SONNAGH III, CO MAYO

FULACHT FIADH

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REGISTRATION NO. E3345

MINISTERIAL DIRECTION NO. A020/030

Sonnagh III, **Co Mayo**
Fulacht Fiadh
NGR 146570/300469
Ministerial Direction No. A020/030, Registration No. E3345
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Abstract

This *fulacht fiadh* consisted of a roughly oval-shaped burnt mound, which partly covered a peat cut trough. The trough was sub-circular in plan with a diameter of 1.25 m and a maximum depth of 0.4 m. The sides and base were concave producing a regular bowl-shaped hollow. It was partly lined by one split timber placed on the trough base and held in place by two rods one at each end. These rods were cut to wedge-shaped points, bent over the timber and inserted into the base to secure the base timber. The mound was sub-oval in plan measuring 10 m by 6 m and had a maximum thickness of 0.35 m. It consisted of moderately compacted burnt stone in a charcoal rich peaty matrix interspersed with lenses of peat.

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Introduction

This *fulacht fiadh* was newly discovered in Sonnagh Townland, Co Mayo, during centreline testing[1] and full excavation was required.

Location

The site was located[2] 3 km south-west of Charlestown, Co Mayo (Fig. 1). It was located within peat near the eastern edge of a shallow east-west peat basin, at an altitude of 71 m OD. This peat basin was bounded to the north and south by low gravel hills. The area had been drained in recent years by a system of land drains which fed into the Sonnagh River 2.5 km west of the site. One of these drains, running east to west, was 5 m to the south of the site.

It was one of a cluster of nine newly identified *fulachta fiadh* excavated in this area as part of this scheme. There were four *fulachta fiadh* located within 200 m of this site[3]. The closest *fulacht fiadh* (Sonnagh IV) was 20 m north-west of this site and a further four[4] were located within 400 m to the west (Fig. 2). All of these sites were situated Sonnagh td.

[1] Centreline and offshoot testing in advance of the construction of the N5 Charlestown Bypass Ministerial direction No. A020/003.
[2] National Grid Reference: 146570/300469.
[3] Sonnagh I, II, IV and IX: E3340, E3344, E3346 and E3358
[4] Sonnagh V, VI, VII and X: E3347, E3348, E3349 and E3359

