

Ed Danaher, archaeologist with *Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd*, describes the excavations of a late Neolithic henge monument in advance of road construction in County Sligo.

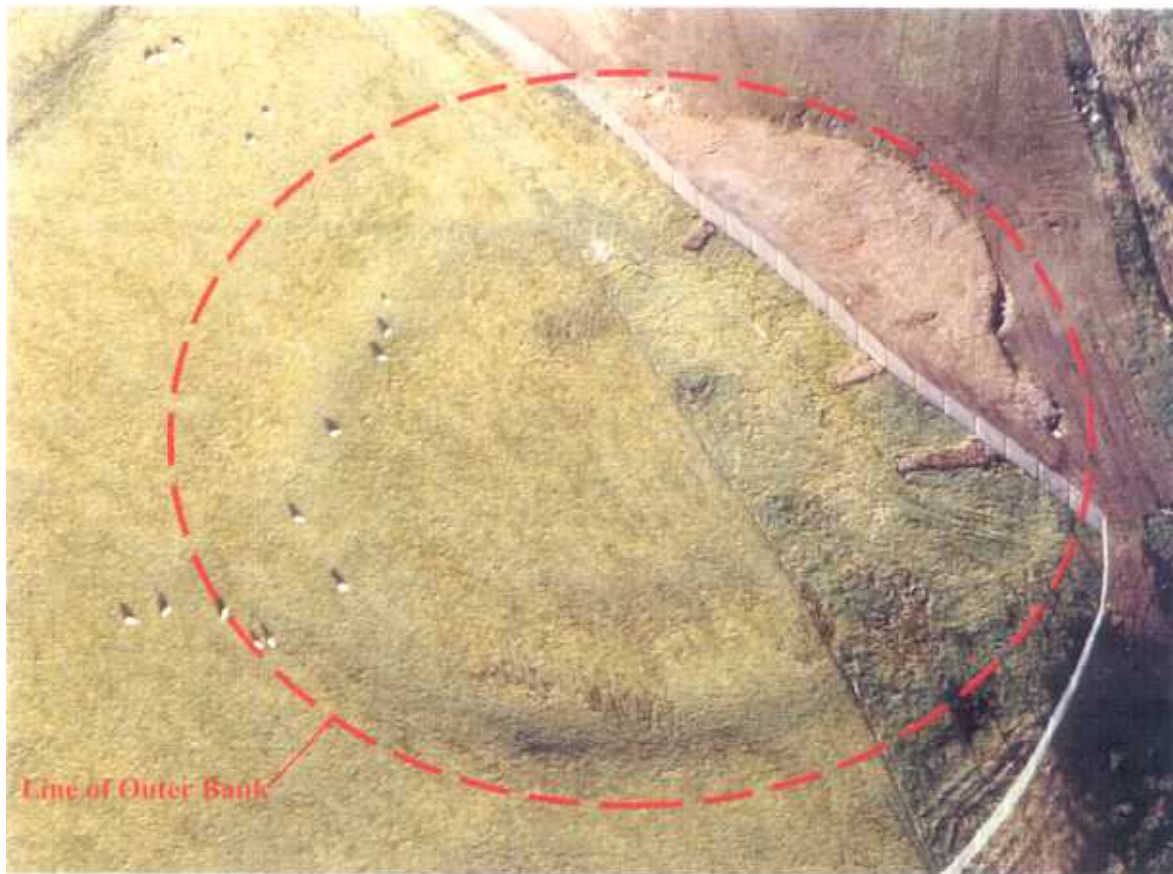
# Tonafortes: ■ a ceremonial enclosure in County Sligo



**A**s part of extensive archaeological works associated with the construction of the N4 Sligo Inner Relief Road and County Extension, excavation took place of part of a ceremonial enclosure at Tonafortes, in addition to ten other sites identified throughout the road-take. One of these, an early Neolithic causewayed enclosure at Magheraboy, was the subject of a previous *Archaeology Ireland* article (Vol. 18, No. 4).

The henge monument at Tonafortes is located in a low-lying drumlin valley at a height of 24m (79ft) above Ordnance Datum

(OD). It lies in a hollow below the embankment of the existing N4 Sligo–Collooney road and is overlooked by a small hill to its north-west. The surrounding landscape comprises the Ox Mountains to the south and south-east, Knocknarea to the west, Ben Bulbin to the north and the Ballygawley Hills along the north-eastern horizon. This vista creates a natural amphitheatre in which the Tonafortes monument gives the impression of being centrally located. Standing in the centre of the monument, it soon becomes apparent that one is not just enclosed by the man-



Left: Aerial shot of henge following excavation, showing reinstatement of sections and protective chain-link fence.

made banks but also by the surrounding landscape. The deliberate placing of the monument in a low-lying area overlooked by an area of high ground is typical of many Irish henges.

