**Where worlds meet**

*The ritual and domestic context of two Irish Prehistoric mountain-top ‘villages’.*

This paper outlines the methodologies involved in the survey of Ireland’s two largest mountain-top prehistoric settlements, and discusses their domestic and ritual context from a landscape perspective.

Mountains and high ground are often venerated as special places. It is their enigmatic quality of high places, their prominence and permanence in both the mental and physical landscapes that draw us to them. The occurrence of prehistoric remains on mountains highlights the question of the role of the topography, and to what degree this reflects a prehistoric perception of the symbolic role of high ground. In the Neolithic/Bronze Age mountaintops in Ireland were actively used for ritual purposes, clearly indicated by the erection of passage tombs and cairns on conspicous summits. In a few instances large cluster of circular houses have been recorded in close proximity to these monuments.

The two by far largest clusters of round houses are found on the exposed upland plateau at Mullaghfarna, in the Bricklieve Mountains, Co. Sligo (c. 150 houses) and on the very summit of Turlough Hill, in the Burren, Co. Clare (c. 140 houses).

The gently rolling drumlin landscape of south Co. Sligo is visually dominated by the dramatic Bricklieve Mountains. This limestone mountain range consists of a series of north/south aligned hills and ridges stretching over some 10kms east/west. Archaeologically the Bricklieve Mountains are best known due to the c. 20 Neolithic passage tombs found on its different summits. This is known as the Carrowkeel/Keashcorran Passage Tomb Complex which is one of the four large passage tomb complexes in Ireland, and strongly underlines the ritual and symbolic role that these mountains had in the Neolithic.

The cluster of houses covering an area of c. 200 x 250m, is found at the eastern end of the mountain range, on a deeply fissured karst plateau at 225m OD, bounded on three sides by vertical cliffs. The house foundations consists of various form of slab built foundations built either directly on top of the fissured limestone pavement, or of circular areas quarried into the bedrock. The size of the houses ranges mainly between 8-13m, while some are up to 20m in diameter.

The uplands of the Burren with its truly spectacular mountainuous karst landscape creates a unique enviroment in many regards. Its eastern extent is defined by a dramatic mountain range extending for some 15km north/south. Turlough Hill forms part of this mountain range and consists of a ridge some 1200m long with its highest point being at 280m OD. 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 roughly hexagonal stone built enclosure, measuring some 225 across, is located at the eastern summit.

The house foundations consist of circular foundation walls of limestone slabs with diameters ranging between 6-11m. They occur in small groups and most of them are built on top of the actual limestone pavement while some have been quarried into the bedrock.

The houses, together with the cairn and the multi-vallate enclosure are all restricted to the flat, exposed summit, even though large areas of flat, and more sheltered ground, are present immediately below the summit.

Besides a minor trial excavation at Mullaghfarna by the author, no excavations or detailed survey had previously been conducted at any of these sites, from which follows that their chronological as well as cultural context had not been established.

This present paper presents the survey work at these two sites undertaken recently, and partly ongoing, by the author. The main aim with the surveys was to create a detailed record of all the houses, to be able to analyse construction modes as well as to facilitate detailed spatial analysis of the areas and the houses. Due to the huge number of stones used in the constructions of the houses at Mullaghfarna as well as the presence of the rough and varied bedrock often being a part of the house constructions, a ground based survey using Totalstation or GPS was not considered a viable option at this site.

Considering that both locations, and especially Turlough Hill are rather inaccessible, combined with the large number of sites at both locations, the methodolgy chosen was digital photogrammetry based on low level aerial imagery.The vertical imagery was captured at 1,800ft producing imagery at a scale of 1:1,500. After scanning digital imagery with each pixel representing 5cm on the ground was produced. This enabled the production of Digital Elevation Models with extraordinary high resolution, from which very detailed topographical analysis of each house could be made. This has then actively assisted in the analysis and interpretation of the morphology of the sites, and thereby supporting an interpretion of their role and link to the the nearby ritual monuments.