

BIG QUESTIONS AT THE BIG DIG

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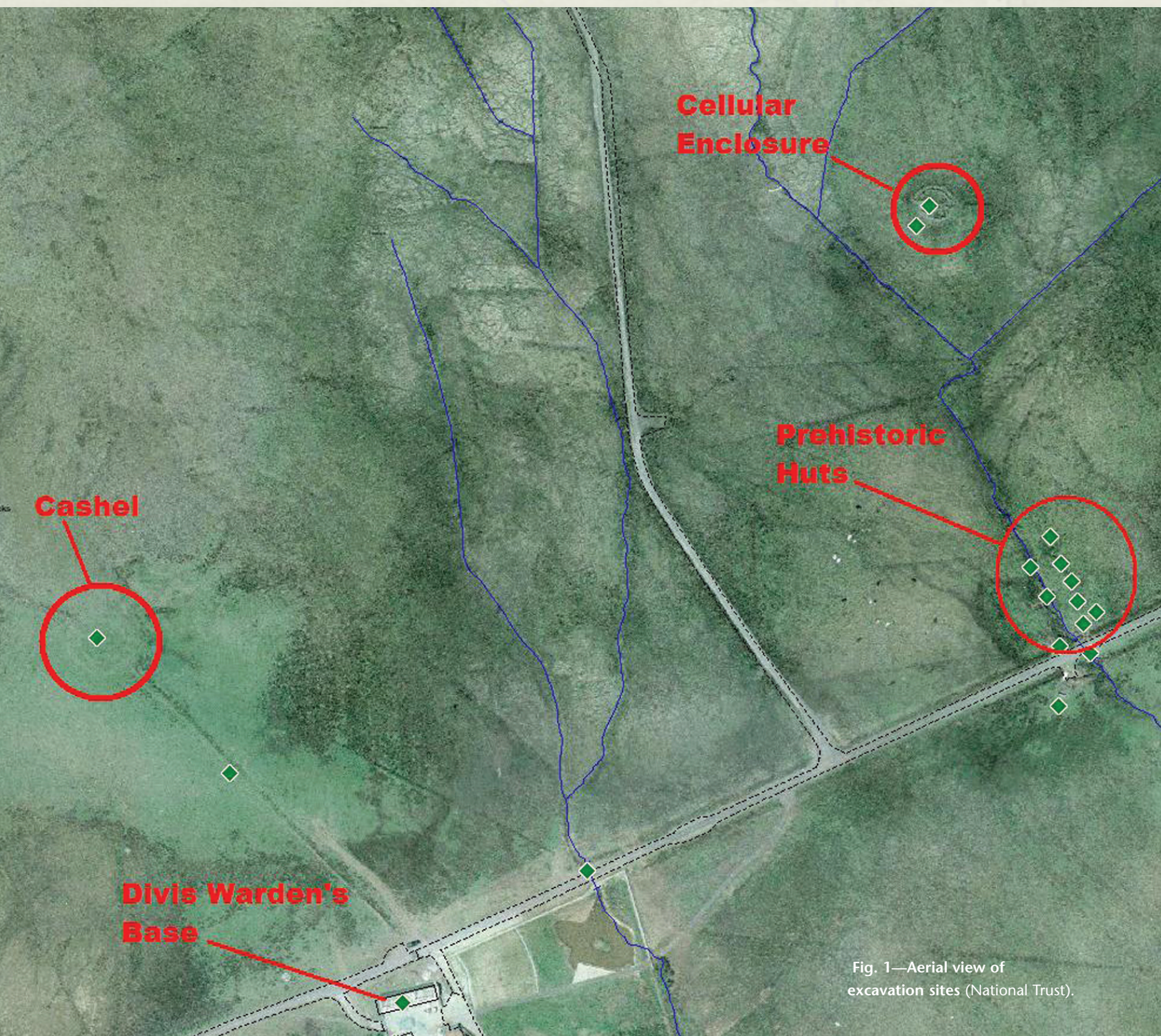


Fig. 1—Aerial view of excavation sites (National Trust).

Harry Welsh, Ruairí Ó Baoill, Ruth Logue, Malachy Conway and Lizzy Pinkerton report on an interesting project at Divis, Belfast.

