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MONUMENTS, LANDSCAPE AND IDENTITY IN CHALCOLITHIC IRELAND

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Abstract: The Chalcolithic wedge tombs of Ireland represent a dramatic re-emergence of megalithism over a millennium after most Neolithic megaliths were built and many centuries after most had gone out of use. This resurgence of building monuments associated with the dead may well have been associated with a period of social instability caused by the expansion of exchange networks and associated with the introduction of metallurgy. Regional, group, and individual identities all seem to have undergone change at this time, probably in a dynamic demographic context. Variations in the distribution and scale of wedge tombs in Co. Clare, on the west coast of Ireland, provide an interesting study that may reveal a pattern of clan affiliations, status competition, and enduring links to an important and ancient locale.

Keywords: Chalcolithic, megalith, monument, status competition, identity, Ireland, landscape, wedge tomb

The Irish Chalcolithic

A strong case for the use of the term ‘Chalcolithic’ for the period c. 2500-2000 BC in Ireland has recently been put forward by O’Brien (2012) to describe a period characterised by technological developments, ideological changes, and social transformations. During these centuries, copper and gold metallurgy was adopted, Ireland became enmeshed in far-reaching Beaker exchange networks, megalithism re-emerged in the form of wedge tombs (burial in cairns and older megaliths was also practiced), populations seem to have been expanding, and societies in different regions seem to have been developing along different trajectories leading to a varied social landscape across the island.

Of crucial importance in understanding this dynamic period is the wider context of a notable increase in maritime and riverine interaction and mobility around the Atlantic and southern-North Sea regions at this time. This appears to have been closely associated with the spread of the Beaker phenomenon and the development and spread of metallurgy (Vander Linden 2007b, 348; Cunliffe 2007, 106-7). Specialist knowledge of copper extraction and the non-slagging smelting of arsenic-rich ores, for example, was first established in Iberia, subsequently spread to France, and was introduced into south-west Ireland, probably via the Morbihan, c. 2500-2400 BC (O’Brien 2012; Cunliffe 2007, 106). As know-how and ideas could only move as far as people could carry them, the transfer of metallurgical knowledge to Ireland implies human mobility. The scale and nature of this mobility are issues which are still being debated, but most current interpretations envisage the movement of a small number of specialists, perhaps through marriage arrangements (Brodie 1997; O’Brien 2004; Vander Linden 2006b; 2007b), a phenomenon which has been ethnographically recorded elsewhere (Helms 1988, 132-4).

In County Clare on the west coast of Ireland, the region focussed on in the present study, there is evidence for all of these important Chalcolithic phenomena. Beaker pottery has been found in domestic contexts (Jones 1998; Lyne 2009; 2012) as well as in mortuary contexts (Hencken 1935; Carlin 2012), and small numbers of copper axes and halberds as well as gold lunulae have also been found (Harbison 1968; 1969b; 1969a; Taylor 1980), even though Clare seems to have been peripheral to Chalcolithic sources of copper and gold (Jones et al. 2011). It should be noted, however, that a small piece of copper ore or slag recovered on the Burren might be contemporaneous (Gibson 2013) and copper ores have been identified on the Burren and elsewhere in County Clare (Jackson 1978). Significantly for the present study, around 150 wedge tombs are known in County Clare with a marked concentration of over seventy wedge tombs on the upland limestone region known as the Burren in the north-west of the county. Of these, at least fifteen are concentrated in a restricted area known as Roughan Hill, making it the densest concentration of wedge tombs in the country (see below).

Wedge Tombs – Form and Function

Wedge tombs are characterised by a chamber that lowers and narrows towards the rear. The simplest wedge tombs consist of no more than this wedge-shaped chamber, but more elaborate wedge tombs have an antechamber or ‘portico’ in front of the main chamber and/or a small closed chamber or ‘cell’ at the rear of the main chamber. In some cases where there is an antechamber, it is demarcated from the main chamber by flanking portal stones and a sill stone that can be crossed over. In other cases the antechamber is divided from the main chamber by a high ‘septal’ stone that blocks access to the main chamber. The chamber is sometimes surrounded by a ‘U’ shaped setting of stones that often increase in height
towards the front of the tomb, thereby increasing the overall wedge shape of the monument (de Valera and Ó Nualláin 1961; O’Brien 1999; Ó Nualláin 1989). In many cases, the surrounding stone setting ends even with the front of the chamber, thus creating a flat façade and an overall ‘heel’ shape to the monument, while in other cases the stone setting extends beyond the front of the chamber, creating a small funnel-shaped forecourt. Other architectural devices that serve to focus attention on the front of the tomb include a slightly raised platform in front of the chamber, as at one of the Parknabinnia wedge tombs on Roughan Hill (Cl 67), and deliberately laid stone spreads, as revealed in front of the excavated Toormore wedge tomb in County Cork (O’Brien 1999). Some regional variation in wedge tomb appearance is due to differences in the type of local stone used in their construction. In Clare, particularly on the Burren, the local limestone slabs from which wedge tombs are built give them a characteristic box-like appearance. Although traces of cairns are present at many wedge tombs, it is not clear whether all these cairns originally covered the chambers and whether or not they are original features. Some of the larger wedge tombs, however, were definitely covered by cairns (O’Brien 1999). Radiocarbon, stratigraphic, and artefactual evidence suggest that wedge tombs were first built between 2540-2300 BC and it is unlikely that any were built after 1700 BC (O’Brien 2002; Schulting et al. 2008).

The majority of wedge tombs open toward the west or southwest and focus on points of the horizon where the sun sets in late autumn, winter or early spring (de Valera and Ó Nualláin 1961; 1982; Ó Nualláin 1989). O’Brien has pointed out that in many past societies the direction of the setting sun was associated with a ‘domain of the dead’ and suggests that wedge tombs may have ‘served as funnel-shaped openings to the otherworld, facing the descending or setting sun to emphasise the symbolic dualism of light/life and darkness/death’ (O’Brien 2002, 162). This interpretation is given strength by evidence for sun-related ritual practices, and ritual associations between the sun’s daily and yearly journeys and a belief in an ‘otherworld’ in Ireland from the Neolithic right up to the inception of Christianity (e.g. Waddell 2014). Of particular relevance may be mythological associations linking the death-god Donn to his dwelling, Tech Duinn, possibly a specific islet situated off the southwest of Ireland (O’Brien 2002, 165-166).

