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In the outskirts of Belfast, 6.5 km from the city centre and 1.2 km S of Shaw's Bridge, off the Ballylesson road in the townland of Ballynahatty. Well signposted with a large car-park at the entrance.

Though it is close to Belfast, the Giant's Ring lies in open countryside, on a distinct plateau in a bend in the River Lagan. For the people of the city it has long been a favourite destination for a Sunday afternoon stroll or a summer picnic, but how many of its visitors realize how important this landscape was 4,000 years ago, and still is for archaeological research today?

The Giant's Ring is a huge circular enclosure, 180 m in diameter. The massive surrounding bank is 4 m high and 18 m wide, and the enclosed area is about 2.8 hectares. From the top of the bank there are magnificent views of the Lagan valley, Belfast and the hills beyond. Near the middle of the enclosure is a stone tomb, now denuded of its original covering cairn. It looks at first rather like a portal tomb, with a sloping dislodged capstone, but its plan indicates that it is probably a passage tomb.

Several excavations have been carried out at the Giant's Ring, in 1917, 1929 and 1954. Henry Lawlor examined the tomb in 1917 but found no evidence for its date. It is generally agreed that the tomb, the only survivor of an extensive passage tomb cemetery, is earlier than the ring, and that the earthwork enclosure was set out round it. The 1950s excavation showed that the bank was created by scraping up soil and stones from inside the area rather than by digging a well-defined ditch as might have been expected.

The Giant's Ring is the type of enclosure called by archaeologists a henge monument. It is not closely dated but a date of around 2000 BC is possible (Late Neolithic - Early Bronze Age). Its scale indicates that very substantial resources of time and effort were available to build the earthworks. Henge monuments are believed to have been regional or tribal meeting places, used perhaps for religious ceremonies, commercial gatherings or social events, but excavation has so far thrown little light on their exact functions.

The Giant's Ring was, however, only one element in a complex prehistoric landscape. In recent years Barrie Hartwell of the Queen's University of Belfast has been studying this landscape and revealing its complexities. From the 19th century there are records of megalithic tombs, standing stones and flat cemeteries in the fields around the Giant's Ring, but most of these were long ago destroyed without any investigation. Barrie Hartwell has, through air photography, discovered a rich range of cropmark sites in the arable fields around the monument and has carried out a series of excavations to establish the nature and date of some of these sites. To date the excavations have identified nine structures formerly unknown, the most notable of which are two Late Neolithic circular enclosures, dating from about 3000 - 2500 BC and located one inside the other. The oval, outer enclosure, over 90 m long, was delimited by a double line of massive wooden posts set in pits 2 m deep. Within this clearly demarcated area was an inner enclosure, 16 m in diameter, similarly constructed. An entrance in its circuit led through a planked façade to what may have been a mortuary platform, enclosed by four massive posts, where the dead could have been placed in security until the soft tissue had rotted or been scavenged (the process known as excarnation), the skeletal remains then being either inhumed or cremated elsewhere in the vicinity. The inner enclosure had then been ceremonially dismantled, burnt and buried, perhaps as part of a death ritual.



The impact of the Giant's Ring on the historic landscape must always have been recognised, if only because of its great size, and people not surprisingly attributed its building to a giant. The stone wall round the outer base of the bank was built in 1841 to protect the monument. An inscription facing the car-park commemorates its building by Lord Dungannon who 'earnestly recommends it [the ring] to the care of his successors'. In 1882 the Giant's Ring was one of only three northern sites in the schedule to the first Ancient Monuments Protection Act (with Navan Fort and the Mound at Downpatrick), and it has been in state care since the early years of the century.

Barrie Hartwell's research is allowing us to glimpse an impressive continuity of use of what he calls the 'ceremonial landscape' around the Giant's Ring during the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. The range of burial monuments recorded at Ballynahatty indicates that the area was a centre for ritual for perhaps a thousand years. Burial practices changed, but people continued to come to this ceremonial area to bury their dead, as their ancestors had done before them. The recent excavations also point to the land not having been under cultivation in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. Though the light soils are ideally suited to arable farming, it seems that the land was set aside from farming, again indicating a special status for the area. Though now farmed, the area is mainly open land with few buildings, and it is tempting to suggest that it has never ceased to be in some way 'special' in the eyes of the people of the Lagan Valley.

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*Hartwell, B, 'Ballynahatty -- a prehistoric ceremonial centre', Archaeology Ireland 5.4 (1991), 12-15;*  
*Hartwell, B, 'Late Neolithic ceremonies', Archaeology Ireland 8.4 (1994), 10-13.*