

# Lisnacrogher in a landscape context

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*This paper aims to put the famous Lisnacrogher Iron Age hoard in a landscape context, to describe the terrain surrounding its find-spot, as well describing as some of the archaeological sites in the vicinity - based both on map-studies and a field-survey. The paper will also review the hoard's association with a possible crannog. New information from a 19th century publication that deals with the connection between the crannog and the hoard is also brought to the reader's attention.*

## INTRODUCTION

Arguably, there is no greater enigma in Irish archaeology than that of the hoard from Lisnacrogher, Co. Antrim. In some ways it has been a lost key to the elusive Irish Iron Age since the nineteenth century when a series of La Tène decorated artefacts were reported from the site. The Lisnacrogher hoard is Ireland's largest collection of Iron Age metalwork (Raftery 1994, 184). It is less well-known that the hoard may have been found on a crannog, the remains of which were documented in the nineteenth century. However, the evidence for the crannog was not clear, and the connection between it and the artefacts, as well as the actual existence of a crannog in that place has been doubted. Given that lack of evidence, it has been suggested that Lisnacrogher may have been a votive site rather than a crannog settlement. Instead, it is suggested that the site might have comprised either jetties or bridges from where the metalwork was thrown into the lake, as was the case at the original La Tène site in Switzerland (Raftery 1994, 184-5). It is the intention here to draw together the available evidence for the site, to discuss its connection with the artefacts, and, in the light of recent survey, to place the site and the metalwork hoard in a landscape context. In the vicinity of Lisnacrogher there are also crannogs at Craigyarwarren, Moylurg and Teeshan, which will be discussed briefly.

## CRANNOG DESCRIPTION BY ANTIQUARIANS

The first academic account of Lisnacrogher, by W. J. Wakeman, drew parallels with other crannogs such as those at Ballinderry and Lagore; Lisnacrogher was judged to be smaller in size. The site had been exposed when the lake was drained and the subsequent digging of peat had revealed more of the structure. Oak timbers were discovered several feet down in the peat but when Wakeman visited the site (c.1882-3) there was very little left of the crannog. Nonetheless, Wakeman, who had been publishing on crannogs for over twenty years, had no doubts about the type of site that had been found. Both timbers and encircling stakes, that seem to have been woven together, could be seen (Wakeman 1883-4, 377). When Munro visited it a couple of years later, there were no obvious remains of the site although he noted a structure of stones that may have been connected with the crannog (1890, 379-80). According to Munro, the site had not been visited

by anyone competent enough to judge the site type before it was dug away, and there was not enough evidence that a crannog ever existed there. He also doubted the connection between the crannog and the Iron Age deposits and suggested that some of the artefacts could have been erroneously attributed to Lisnacrogher in order to increase their value.

