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AN EARLY BRONZE AGE BURIAL AT BALLYVEELISH, CO. TIPPERARY

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Introduction

Until recently evidence for prehistoric occupation in South Tipperary was comparatively sparse, with only a few documented sites and stray finds. It almost seemed that the area was devoid of settlement before the historic period.

However, in the aftermath of excavations carried out prior to and during the construction of the Cork/Dublin gas pipeline in 1981/'82, the picture has considerably changed.¹

Several sites were uncovered during the project which had hitherto no surface indications, and which only became apparent following extensive geophysical prospecting and trial trenching. Among other sites county Tipperary can now claim at least two Late Bronze Age habitation sites which date to about 700 B.C., and which are of a type which is rare in this country.

The subject of this article is an Early Bronze Age burial site which dates to around 1600 B.C. and was found at Ballyveelish, Co. Tipperary.² The burial was found adjacent to the Clonmel-Cashel road, three miles north-west of Clonmel, and the excavation took place between April and May 1982.

The immediate vicinity of the site is rich in archaeological remains. Within 200 metres of the site, excavations in 1981 had already uncovered the remains of a Late Bronze Age enclosure and a medieval moated site.

The Burial

Cremated remains were contained within an urn and were protected by a small slab-lined grave known as a polygonal cist. The grave was surrounded by a shallow circular fosse or ringditch. Postholes and slot trenches surrounding the cist are interpreted as the remains of a mortuary house. Almost the entire area of a circular enclosure was uncovered during excavation, (Fig. 1; Plate 1.) The enclosed area, which was 11 metres in diameter, was defined by a shallow ditch which was symbolic and presumably enclosed a sacred area. On average it was 1 metre wide and 65 cm deep. The fill of the ditch was in the main due to natural silting and was mostly comprised of a sandy material with charcoal pieces throughout.

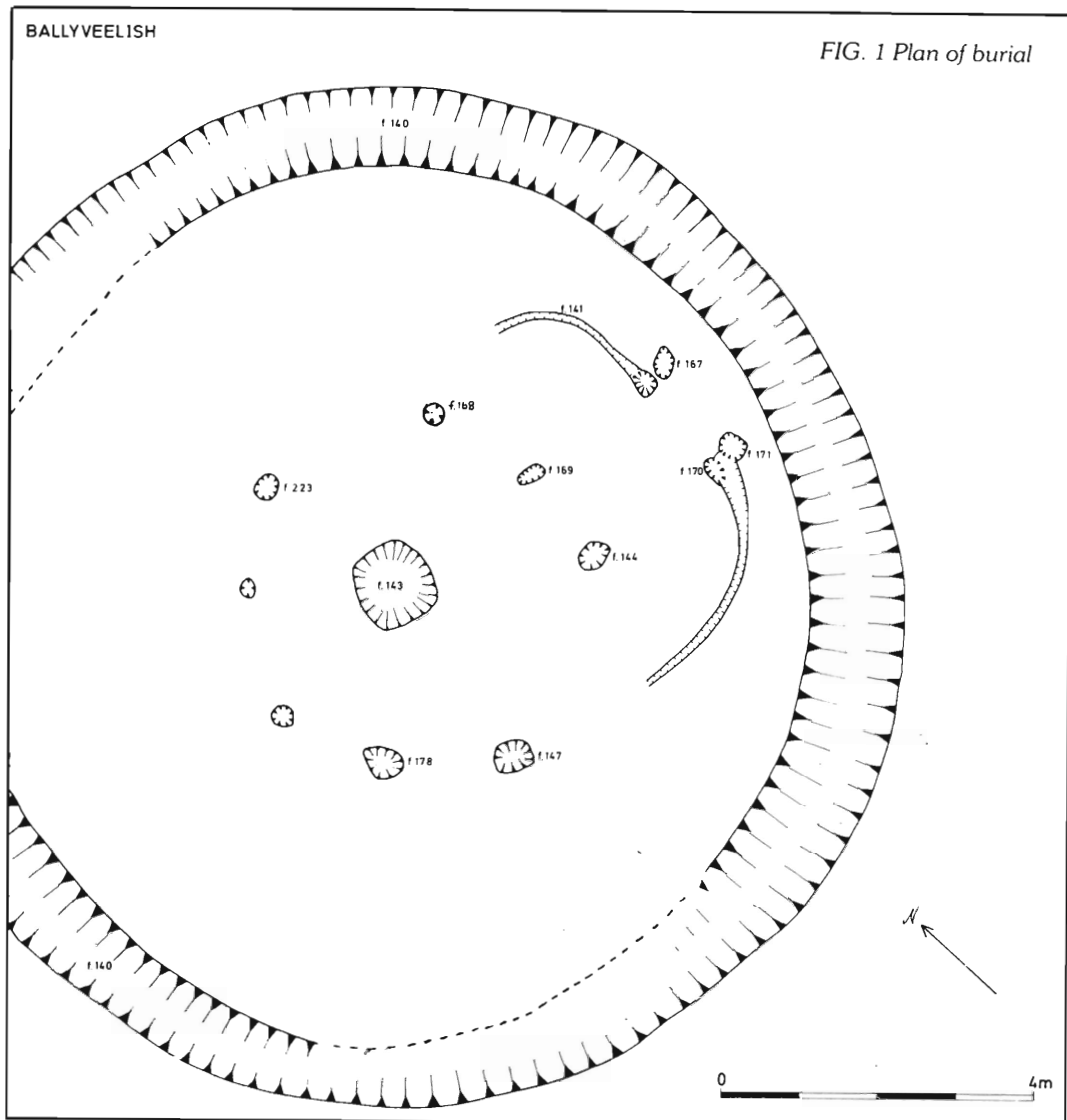
However, in the eastern section the fill was significantly different. Here, above a slight layer of natural silt, was a layer rich in charcoal or charred wood remains. The pieces varied between 20 and 30cm in length, and in places were recorded two and three on top of each other. These have been identified as willow and hazel, and may be part of the mortuary structure.