Wedge tombs do not appear to have been commonly decorated with rock art. However, there is incised rock art on one in Scrabhanard, Co. Cork (Shee Twohig 2004), a cupmarked stone was found in the cairn of a wedge tomb at Ballyedmonduff, Co. Dublin (Ó Riordáin and de Valèra 1952) and cupmarks have been recorded on several capstones (O’Brien 1999, 87; O’Sullivan and Downey 2010).

Although some excavated wedge tombs have yielded very little, both inhumed and cremated human remains have been found in others. The remains of adults outnumber the remains of children (Cooney and Grogan 1994). There are indications that specific attributes of an individual may have sometimes caused them to be interred in a wedge tomb. This may have been the case for the adult woman with a deformed leg whose headless body was buried in a small chamber at the rear of the Labbacallee wedge tomb, while the skull that appears to belong to the body was placed in the main chamber (Jones 2007; Leask and Price 1936). Drawing on the evidence from Labbacallee and other wedge tombs, O’Brien (1999, 209-10) has explored the possible links between witches or ‘hags’ and some wedge tombs. In other cases, the manner of death may have been a factor influencing inclusion in a wedge tomb. At the Largantea wedge tomb, the tip of a burnt flint point was found amongst cremated remains, suggesting that a cremated individual interred in the tomb may have died violently (Herring 1938; Schulting et al. 2008). Discrete cists and pits containing cremations are sometimes found within the chambers or outside the tombs. In some cases, these cists are later insertions, in others they seem to be contemporary with the initial use of the tomb.

Where little or no bone has been recovered, acidic soils may be to blame, but the very open and accessible chambers are probably also in part responsible for the low volume of finds in some excavated wedge tombs. In addition to human remains, other organic finds consist of animal bones and shellfish (Jones 2007; O’Brien 1999). Beaker pottery and barbed-and-tanged arrowheads, elements of the ‘Beaker package’, have been found in and around wedge tombs. Other pottery types associated with wedge tombs are Food Vessels, Early Bronze Age urns, and coarseware vessels. The later pottery types are sometimes in recognizably secondary contexts. Other stone artefacts include leaf shaped arrow heads, scrapers, axe heads, hammer stones, debitage, and a stone bead. Metal and metal-related finds include a copper ring, a fragment of a bronze blade, a bronze axe, cakes of raw copper, moulds for making a palstave, an axe, a spearhead, and fragments of crucibles (O’Brien et al. 1989; O’Brien 1999; Schulting et al. 2008).

Where excavations have revealed what appear to be undisturbed deposits within the chambers of wedge tombs, these deposits appear to be the result of repeated insertions of material into the chambers. In some cases the deposits are thick layers of soil with potsherds, bone, charcoal, stone artefacts and debitage mixed into the matrix, as at Cashelbane in County Tyrone where the chamber-fill was up to 60cm deep (Davies and Mullin 1940). A 6cm thick layer of bone and charcoal found within the Largantea wedge tomb in County Derry may have been the remains of a funeral pyre (Herring 1938; Schulting et al. 2008). In other cases, the deposits in wedge tombs are thinner but are also the result of successive activities and insertions, as at the Toormore and Altar wedge tombs in County Cork (O’Brien 1999). Excavations of these two wedge tombs produced sequences of pit features and thin depositional layers within the chambers that seem to be the result of various activities; these included fires being lit both within and
outside the chambers, and depositions of sea shells, fish bones and cetacean bones being made within the chambers. At Altar, these depositions continued into the Iron Age (O’Brien 1993; 1999).

Intact deposits have also been found in front of, and around, wedge tombs. The bronze axe and cakes of raw copper mentioned above were found in a neat arrangement placed adjacent to a low upright stone and covered with a distinct spread of stone slabs in front of the Toormore wedge tomb (O’Brien et al. 1989; O’Brien 1999). Both the Toormore and the nearby Altar wedge tombs also had concentrations of white quartz pebbles and small stones around them (O’Brien 1999). The hearths, scatters of potsherds, and bovine burial around the Lough Gur wedge tomb are further examples of deposits indicative of various activities being carried out in the immediate surrounds of wedge tombs (see below).

Wedge tombs are primarily, although not exclusively, a west of Ireland phenomenon. Until recently they were also thought to occur only in Ireland, but Bradley (2009) has now identified a few in the Outer Hebrides as well. Bradley has also suggested that wedge tombs are part of a larger group of contemporary monuments found in Scotland and Ireland which share a south to south-west orientation that seems to be linked to either the setting sun or perhaps movements of the moon, the occurrence of cup marks on some of the monuments, the use of quartz and sometimes other coloured stones, and associations with fire and sometimes burials. These possibly related monuments identified by Bradley are the stone circles of northeast Scotland, the Clava Cairns in the Inverness area, the four-posters of eastern and central Scotland, and some of the stone alignments on the west coast of Scotland and in northern Ireland (Bradley 2000; 2007b).

Where evidence for contemporary settlement exists, wedge tombs have been found to be located quite close to habitations. This is certainly the case on Roughan Hill in County Clare where some wedge tombs are located as close as 100 meters from Chalcolithic-Early Bronze Age habitation enclosures (Jones 1998; Jones et al. 2011). At Lough Gur in County Limerick another notable pattern is evident. Here the wedge tomb is sited on sloping ground not far from the south-eastern shore of the lake, with a view directed across the water towards contemporary settlement on the Knockadoon peninsula (Jones 2007). Interestingly, although the Lough Gur wedge tomb was certainly an important focus for local burial, seemingly contemporary child burials were also found associated with one of the habitation sites on Knockadoon. Striking contrasts in mortuary rituals between these two locations include the presence of both cremated and inhumed remains at the wedge tomb but only inhumed remains on the habitation site, and the dramatic contrast in ages of the people buried at the two locations. At the wedge tomb, adults predominated in a 2:1 ratio but the only adult buried on the habitation site was a woman with a foetus (Grogan and Eogan 1987; Jones 2007; Ó Riordáin and Ó h-Iceadha 1955).

