



**Survey of a late  
prehistoric  
settlement on  
the Isle of  
Doagh 2018**

## **Report on a previously unrecorded prehistoric farm settlement on Craigawannia, Craignacally townland, Isle of Doagh, Donegal in 2018.**

Report compiled by Inishowen Studies Group

September 2018

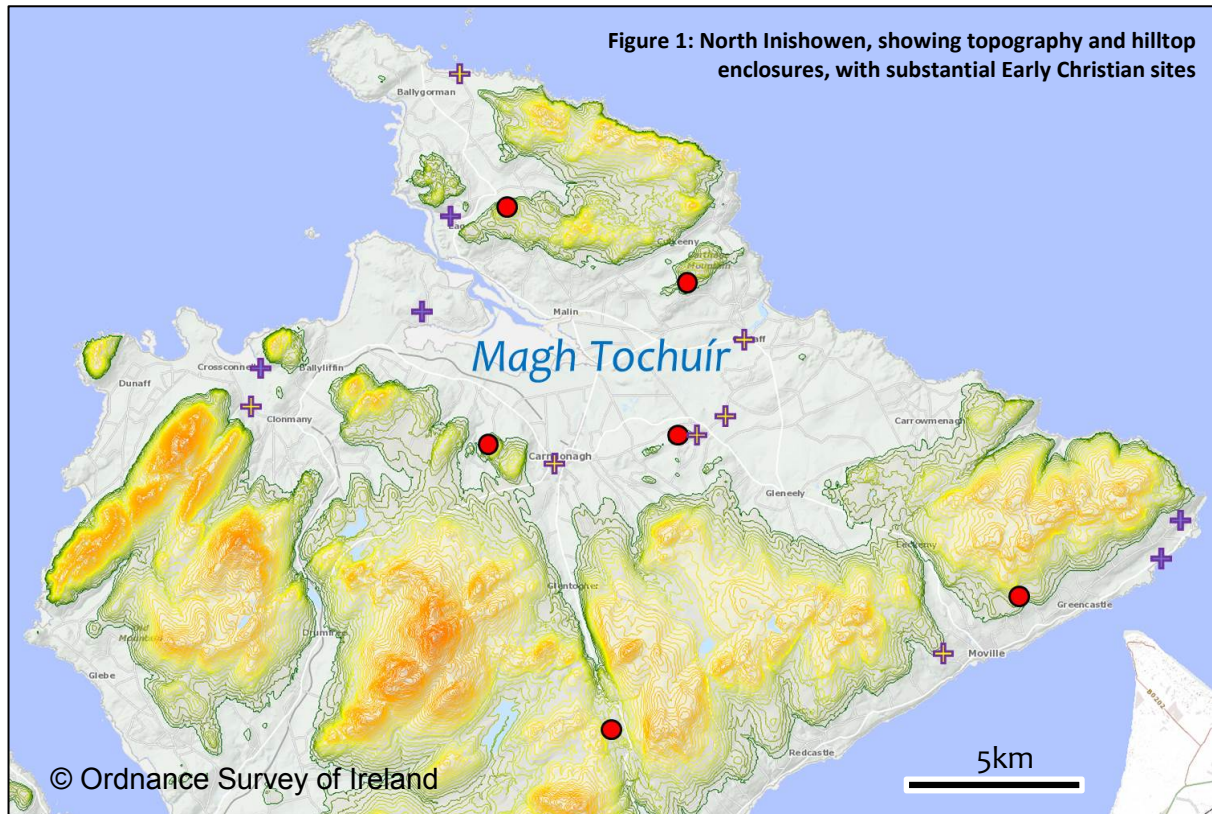
### **Summary**

Substantial earthworks belonging to a prehistoric farmstead have been identified and surveyed on the Isle of Doagh, Inishowen, by the Inishowen Studies Group in partnership with an Inishowen Community Archaeology Project funded by the Leader Programme and supported by Inishowen Development Partnership. Structures include several house platforms, walled enclosures, cultivation ridges and a system of co-axial field walls likely belonging to more than a single phase. Geophysical survey of the domestic structures confirms their basic morphology and suggests chronological depth to the settlement.