The enclosure, first noted from aerial photographs by staff members of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, is listed in the Record of Monuments and Places for County Sligo as a 'ceremonial enclosure' (RMP no. SL014-224) and has an overall diameter of approximately 85m. It consists of a circular central area, 45m in diameter, and is enclosed by two banks with an intervening ditch. Archaeological test excavations on the enclosure and its environs, carried out in 2001 by Mary Henry Ltd, revealed the dimensions of the banks and ditch, while a number of potential features, notably spreads of burnt mound material, were identified to the north and east of the enclosure. The N4 Sligo Inner Relief Road (SIRR) impacted on less than 10% of the entire henge/ceremonial monument, and advance archaeo-

logical works carried out between April and July 2003 revealed the eastern segment of this circular enclosure.

The excavation mainly concentrated on the sections of the ditch present to the north and south of the eastern entrance feature (which consisted of a causeway of undug soil spanning a distance of 8.2m between both ditch terminals); none of the site interior was investigated. The ditch was considerably deeper on the north side of the causeway than on the southern side. To help understand the ditch morphology and subsequent depositional history three extended cuttings were placed across the ditch, two to the south of the entrance and one to the north, in order to provide complete profiles of this feature. The fills within the northern cutting fell into three distinct groups, while only the upper two of these groups were present to the south.

In summary, the stratigraphical sequence of the ditch to the north of the causewayed entrance suggests that, after it was formed, the sides and/or bank were slightly unstable, resulting in material rolling into the base of the ditch. At the same time small charcoal deposits were deliberately discarded into it. Soon after, the sides and/or bank became stable and a topsoil layer began to develop. These events occurred during the late Neolithic/early Bronze Age. The formation of the topsoil layer would have marked the last depositional sequence of the ditch until the

Far left: Aerial shot of henge and environs.

Left: South-facing section through cutting 1.



## TONAFORTES



Top: Shot of ditch section showing modern drain/stone dump C49 to left of photo.

Middle: Shot of drain/stone dump C49 from north-east.

Bottom: Stone dump C118 cut through henge ditch C6 from east.

middle Bronze Age, when charcoal either associated with henge activities or from an unrelated event settled within the ditch. The next verifiable event occurred during the post-medieval period, when this area of the ditch was deliberately backfilled. Cultivation of this newly reclaimed area soon followed.

The Tonafoertes enclosure is defined by an internal ditch and an external bank, thus conforming to the type of henge found in most areas of Britain. Of the dates obtained for such sites, all but one are later than 2800 BC. The henge at Tonafoertes would appear to conform to this sequence, with a likely construction date of 2460–2140 cal. BC. Charcoal from close to the base of cutting 1 provided this date. This charcoal was contained within the stony basal ditch fill, which is interpreted as the product of rapid redeposition from unstable ditch sides or the upcast bank. It is likely that this event occurred shortly after the construction of the monument. The small number of finds associated with this monument may also have been deposited during the construction phase. These included a flint scraper, a chert scraper, a sherd of prehistoric pottery and a possible chalk ball. Although three other dates were obtained from various ditch fills, these derived from post-henge activity (1760–1610 cal. BC, cal. AD 250–430 and cal. AD 1300–1420).

Surprisingly, the excavation revealed very few traces of human activity, which suggests that the monument was largely left alone after its construction. These findings were further substantiated by micromorphological analysis of the soil taken from the ditch, which revealed no detectable traces of prehistoric activity in the ditch fills. More often than not, even when a site presents little coherent evidence there is 'background noise' in terms of low-level traces of human activity, but these were not present in the thin sections from Tonafoertes. It would therefore appear that, following its construction, the site may have had a short life-span. Alternatively, good housekeeping was the order of the day and the site was deliberately kept clean, though of these two assumptions the former seems the more plausible.