The excavation of the Lough Gur wedge tomb also provided evidence for a range of activities in addition to burial. Quite strikingly, not only did the excavations reveal deposits within the chamber and from the area surrounding the tomb, but the stony fill of the tomb walls were also found to contain potsherds, animal bones and human bones (Ó Riordáin and Ó h-Iceadha 1955). This might reflect a conscious effort by the tomb-builders to incorporate materials of the dead and the living together into the very fabric of the tomb, and it resonates with ethnographically documented practices such as that of the Tzotzil Maya of southern Mexico who embed their own hair into cracks in the walls of their houses as a way of binding themselves to their houses (Beck 2007, 11). Outside of the tomb, scatters of potsherds, stone tools, human bone and animal bone may be in part the result of disturbance of the tomb’s contents, but the presence of hearths, child inhumations, and the burial of a complete bovine carcass adjacent to the tomb all point to structured ritual activities taking place around the tomb. Whether these rituals involved acts of magic or rituals that may have been directed at interacting with the spirits of the dead ancestors interred in the tomb is not clear, and both scenarios are certainly possible. In addition, a crucible from the portico at the front of the tomb and a fragment of a spearhead mould (probably Middle or Late Bronze Age) found outside of the tomb suggest metalworking magic (Jones 2007; Ó Riordáin and Ó h-Iceadha 1955).

The available evidence from Lough Gur and other wedge tombs suggests, therefore, that wedge tombs were sites of varied rituals carried out both within, in front of, and adjacent to the monuments. Rituals at wedge tombs appear to have focused on death and the dead (with an emphasis on adults over children), possibly attempts to commune with dead ancestors, possibly acts of magic including metalworking magic, and probably acts of votive offering. Wedge tombs were often sited near habitation sites. At Lough Gur, as already mentioned, the wedge tomb is located across the water from and in view of the settlement; on Roughan Hill the wedge tombs are even closer to the habitations, with many on slopes overlooking habitation enclosures.

Wedge tombs range from 2m to over 10m long. At the small end of the scale, there is a degree of ambiguity in classification, as some very small wedge tombs could alternatively be classified as cists (de Valera and Ó Nuallaíín 1961, 101-2), but examples such as the 2m long Eanty More wedge tomb in County Clare do have wedge shaped plans and elevations, and southwest to west orientations. In terms of distribution, in the north-west of the country, wedge tombs are dispersed across the landscape in a pattern not too different from the earlier Neolithic court tombs (Springs 2005; 2009), but this pattern does not hold true elsewhere. In the south-west of the country there are distinct concentrations of wedge tombs in counties Cork and Clare, where there are few or no earlier court tombs. The densest concentration of wedge tombs in the country occurs on the Burren in north-west Clare, and in particular on Roughan Hill on the south-east corner of the Burren (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Distribution of wedge tombs throughout Ireland. Note the unusually dense concentration of wedge tombs clustered on the Burren in Co. Clare as shown in the enlarged window and also the even denser concentration on Roughan Hill, located at the south-east corner of the Burren (Co. Clare is marked 'Cl.'). (from de Valera, R. and Ó Nualláin, S. 1982. Survey of the Megalithic Tombs of Ireland, Volume IV, Counties Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary, Dublin, The Stationary office)
Megalithism, Competition, and Ancestral Geographies

The foregoing summary still leaves some important questions unanswered. This paper attempts to address three of these. Why was there a re-emergence of megalith building around 2540-2300 BC? What is the significance of the variation in size amongst wedge tombs? And finally, what is the significance of the densest concentration of wedge tombs in the country, namely the concentration on Roughan Hill in Co. Clare?

The Re-emergence of Megalithism

The study of megalithic architecture has a long history stretching back to early work by antiquarians and from these early days the question of why people chose to build with massive stones has been pondered (cf. Borlase 1987; Ferguson 1872). Modern explanations have tended to focus on the collective effort that building a megalith demonstrates (Trigger 1990; Tainter 1977), the potential symbolic properties of stone such as its hardness and durability (Parker Pearson and Ramlisonina 1998), and possible associations between particular features and locations in the landscape where the stones originated (Scarre 2004). Interpretations have also highlighted the effectiveness of megaliths in conveying messages of identity, status and power; all of which are lent further effectiveness of megaliths in conveying messages of identity, status and power; all of which are lent further weight by the frequent association of remains of the dead with megaliths (DeMarrais et al. 1996; Vander Linden 2006b; Scarre 2004).

The wedge tombs are a final flourishing of megalith building in Ireland. The earliest wedge tombs were built around 1300 years after court tombs were built and around 600 years after the zenith of passage tomb building (Schulting et al. 2012; Sheridan 1985). As wedge tombs are primarily a western phenomenon, it is interesting that some western court tombs show particularly late use episodes (Schulting et al. 2012). The Parknabinnia court tomb on Roughan Hill is one of these western court tombs with an extended use, up to sometime between c. 3000-2600 BC. Whether or not there was a significant gap between the final use of the Parknabinnia court tomb and the construction of the wedge tombs that surround it is uncertain.

It is quite clear, however, that the Parknabinnia court tomb and other court tombs around the country were constructed much earlier in what seems to be an island-wide phase of construction c. 3750-3570 BC (Schulting et al. 2012). Wedge tombs are, therefore, a demonstration of a renewed focus on the construction of megalithic mortuary monuments after many centuries without such an emphasis. A pertinent question is, therefore, what were the particular circumstances around c. 2540-2300 BC that may have been related to this re-emergence?

In the past, explanations have oscillated between the arrival of newcomers, either in substantial (Shee Twohig 1990; ApSimon 1986; 1997; de Valera and Ó Nualláin 1961; 1982) or small numbers (Case 1969, 19; O’Brien 2012), and a purely indigenous development (Cooney and Grogan 1994, 84; Flanagan 1998, 91-4; Waddell 2010, 109). But O’Brien (2012) has also recently suggested that wedge tombs are best interpreted as having arisen from a combination of indigenous development and external influences.

Those that argue for an external stimulus normally point to northwestern France and the allées couvertes tombs, which they argue are architecturally similar, share features such as occasional double walling and antechambers, and occasionally face west (ApSimon 1986; 1997; de Valera and Ó Nualláin 1961; 1982). These arguments normally postulate a point of arrival in the peninsular southwest, because of the density of wedge tombs there and the region’s proximity to France, but Shee Twohig (1990, 57) has also put forward the Shannon estuary as a likely point of arrival.

Those in favour of an indigenous origin, argue that the Breton allées couvertes tombs are rectangular rather than wedge shaped and are not usually orientated to the west, and that no supporting evidence has been found in the excavation of any the south-western wedge tombs (Waddell 2010, 109). They look to court tombs as the source of inspiration for the wedge tomb builders, point out shared features with those predominantly northern tombs, such as jamb stones, and argue that the idea of the French connection has its roots in outdated culture-historical models (Waddell 2010, 109).

The idea of a French connection does arguably stem from a time when culture-historical models were in the ascendancy, when migration and invasion were the favoured mechanism to explain cultural change. However, similar arguments could be levelled against arguments for a purely insular origin; that they stem from a time when processual and post-processual models focused so entirely on internal developments that it was difficult to include any external impetus to considerations of cultural change (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005, 5).