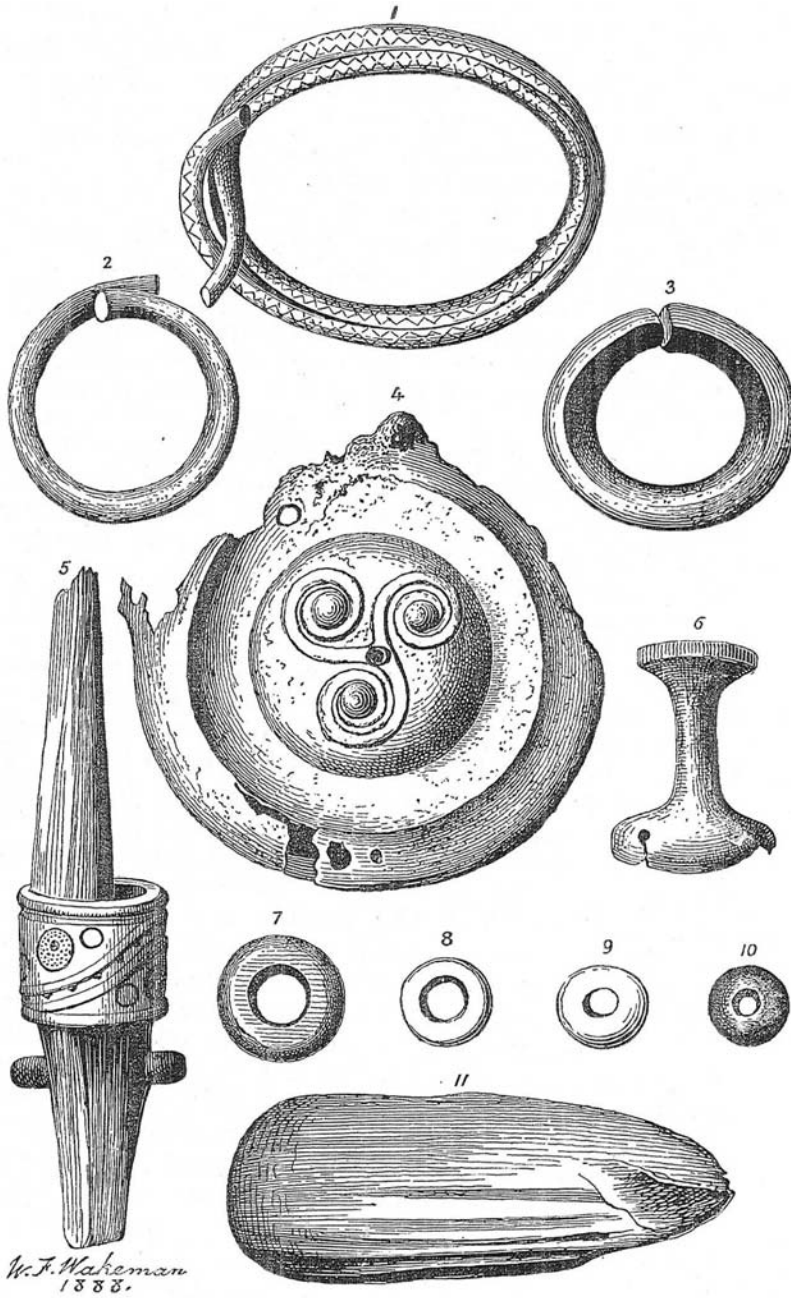
What has not been given wider attention before is the fact that the site was described in the local press three years before Wakeman's account. An excerpt from the *Ballymena Observer* (4 September 1880) shows that the Ballymena Naturalists Field Club visited the site on Thursday 26 August 1880. Originally, the intention was to visit the Rathkenny iron and lignite mines;

As the party could not enter the mine, they visited Lisnacrogher Crannoge, about half-a-mile distant. It is situated in the middle of a large bog, and had been a dwelling place when the bog was a lake. It has been formed by driving into the bottom of the lake pointed stakes, and placing on top of those wattles, stones and clay, and on this the dwelling place has been erected, probably for protection from animals and wild beasts...

The party excavated a portion of the Crannoge, and found the large rudely pointed stakes standing up, and an interlacing of branches with clay and stone on the top and among these material various objects – broken hazel nuts, wood variously cut and wrought, a hoop bound together by wooden pegs, stones variously marked, an elf stone, like a hammer, with a piece of wood still remaining in the hole, flint flakes, broken pottery, bones, and a very perfect quartz crystal, which must have been used as an amulet. On a previous occasion an ornamented glass bead was found, and during the past summer a workman, while cutting turf near the Crannoge obtained a sword sheath (sic) of bronze in very perfect preservation, an object which is very rare, if not quite unique. It is now in the collection of the Rev. Canon Grainger ... .. It is alleged by the men who cut turf in this bog that the peat cut off the top of this portion was similarly covered with stones, clay etc., and that similar objects were found among them.

This is the first published account of the Lisnacrogher crannog, giving a description of the site sometime before Wakeman's first visit. This article, together with Wakeman's observations strongly suggests there was a real crannog structure at the site. The *Ballymena Observer* described the crannog as surrounded by a palisade that may have been woven together by a form of basketwork. The body of the crannog seems to have been made of clay, stone and wood, as would be normal. Furthermore, hazelnuts and bones were found on the site, suggesting some type of settlement activity.