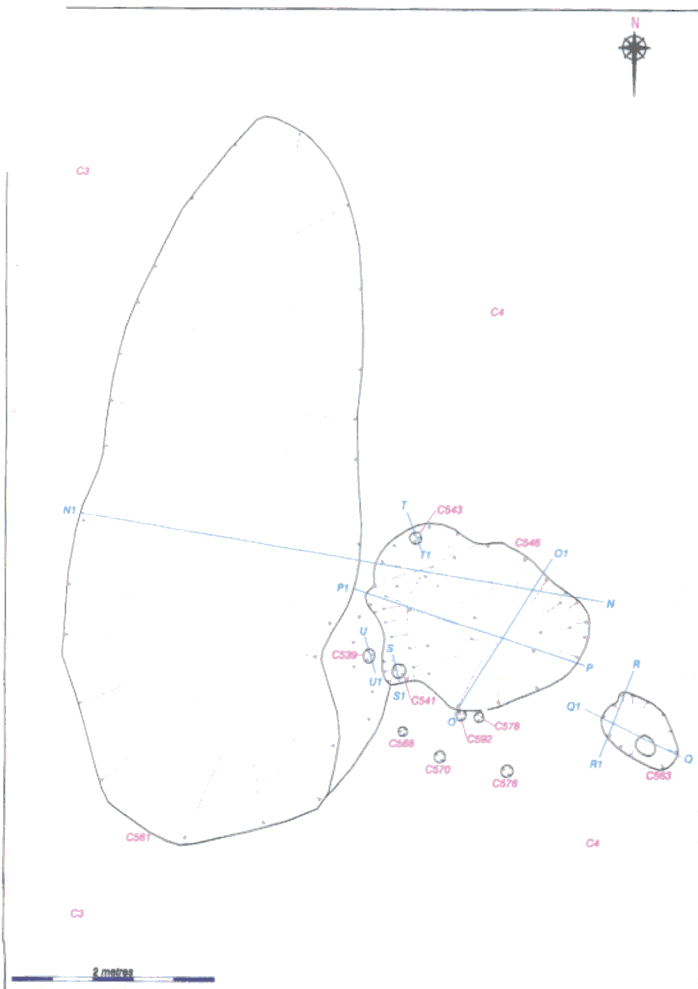
So where and how does Tonafoertes fit into the overall spectrum of henges in Ireland? Many of the Irish henges appear to have pronounced connections with death and the past, being closely associated with passage tombs. Surprisingly, given the large quantity of passage tombs in Sligo, only three henges are known from the county. The location of the Tonafoertes henge, the only internally ditched enclosure of the three, suggests that it formed part of a wider ritual landscape, particularly in light of the SIRR excavations. It is one of three Neolithic enclosures investigated within the road-take that stretches from the townland of Tonafoertes to the townland of Magheraboy, a distance of c. 3km. The earliest of these was the early Neolithic causewayed enclosure at Magheraboy, while south of this was a possible stone-walled enclosure of undetermined Neolithic date in the townland of Caltragh. These latter two were identified as a result of archaeological works associated with the N4 SIRR, and even though numerous ritual monuments are present within the wider landscape, many others that no longer show any surface expression may lie undiscovered.

Within a 4km radius of Tonafoertes there are numerous prehistoric monuments, including passage tombs, ring-barrows, bowl-

barrows, megalithic structures, undated enclosures, earthworks, possible hut sites, etc. Many of these are ritual in nature and form part of a wider ritual monumental presence within the Cuil Irra Peninsula. It is possible that the ceremonial enclosure at Tonafortes was an integral part of this vast ritual landscape. It has been observed that causewayed enclosures often give rise to ritual landscapes that include a wide variety of later Neolithic and early Bronze Age ceremonial sites, containing dozens of henges, barrows and other 'shrine-like places'.

Henges have long been credited with having an astronomical significance, though the current body of evidence is somewhat ambiguous. The width of the entrance at Tonafortes would suggest that it was too wide for astronomical observation, while excavation did not reveal any evidence of a sighting post outside it such as the Heel Stone at Stonehenge. Tonafortes, like most henges, was most probably built as a ritual centre. What these ceremonies and rituals entailed will never be recreated and are now the forgotten customs of these once-sacred places.

In Ireland, and possibly in Orkney, there was another association: a water cult. Water is associated with a number of henges, with many sites being located close to water. The ditches of many henges may have contained water for long periods of the year. The peaty basal deposit from the ditch to the south of the entrance would suggest that this was the case at Tonafortes. However, the



better-drained ditch to the north would not have held water for any lengthy period. Two small seasonal ponds, one to the south-west and the other to the north, appear to have been associated with the henge at Tonafortes. It is feasible that the association between henges and water is a precursor to what is perceived as a feature of Celtic ritual. Two *fulachta fiadh* were located in close proximity to the more northerly of these two ponds. The smaller of the two had been almost entirely destroyed by a field clearance pit. The larger one revealed a thin spread of burnt mound material, which sealed a trough, a pit and seven stake-holes.

Regarding location, *fulachta fiadh* and henges often occupy similar low-lying positions, while at Tonafortes further associations are suggested by the comparable dates obtained for *fulacht fiadh* no. 2 (2400–2380 cal. BC and 2360–2140 cal. BC) and the formation of the henge ditch (2460–2140 cal. BC). Also of note was a spread of burnt mound material south of this monument, excavated by Sue McCabe, which may also have been related to the enclosure in some way. Associations between spreads of burnt mound material and ceremonial enclosures within the wider landscape are paralleled by a number of sites identified in Counties Clare and Kerry. Most of these spreads do not contain evidence of troughs, the defining feature of *fulachta fiadh*, and all are associated with ceremonial enclosures. While these spreads may be just another component of the ritual landscape, and although they could have been used for the roasting rather than the boiling of meat, they may have had more ritual functions.

The relationship between *fulachta fiadh*, spreads of burnt mound material and ceremonial enclosures is purely speculative at this juncture, but what is of importance is that it is increasingly likely that associations between these features did indeed exist. ■

*This project was funded by the Irish Government and part-funded by the European Union under the National Development Plan 2000–2006. The total archaeological cost was administered by the National Roads Authority through Sligo Borough Council and Sligo County Council.*

Left: Post-excitation plan of zone C, showing detail of *fulacht fiadh* no. 2. Above: Pre-excitation shot of *fulacht fiadh* no. 2 from east.