Introduction and background

Small-scale research excavations were carried out at two sites in Divis townland, Co. Antrim, between 12 and 23 June 2017. These were a stone circular enclosure, recorded as 'Cashel' on Fig. 1 (NISMR ANT 060:083; Irish Grid reference J 2710 7455), and what had been thought to be a prehistoric hut site, recorded as 'Prehistoric Huts' on Fig. 1 (not in NISMR; Irish Grid reference J 2747 7456). They were situated within the Divis and Black Mountain property owned by the National Trust and close to the Divis Warden's Base, also known as Divis Barn. The excavations were part of a wider project managed by the Belfast Hills Partnership in an ongoing programme of such work in the Belfast Hills, funded by the Big Lottery Fund and supported by the Department for Communities: Historic Environment Division (HED). They were led by professional archaeologists from the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork (CAF) at Queen's University Belfast (QUB), and a wide range of schools and community groups took part.

A small excavation team from the CAF was augmented by volunteers from the Ulster Archaeological Society (UAS), archaeology students from QUB and members of the general public. Seventeen local primary and secondary schools supported the event and over 400 pupils participated in the excavations. In addition, eighteen members of the public signed up for a one-day excavation course, and a further 142 members of the public got the opportunity to work on the excavation at an open day on Saturday 17 June. Three evening field trips, involving 71 members of the public and international students, also took place. As well as the 250 members of the public who visited the excavations, it is estimated that almost 1,000 people were in some way involved over the two-week period. The event attracted widespread media attention, including radio and local newspapers. Information obtained from this and other recent community digs in the Belfast Hills has informed site management plans, signs and interpretive material and, most of all, has added to the appreciation of the historical sites in the hills and their significance by those who visit the area.

Above right: Fig. 2—Members of a local school group excavating at the site.



The excavation involved two separate sites, which are part of a cluster of monuments in proximity to the modern National Trust Warden's Base at the Divis and Black Mountain property. These monuments include two circular stone enclosures (shown as 'Cashel' and 'Cellular Enclosure' in Fig. 1), a series of circular platforms (shown as 'Prehistoric Huts' on Fig. 1), a small quarry and a long stone cairn.

Excavation at the circular stone enclosure

The larger excavation site was at the circular stone enclosure known as Divis Cashel, previously surveyed by the UAS (McAlister 2012). One north/south trench, 18m long and 1.5m wide, was opened across the enclosure at the south-east of the monument and quickly uncovered a portion of mortared stone wall. This was entirely unexpected, as preliminary research had not indicated any post-medieval activity in the area. As the excavation progressed, four further walls were uncovered, some unmortared, with areas of rough cobbling and a flagged surface in association. At the southern end of the trench, evidence of metalworking (clinker and slag) was recovered, indicative of the presence of a post-medieval forge nearby. The most southerly of the walls was the enclosure wall itself, constructed of large rounded boulders with a rubble infill. At the inner face of this wall there were at least three soil and clay horizons, which contained sherds of Middle Neolithic

pottery and flints, including a hollow scraper and several cores. No evidence of medieval activity was recovered.

Excavation at the burial cairn

A second and smaller trench, 3m north/south by 3m east/west, was opened across one of at least seven circular platforms, thought to be the remains of a settlement cluster, previously surveyed by the UAS (Gillespie 2011b). These lie approximately 350m to the east of the Cashel. No evidence for a habitation surface was found, but increasing amounts of stone with patches of charcoal-rich material were encountered. It soon became apparent that this was not a hut site but rather the remains of a burial cairn. At least eleven burial cairns have been identified within the National Trust property and, as the 'hut sites' are likely to represent a further seven, this has become a significant prehistoric burial site. Finds recovered here included sherds of prehistoric pottery and struck flint. Bulk samples were also taken in order to obtain a radiocarbon date if further funding can be secured.

The wider landscape

There are several interesting monuments close to the excavation site, including another stone-built circular structure known as the Cellular or Cell-Bay Enclosure, previously surveyed by the UAS (Gillespie 2011a), a quarry and a rectangular cairn, but the age and function of these monuments will remain uncertain unless excavation is carried out to recover dating

Right: Fig. 3—Divis Cashel: view of trench, looking north.

evidence. Several Bronze Age burial cairns have also been surveyed: Summit Cairn (Welsh and Welsh 2007b), Cairn 2, Black Mountain (Welsh and Welsh 2007a), Yellow Jack's Cairn (Rutherford 2009) and Cairn 3, Divis (McShane and Cooper 2012). Seven vernacular houses have also been investigated: House Site 1, Black Mountain (Dunlop and Catney 2008), Divis Farm (McDonald and Catney 2010), Johnston's Green (McShane 2012), Reavy House (Scott 2013), Divis Lodge (McShane and Catney 2015) and Game Keeper's Cottage (Catney 2016). Many other monuments, including several defence heritage buildings, have been identified by staff of the National Trust and will be the subject of future investigation, while still others probably await discovery under the blanket bog in the area.