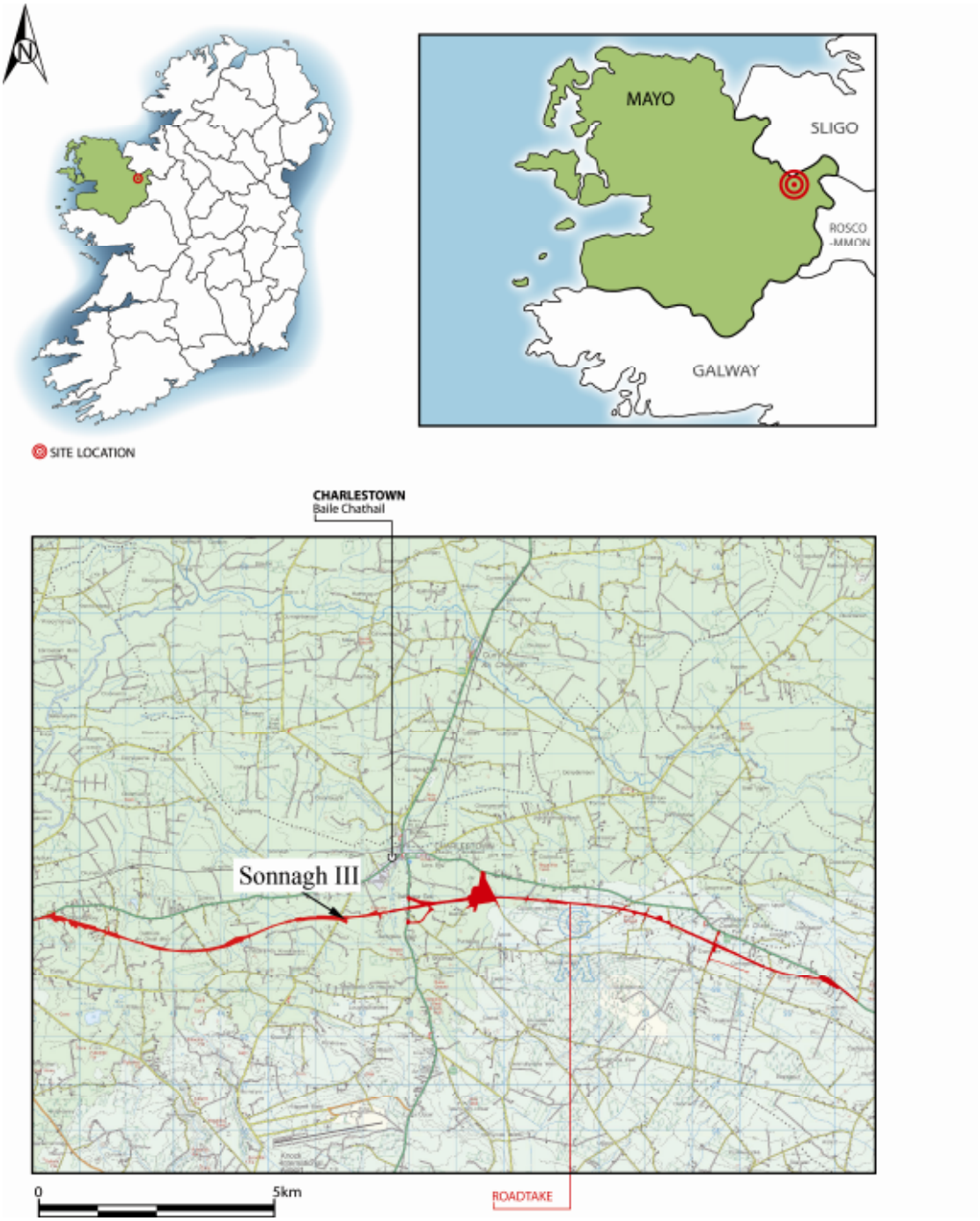

Figure 1: General site Location Map

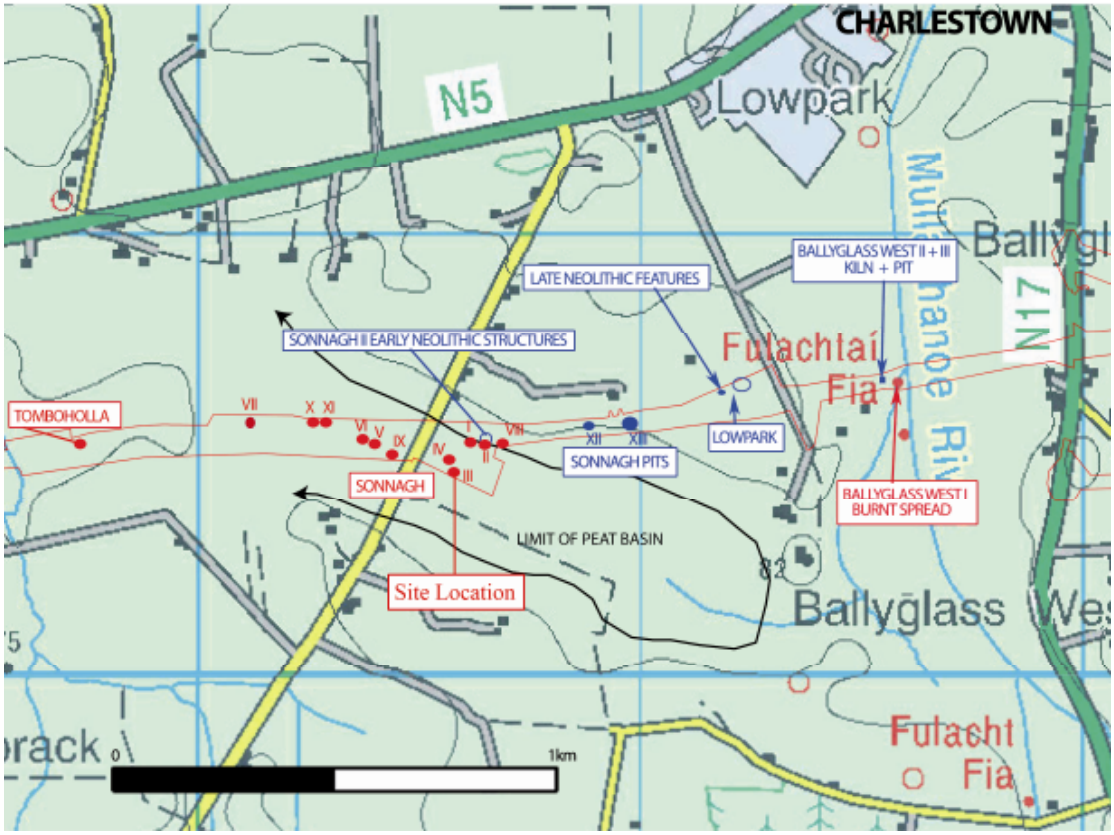

Figure 2: Sonnagh td. fulachta fiadh location map

Description

The site was fully excavated and consisted of a pit cut into the underlying peat which was partly overlain by a burnt mound (C2). The stratigraphy was as follows: a circular trough (C4), which had a partial timber lining (C5), loose charred wood (C3), the burnt mound (C2), and overlying peat (C1).