### **Introduction**

The Isle of Doagh is a peninsula surrounded on three sides: by the Atlantic ocean to the north-west, and by the tidal waters of Trawbreaga (formerly Strabreaga) Bay to the north, east and south-east. It is connected to the mainland of Inishowen by a neck of substantial sand dunes and reclaimed pasture. Doagh lies at the heart of the Magh Tochuír (Plain of the Causeway), identified as an Early Medieval kingship centre of the Cenél nÉogain by Charles-Edwards, who described such emergent territories as 'a single area of well-cleared land, often called a Mag or Campus' (1987, 34). Roberts (2010, 121) calls such plains, frequently defined by watersheds of sheltered estuaries, as 'cultural corelands'. The Magh Tochuír is overlooked by hills on three sides rising to over 200m and in four cases these hills are topped by substantial enclosures reflecting the interests of a prehistoric élite in controlling the resources of the plain. Standing stones, souterrains, ringforts, high crosses and their associated monastic enclosures also define the plain's cultural capital (O'Brien and Adams 2016; Figure 1). The Isle of Doagh is well-known for its extensive rock art (Lacey 1983; Colhoun 1995; Van Hoek 1987; 1988) and standing stones. Two early crosses stand, or stood, in prominent locations on Doagh. Inishowen in general is surprisingly empty of the sort of late prehistoric farming settlement remains that might be expected in a landscape so heavily invested with the fruits of agricultural surplus. Bronze Age farmsteads are known to survive intact beneath the peatlands of the highland zones but no identifiable features of obvious Iron Age date have been observed prior to the current project. A medieval castle lies on the extreme north-west corner of the site on a rocky prominence at Carrickabraghy, regarded as a probable early kingship focus (Gleeson 2015).





## Craigawannia

Craigawannia (the 'rock of Vannia') is a circular hill of about 750m diameter which confronts those approaching across the causeway from Ballyliffin. It rises to a height of 59.44m. Solid geology in the form of metamorphic sandstone schists is visible in bands lying on a north-west to south-east alignment. A series of low but sharply defined scarps faces the south-west and between these, some 30-70m across, are flattish ledges on which cultivable soils and pasture for sheep and cattle have developed, enclosed by co-axial boundaries that have adapted the natural morphology to suit. A 'modern' field boundary morphology of straight fences aligned perpendicular to the road that bisects the island from south to north overlies these and is clearly visible on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey.

A small number of clustered modern farms and houses at Carrowreagh, overlooking the head of Trawbreaga Bay, lead onto the south-east slopes of Craigawannia where, in 2017, the farmstead was first observed by Angela McLaughlin. The Inishowen Studies Group,<sup>1</sup> which has been studying the Early Christian landscapes of Inishowen since 2012 (O'Brien and Adams 2016), was alerted to the potential value of the site by Ms McLaughlin and her partner Adam Rory Porter. Under the auspices of the Lands of Éogain project group and thanks to Leader funding obtained by the Inishowen Development Partnership, ISG carried out a programme of Community Archaeology training and surveying on the site in September 2018.

<sup>1</sup> Formed in Ireland by the Bernician Studies Group [www.bernicianstudies.eu](http://www.bernicianstudies.eu).

Participants mapped the earthworks and field walls using a Total Station Theodolite and carried out a geophysical survey using a Fluxgate Gradiometer. A parallel programme of re-recording and assessing existing and newly-discovered rock art on the Isle using hand-held GPS was carried out by the group under the guidance of Mrs Joy Rutter and Mr Liam McLaughlin, whose invaluable knowledge and support is warmly acknowledged.

Access to the farm was kindly granted by its owner, Mr Bill Johnson, and tenant farmer Mr John Joe McLaughlin, to whom the authors' grateful thanks are due.