The *Ballymena Observer* article also pointed out the relationship between some of the artefacts and the site. Many artefacts such as pottery, an 'elf stone' (presumably a stone axe), flint flakes and a quartz crystal were found directly on the site at the time of the Field Club's excavations. What is particularly interesting is a mention of the circumstances of the finding of the bronze 'sheath', which presumably was one of the La Tene decorated sheaths accounted for by Wakeman. The article shows clearly that this object was found not on the crannog but near the crannog, and to a certain extent confirms Munro's fears that the metalwork was not physically connected with the crannog. However, the subsequent sentences state that similar objects to the bronze sheath had been found in layers of clay and stone at a structure that resembled the crannog, or at least in an area of the bog near to the crannog.



Objects found in Lisnacrogghera Crannog.

Fig. 1 Artefacts from Lisnacroggher

The Iron Age finds from Lisnacrogher were published in recent times by Barry Raftery (1983). The most important artefacts are the decorated bronze sheaths or scabbards, of which there are four. Four swords were also found together with three chapes and two possible chape fragments. There were also two spearheads, nineteen spearbutts, seventeen spearshaft fragments with four mounts. Besides these, presumably ceremonial weapons, there were also pieces of personal ornaments, such as two ringheaded pins, a ribbon torc, a bronze necklet, two bronze bracelets, two spiral rings, four pennisular rings and a stone bead. Furthermore there was a bronze bowl and some more utilitarian objects such as an iron axehead, an adzehead, a sickle and billhook. Also eight decorated bronze mounts and eleven rings of various types were found, together with two bronze strips. Raftery (1983, 287-88) also refers to miscellaneous material from the Iron Age as well as material that belongs to other time-periods (though, these were not published in the catalogue). Many of these objects date to the second or third century BC but, according to Raftery, there are some that may date to the first centuries of the Christian era (1984, 42, 73, 107, 125). These depositions may not have all occurred at the one time. There is evidence for other roughly contemporary depositions made in boglands in the vicinity; Earwood reports a wooden bowl from nearby Cloughmills townland, located approximately 8km north-east of Lisnacrogher, dating to (1985+- 70BP) 174BC-134AD (1989/90, 39).

#### **EARLY CRANNOGS AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN A SETTLEMENT AND A VOTIVE SITE**

Above we have laid out the currently available evidence for the existence of a crannog at Lisnacrogher. By drawing parallels with a series of other sites, Lisnacrogher's nature as either a votive- or a settlement-site can be discussed. The two lowermost layers of the crannog at Rathtinaun, Lough Gara, Co. Sligo are dated to the Dowris phase of the Late Bronze Age. Perhaps that site was also used in the earliest Iron Age. Barry Raftery has judged it to be a domestic settlement site which included brushwood, areas of cobbling, the remains of hearths (some with walls of woven basketry) and, for example, finds of coarse pottery and clay-moulds for bronze-working. Just as at Lisnacrogher, hazelnuts were also found. At the edges of the crannog a hoard of two disc-headed pins, amber beads, metal rings (of bronze, tin or gold-covered tin), a pair of tweezers and six boars' tusks - interpreted by Raftery as amulets or pendants - was found. There were also some iron objects. The hoard was placed in a wooden box and the location marked by pegs. The radiocarbon determinations, albeit questioned by Raftery, date the two lowermost phases of the site to 410BC-100AD and 490BC-140AD (1994, 32-35).

There are other crannogs in Lough Gara with dates from structures belonging to the later stages of prehistory (Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age): Inch Island, Sroove, Ross and Derrycoagh. The dates for the crannog off Inch Island (KILA 16) are of particular interest with one radiocarbon date placing it in the Late Bronze Age, between 900 and 800 BC, and four radiocarbon dates, 390-200 BC, in the Iron Age (Fredengren 2002, 94).