A recent review and statistical modelling of the available dating suggests the practice of building wedge tombs may have arrived relatively suddenly in both the north and southwest (Schulting et al. 2008, 12), however, this does not necessarily support an indigenous or immigrant origin. Currently, there is not enough dating evidence to say whether the earlier wedge tombs are in the southwest, the Shannon basin, or the north. In the absence of this, the arguments have had to rely on architectural similarities and differences.

A potentially more rewarding avenue of inquiry into the origins of wedge tombs may be provided by a focus on the social contexts they arose in. As early as the work of Gordon Childe (1945, 18), it has been proposed that episodes of impressive mortuary monument construction can be correlated with periods of social change where status must be legitimated. More recently, this idea has been supported by studies of a wide variety of societies...
throughout the world (Kolb et al. 1994, 156; Parker Pearson 1999, 86-7; Earle 2004). The types of social situations now recognised as likely to give rise to monumental mortuary architecture have also now been expanded to include more stable social situations, but ones that still require that status must be achieved or demonstrated to others (Wason 1994). It seems that when mortuary rituals are emphasised, it is often because the ancestors are called upon to legitimise social statuses that may be open to challenge, whether the statuses open to challenge are traditional or newly conceived statuses. This may occur in contexts of changing ideologies, changes in the status system, or both (Wason 1994). 

A dramatic re-emergence of monumental mortuary ritual, such as the appearance of wedge tombs in the Chalcolithic, may well be explained in terms of a context of unstable or challenged social statuses. The expansion of Beaker exchange networks and the advent of metallurgy in the Chalcolithic are both potentially very disruptive events that could have precipitated challenges to existing social systems.

The significance of the later 3rd millennium BC as an era of increased mobility within new social networks (seemingly facilitated by exogamous marriage practices), technology transfer, and changing social structures has been highlighted by much recent research (Brodie 1997; Vander Linden 2004; 2006b; 2007b; 2006a; 2007a; Desideri 2008; Desideri and Besse 2010). Also relevant are studies of aDNA (Ricaut et al. 2012; Brotherton et al. 2013) and dental variability (Desideri and Besse 2010) which have identified considerable demographic change during the Chalcolithic of Western and Central Europe. These changes are generally characterized as Beaker associated population movements from Iberia into France and Central Europe. Additionally, isotope studies of Beaker burials from Central Europe have identified high levels of movement between neighbouring regions (Grupe et al. 1997; Price et al. 2004).

This period of change, however, should not automatically be assumed to be part of a uni-directional evolutionary trajectory towards more hierarchical social structures as has sometimes been argued in the past (cf. Harrison 1980, 10). For example, a transitory period of ‘emulatory competition’ among proto-Beaker groups in Bohemia and Moravia does not seem to have been followed by a more stratified social organisation (Brodie 1997, 309-10), and in eastern and southern France the arrival of metallurgy and the Beaker phenomenon does not seem to have coincided with a climax of social competition or with the onset of a process leading to more complex societies in the region (Pétrequin and Pétrequin 1988, 262; Vander Linden 2006a, 325-6).

Instead of experiencing an inevitable march towards greater complexity, therefore, societies across Europe at this time may have been experiencing the advent of new social statuses that may have challenged the status quo but also which may have been open to challenge and interpretation as well. For instance, since the mid-nineties it has been argued that the Beaker phenomenon and its associated ‘package’ of artefacts was associated with a particular ‘ethos,’ and that connected with the core of this ideology was a figurative warrior/archer ‘persona’ and possibly other recognizable personae including various craft practitioner identities such as leather-workers (Case 1995, 55, 60; Brodie 1997, 298-311; Turek 2004). Similarly, in the Czech Republic, Vander-Linden (2006b, 325-6) has argued that some ‘prestige burials’ may be signalling individuals of influence or reputation.

In Ireland, the distribution of Beaker pottery and early metal artefacts in the Chalcolithic suggests that this new ethos and its associated personae/statuses did reach western Ireland and so we should expect that some response was triggered. One aspect of that response in western Ireland appears to have been the construction of wedge tombs. In the case of wedge tombs, the fact that the re-emergence of prominent mortuary ritual took the form of megaliths suggests that groups who built wedge tombs may well have been harking back to Neolithic social structures and ideologies, whether real or imagined, to legitimise their claims to status (cf. O’Brien 2012).

Looking at the Burren and County Clare, a region with numerous wedge tombs, the small number of recognized Neolithic mortuary monuments in the same region and the uniformly small scale of many of these monuments, suggests a Neolithic context of segmentary societies at relatively low population densities. For example, although the ruined nature of many of the seven definite and possible court tombs in the county precludes exact measurement, they seem to typically measure between eight and nine metres long from the front of their court areas to the rear of their chambers. The obvious exception, although not dramatically larger, is the example at Doolin (Cl. 134) which measures a little under ten metres (de Valera and Ó Nualláin 1961; Jones 2003; Jones and Walsh 1996). Furthermore, the dates we have so far for Neolithic monuments in the region indicate that they were constructed in either the early 4th millennium BC (Poul nabronbe portal tomb), the early/mid 4th millennium (Parknabinnia court tomb), or in the mid 4th millennium BC (Poulawack Linkardstown cist) (Schulting et al. 2012, Fig 10, 33).

Interestingly, just as periods of social upheaval and the elaboration of mortuary rituals are correlated, periods of political stability seem to be correlated with a dramatic lessening of emphasis on mortuary ritual (Wason 1994). While the Neolithic monuments on the Burren were used for many centuries, and one of their uses was probably to legitimise social statuses, it seems that between the mid 4th millennium BC and c. 2540-2300 BC when the first wedge tomb on the Burren was probably built, social structures and ideologies in the region may have been sufficiently stable that the construction of new monuments was not necessary.

During the Chalcolithic, the social landscape of Ireland was certainly diverse and O’Brien (2004, 568-73) has
argued for contemporary segmentary and more hierarchical societies occupying different regions. Most wedge tombs are probably best interpreted as ritual foci for small-scale segmentary societies (cf. O’Brien 1999; 2004) and so these types of societies seem to have prevailed in most regions where wedge tombs occur. In the Late Chalcolithic (c. 2160–2000 BC), as defined by O’Brien (2012), the appearance of the ‘single burial tradition’ in cists and pits in the east and north of the country is generally interpreted as evidence for emergent ranking in those areas where it occurs and it is also seen as emerging in a context of contact with Beaker burial traditions across the Irish Sea to the east (Cooney and Grogan 1994; Mount 1997; Waddell 2010; O’Brien 2012). This burial tradition does not occur in County Clare, but quite interestingly, the cairn of the Poulawack Linkardstown cist on the Burren is re-used at this time (c. 2140-1682 BC) as a burial cairn for several cist burials of multiple individuals, one of which was accompanied by a single sherd of Beaker pottery (Hencken 1935; Brindley and Lanting 1991).