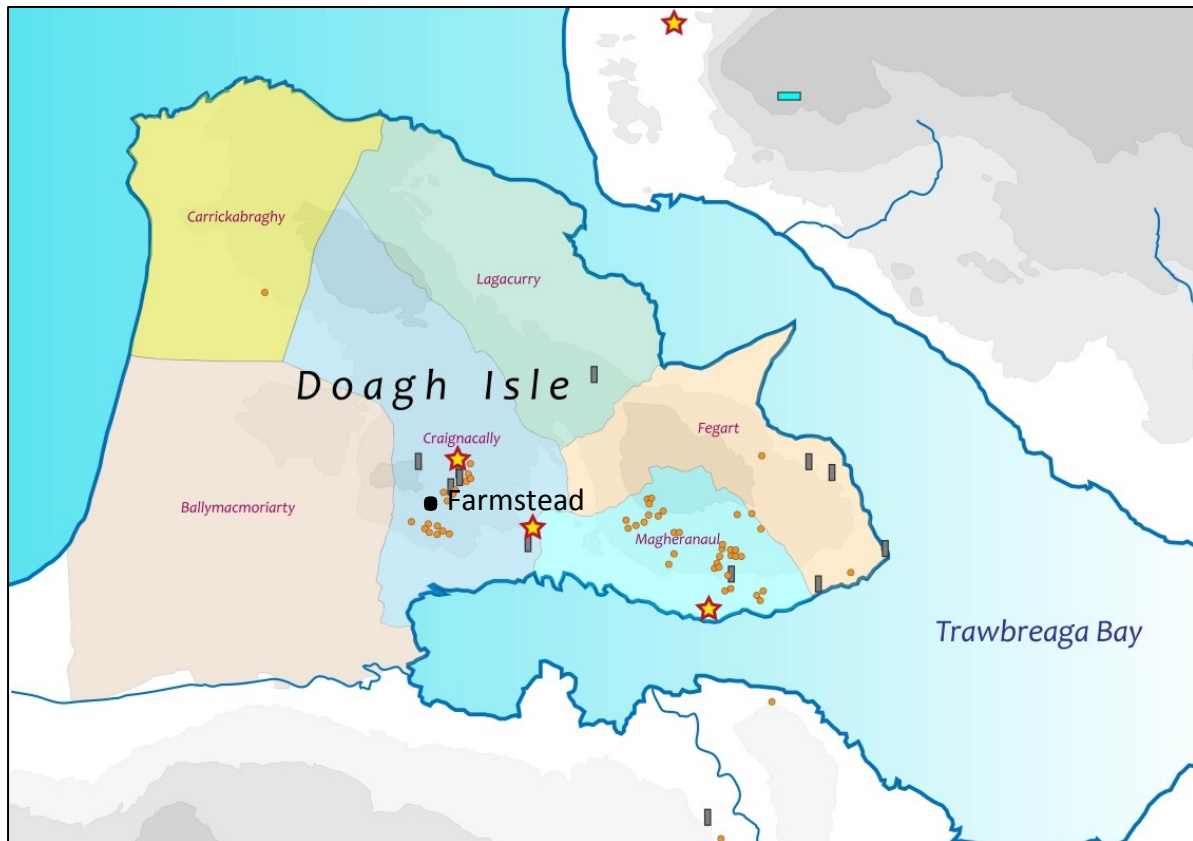


Figure 2: Doagh island, showing historic townlands, crosses, standing stones and a representative distribution of rock art as currently recorded on the National Monuments Record.



### The farmstead survey

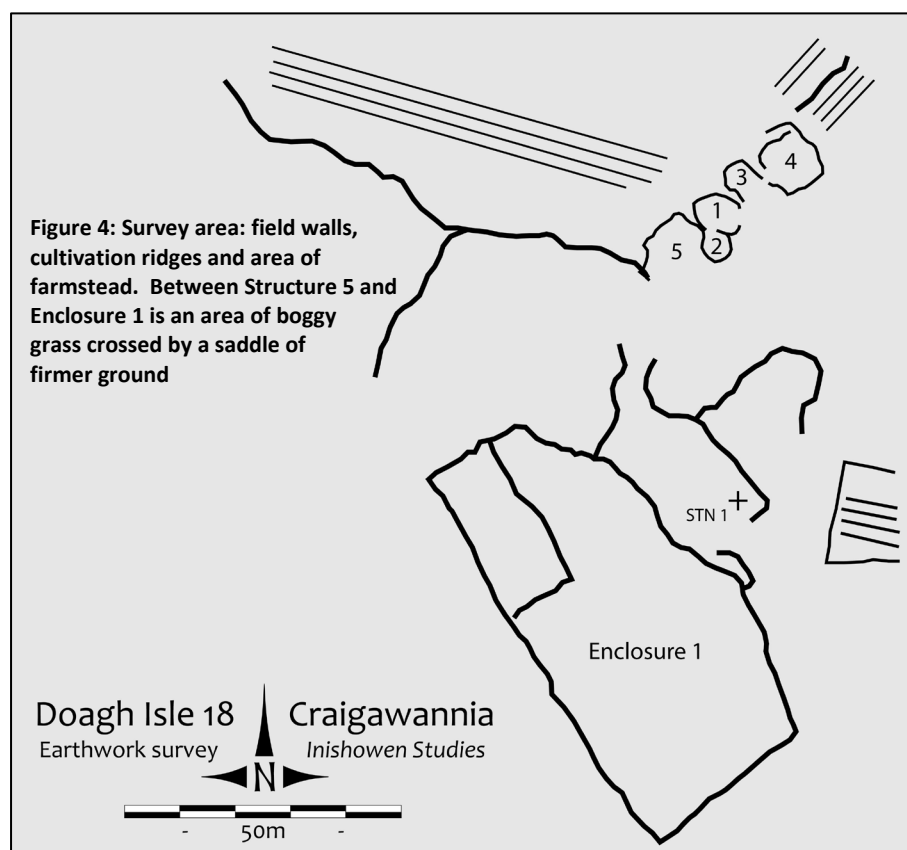
The farmstead lies on a sheltered south-east facing slope on Craigawannia at a height of between 35m and 44m OD.