In the case of Rathtinaun there are elements that can be described as domestic that seem to occur contemporaneously with the deposition of a hoard at the edge of the site. The material from the Lisnacrogher crannog and hoard, if at all contemporary, would show the same pattern with depositions near or on the crannog together with evidence for domestic pursuits. In Janet Levy's study of ritual hoards in Bronze Age Denmark (1982) a distinction is made between ritual and non-

ritual hoards, with the ritual examples, containing ornaments or weapons, placed in inaccessible locations, such as bogs, springs and wells. The non-ritual hoards would, instead, often be placed on dry land with a marker for re-locating them; these often contain damaged objects. The Rathtinaun hoard contained ornaments and other artefacts, but its location was marked out with wooden pegs for future reference. Using Levy's model, the Rathtinaun hoard would lie somewhere between both categories. One interpretation is that the crannog structure was playing a part in the practice of depositing hoards in the water and that the objects in the hoard could have undergone a ritual process, before finally being deposited in a bog or a lake. Given the fluctuations in water-level, it would only have been possible to access the hoard at the edge of Rathtinaun crannog at certain parts of the year. If the reference in the *Ballymena Observer* is taken literally, the Lisnacroggher hoard could be interpreted in a similar way. Richard Bradley has discussed how rituals in prehistory might not have been a separate sphere of activity; but may have developed in tandem with domestic activities and everyday life (Bradley 2005, see also Brück 1999, 55-61). Perhaps the line between ritual and settlement has been drawn too sharply for these crannogs.

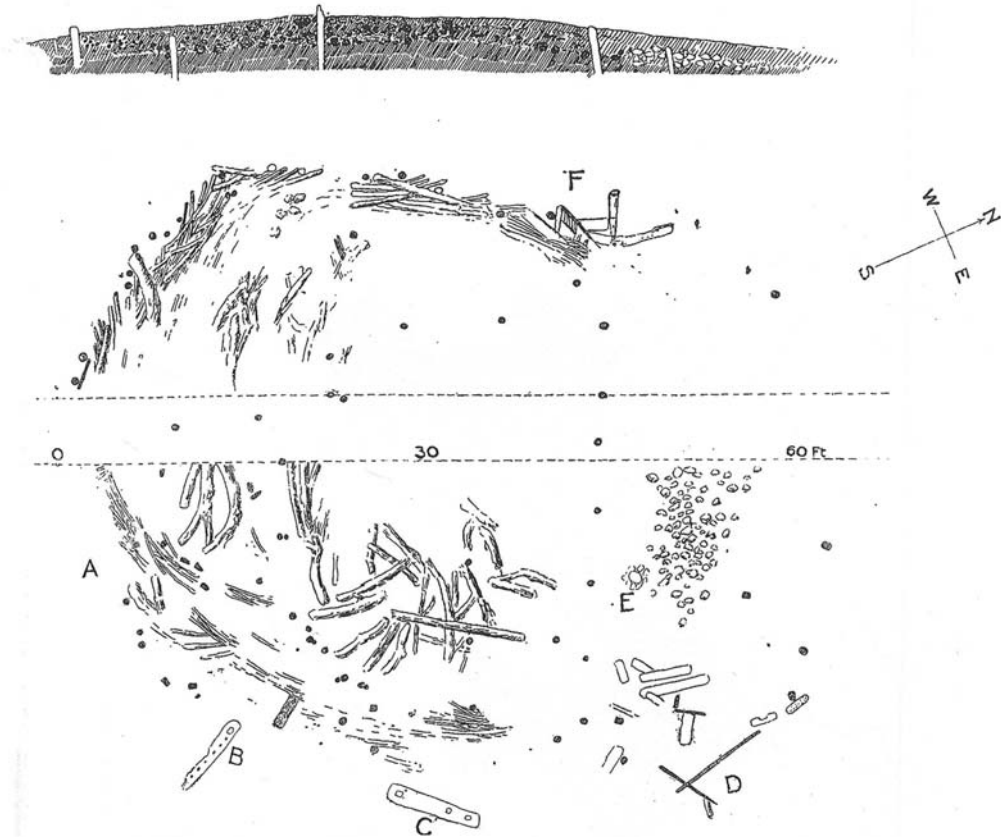


Fig. 2 Plan of Craigywarren crannog (after Coffey 1906)