Unfortunately, without yet having excavated wedge tombs on the Burren, we cannot say whether these burials at Poulawack are exactly contemporary with the tombs on the Burren or perhaps slightly later. The single radiocarbon date from a wedge tomb construction of the surrounding wedge tombs or perhaps at Poulawack are exactly contemporary with the tombs on the Burren, we cannot say whether these burials on the Burren are re-used at this time (c. 2140-1682 BC) as a burial cairn for several cist burials of multiple individuals, one of which was accompanied by a single sherd of Beaker pottery (Hencken 1935; Brindley and Lanting 1991).

Variation in the Size of Wedge Tombs

Most wedge tombs are fairly modest-sized constructions. Working on the Mizen Peninsula in County Cork, O’Brien concluded that ‘... these small tombs were probably built over a period of weeks rather than months. Their construction was probably less laborious than the breaking in of a new cultivation field or the operation of a single Mount Gabriel-type copper mine’ (O’Brien 1999, 255). This is also true for many of the wedge tombs further north in County Clare which do not seem to be built on a scale that would require the efforts of a huge number of people and which seem, therefore, to be monuments that were associated with fairly modest-sized corporate groups.

There is, however, quite a large variation in the size of wedge tombs. As shown in Figure 2, the external length of the longest chamber side on wedge tombs throughout County Clare ranges from the very small (2.0m long) to the very large (7.2m long). The range on Roughan Hill is from 2.2m long to 4.9m long. Some of the Clare wedge tombs (approximately 40% in the 1961 Megalithic Survey) have outer rows of walling that both widen and lengthen the monument. In many cases, this outer walling can substantially increase the monumentality of the megalith (Figure 3).

The main source for measurement data on the wedge tombs used in the present study and shown in Figure 2 was de Valera and Ó Nualláin’s (1961) survey of the megalithic tombs of County Clare. From this survey, only those with the definitive label ‘Wedge-shaped Gallery Grave’ (n=91) were considered. Those labelled ‘Wedge-shaped Gallery Grave (?)’ (n=9) and those labelled ‘Unclassified’ but described as probable wedge tombs (n=5) were not considered. Not only is there a degree of uncertainty in these later two groups, but the uncertainty was a result of the ruined state of these megaliths, thus making accurate measurement impossible anyway. Of the 91 definite wedge tombs in the 1961 Megalithic Survey, seven were still too ruined to obtain an accurate measurement (or in one case recently buried).

Additional wedge tombs and possible wedge tombs have also been recorded subsequent to the 1961 Megalithic Survey, and the total count of definite and possible wedge tombs in County Clare now stands at around 150 (this count includes many ruined examples which have a degree of uncertainty in their classification, including some considered uncertain by de Valera and Ó Nualláin). Of these newer additions to the record, most have not been published. Five which have been published are included in the present study (Megalithic Survey no.’s Cl. 131, 141, 152, & 155 and SMR no. CL 016-164) (Jones 2000; Jones and Walsh 1996; Ryan 1981). This brings the total count of clearly identifiable wedge tombs which are intact enough to accurately measure, and for which a published plan exists, to eighty-nine. These are the wedge tombs included in the present study and they probably represent about 59% of the total wedge tombs in County Clare.

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1Range as based on statistically most likely dates from all phase 2 graves (4, 5, and 6/6a) as presented in Brindley and Lanting 1991.

2Where dates are specified to be single radiocarbon dates, they are given at 2σ.
The different sizes of the wedge tombs can be interpreted as reflecting differing expenditures of energy and ultimately probably differing numbers of participants in their construction (Figure 4 – Figure 7). Although other scenarios could be postulated to explain this variation in size, the scenario of individuals and/or groups competing for social status through the construction of wedge tombs and through the enactment of rituals within and around them, fits the available evidence well. As discussed above, the re-emergence of megalithic architecture may have been an attempt to evoke an archaic Neolithic society where status structures were more stable, but the variation in wedge tomb size suggests that wedge tombs may have been built in a new context of status competition between individuals or groups where status had to be achieved and demonstrated.

Related to the observation that mortuary rituals are often emphasised at times when social statuses are open to challenge, Adams and Kusumawati (2010) have also shown that in various ethnographically documented societies in island Southeast Asia, monumental tombs are built in a context of individual and group competition. Adams and Kusumawati (2010) focus in particular on West Sumba in Indonesia where megalithic tombs continue to be built today and their study offers many useful insights relevant to the interpretation of wedge tombs.

The utility of ethnographic analogy in helping to explain archaeologically known societies has been a subject of debate for some time. Early processualists criticised the use of any analogy that could not be rigorously scientifically tested (Binford 1967), a train of argument that has led some writers to denounce the usefulness of any analogical reasoning (Gould and Watson 1982). Others, notably Hodder (1982, 13), have tried to seek out the causal relationships behind the variables in analogies and thereby establish what they term ‘relational analogies’. However, as early as the 1950s Childe (1958) recognized the main value of such comparisons was to broaden our interpretative horizons and it is in this vein, following other remote but useful analogies (cf. Dickins 1996), that the present study proceeds.

