

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE BLACK MOUNTAIN

By Sinead McCartan

"The scenery in the neighbourhood of Belfast is agreeably picturesque. The westernside is skirted by a chain of mountains, one of these, the Black Mountain, seems to overhang the town".

In Cathal O'Bryne's book "As I roved out", he uses this quotation from a Guide to Belfast written in the middle of the nineteenth century to describe how the Black Mountain and the other Belfast hills dominate the skyline of the west and north of Belfast. There is little doubt that the Black Mountain has played an important role in the lives of the people who lived on or near it. This importance has been both economic and social, varying in emphasis at different times. This paper will provide a general outline of the archaeological evidence for the use of the mountain from the prehistoric period to the early historic period. It will illustrate that since nearly 7,000 years ago people were living on and near the Black Mountain exploiting the natural resources for food, the abundant supplies of flint in the chalk outcrops for the manufacture of tools and weapons, and the defensive position that the Black Mountain affords for settlement.

During the ice age the north of Ireland was covered by ice a half a mile thick. By about 12,000 years ago the climate was getting warmer and the ice had started to melt. Animals and plants migrated over narrow bridges of land which still connected Ireland to Britain. About 10,000 years ago Ireland was cut off from Britain by the newly formed Irish Sea. Dense forests of birch, oak, hazel and elm and Scots pine had already spread over most of Ireland and red deer, wild pig and wolves inhabited the forests. The Black Mountain at this time looked very different. Most of the lower slopes were covered by dense woodland with only the summit and the immediate areas surrounding the streams and rivers free of tree cover. The Black Mountain streams were filled with ice melt-water, flowed into a much larger Blackstaff which probably sustained abundant populations of fresh water fish.

Against this environmental setting the first people arrived in Ireland. The Middle Stone Age or Mesolithic people were hunter-gatherers who depended on the lands natural resources for their food. They lived mainly along the coast, rivers and lakes, hunting wild animals in the nearby forests and gathering fruits, nuts and berries. Stone tools, mainly made from flint, provide much of the evidence for these first settlers. These tools, primarily made from flint, were essential for everyday activities such as hunting, butchering meat, processing vegetables, preparing animal skins for clothing and shelter. Evidence for Middle Stone Age hunter-gatherers in the Belfast area is fragmented; some material has been found at the Ormeau Bridge, the Kinnegar and Sydenham. A single flint tool, most probably of this period, was found at Ballygomartin which indicates that 7,000 years ago people were present in the west of the city where the natural resources of the mountain and its surrounding area provided them with a means to existence.

Around 6,000 years ago farming was introduced which dramatically changed the way people lived. The New Stone Age or Neolithic farmers grew crops of wheat and barley, and kept livestock including domesticated sheep, goats, cattle and pigs. They used stone axes to clear spaces in the forests for fields, grazing grounds and farms. One stone axe has been found on the mountain, others at Ballygomartin and Ardoyne. These are just a few of the numerous axes from the Belfast area, the best known being the hoard of 19 which were found on the Malone Road in Belfast. At least two of the Black Mountain axes are made from a stone called porcellanite which was exploited on a large scale during the Neolithic period at Tievebullisagh and Rathlin Island, County Antrim. Axes of porcellanite have been found throughout Ireland and in parts of Northern Scotland, the Isle of Man, Wales and even in the south of England. This large scale exploitation and movement of axes suggests that organised transportation of Irish axes for either trade or social purposes such as gifts or symbols of power. It is possible that the Black Mountain, together with the other Belfast hills were used by Neolithic traders as a routeway to transport material such as stone axes into the Lagan valley and beyond.

George Benn writing 'The History of the town of Belfast' in 1823 describes a cairn (mound of stones) on the Black Mountain called the Giants Grave. Several people remarked to Benn that 'the place resembled a large grave with a headstone, which is still to be seen marked with several strokes both perpendicular and horizontal'. While it is difficult to identify the type of monument Benn had described, it is possible to suggest that the monument was a megalithic tomb built by Neolithic farmers to bury their dead. Today, there is no evidence of the stones, although megalithic tombs have been found on Colin Mountain, Wolfhill, Ligoniel and Altgarron. The monuments found at the latter two sites are known locally as the 'Giants Grave'.