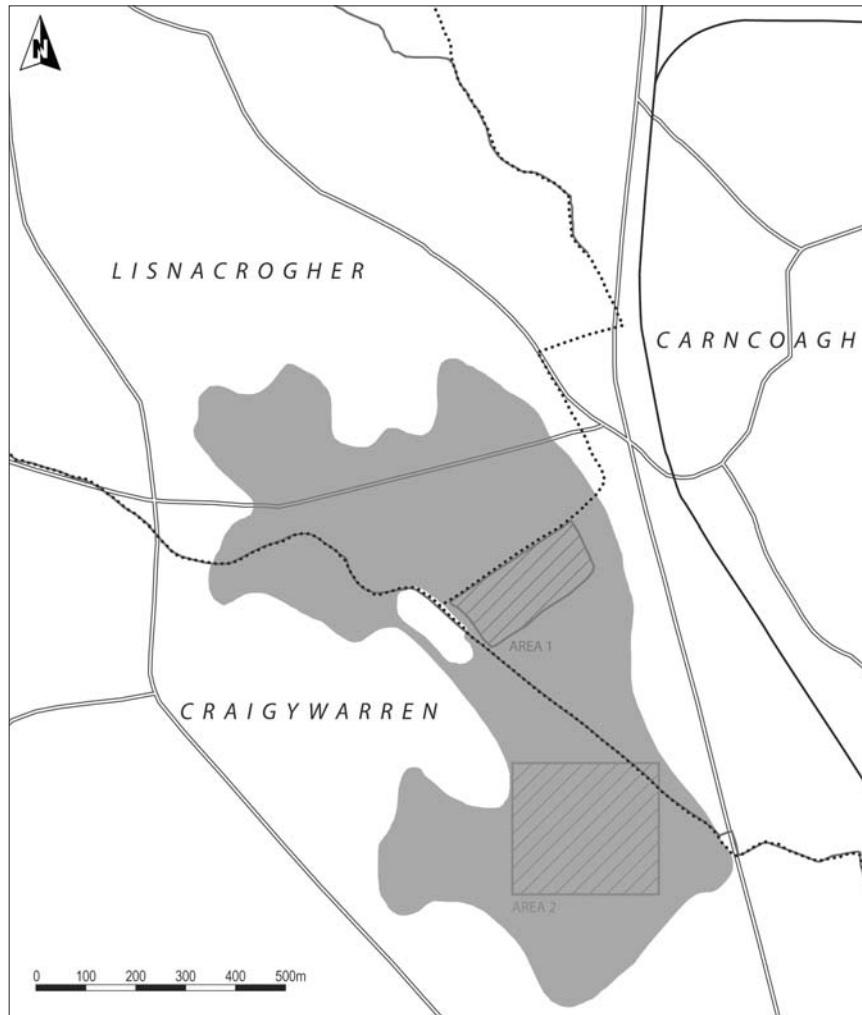


Fig. 3 Outline of Lisnacrogher bog

There are other crannogs in the vicinity of Lisnacrogher with indications of relatively early dates. Craigywarren crannog was located in the same bog as Lisnacrogher. It was described as having been located some 80 yards out from the earlier western shoreline (area 2 on Fig. 3). The site was excavated by Coffey in 1901 but it had been known before that; e.g. it had been listed among the crannogs of Co. Antrim in 1886 (Wood-Martin 1886, 110). Excavation revealed a small circular to oval crannog (Fig. 2), measuring not more than 18.6m north-south and 15.6m east-west. It was laid down on black greasy mud, which must have been the former lake-bed (Coffey 1906, 109-112). Deer, horse, cattle, sheep, goat and pig bones came to light both on and at the edge of the site. What was striking to the excavator was the find of three horse skulls. Of

these, two were well preserved one a stallion, the other a mare. Coffey compared this find with the deposition of horse-bones at the site of La Tene (Coffey 1906, 117-118).

