Fulachta Fiadh: a general statement

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Fulachta fiadh, those unassuming and often unnoticed little mounds of burnt stone, are at last enjoying the serious attention of a widening group of archaeologists in Ireland and abroad. The fortunes of these monuments in archaeology over the past centuries are reviewed in this essay, and the present state of research is assessed in the light of the ever-growing knowledge of their distribution and the increasing number of radiocarbon dates becoming available.

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Fulachta fiadh, or burnt mounds, survive as relatively small grass-covered mounds of burnt and broken stone, ash and charcoal. They vary greatly in size, from only a few metres in diameter to over 20 metres in some cases. While the height of the mounds can vary greatly also, most would seem to be between 1 and 2 metres in height.

The classic fulacht fiadh is regarded as being horseshoe-shaped in plan, i.e., two horns or arms of the mound incompletely enclosing a shallow area or depression. The Co. Cork Archaeological Survey, for example, has established that nearly half of the nearly 2,000 surviving mounds in that county had something approaching this classic shape. Other mounds are circular, oval or D-shaped in plan.

With very few exceptions, fulachta fiadh are located in wet or marshy areas, by a stream, or near springs or wells. In the Burren of Co. Clare, an area partly characterised by its lack of surface water or drainage, the fulachta fiadh, now known to number hundreds, are located only where surface water is visible or accessible. While changes in hydrology and drainage patterns may have taken place in the three or more thousand years since these sites were used, water was necessary for their functions and one can assume a waterside location for fulachta fiadh in antiquity also.

Grouping of sites can also be considered a feature of their locations, with between 2 and 6, or more, sites being located within a relatively small area. All of such sites in a group being perfectly intervisible and within a few metres of each other in many cases.

Fulachta fiadh are quite common in Ireland, with over 4,500 examples being identified. Similar monuments are also known in many parts of Britain, especially in Scotland, Wales and in parts of England.

It is difficult to isolate the first "archaeological" reference to a fulacht fiadh. It would seem that a 12th century text in The Book of Lismore, edited and translated by D. Hyde in 1916 and often quoted in the more recent "fulacht literature", deserves pride of place. The two characters in the passage, Cailti and Finchad, have been travelling and stop to make a camp for the night. They walk to a nearby stream to wash and Finchad remarks:

"This is a cooking-place (inadh fulachta) and it is a long time since it was made". His companion replies: "That is true ... and it is not to be worked without water". Could this be a reference by a medieval scribe or storyteller to a fulacht fiadh as we know it in archaeology, a monument even more common in the landscape of the time? It is interesting that the streamside location agrees with the present-day siting and that the site's antiquity is also mentioned.

The term 'fulacht' does occur in a number of early Irish texts, even older than that quoted, but it is the archaeological flavour of this reference that attracts attention.

In the early 17th century Seathrún Céitinn wrote his Foras Feasa ar Éirinn, and writes as

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an archaeologist, as it were, in a discussion of the function of what he called "Fulachta Fian". He describes the building and use of a site for both cooking and bathing and then he remarks that "...these fires were so large that their sites are today in Ireland burnt to blackness, and these are now called Fulachta Fian by the peasantry". One can only conclude that fulachta fiadh were both plentiful and visible in the landscape of Céitinn's time, that is in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Some two centuries later Townsend, in his *General and Statistical Survey of the County of Cork*, published in 1815, notes the very large number of fulachta fiadh in that county and remarks on their water-side location. He identified them as cooking-places and remarked that many had been and were being destroyed through tillage and the quarrying of their mounds for road metalling.

The *Cork Examiner* of 3rd April, 1854, quoting an edition of *The Munster News* of the previous month, describes the find circumstances of the Mooghaun or Great Clare Find of Bronze Age gold ornaments: "They were laid about 18 inches under the surface of one of those tumuli or mounds of small stones which are supposed to have been the open-air cooking places of our primitive or our martial forefathers".

In 1873 the Rev. R. Smiddy in his book *The Druids, Ancient Churches and Round Towers of Ireland*, writes, "The name fulach fiadh is well known to the country people, and they bestow it on a heap of burnt stones, of which, as a rule, they know neither the origin nor the use".

In addition to this evidence of the familiarity of fulachta fiadh to commentators, archaeological and otherwise, journals such as those of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* were, from the middle of the 19th century, publishing notes by antiquarians who were discovering fulachta fiadh in the course of their fieldwork. Occasional debate or discussion as to function was entered into, though the sites were generally regarded as little more than archaeological curiosities. Megalithic tombs and the more visible and visual monuments were then, and for some years after, considered more attractive and productive for excavation and investigation.

In his pioneering paper "Ancient Irish Cooking-Places", published in 1954, M. J. O'Kelly established the fulachta fiadh as fully-fledged archaeological monuments and, through experiment and demonstration, was able to propose a very plausible function for them. O'Kelly was not aware then of the great number and distribution of sites that has since been identified. It was during the 1970s before the number of known sites began to multiply in proportions unimagined some short years before.

After Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community in 1973, generous grants became available for the clearing and draining of marginal land as part of the development of Irish agriculture. These lands had lain undisturbed by man for hundreds if not thousands of years in many instances, and their "improvement" inadvertently destroyed and inestimable number of fulachta fiadh. Drivers of earthmoving machinery and improving landowners became very familiar with the spreads of heat-shattered stones and blackened soil. These can still be seen in many parts of the country when such land is tilled.