More questions than answers

The excavation at Divis Cashel has uncovered no evidence of medieval activity there. Instead, the stratification and artefactual evidence suggest a substantial Neolithic presence in the immediate area, but further investigation would be required to identify structural features related to this. There is clear evidence that a well-built circular stone enclosure is present, but nothing has so far been recovered to indicate its date. The wall enclosing the monument may originally have been only one course thick. It now consists of two courses and the excavation revealed substantial quantities of mortar adhering to the inner face, so it would appear that this wall was augmented during the post-medieval period, when the site was reused for small-scale industrial or agricultural purposes. A series of mortared stone walls were constructed within the enclosure, probably during the Victorian period, and these respect the curvature of the stone enclosure. The Cashel is located close to a quarry of unknown date, but the structures found seem too elaborate for servicing the needs of small-scale quarrying.

At the supposed settlement cluster, it now seems that the feature is more likely to be a burial cairn, as are the remainder of the circular platforms nearby. The circular platform immediately to the north of the



excavation, only a few metres away, has a convincing cist-like depression in the centre. These cairns are very close together and are positioned along the route of the headwater of the Colin River, which flows downhill from here to eventually join with the River Lagan. Did the Bronze Age mourners climb up the river valley to its source in order to establish a small cairn cemetery? The other cairns in the area are not clustered together in the same way, nor are they associated with streams or rivers, so perhaps they are not contemporary. Only further investigation may answer this.

Conclusion

The National Trust Divis and Black Mountain property is steadily revealing its wealth of archaeological sites, which range

from Neolithic activity and Bronze Age burial cairns to enigmatic enclosures, field systems, vernacular houses, and early industrial and military sites. The recent archaeological investigations are adding greatly to our knowledge of the story of human settlement around Belfast from the earliest times (Ó Baoill 2011). The ownership of the site for many years by the Ministry of Defence protected the area from development, and its acquisition by the National Trust will ensure that this fascinating landscape will now be available for all to explore and enjoy in the future. Reports of all the investigations carried out by the CAF, the UAS and the Belfast Hills Partnership are available on-line on their respective websites, to read or download as required. In addition, several articles on sites

in the area have been published in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* and *Archaeology Ireland*. Many visitors to this and previous excavations have confirmed that they have accessed this information, confirming the benefits of publishing such reports.

Thanks to the efforts of organisations such as the Belfast Hills Partnership and the National Trust, public awareness of the Belfast Hills as a place of interest and relaxation is rapidly increasing. One of the aims of the project was to encourage an interest in the archaeology of the Belfast Hills, leading people to value and engage with the area and its heritage, and this has been a success, judging by the high levels of media coverage, public participation and positive feedback. The research aims of the excavation have only been partially met, however, and there still seem to be more questions than answers! The development of an appropriate multi-agency research agenda may be the way forward. ■

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Below: Fig. 4—National Trust archaeologist Malachy Conway with UAS members excavating the burial cairn.



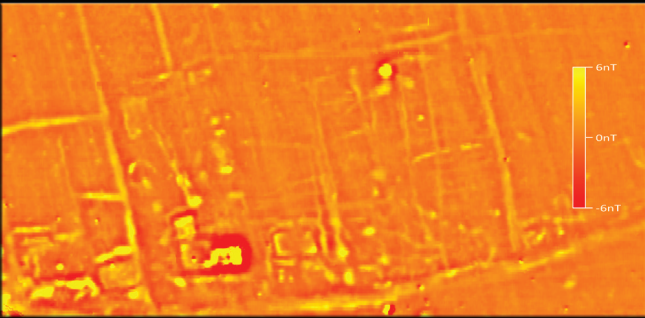
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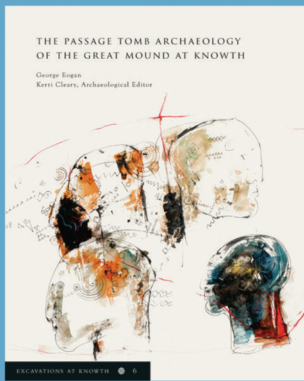



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