While it is not stated, it is likely that the reason for the Craigywarren excavation was to throw light on the Iron Age and to find a parallel for the Lisnacroggher site. The report mentions both the pin and the La Tene artefacts from Lisnacroggher. Furthermore, in and around this time Coffey showed a particular interest in the Iron Age and published a paper on 'La Tene' monuments. He also discussed the process by which the Celts 'came' to Ireland (Coffey 1903; 1910). However, he dated the Craigywarren site to a much later period. Based on the find of a silver-plated ring-brooch with parallels to some Scandinavian material from Kilmainham in Dublin, Craigywarren crannog was dated with a terminus post quem of the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. There were, however, numerous pieces of flint from the excavation as well as a polishing stone with a 'Late Celtic' trumpet-ornament sketch on one side. It was pointed out by another antiquarian, W. J. Knowles who participated in the excavation, that some of the objects were of an earlier date and that this might indicate an earlier occupation phase at the site.

The crannog in the bog of Moylurg, which is located north of Cullybackey some 6km west of Craigywarren, was also excavated (Buick 1893, 1894). In that publication, as was common at the time, the construction of the crannog was not given any particular attention. What caught the excavator's attention instead was the artefact material. Of particular interest was a Roman style wine-strainer dating to the early part of the Early Medieval period. This crannog was situated in a fairly small bog, just like Lisnacroggher and Craigywarren.

Another crannog, Teeshan, was also located in this general area some 5km southwest of Lisnacroggher and Craigywarren. The site was described as a gravelly knoll framed by oak posts, located at the lake's western margin (Wood-Martin 1886, 164-165; Knowles 1904, 49-50; OS field report no. 213). Today this is an area of rough grazing land on reclaimed bog. Teeshan crannog was destroyed in 1967. The remains were recorded by the archaeological survey of Northern Ireland (SMR ANT032:006). Samples of the crannog timber were collected at random and used for the construction of the Belfast dendrochronology curve. The analysis showed two phases of construction, the first in 453+-9AD and the second in 581AD (the earliest date could, of course, be due to timbers from some other site being re-used). What is noteworthy however is the relatively early date in the Early Medieval period. This can be paralleled at other Antrim crannogs; the crannog at Lough Tamin, for example dates to 618+-9AD (Baillie 1990).

Craigywarren, Moylurg and Teeshan crannogs, in the vicinity of Lisnacroggher, all have either early Early Medieval dendro-chronological dates or artefact material such as the wine-strainer or the hand-pin dating quite early in this period. However, there is a gap of hundreds of years between these dates and the dates of the Iron Age material from Lisnacroggher.

### **THE FORMER LAKE AND THE LOCATION OF LISNACROGHER CRANNOG**

As with many archaeological discoveries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, more attention was paid to the artefacts rather than to describing and analysing the site and its surroundings. The immediate area around Lisnacroggher today consists of reclaimed bog, in a former lake-valley in a drumlin landscape. The area is located some 4km north of Ballymena in the valley of the Clough River and the River Maine. To the northwest of Lisnacroggher is the mountain area of Slieve Rush. Directly east lies Carncoagh Hill.

Fig. 3 shows the nearby surroundings and outlines the area that once would have been a bog and, at some earlier stage, a lake. Judging from the size of the bog, the lake would have been around 1.3km north-south and roughly 700m east-west at its widest point. At the end of the nineteenth century it was described as a 'nearly drained loch' (Wakeman 1883-4, 377). The bog had been saved from peat-cutting until quite late in the eighteenth century due to repeated flooding (Munro 1890, 379). Just off the western shore, in the middle of the former lake, there is a small rise that would have been an island in the past. The surface of the island is under forestry now. The drains in-between the plants reveal very unusual white shattered stones. The stone is pink in un-weathered condition but turns white on exposure (Glascott Symes 1886, 10-11). This area is described as an outcrop of trachyte porphyry and rhyolite by the Geological Survey (Ballymena, Sheet 20, published in 1883). The 2001, 1:50,000 Geological map of the area - sheet 20, however, identifies the rock-type as Rhyolite only. Although today the bog is reclaimed and cut away to some extent, peat can still be seen in the drains that connect to the Clogh River, north of the bog. The reclaimed bog is divided between Lisnacrogher townland to the northeast, Carncoagh townland to the southeast and Craigywarren townland to the west.