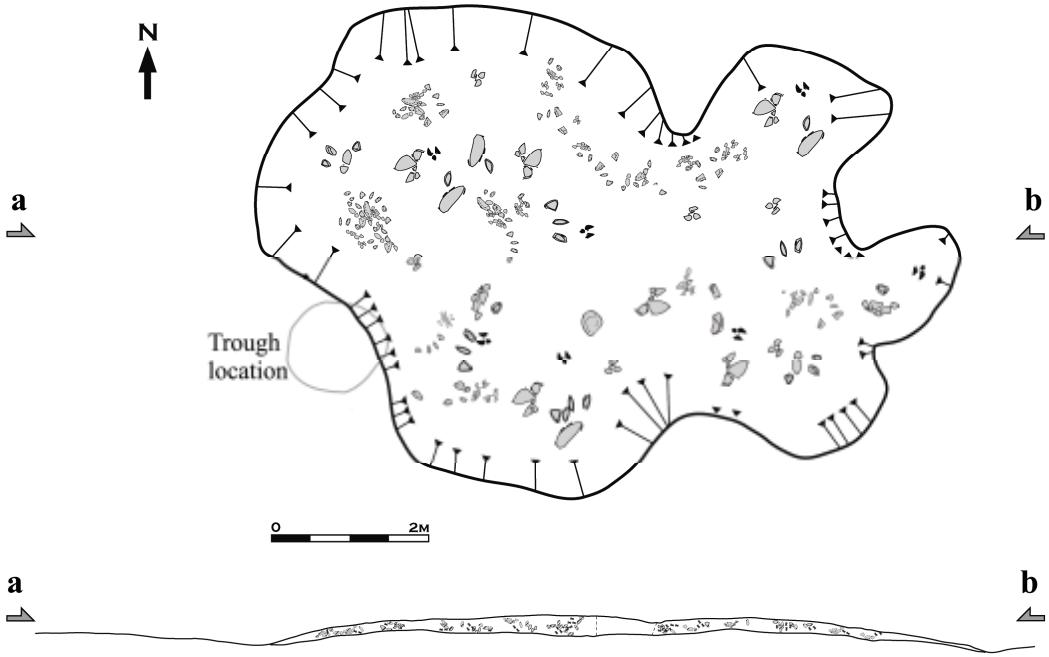

Figure 3: Pre excavation plan of mound with south-facing section

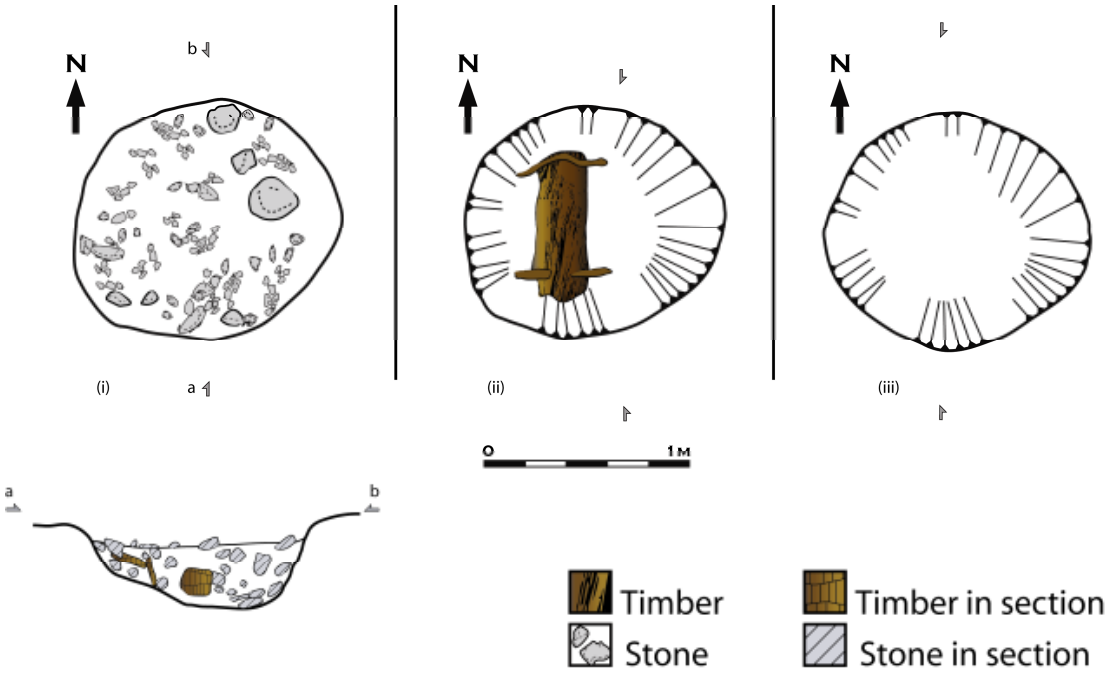

Figure 4: (i) Pre-excavation plan and section of the trough (C4) (ii) Mid-excavation plan of the trough with base timbers (C5), (iii) Post-excavation of the trough (C4)

The Trough

The trough (C4) was circular in plan with concave sides and a flat base and measured 1.25 m in diameter by 0.4 m deep (Plates 1 and 2, Fig. 4). It was partly lined with poorly preserved timbers (C5). This lining consisted of a single flat tangentially split alder plank with 30 annual tree rings present, held in place by a hazel rod at either

end[5]. These rods had pointed ends, which were inserted into the base of the trough. It was filled with heat-fractured sandstone in a matrix of sandy peat and charcoal, with small pieces of charred timbers. These stones were relatively large and may represent the final trough use and consequently were not as severely heat fractured. Alder (Alnus) charcoal from this fill produced a radiocarbon date of 4100±40BP: 2867-2497 Cal. BC (GrN-30754) placing it in the late Neolithic period. Two charred timbers (C3) rested on the top of the trough fill, directly underlying the mound. There were no further associated artefacts.

Plate 1: Half section of trough (C4)

Plate 2: Trough with base timbers

[5] All timber species were identified by Ellen O Carroll

The Mound

The mound (C2) was sub–oval in plan and measured 10 m east-west by 6.5 m north-south and had a maximum thickness of 0.35 m (Plates 3 and 4, Fig. 2). It consisted of burnt and heat fractured stone in a matrix of sandy peat and charcoal. There was no layering or evidence of sod regeneration within the mound indicating continuous use and deposition rather than seasonal or sporadic use. It was covered by dry soft peat with rough grasses and reeds.

Plate 3: Pre excavation view of the mound (C2)

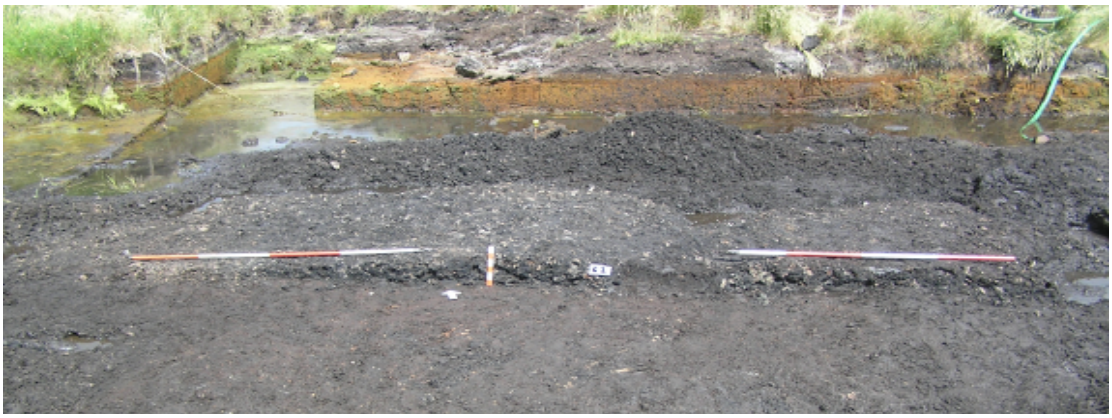

Plate 4: South-facing section of the mound (C2)