One of the most important insights provided by the Adams and Kusumawati (2010) study is that while there are various motivating forces leading to monumental tomb construction in West Sumba, including establishing long-lasting physical links to specific locales, maintaining relationships with dead ancestors, and fostering group solidarity amongst the living, the most important factor motivating people to build megalithic tombs is the acquisition of power. Building large stone tombs in West Sumba results in the acquisition of power, both by the individual in charge of the building and by
Figure 3. Clare wedge tombs with outer walling. Outer walling, where present, can significantly increase the overall length of wedge tombs but as it is constructed from smaller slabs, it would not have required as much cooperative labour and was not, therefore, used in the present study as a measure of the length of wedge tombs. (adapted from de Valera, R. and Ó Nualláin, S. 1961. Survey of the Megalithic Tombs of Ireland, Volume I, Co. Clare, Dublin, The Stationary office)
Figure 4. Eanty More (Cl. 40), a small wedge tomb in the central Burren, County Clare. The wedge-shaped plan and westerly orientation of this very small wedge tomb are clear in the plan, while the position of the rear capstone in the section drawing and the view of the south side stone in the photo show the monument’s wedge shaped profile. (adapted from de Valera, R. and Ó Nualláin, S. 1961. Survey of the Megalithic Tombs of Ireland, Volume I, Co. Clare, Dublin, The Stationary office)
Figure 5. Parknahinnia (Cl 69), a medium wedge tomb on Roughan Hill, south-east Burren, County Clare.
Figure 6. Plan of Fanygalvan (CL 33), a large wedge tomb in the south-central Burren, County Clare. (adapted from de Valera, R. and Ó Nualláin, S. 1961. Survey of the Megalithic Tombs of Ireland, Volume I, Co. Clare, Dublin, The Stationary office)
Figure 7. Photo of Fanygalvan (CI 33), a large wedge tomb in the south-central Burren, County Clare

As archaeologists, we often struggle to understand the 'meaning of monuments' in their proper historic and cultural context; in the ethnographic study of West Sumba, the following responses were elicited when informants were asked what meaning the size of a tomb conveyed:

When asked about what they thought when they saw a large tomb, informants indicated that (1) they believed the person who built it must be wealthy and socially prominent and (2) the person's clan must be prominent.

(Adams and Kusumawati 2010, 25)

These interpretations may not be correct in all societies and Parker-Pearson’s (1999, 103-4) example of the overly monumental and lavish graves of gypsies and showmen can be cited as an example of low status members of modern society building more monumental graves than those with higher status, but the case of the gypsies and showmen can probably be accounted for by the fact that within their sub-culture, lavish burial monuments do correlate with status. Furthermore, lavish burial monuments amongst the gypsies and showmen may also reflect a more fluid status context within their sub-culture than that which prevails in mainstream society.

In general, when archaeologists are faced with the task of trying to assign meaning to monuments, interpretations which highlight the role of monuments as broadcasters of messages of social accomplishment, power, and sometimes centralized organization do seem to fit the evidence well (Trigger 1990; Earle 2004, 156). It seems more likely, therefore, that the variation in wedge tomb size would probably have elicited responses similar to those of the West Sumba informants than otherwise if we were able to ask the Chalcolithic inhabitants of the Burren what wedge tombs ‘meant’. And while archaeologists should always be aware that ethnographic examples should not be treated as timeless and universal behaviours (cf. Parker Pearson 1999, 84), it remains true that the ethnographic record does provide us with models of human behaviour that are based on documented patterns.

**The Significance of Roughan Hill**

Roughan Hill is located at the south-east corner of the upland limestone region known as the Burren and at the topographical and ecological divide between the limestone uplands of the Burren to the north and the lowland watershed of the River Fergus to the south. Roughan Hill is not an isolated hill but is actually the southernmost tip of the south-west to north-east trending ridge that forms the eastern edge of the Burren. Although the soils on the hill are thin rendzinas (Finch 1971) and areas of bare bedrock are exposed in places, the soil cover is generally better than in many parts of the upland Burren. The hill rises to a little over 130m and has a concentration of prehistoric activity on its gentle north slope. The south slope is a steep drop to the River Fergus, approximately 100m below the crest of the hill.

The remarkable concentration of archaeology on Roughan Hill seems to be due in part to the location of
Roughan Hill at this ecological divide (Cooney 2000). The two ecological zones of the Burren uplands and the Fergus lowlands (including nearby Lough Inchiquin) are quite complementary. Roughan Hill provides well-drained pastures that do not get water-logged in the winter; Lough Inchiquin and the River Fergus provide abundant fresh water, summer meadows when the level of the river drops, fish and birds. The River Fergus is also navigable in small boats and it provides an easy transport route starting at the base of Roughan Hill in the north, flowing east and then south through the central lowlands of County Clare, and finally meeting the Shannon estuary, the mouth of the largest river in Ireland.

There is a long history of activity on Roughan Hill. The first dated evidence of activity is the Cl 153 court tomb which appears to have been built in the early/mid 4th millennium BC (Jones 2003; Schulting et al. 2012). The construction of this monument probably coincides with an initial tree clearance episode on the Burren documented in various pollen cores (Crabtree 1982; Jeličić and O’Connell 1992; O’Connell and Molloy 2001; Watts 1984), and probably also with a tree clearance episode adjacent to Lough Inchiquin (Lamb and Thompson 2005). Other early activity in the area is evidenced by a portal tomb (and another early megalith) at Ballycashreen immediately south of Roughan Hill overlooking the Fergus and another portal tomb in the centre of the Burren at Poulnabrone 6km to the northwest. Another very ruined monument on Roughan Hill (Cl 154) may be another court tomb, while 3.5km to the west are two more court tombs at Ballyganner/ Lemaneh. To date, no habitations dating to this period have been discovered in the area but the siting of the Cl. 153 court tomb very close to what is the best spring on the hill today suggests that there is probably a close spatial relationship between the early megaliths and contemporary habitations.

Five other unclassified megaliths and eleven large/ medium cairns on the hill are of uncertain age, but moving into the Chalcolithic there are at least fifteen wedge tombs (Figures 8 and 9). This is the densest concentration of wedge tombs anywhere. There are also four habitation enclosures with associated field walls dating to the Chalcolithic–Early Bronze Age (Jones et al. 2011; Jones 1998) (Figure 10). It seems significant that this cluster of Chalcolithic–Early Bronze Age monuments and habitation (and other undated monuments) is focused on the same hill that appears to have been prominent in the local landscape from the start of the earliest Neolithic settlement in the area. Similarly, two other notable concentrations of wedge tombs occur around the other early megaliths on the Burren, a concentration in the Ballyganner/Lemaneh area, and a concentration around the Poulnabrone Depression. Also significant to the present discussion is the occurrence of Beaker pottery in one of the habitation enclosures (RH1) on Roughan Hill.

The idea that the forms and distributions of various types of megalithic tombs might be related to the structure and dynamics of the societies that built them has been debated in the archaeological literature for some time now. Dispersed patterns of megaliths have been interpreted as being the result of ‘local’ autonomous burial groups that could be equated with particular lineages or corporate groups within a segmentary social structure (Renfrew 1976; Darvill 1979; ApSimon 1986; Bergh 1987), while some pairs of megalithic tombs have been viewed in a context of communities organized into two groups with different ancestries (Mallory and Hartwell 1997, 12; Cooney 2000, 112). Similarly, complex arrangements of multiple courts and chambers within individual court tombs have been interpreted as reflecting communities built around multiple descent groups (Powell 2005).