There has been some discussion as to where in the bog Lisnacrogher crannog would have been located. Wakeman described it as being located in 'Lisnacroghera' townland (1883-4, 377), which would mean in the northeastern part. However, Knowles was not convinced about that location. First of all he argued that there was no townland called Lisnacroghera, but instead a Lisnacrogher townland, without the 'a' ending. Knowles also argued that Wakeman's positioning of the crannog was incorrect; he claimed that it was in the adjacent Carncoagh townland (Knowles 1897, 109). The last person to comment on this issue was George Coffey who excavated Craigywarren crannog located in the same bog. Coffey stated that the remains of the Lisnacrogher crannog could be found where the townlands of Lisnacrogher, Carncoagh and Craigywarren met. Furthermore, there was roughly 0.5 miles (0.8 km) between the Craigywarren and Lisnacrogher crannogs and they would have been in view of each other (Coffey 1906, 109). The three townlands meet at the eastern foot of the small rhyolite rise. According to Coffey's description this is the area where Lisnacrogher crannog was situated. A drain leading north towards Clogh river follows the edges of Craigywarren townland where it borders Carncoagh and Lisnacrogher townlands. This drain, following the edges of the rhyolite rise, is the boundary between Kirkinriola and Skerry parishes.

The part of Carncoagh indicated by Coffey, including the rhyolite rise, was inspected in March 2004. At that time the reclaimed bog was under pasture and the grass was short. The point that Coffey described as the meeting of the three townlands, and the eastern edges of the rise, can be seen in Fig. 4. The rise which ascends gradually is interesting in its own right as it would have been an island in the former lake. As mentioned above, it is made up of small shattered stones of rhyolite. While no traces of a crannog could be found at the place where the townlands meet, there were some indications in the adjacent area. About 70m to the east, a concentration of sub-angular stones (c. 30cm in approximate size) was located. While similar stones were often used as the building material of crannogs, these particular ones were too dispersed to constitute a platform. One possibility is that these are the same stones as noted by Munro (described above).

The area was re-inspected in July of the same year after a deep trench for a gas-pipeline had been dug across this area. According to a representative of ADS Ltd who carried out the monitoring of the pipeline trench no archaeological remains were recovered from Lisnacrogher,



Fig. 4 Meeting place of the three townlands

Carncoagh or Craigywarren townlands. Our inspection showed that bog, up to a depth of 1.5m, was still preserved under the grass there, and at the base, on the lake-sediments, the occasional streak of shattered and fire-cracked stones could be found.

#### GENERAL LANDSCAPE CONSIDERATIONS

There is a series of monument concentrations in the area around the sites of these crannogs. Most of these consist of megalithic tombs, cairns and standing stones and they are located on the mountain slopes. One such concentration is located on the foothills of Slieve Rush. A hilltop enclosure is registered for Carncoagh hill (ANT 28:23) and may have been contemporary with the Lisnacroggher crannog. What can be concluded is that the site of Lisnacroggher is located away from the main known prehistoric monument concentration.

From the highest point on the rhyolite 'island' the elevated ground to the east and west of the bog frames a view of Slemish (an oval, bowl-shaped hill with an outline that separates it from the surrounding mountainous area) (Fig. 5). Slemish has a ring-cairn on its summit (ANT 033:023). The hill and the area around it is mentioned in a number of sources about St Patrick as the place where the saint was kept in captivity by Miliuc the druid, and where an angel appeared declaring Patrick's mission (de Paor 1993, 95, 154, 173, 181-2). Evidently, this view from the island-rise



Fig. 5 View from the island with Slemish in the background

towards the mountain would have been striking to people in the past and the hill might have had a religious relevance also in pre-historic times.