Immediately to the north-east faint cultivation ridges lead down to a narrow defile carrying a minor, perhaps seasonal stream. On a bluff to the immediate west narrow (c1.5m



Figure 3: Aerial view of survey area, with Enclosure 1 prominent, and modern field boundaries. Source: Bing Maps

between furrows) cultivation ridges of unknown date, now insubstantial, show further



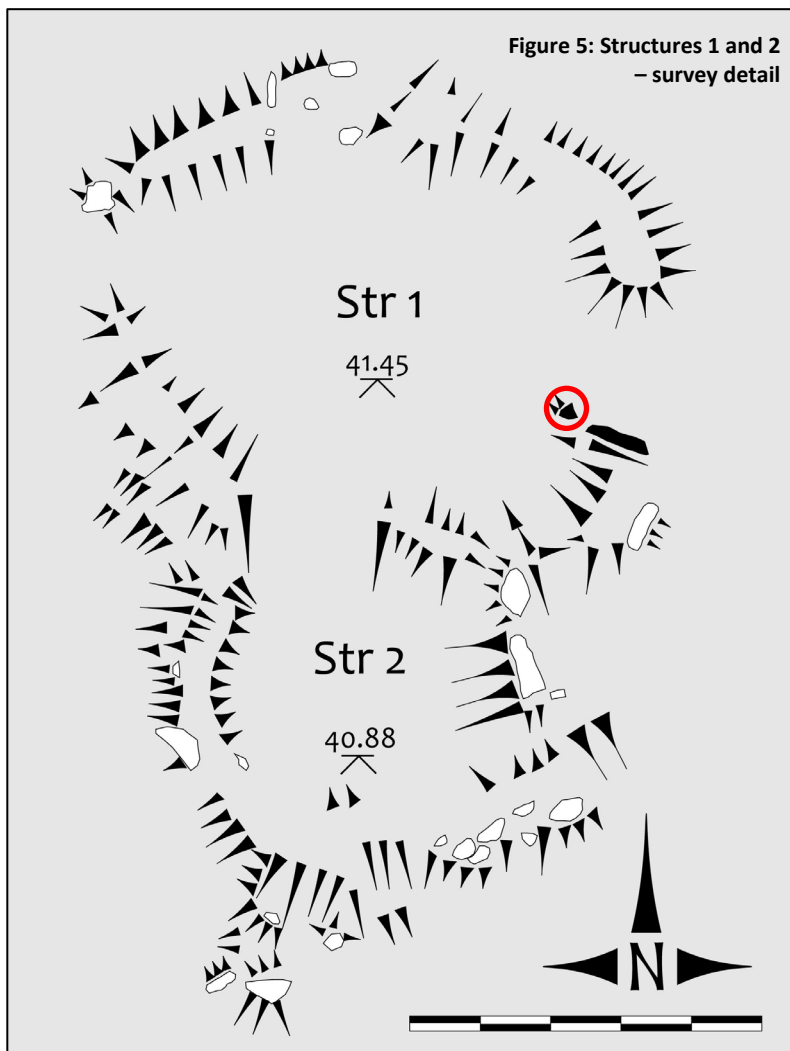
evidence of an arable component to the farm's economy. To the south a large walled rectilinear enclosure (1), with a smaller rectangular enclosure within it (Figure 4), may be associated with a later, as yet unidentified farmstead building: to the east is a small banked enclosure or garth containing prominent cultivation ridges that may be of post-

medieval date. The north-east edge of Enclosure 1 runs along the crest of a steep scarp; here, the wall may also have played a role in funnelling the movement of livestock up onto unenclosed pasture to the north-west. The overall impression of the enclosures and co-



axial field system is that of a tightly controlled and long-lasting farm complex primarily devoted to livestock management. The farmstead (Figures 4, 5, 9 and 10) consists of three or more sub-circular platforms and two or more rectilinear walled structures, all lying under either cropped pasture or bog grass and surviving as upstanding earthworks. It seems likely that, with lower vegetation and winter light more, structures will become visible.

The most prominent of these (Structures 1 and 2: Figure 5) form a contiguous earthwork no more than 40cm high, with prominent stones indicating the line of a wall foundation, in the shape of a double cell, apparently connected by an entrance in the south-west corner of Structure 1. The latter is larger, approximately 7m by 6m, with a possible entrance in its north-west side. Magnetometry gives a high reading towards its central east side, suggesting the position of an internal hearth. The only internal visible feature in Structure 1 is an upright stone, or orthostat, approximately 35cm tall (ringed in red on Figure 5). Photogrammetry by Peter McNally shows that a very small cross, no more than 5cm in



diameter, is incised into its west-facing surface (Figure 6: ringed in red). The stone, and/or the cross, may be secondary to the occupation of the building.