A C14 date of 1535 B.C. has been obtained from one of these pieces of charcoal. The only finds from the ditch were two fragmentary sherds of coarse pottery and some waste flint flakes.

The burial was in a simple polygonal cist grave which was positioned at the centre of the ringditch enclosure. These are small, slab-built graves of roughly circular form, generally sufficiently large to contain a cremation in an urn. (Waddell, 1970, 96.)

The capstones of the cist were uncovered 52cm below ground level. One of these was a well-made saddle quern.³ The grave measured 52cm east/west and 70cm north/south. The height from the floor to the underside of the capstones was 40cm.





The grave contents comprised a considerable quantity of charcoal and burnt soil, three pottery vessels, a plano-convex flint knife and a large amount of burnt human bone.

An encrusted urn and two pygmy cups were found in the grave. (fig. 3). Cremated burials in urns are a common feature of early bronze age burial practice. When found, the urn was crushed by the weight of the capstones. However, it has been possible to reconstruct the profile. The measurements are 30 cm in height and 30 cm in rim diameter. The vessel had originally been inverted over cremated human remains in the grave.

Of the two smaller vessels which accompanied the urn, one was badly broken. Both were small delicately-made vessels not exceeding 5.5cm in height. One was profusely decorated with impressed linear and inverted V shaped designs.

Their function in the burial is not clear. Various suggestions range from their being containers of food-offerings to their being used to burn aromatic substances during the actual cremation. The only other find from the cist was a small well-made flint knife often called plano-convex or slug knife.

A full report on the human remains from the cist has been prepared (O'Sullivan et al, 1987). The bones had been cremated and placed with some of the remains of the funerary pyre in the cist grave. Some of the bone was covered by the urn; more was deposited unprotected in the grave.

There were some 4500 fragments of bone, representing the remains of at least five individuals — two adults and three children. There was evidence to suggest that some of the bones in the grave represented the remains of a large dog or wolf (McCormick, 1987). The age and number of individuals interred in the grave is strongly suggestive of a family grouping.

Mortuary House

The outline of a timber building was evident within the enclosure (Figs. 1 and 2). It surrounded the cist and was defined by a circle of postholes and two arcs of foundation trenches. The overall dimensions of the house were 7 metres east/west and 5.1 metres north/south.

The structure was divided into two compartments: (1) An area circular in plan, and defined by a ring of postholes in which the cist was slightly off centre; (2) An entrance compartment, or porch, which was D-shaped in plan and formed by the two foundation trenches. The circular compartment was positioned centrally within the ringditch.

The angles of incline of the postholes suggested that they held vertical posts; see reconstruction, fig. 2. Some of the postholes contained their original stone packing. The postholes varied considerably in diameter and depth.