Looking at wedge tombs throughout Ireland, their overall dispersed distribution can be plausibly tied to an overall dispersed pattern of settlement in many areas where they occur and probably also to a segmentary form of social organization (cf. ApSimon 1986; O’Brien 1999). On the Mizen Peninsula in the southwest, where wedge tomb sitting has been studied more closely by O’Brien (1999), the dispersed distribution of wedge tombs has also been shown to correlate with optimum locations for settlement (defined by access to good soils, marine resources and copper resources). There are, however, many possible spatial relationships between megalithic tombs and habitation sites depending on whether the megalithic tombs are dispersed or agglomerated and whether the habitation sites are dispersed or agglomerated (Bradley 2007b; Renfrew 1981).

Given the agglomeration of wedge tombs on Roughan Hill in proximity to habitation enclosures, it might be expected that particular wedge tombs were associated with particular habitation enclosures, but the survey of the hill provided no such definitive correlations. Instead, only the general pattern of wedge tombs being located in proximity to the habitation enclosures and typically, but not exclusively, sited above the enclosures on hillslopes so that they have a ‘directed visibility’ over the habitation enclosures can be noted.

A further surprising aspect of the relationship between the wedge tombs and the habitation enclosures on Roughan Hill is that there are eleven wedge tombs but only four habitation enclosures within the survey area (and another four wedge tombs just beyond the bounds of the survey). This is a significant agglomeration of wedge tombs on Roughan Hill seemingly without a corresponding agglomeration of habitation sites. It may be, of course, that four habitation enclosures in close proximity is a significant agglomeration, but it will take further survey work on the Burren to determine if that is the case. It may also be the case that additional habitation enclosures are located not too far beyond the bounds of the survey area. Informal walk-overs beyond the survey bounds indicate that this is probably not the case immediately outside of the survey area to the west, south, and east, but another habitation focus may be located immediately north of the survey area. In any case, whether or not four habitation enclosures is a significant agglomeration and whether or not more habitation enclosures await disco-
Figure 8. Plans of Roughan Hill wedge tombs. Fourteen of the fifteen Roughan Hill wedge tombs are shown in Figures 8 and 9. The fifteenth (CL 016-164) was measured and sketched in the field, but a finalized plan is not available. Cl. 60 is shown here, but was not included in the length analysis due to its ruined condition. (adapted from de Valera, R. and Ó Nualláin, S. 1961 and Jones, C. and Walsh, P. 1996)
Figure 9. Plans of Roughan Hill wedge tombs continued.
(adapted from de Valera, R. and Ó Nualláin, S. 1961 and Jones, C. and Walsh, P. 1996)
Figure 10. Roughan Hill. Sites RH1, 2, 5 & 7 are Chalcolithic/Early Bronze Age habitation enclosures. They are set within contemporary fields defined by collapsed walls termed ‘mound walls’. See Jones (1998) and Jones, Carey and Hennigar (2011) for further explanation.
very in the immediate surroundings, the concentration of wedge tombs on Roughan Hill remains the densest concentration of wedge tombs in the country. It is, therefore, a very significant and anomalous concentration.

The imbalance between ritual monuments and habitation sites on Roughan Hill becomes even more pronounced when the cairns on Roughan Hill are taken into account as there are seven large/medium cairns within the survey area and another four just beyond its bounds. Numerous small cairns were also located within the survey area but it is not certain that all may have had a ritual function. As with the wedge tombs, it is difficult to link specific cairns on Roughan Hill to specific habitation enclosures. The larger cairns on the ridge tops appear to be sited with the wider landscape beyond Roughan Hill, rather than their immediate surroundings, in mind and this is also, of course, quite possibly significant when assessing the regional significance of Roughan Hill. The fact that wedge tombs outnumber habitation enclosures within the survey area by a factor of nearly 3:1 is certainly striking. Even more striking, if the seven large/medium cairns within the survey area are included, as well as three of the unclassified megaliths within the survey area (this excludes one of the unclassified megaliths that may be an earlier court tomb (Cl 154) and the definitely earlier Cl 153 court tomb), then ritual/burial monuments within the survey area outnumber habitation enclosures by a factor just over of 5:1 (this calculation also excludes small cairns, some of which may also be burial monuments).

This clustering of wedge tombs and cairns on Roughan Hill opens up the possibility that Roughan Hill was of ritual and kinship significance to a wider community than those who lived on the hill. Anthropological and historical studies worldwide have revealed the complexity of related factors according to which communities are constructed and societies are structured, but in this complexity, three factors: kinship, residence locale, and institutions of affiliation, are particularly prominent (Johnston and Earle 1987; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). Close links between habitations, ritual structures, burials, and ideas of ancestry, identity and place are well recognized in European prehistory (Brück 2004, 321; Hodder 1984; 1990; Bradley 2013; Earle 2004, 156) and the very long sequence on Roughan Hill combined with the clustering of ritual monuments may be evidence that by the Chalcolithic, Roughan Hill was an ‘ancestral home’ or mythologized place of origin.

Structurally cohesive groups can be ‘nested’, with increasingly smaller cohesive groups occurring inside larger ones, where ‘primary social groups’ are elements of larger social formations rather than unique entities (Johnson 1982; Moody and White 2003, 12). The pattern of clustered wedge tombs set within a wider pattern of dispersed wedge tombs suggests just such a ‘nested’ social structure with the individual wedge tombs perhaps belonging to disparate sub-groups united at a higher level of identity by their common ties to specific locales, particularly to Roughan Hill. It is also worth noting the apparent bi-modal distribution of wedge tomb size in County Clare (Figure 2). This may well be the result of a nested social structure producing work-groups of two, roughly standardized, sizes.

Various landscapes and locations in prehistoric Europe that seem to have been endowed with mythological or social significance by the groups who lived in them or moved through them seem to have been distinguished by conspicuous natural features (Bradley 2000; 2002; Tilley 1994; Scarre 2004, 146-50). Roughan Hill is not a dramatic topographic feature but it is a distinct feature in the landscape when it is approached from the south along the River Fergus, which as discussed above, is a natural routeway leading all the way from the Shannon estuary in the south to the start of the Fergus at the base of Roughan Hill. Approaching from this direction, Roughan Hill rises steeply above the River Fergus, its craggy slope clearly distinguished from the lower-lying alluvium and drift-covered valley floor. This distinct appearance and significant location combined with the long cultural history of the hill may have been enough to elevate Roughan Hill to a location of regional significance.