Taçon (1999, 36-37) has drawn attention to how striking, natural features may have attracted human attention over time and been drawn upon in the construction of and experience of sacred landscapes. Among these would be particular geological features or distinctively different landscape formations. Lisnacroggher crannog may have been set in such a specific landscape context. The site would have been located in the middle of a rather small lake, just off a small island. This island would have had a striking appearance, consisting of white shattered rhyolite stones. Richard Bradley has said that: 'natural places have an archaeology because they acquired a significance in the minds of people of the past' (2000, 35). It is possible that the Lisnacroggher hoard and the crannog were located near this rhyolite island due to its special characteristic of having pink stones that changed in colour over time. These stones (and possibly the island as a whole) may have symbolised the process of transformation to the local Iron Age people, providing a metaphor in the landscape for the transformative process of metalworking.

Bradley (2000, 61) has suggested that we compare sites that share locational and topographical characteristics in order to understand the landscape aspects of archaeology. As mentioned above, there are some parallels between the archaeological remains at Lisnacroggher and those of Lough Gara, which is surrounded by hills to the west and the north. The eastern shore consists of drumlins with low-lying ground to the south. What stands out in the topography around the lake is a hill, Keash, which resembles Slemish to a large extent. Keash is also bowl-shaped and is the main

point of reference for orientation around the lake. The summit of Keash has a possible passage tomb (SL040-008). The Inch Island crannog in Lough Gara is situated in a similar location to that of Lisnacroggher, just off a natural island. From the crest of Inch Island, Keash, can be seen, but it is not visible from the crannog. It is evident that mountain sites which have tombs such as Slieve-na-Calliaghe were also important to Iron Age people, with finds such as the decorated bone flakes supporting this (see for example Raftery 1984, 261). Further fieldwork is needed, however, to see if a pattern emerges where late prehistoric crannogs are located in lake-lands near topographically distinctive hills.

As mentioned above the Lisnacroggher site would have been located where three townlands meet and was also on the borders of a parish boundary. While it is commonly understood that these boundaries could be of much later date (Duffy 2006) there is a possibility that later townland and parish boundaries reflect earlier land divisions. Pádraig Ó Riain believes that 'few aspects of early Irish society were less peripheral than its boundary zones'. Lakes are mentioned as one of twelve types of boundary markers in *Bretha Comaithchesa* (Ó Riain 1972, 17). Such a location for the Lisnacroggher crannog could have had liminal implications and be associated with festivals and rites of transition.

## CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

It can be established from the sources above that a Lisnacroggher crannog did exist and was presumably located on the borders of three townlands: Lisnacroggher, Carncoagh and Craigywarren. However, it would have been small in size, possibly comparable to the other excavated crannog in the same bog/lake, i.e. in Craigywarren townland. It is also clear that at least some of the Iron Age material from Lisnacroggher was found in the vicinity of the crannog, and it is possible also that some of the artefacts from this period were found in the top layers of the site. The account in the *Ballymena Observer*, however, relied on second-hand information for its report. This paper has also drawn together evidence for other crannogs dating to the later stages of prehistory, such as those at Lough Gara, Co. Sligo. There is evidence for late prehistoric crannogs elsewhere and even concrete evidence for their use in the Iron Age.

The question was raised above as to whether the depositions of metalwork implied a votive or a domestic use. Again, with parallels from the excavated site at Rathinaun, it was suggested that the line between these two different types of activity may be drawn too sharply. An alternative proposal is that the late prehistoric crannogs could have had both a settlement and ritual use.

This paper also set out to provide the hoard and site with a landscape setting. It was found that these would have been set in a rather small lake, just off a small rhyolite rise that may have been of importance due to its particular geological characteristic. A visual relationship between this rhyolite rise and Slemish was also demonstrated. This characteristic setting is shared with the late prehistoric crannogs of Lough Gara, a lake dominated by the similar-looking Keash hill, with its possible megalithic tomb. In terms of the context of the Lisnacroggher hoard and crannog, it is possible to get, by reference to natural features, an insight into how this area might have been important in people's experiences of the landscape and why it was used for the deposition of metalwork in lakes. It is also an example of how lake-archaeology can gain by applying analysis of the landscape setting.

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