The upstanding earthworks may represent only the last phase of building on the site. Magnetometry data indicate the presence of a circular ring-ditch or drip gully which may belong to the visible structure or to a predecessor (Figures 7 and 8).

Examination of the geophysical images shows that a number of interpretations are possible, including multiple circular features overlapping (Figure 8) and a possible hearth in Structure 5. Only excavation will tease out the

complexities of the sequence, but one may reasonably infer that the farm settlement here was permanent and long-lasting and not merely the result of booleying practices.

Conventionally, by comparison with similar-looking structures in the northern uplands of England, such features would fit into a well-established typology of late Iron Age or Romano-British houses with



Figure 6: Photogrammetric image of standing stone in Structure 1. © Peter McNally

ancillary store rooms (Structure 2). There are no such comparable structures in the National Monuments Record for Donegal, although casual reconnaissance during this year's survey revealed a possibly similar settlement on Crockmore – the Isle's only other prominent hill) some 2km to the east. The local name Magheryard, High plain, is apposite.

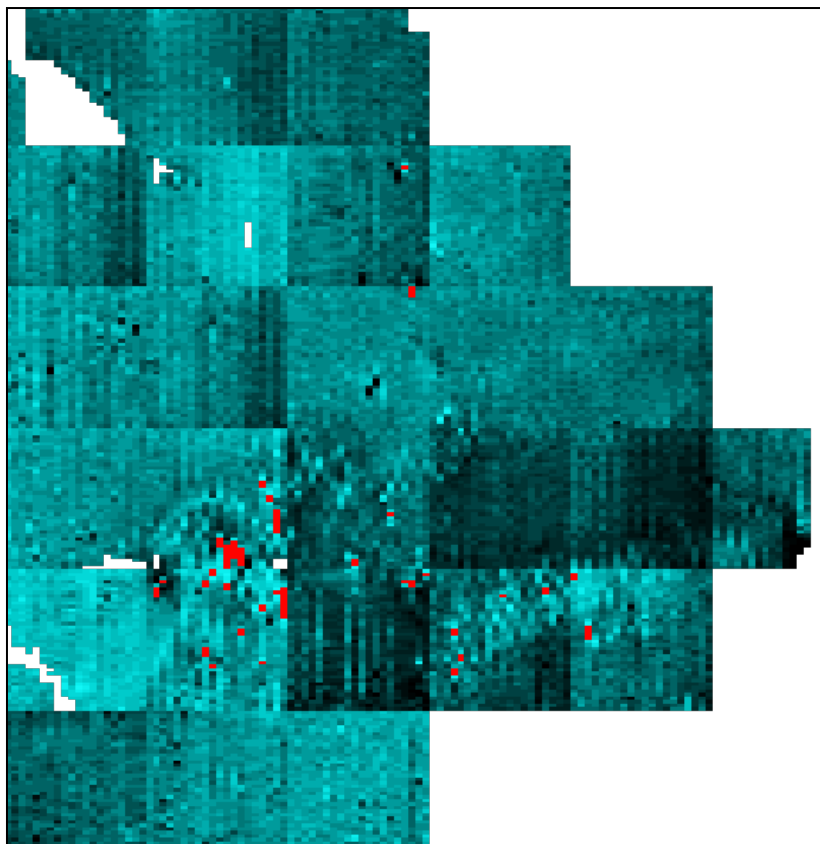


Figure 7: Magnetometry survey showing in red the likely hearth in Structure 1

Structure 5 (Figure 9), immediately to the south-west of Structure 1 and abutting Structure 2, is a flattish artificial platform cut into the natural slope and enhanced with a wall on its south-west side. It may represent a small stock holding area or provide a platform for a further circular domestic structure. A prominently visible stone forming part of a possible north entrance to Structure 5 (Figure 9) may be a fragment of standing stone – with a possible pair utilised as walling in Structure 3 (see below).

Structure 5 looks out over a broad, low-lying area of bog grass that surrounds the rocky bluff on which the farm structures sit (Figure 4). A raised area running to the south-east indicates the presence of a saddle, perhaps artificial, which may have led towards structures close to Enclosure 1 and the garth area indicated by the enclosure containing ridged cultivation to the east.