As described above, there is a pattern of wedge tombs clustering around older Neolithic monuments at Roughan Hill, Ballyganner/Leamaneh, and the Poulnabrone Depression. But there is also a thinner spread of wedge tombs away from those earlier monuments that is suggestive of expanding populations. If wedge tombs were the ritual foci of some sort of corporate groups bound together by a concept of common ancestry, one scenario might be that as the population grew and dispersed, the act of building wedge tombs on the old ancestral ground of Roughan Hill was a way of maintaining links with both the ancestral geography and with more widespread relations. A descent group of this sort, that is one not defined by a common current residence but instead bound together by a concept of common ancestry or common ancestral residence (whether real or imagined), would be something akin to what Service (1962) defined as a ‘clan’. Because clans, as defined by Service, are not based on a common current residence locale they need something else to bind them together and Service states that ceremonies seem to be particularly important in this regard. It could be added that ceremonies focused on dead ancestors, such as those that seem to have been associated with wedge tombs, would be particularly appropriate. Locating those rituals in a place of origin would also be particularly appropriate and this brings us to anthropological discussions of ‘house societies’, a concept first formulated by Lévi-Strauss and subsequently elaborated upon by others (Beck 2007; Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995; Joyce and Gillespie 2000).

The concept of a ‘house society’ was first defined by Lévi-Strauss in relation to Medieval Europe, but societies with similar structuring principles have also been identified in the Americas, Africa, and Asia (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). The analytical benefit house based approaches have over more traditional anthropological analyses that use kinship based categories lies in the fact that house based
analyses are rooted in performance or practice based approaches, as opposed to reflecting some static essence (Gillespie 2007, 34). In studies of European prehistory, models arguing for the importance of houses in the structuring of prehistoric societies (some using the Levi-Strauss ‘house society’ concept, others not) have not only been very important in Neolithic studies (cf. Bradley 2007a; Hodder 1990; Whittle 2012; Smyth 2010), but have also figured in analyses of later periods as well (cf. Bradley 2013). As the name suggests, fundamental to the structuring of house societies is the concept of the ‘social house’ as an enduring entity that binds people together. In these societies, in other words, houses are not just buildings. They are also mechanisms for uniting people in kinship and are key to the formation of identity. They are also mechanisms for acquiring, holding on to, and transmitting property – all important in the maintenance of identity over time.

The West Sumba ethnographic example introduced earlier is one such ‘house society’ which may offer some analogies relevant to the present study as the people of West Sumba also build megalithic mortuary monuments. Looking in more detail at the example of West Sumba (Adams and Kusumawati 2010), we can get a picture of how the population of this particular non-residential clan-based ‘house society’ is spatially related to ancestral villages and ancestral megalithic tombs and how this might give us insights into the spatial patterning of wedge tombs in the Irish Chalcolithic. In West Sumba, society is organized according to clans whose members live in about two hundred separate houses. These houses are not, however, all clustered together. Instead, each clan has a small number of ancestral houses (typically four), each of which is associated with approximately fifty branch houses. While all the ancestral houses are located in the main clan ancestral village, most people live in small household clusters of branch houses which can be several kilometres away from the ancestral village. Significantly, the megalithic tombs housing the dead clan members are not located adjacent to the branch houses, but are instead located in the ancestral village, which is also the setting for large clan feasts. Using this as an analogy, we might envisage a similar situation pertaining between Roughan Hill and areas farther afield with ancestral residences and important tombs clustered on Roughan Hill while most of the population lived elsewhere, perhaps adjacent to the more dispersed wedge tombs. In this scenario, a more dispersed population would be tied to the ancient focal locale of Roughan Hill through descent and tradition but might only converge on the hill periodically to witness or participate in the erection of a new wedge tomb or perhaps for some other ceremonial occasion.

Of importance to the present study are the observations that known examples of social houses have been shown to incorporate households, clans, villages, and even regional polities, and that amongst ‘the most durable and power-laden materializations of a house’ are not only its architecture and heirlooms, but also ‘the bones and bodies of its ancestors; its origin narratives, along with those places in the landscape that figure prominently therein’ (Beck 2007, 5-6). On Roughan Hill, we can see a very close spatial relationship between the curated remains of ancestors in wedge tombs and a small cluster of habitations. The disparity between the small number of residences on the hill and the large number of wedge tombs and other ritual monuments, as well as the wider more dispersed spread of wedge tombs farther afield is not an exact fit with the West Sumba situation, but it does resonate.

**Conclusion**

In house societies, kinship is based not just on lineage but also on ties to land and locality. Overall, the scale and spatial patterning of most wedge tombs suggests that they are the products of the efforts of fairly small-scale corporate groups. In most areas, the dispersed distribution of wedge tombs seems to coincide with a dispersed pattern of habitation and probably a very localized sense of identity. The biggest exceptions to this are Roughan Hill which has the densest concentration of wedge tombs in the country and the nearby areas of Ballyganner/Lemaneh, 3.5km to the west, and the area around the Poulnabrone Depression, 6km to the north-west, which also have noteworthy concentrations of wedge tombs. So far we only have a more complete picture of the inhabited landscape at Roughan Hill, but the evidence there suggests an imbalance between the high number of wedge tombs and other ritual monuments on the hill and the relatively low number of contemporary habitation sites. This suggests that Roughan Hill, and to a lesser extent the Ballyganner/Lemaneh and Poulnabrone areas, had a ritual/identity significance to a more widely dispersed population.

When the archaeology of Roughan Hill is viewed through the lens of ethnographically known societies, it suggests the possibility that the significance of Roughan Hill may well be have been due to its having been viewed as an ancestral locale to which a more dispersed population was tied through tradition, kinship, and ritual. The scenario in which the clustered wedge tombs on Roughan Hill may have been the ritual foci of dispersed clan or ‘house’ groups has much to recommend it. The evidence is suggestive of a society where it was important to appeal to the authority of the past, both through the use of megalithic architecture and also through the focus on a location with a very long history. The Chalcolithic was not, however, the Neolithic. It was a time of increased mobility, far-reaching exchange networks, and new technology. The variation in the size of wedge tombs and the re-emergence of megalithic mortuary ritual after a long period of non-megalithic burial ritual suggests that the groups/clans that built the wedge tombs probably existed in a new context of competition where social status was not fixed. This new Chalcolithic society seems to have been one where the ability to mobilize resources and labour, and to advertise that ability was critical.

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