Archaeologists working on the regional and county-based archaeological surveys which began in the early 1980s were able to identify fulachta fiadh, and recognised them as "valid" monuments. All of these surveys have noted fulachta fiadh in areas as diverse as Donegal and Corca Dhuibhne, Cork and Galway. Indeed, there is scarcely a county that has not provided at least one dot on the fulachta fiadh distribution map.

Over the past 15 years a number of gas pipelines have been laid (c.g. Cork-Dublin, Cork-Limerick) and the survey of these routes has led to the identification of many fulachta fiadh
not previously known. A number of these sites have also been excavated. Faluchta fiadh were indeed the most noted archeological monument-type along the route of the Cork-Dublin pipeline.

Many dedicated field-walkers and amateur archaeologists have for long noted and mapped faluchta fiadh, their work virtually ignored by the establishment of academic archaeologists. The results of this work are often unpublished and are never combined with the results of other similar workers in different localities. The work of such committed people as the late Fr. Martin Ryan and the industrious Tom Coffey, names familiar to the members of this Society, has resulted in the identification of hundreds of faluchta fiadh in the Burren area for example. This is all the more remarkable as it was widely believed and accepted that the sites would never be found in limestone areas, an idea based on the assumption that limestone could not be heated to a sufficiently high temperature without it disintegrating and being rendered useless for heating large quantities of water. The Burren faluchta fiadh and recent experiments have shown this assumption to be false.

Faluchta fiadh are now accepted feature of our archaeological landscape. They are known in their thousands in Ireland and elsewhere. It is the task now to properly ascribe to them a function and date, and to give them a meaningful context in a cultural and economic setting. Some of this work is already under way.

In Ireland these sites have traditionally been accepted as cooking-places. The meaning of the term 'faluchta', tradition and folklore, certain accounts in medieval and early modern Irish literature, experiment and ethnographic parallels, have all supported this suggested function. Joints of meat have been successfully cooked in water-filled troughs in the manner described by Seathrún Céitinn in the 17th century. A large quantity of stones is heated thoroughly, spending a minimum of one hour in the fire. These stones, ideally about 4 lbs. each in weight, are then put in the trough and this way c. 100 gallons of water can be brought to the boil in 20 minutes or so. The meat is then placed in the boiling water and the addition of further carefully placed stones keeps the meat cooking for the necessary period. The debris produced in experiments such as this, i.e. burnt and broken stone, ash, charcoal etc., matches that found in the mounds of faluchta fiadh and the principal features of a site, the trough and hearth, are used in a plausible fashion.

Two of the early Irish accounts, that of Céitinn and a description of cooking in a text called "The Romance of Mis and Dubh Ruis", also have washing and bathing being performed after the cooking. It is indeed quite possible, and even likely, that bathing was an important function of the sites. The opportunity presented by a large quantity of hot water could not have been ignored and the melted fat and ash would have served as a basic soap! This second, or possibly secondary, function of the sites is regarded as the primary function by L. Barfield and M. Hodder who published a paper on their researches, "Burnt Mounds as Saunas, and the Prehistory of Bathing", in 1987. The view is held by some that the sites may also have served a semi-industrial function in leather-working or in textiles.

While the sites may have served one or more of these functions, they cannot be regarded as habitation-sites. Though excavation has occasionally revealed post-holes suggesting adjacent overground structures of some type, they do not seem to have been large enough for use as dwellings, and any permanent or temporary structure would have been sited on the nearest dry ground, the immediate vicinity of the faluchta fiadh being wet at the best of times, and in winter frequently flooded. The sites consist of the accumulated debris of the activity carried on there, and while the overall distribution of faluchta fiadh may reflect the distribution of inhabited areas, the specific sites themselves were not the habitations.

About 20 faluchta fiadh in Ireland have been dated by C14 or Radiocarbon methods.
These dates fall generally fall into the range 1800-1000 B.C., i.e. Early to Middle Bronze Age. The fulachta fiadh and the culture or life they represent may now be added to the range of other archaeological evidence from that period in our attempts to create the fuller picture.

The excavated evidence from fulachta fiadh suggest that their users were materially and technologically poor. Little if any pottery has been found and the amount of implements or weapons in stone or metal found is equally slight. If the sites were primarily for cooking, then their users were apparently unable to make or acquire vessels of pottery or metal in which to cook or heat liquids. Do the sites, numbering thousands, represent a stratum or element of Bronze Age Society (if one can use that term in this context) unrepresented in much of the rest of the Bronze Age record? The majority of the sites are found today in what is regarded as marginal land. Is it possible that these areas were in antiquity marginal in a similar or other manner? One must keep in mind, however, that tillage and land clearance may have destroyed the sites in many of the areas where they are not known today. Suggestions are also made that the sites were used by hunters who moved from place to place, hunting deer, and who camped and cooked at a fulachta fiadh before moving on to another area and another site. While the suggestion may be attractive it is difficult to accept fully. To say that all of the sites we know today were hunting stations of some type seems too easy an explanation. For example, the recent excavation of the exceptionally fine fulachta fiadh at Fahee South, near Carron, Co. Clare, which it is intended to publish shortly in this Journal, produced the bones and teeth of red deer and domesticated cattle, suggesting that this site, at least, was used by people not solely dependent on hunting.

Whatever their social or economic context, the distribution of fulachta fiadh indicates areas where man was active during the second millennium B.C., and these areas appear to be far more widespread than previously believed. The abundance of sites, their apparently consistent dating and their potential to add greatly to our knowledge of Bronze Age Ireland, will maintain the impetus for continuing fieldwork, distribution studies and excavation. Debate regarding function may continue and experiments in cooking will entertain, but the more difficult and larger issues demand attention also.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