Possibly the most significant evidence for neolithic activity on the Black Mountain was uncovered by an antiquarian, Mr Robert Bell earlier this century. During Mr Bell's investigations hundreds of Neolithic stone artefacts were uncovered including flint axes, hammerstones and a fragment of red deer antler. No evidence for houses or food remains were discovered which might have suggested that Neolithic people had settled on the Mountain. This led Bell and later investigators to suggest that the site was industrial, exploiting the suppliers of flint to make tools and weapons. The only other known site of its kind in Ireland is at Ballygally Head, County Antrim. Similar sites are known in the south of England, for example at Grimes Grave in Norfolk and Harrow Hill, Sussex.

Around 4,000 years ago metal was introduced into Ireland from Britain and the continent. Initially copper was used, but with the addition of tin which was possibly imported, a much stronger metal could be manufactured, bronze. At first metal was very precious and was probably owned and used by people of great wealth and power. There is limited evidence for Bronze Age activity on the Black Mountain. In Mary Lowry's book 'The Story of Belfast and its Surroundings' she states that in 1827 two cairns were discovered on the mountain, one of which contained a 'large urn filled with human bones with a spearhead and two brass ornaments'. The type of grave goods suggests a bronze age date for the burial. The surviving evidence for the Bronze Age are two standing stones on nearby Divis and Mount Gilbert. These are monuments often regarded as burial markers and archaeological excavation of similar

monuments elsewhere has revealed burials in close proximity to the stone. In addition, several Bronze Age barbed-and-tanged arrowheads have been discovered in recent years on the Cave Hill.

The paucity of evidence for Bronze Age material from the Black Mountain is not necessarily a reflection of its use at that time. Recent agricultural activity and development may have unwittingly destroyed evidence, and possibly some has yet to be discovered. Elsewhere in Belfast there are finds of bronze swords, for example from the River Lagan and the Antrim Road. Highly decorated clay pots, some used for burial, have been found at Finaghy, Knock and Ballyhanwood. Finds of gold 'ring money' and personal ornaments such as dress fasteners have been discovered in the vicinity of Belfast.

Around 2,300 years ago the skill of iron working arrived in Ireland from the continent. The metal-workers of this time are commonly known as the 'Celts'. They are particularly known for the highly decorative art style used on some of their tools, weapons and ornaments. This art style was inspired by that used by 'Celts' on the continent. There is, however, no evidence for the Celts in the Belfast area, although a wooden tankard with decorated bronze trimming has been found at Carrickfergus. Despite the paucity of finds, the Belfast area was known as the Roman geographer Ptolemy in 2nd century AD made reference to Belfast Lough, the 'estuary of Logia', which is the ancient form of 'Lough Laoigh' - Lough of the Calf.

There is evidence for increased settlement in the Belfast area after about 500AD. At this time people were living in small farms commonly known as 'raths' or 'ringforts'. Each farm had a circular bank and ditch which afforded both people and animals protection from cattle and slave raiders. Underground chambers known as 'souterrains' were built leading from the interior of the farmstead to outlying areas so people could take refuge in the event of an attack. At one time more than twenty raths were located on the slopes of the Belfast Hills, and at least two still survive on the Black Mountain. In 1977 archaeologists from the Department of Environment investigated two raths when there was a proposal for an extension to the Monagh by-pass. The excavations produced pottery shreds of a type called 'souterrain ware' and several glass beads. On the Whiterock rock a portion of a pennannular brooch has been found also providing evidence for early christian settlement. Sometimes, souterrains are the only surviving evidence for raths and are known from Hannahstown, Ballysillan and Crow Glen.

The Black Mountain has been of both economic and social importance since early times. It provided important sources of flint for tools and weapons, and food resources for Mesolithic hunter-gatherers and Neolithic farmers. The references in the 19th century guides to Belfast suggest that during the Neolithic and Bronze ages the Black Mountain was possibly used for the burial of some of the dead although there is no surviving evidence of this today. The best surviving evidence for the settlement of the mountain dates to the early christian period when farmers built fortified farmsteads for protection from cattle and slave raiders. Today, we have inherited the heritage of the Black Mountain and it is our duty to safeguard both the environmental and historical heritage of the mountain for the present and future prosperity.