: in a letter of 1836 to Thomas Larcom of the Ordnance Survey, he wrote that ‘… perhaps the Tumulus of Queen Maud may be ransacked by us this season’. Luckily, these plans never materialised!

Besides the passage tombs, there is a subcircular enclosure, a small mound and two very low cairns on the summit—all rather unusual sites which could be either Neolithic or later in date.

South-east of the summit, some 180m from the large cairn, there is another passage tomb with a cruciform chamber set in a low cairn. This monument has isolated boulders placed equidistantly along its perimeter, a very unusual feature among passage tombs.

At the eastern end of the lower ridge to the east, in Grange North, there is a boulder circle with a central chamber, reminiscent of the monuments at Carrowmore, which it overlooks to the east.

Banks

On the eastern side of the mountain, on the upper slopes close to the 250m contour, is a system of grass-covered banks (0.5m high...
and 3m wide, with a total length of c. 2.3km) stretching north/south along the entire length of the mountain. In the northern part there are up to five parallel banks, some sloping across the contours at a 45° angle. Here they also appear increasingly segmented, as they are frequently interrupted by short gaps.

These were originally rather substantial stone-built banks, with a height of up to 1m and a width of c. 2m. A rich array of Neolithic finds, including chert lithics (both debris and retouched tools) and decorated pottery, show active use of the space just behind them. The production and use of concave scrapers and other stone tools seems to have been part of this activity. A series of radiocarbon dates shows that the banks were built and used sometime between 3500 and 3400 BC.

Round houses
A number of round house foundations also exist on Knocknarea. In the main they consist of some fifteen sites stretching westwards from the bank at its most southern end. Their outer diameters range from 5m to 10m, and many of them consist of a low stone-built bank that could have served as a foundation for a timber-built superstructure. Finds in them are identical to those made along the banks, and radiocarbon dates support an occupation date in the mid-Neolithic.

The locations of these houses suggests that they were used during special or ritual activities rather than being ‘ordinary Neolithic farmsteads’.

Caves
High up on the north-western slopes of Knocknarea are a number of natural caves, and in two of them human remains of Neolithic date have been found. These may have been places used for excarnation of the dead, and the caves might have played a role in the rituals linked to the more obvious monuments on the summit.

Carrowmore

At Carrowmore in the centre of the peninsula some 50 passage tomb monuments are found over an area of approximately 1000m by 600m. A line of monuments also extends from the main concentration to the north-east.

Unlike most other passage tombs, which are often highly visible in dominating locations, the Carrowmore tombs are in the undulating lowland, which in the Neolithic would have been covered by a rich deciduous forest. This might have been cleared, leaving the monuments in a forest clearance, or conversely the monuments might originally have been situated in a grove surrounded by more open land cleared for farming. Notwithstanding the vegetation, the Carrowmore monuments were not built to be visible from a distance.

Most of them have been placed along the periphery of an oval, forming a ring with few monuments in the centre. Furthermore, most of their entrances point in towards the central open space, indicating the significance of that area.

The Carrowmore cluster is unique in the Irish passage tomb tradition owing to the sites’ uniform and simple construction, consisting of a circle of large boulders set shoulder to shoulder, enclosing a central free-standing chamber. The often pentagonal chamber consists of five standing wall slabs covered by a single roof slab, often a split boulder. The burial chambers at Carrowmore were most likely never covered by a cairn or mound. They were intended to be visible and ‘accessible’, suggesting that the rituals there would have been slightly different from those at the more hidden, ‘mysterious’, cairn-covered chambers that we find in other passage tomb areas.

Most of the Carrowmore sites were excavated by Woodward in the 1880s, while modern excavations were carried out at ten sites by Burenhult in the 1980s–90s. The finds from the chambers consist of cremated bone, together with stone beads, bone/antler pins, pendants in bone or stone, flint/chert scrapers and flakes as well as pieces of quartz. In Carrowmore 3 some 32kg of...