FIG. 2 Reconstruction of mortuary house

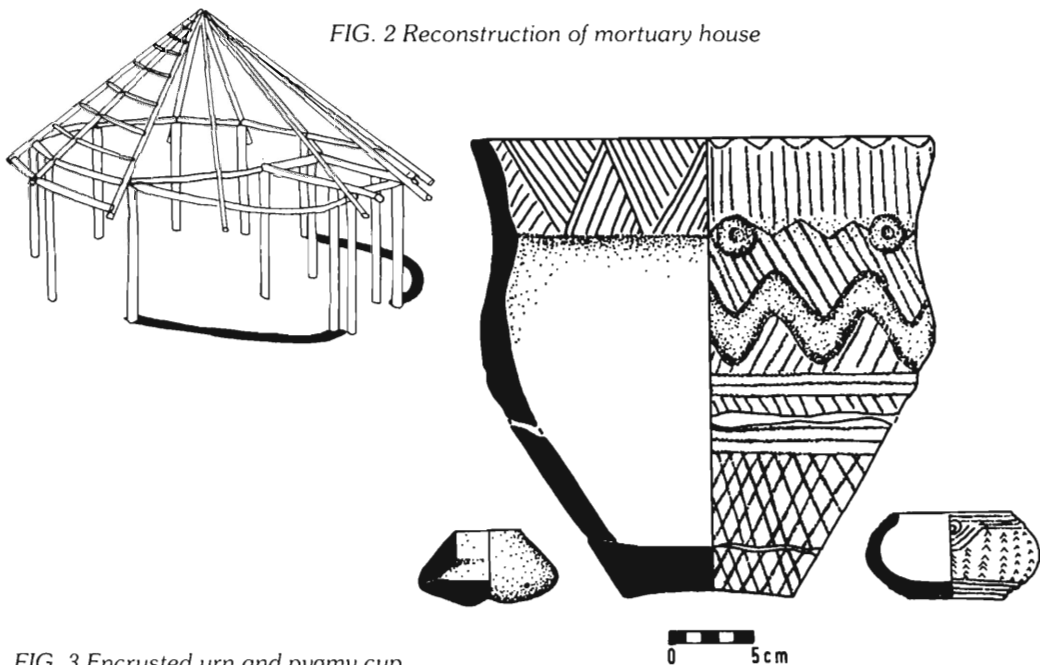


FIG. 3 Encrusted urn and pygmy cup

The D-shaped entrance area or porch, which extended from the south/east side of the structure, measured 5 metres north/south and 2.4 metres east/west. The perimeter was defined by two narrow foundation trenches which extended from the entrance in an arc towards the circular compartment. The north end of the foundation trench (feature 141) could not be traced as far as the circular compartment. It may be that the trench was disturbed by a later phase of activity.

The foundation trenches were filled with charcoal-enriched soil, which made them clearly visible against the yellow/brown subsoil prior to excavation. The entrance, which faced north/east, was set 1 metre to the north/west of the encircling ringditch.

This structure is most likely best interpreted as a mortuary house. From the number and depth of the postholes, the mortuary structure appears to have been quite substantial. It is likely that it was similar in construction to contemporary domestic dwellings. Although substantial enough to have been used as a dwelling, the timber structure did not produce any evidence that it had ever been used as a domestic site.

There were very few finds from the area, and there was no evidence of a hearth from the house or its immediate vicinity. The function appears to have been exclusively associated with the cist grave.

Close parallels for the type of structure over the cist grave at Ballyveelish are difficult to find in Britain or Ireland. A hut close to the main passage grave mound at Newgrange may be interpreted as a mortuary house (O'Kelly, 1982, 77). However, the construction details and the dating differ from the Ballyveelish example.

The Brenig Valley excavations in North Wales have produced evidence for at least two mortuary structures (Lynch et al, 1973). Brenig 42 contained a central rectangular structure surrounded by a ditch. Brenig 40 also contained the remains of an urn burial and some form of timber structure. Again, these differ from the Ballyveelish example in that they were less substantial.

The function of these mortuary houses must be a matter of pure speculation "Burial, ritual, ceremony and religion were inseparable in the lives of the third millennium population". (Burgess 1980, 48). "Timber structures were recorded beneath some Dutch Stake Circle Barrows. These are usually interpreted as the remains of temporary mortuary houses erected to protect the grave prior to the completion of the mound". (Lynch et al, 1973, 23).

Alternatively, the houses may have been specifically built for some ceremonial function directly associated with the interment of human remains. The latter appears to be the most likely explanation for Ballyveelish, where there was no evidence of a mound covering the grave.

At both examples from the Brenig Valley there was evidence to suggest that the mortuary houses had been burnt down. At Ballyveelish the slot trenches of the entrance area were rich in charcoal, and the ringditch immediately adjacent to this contained a considerable quantity of charcoal and ash. This strongly suggests that the timber structure had also been burnt down.

Two radiocarbon dates have been obtained from this phase of activity at Ballyveelish. These place the site in the earlier part of the Bronze Age. A sample of wood charcoal from the encrusted urn gave a date of 1630 ± 50 B.C. (GrN 11657) while a sample from the fill of the ringditch returned a date of 1535 ± 40 B.C. (GrN 11659).





PLATE 1 Site during excavation.

Conclusion

The burial at Ballyveelish is interesting in several respects. Bronze Age burials in general are considered as single burials. The interment of five individuals at this site is strongly suggestive of a family group, and the evidence indicates that they were all buried at the same time. It poses the question of what sort of calamity might have resulted in the deaths of these five individuals.

Given the virtual absence of mortuary houses from the Irish archaeological record, the Ballyveelish example is of particular interest. This, together with the fact that the builders took the trouble to enclose the burial with a shallow ringditch, indicates the importance of ritual activities surrounding death in the lives of the Bronze Age inhabitants of this site.

The archaeological remains conjure up a tantalising picture of ceremonial surrounding the burial of these people. However, the lapse of over 3,500 years since the event means that we can only speculate as to their nature and complexity.

FOOTNOTES

1. Copies of the pipeline publication may be purchased from the Archaeology Department, UCC.
2. Exact location: OS 6" scale sheet no. 77, Co. Tipperary; barony of Iffa and Offa East; townland of Ballyveelish North; parish of Newchapel; Map ref: W 12.5cm, S 24cm; Elevation: 76.73 metres above OD.
3. These saddle querns were used to grind corn. The presence of this example in the grave may be taken to indicate the presence close by of an Early Bronze Age habitation site.

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