Structure 3 (Figure 10) forms a rectangle abutting Structure 1 to the north-east. Its south-west 'wall'

is formed partially by a low earthen bank and partially by a large squared-off stone tapering to a point at its north-west end. This appears to be a recumbent standing stone, perhaps

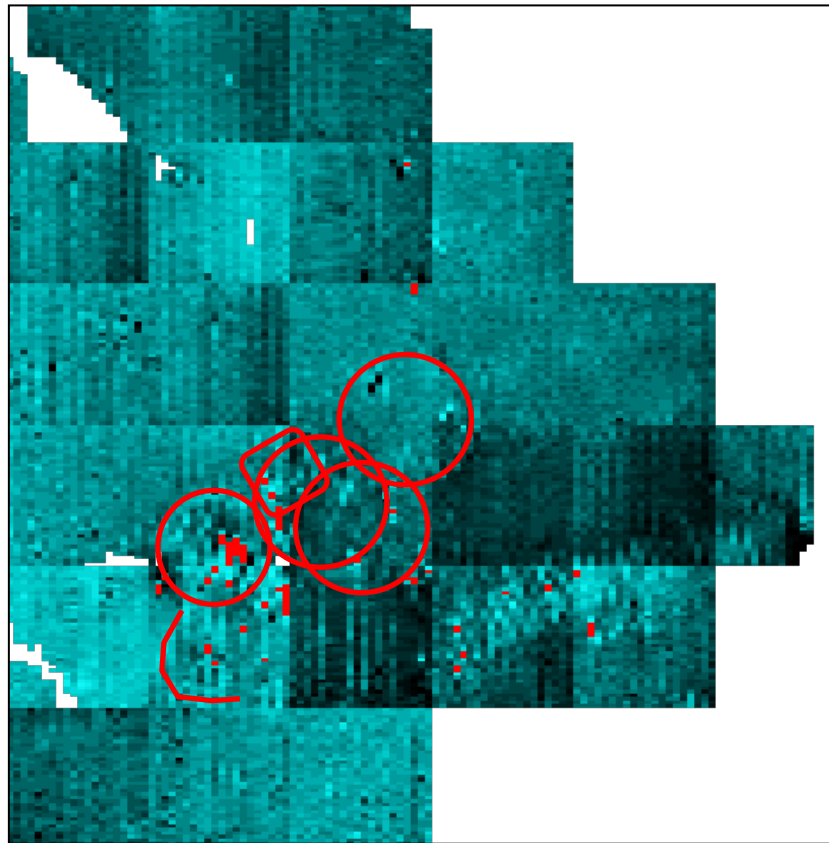


Figure 8: Magnetometry survey with interpretive overlay of identified structures

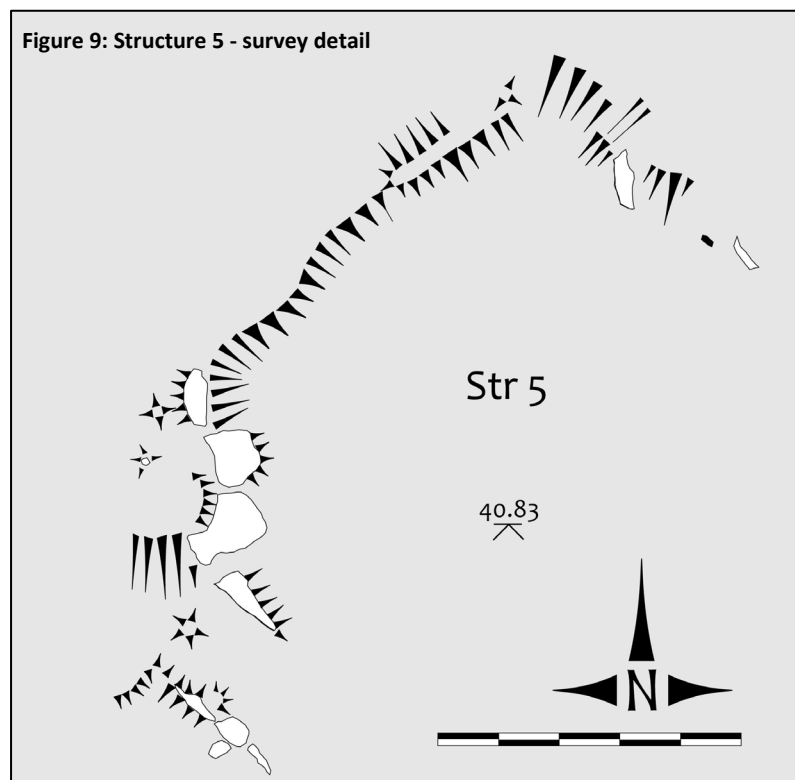


Figure 9: Structure 5 - survey detail

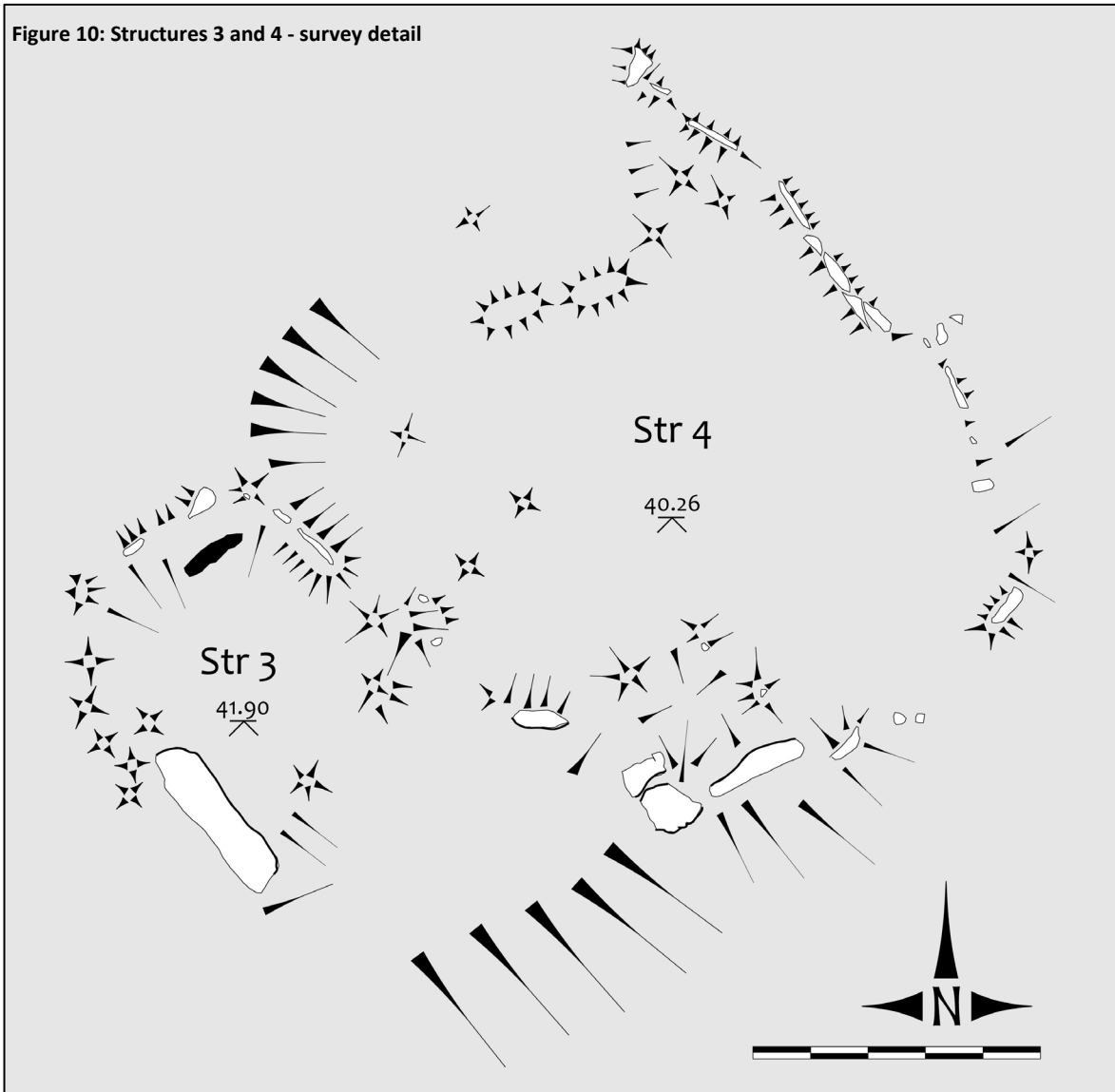
redeployed for structural purposes and a possible pair for that seen in Structure 5 (above). Internally, in the north-west corner of the structure, a large slab of schist (c. 1.5m long by 0.6m high) has been placed on edge. To the south-east the flattish platform on which the structure sits forms a distinct sloped edge falling away towards the boggy grass area.

Abutting Structure 3 to the north-east, Structure 4 (Figure 10) is a rectangular artificial platform with what



appears to be a sub-circular internal earth bank (and see possible interpretation of the geophysical survey in Figure 8), sitting above faint traces of cultivation to the north-east which run down to the watercourse. A stone and earth wall separates this area off from cultivation ridges to the west on the bluff.

The whole complex of structures indicates the settlement of a small extended family unit. But the visible remains may, as the geophysical results indicate, represent only the last phase of a settlement complex containing several more structural elements.



### Geophysical survey

The survey was conducted using a Geoscan FM256 Fluxgate Gradiometer in 10m-square grids with a sensitivity of 0.1nT in north-south parallel traverses of 0.5 m width, with 0.125m reading intervals, producing 1600 readings per grid. Processing was limited to zero mean

traverse and interpolation, with some de-stripping necessary to compensate for the rough terrain.