Discussion

This *fulacht fiadh* differed from the others in the group excavated in Sonnagh. The position of the trough in relation to the mound is unusual as the trough was partly covered by the south-western edge of the mound, compared with the more usual central position. The trough had a concave profile, with an unusual arrangement of timbers at its base and was otherwise unlined. Complex linings of timber, moss and sand were present in the other troughs in Sonnagh. This suggests a different use or method was employed here. The single split timber may have been used as a platform to keep material off the floor of the trough. The two rods which held the split timber in place were a means of securing it in place and there was no evidence for further elements of lining. Meat, possibly wrapped in sugán, may have been placed on this plank if its function was cooking or it could have been used as a seat for bathing.

This alternative trough form may be due to its relatively early date, 2867-2497 Cal. BC which is significantly earlier than any of the other fulachta fiadh in the Sonnagh Td. complex. This date places it in the Neolithic, roughly contemporary with the burnt spread in Tomboholla Td[6]. 850 m to the west and a possible Timber Circle in Phase 1(ii) of Lowpark[7]650 m to the east. Its closest parallel a *fulacht fiadh* with an oval, peat-cut trough, Sonnagh IX[8], was located 400 m to the west and included a larger trough however it produced a later date of 3645±40BP; 2134-1919 Cal. BC (GrN-30759). Animal bone from this trough supports cooking as a function.

[6] Tomboholla Td., E3350, NGR14549/300520
[7] Lowpark Td., E3338, NGR147233/300643
[8] Sonnagh Td. E3358, NGR 146463/300532

Context Register

Context 1 This was dark brown peat which enveloped the site. The surface vegetation, which was made up of rough grasses and reeds, grew directly on the surface of the peat. A 0.4 m thickness of peat covered the mound and a further 0.4 m of peat underlay the mound. This rested on a natural marl layer.

Context 2 This burnt mound was irregular in plan and measured 10 m east/west by 6.5 m north/south and had a maximum thickness of 0.35 m. The mound consisted of compacted heat fractured sandstone (90%) in a matrix of sandy peat and charcoal.

Context 3 These two pieces of slightly charred wood were located beneath the south-western extent of the mound and directly overlay the trough (C4). The first piece (C3:1) measured 0.6 m long by 0.15 m in diameter. It was in a good state of preservation and had a wedge end that was multi-faceted. The second piece (C3:2) measured 0.6 m by 0.17 m in diameter. It was well preserved and had a multi-faceted wedge end. Both pieces were found loose and were not part of any particular arrangement.

Context 4 This trough was cut directly into peat. It was circular in plan and measured 1.25 m in diameter by 0.4 m deep. The trough had concave sides with a gradual inward slope top and bottom, the north side being slightly steeper than the south. The base of the trough was flat, which accommodated a base timber (C5). The fill consisted of heat fractured sandstone in a matrix of sandy peat with occasional inclusions of charcoal. The burnt stone within this fill was not as decayed or fractured from heat as the stone from the mound (C2). It was reasonably solid with an average diameter of 0.1 m. Small pieces of charred wood were also found throughout the fill of the trough, ranging from small flecks of wood to pieces 0.1 m long by 0.02 m in diameter.

Context 5 This included three timbers located at the base of the trough (C4). These three poorly-preserved timbers included one large tangentially split timber and two pointed rods. The split timber (C5:7) rested on 0.08 m of peat and occasional burnt stones at the base of the trough (C4). It was aligned north/south and measured a maximum of 0.75 m long by 0.25 m wide with a thickness of approximately 0.05 m. Two worked pieces (C5:3 and C5:6) were originally part of the same rod which had broken *in situ*. C5:3 measured 0.32 m long by 0.018 m in diameter while C5:6 measured 0.14 m long by 0.013 m in diameter. Both ends had worked chisel ends. This rod stretched across the north end of the split timber to secure it to the base of the trough. Each end of the rod was pushed into the peat on either side (east and west) of the split timber. The second rod was also broken into two pieces (C5:4 and C5:5). C5:4 measured 0.25 m long by 0.016 m in diameter, while C5:5 measured 0.26 m long by 0.02 m in diameter. Both had worked chisel ends and as a single rod this was stretched across the southern end of the split timber (C5:7) securing it to the trough base by each end (east and west) being pushed into the peat.