The geophysics grid was laid out using tapes either side of the site Total Station base line, with a false origin at 1000E/1000N and 20m grid points established on the 1000m E line. The unevenness of the terrain means that direct superimposition of the geophysics results onto the earthwork survey is impossible. Generally the readings were of a very low order, an effect of the thin soils containing little clay. The indications on the plots of annular features may reflect dug foundations or drip gullies of either the observed upstanding features, or of buried predecessors. Several interpretive schemes are possible, of which Figure 8 is one.

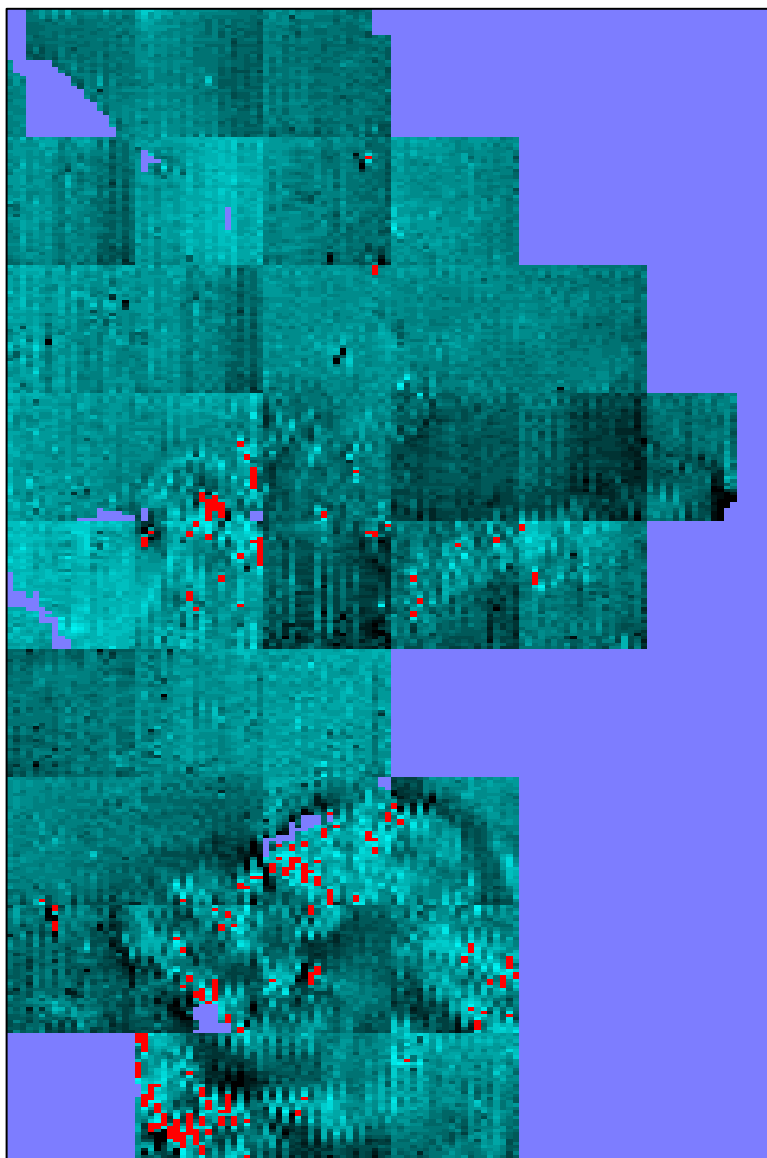


Figure 11: Geophysical survey showing the area immediately north-east of Enclosure 1

North-east of Enclosure 1 the geophysics plot shows relatively high anomalies, offering an image of a large sub-circular enclosure or, less likely, geological feature (Figure 11). Its outline seems to represent an excavated ditched (by a 'shug') corral containing an outcrop of rock enhanced by low stone and earth walls. Only excavation will determine if it forms a coherent set of structures. If nothing else, the survey demonstrates the value of conducting magnetometry in what may seem an unpromising landscape.

#### Further research

It is hoped that in future further earthwork and geophysical survey will be carried out both here and on the adjacent lands to the north covering the larger part of Craigawannia. More field

walls and apparently artificially flattened platforms await detailed mapping. An intensive contour survey of the structures already identified, along with photogrammetric drone

footage, would enable a detailed portrayal of the micro topography to be established. Subject to licence and relevant permissions, obvious potential exists to reveal the development and layout of the farmstead by excavation, perhaps as part of a long-term training programme. It represents a unique opportunity to write the narrative of an otherwise unrecorded period in the history of the Isle of Doagh and Inishowen, at the heart of the Magh Tochuír.

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