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A Bronze Age Ditched Enclosure at Ballyveelish, Co. Tipperary

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Introduction

The Bronze Age in Ireland is typified by a wealth of accomplished metalwork and a thousand or more burial sites found all over the country. Ancient cooking places or *fulachta fiadh*, also dating to the Bronze Age, are recorded in most counties, especially in Munster, and are definite remains of Bronze Age activity. The relative scarcity of settlement sites of the period is more likely to be a reflection of the inability of archaeologists to detect the settlements in the absence of fieldwork and large-scale excavation.

Bronze Age houses were largely constructed of ephemeral materials such as posts, stakes, wickerwork and skins, and once decayed these leave very little trace overground. Only in a few instances have stone footings or stone walls survived from the period. Though settlements must have been associated with the burial sites, most of the burials have been excavated under rescue conditions where there is little time or finance for large-scale investigations. Allied to this, present-day land use, under pasture, contributes to the lack of visibility of burial and settlement sites, where ground may lie undisturbed for several generations.

The construction of the Cork-Dublin natural gas pipeline in 1981-82 provided a valuable opportunity to discover settlements in areas which hitherto appeared to be almost devoid of prehistoric sites. Work prior to and during the pipeline construction, which involved extensive geophysical prospection, trial trenching and large scale excavation, has greatly increased our archaeological knowledge of these areas.¹This is particularly so of County Tipperary, which is now on record as having two new and important Later Bronze Age settlement sites.

One of these, at Ballyveelish North, is the subject of this article. The site was found adjacent to the Clonmel-Cashel road, c 3 miles north-west of Clonmel.²Excavations in the immediate area uncovered three sites: a medieval moated site (Ballyveelish 1), a Later Bronze Age enclosure (Ballyveelish 2) and an Early Bronze Age burial (Ballyveelish 3). [Fig. 1]

Ballyveelish 2

[Figs. 1-4, Plates 1 and 2]

Prior to the excavation there was little to indicate anything of archaeological importance in the area of Ballyveelish 2. A series of trial trenches uncovered features which led to a fuller investigation of the site. An area 35m x 27m was opened within the proposed pipeline construction corridor. The excavation uncovered a settlement site which was enclosed by a ditch or fosse.

The enclosed space was roughly rectangular in plan, with estimated overall dimensions of 47m x 25m. It was not possible to investigate the entire enclosure since some of it lay outside the pipeline corridor. The surrounding ditch was substantial and there was an entrance into the interior of the enclosure on the eastern side.

When the topsoil was removed it was apparent that considerable disturbance had taken place on the site. A natural spring (feature 87) had been infilled with stones. Any trace of occupation had been removed and a sterile horizon of boulder clay with no archaeological features was recorded directly

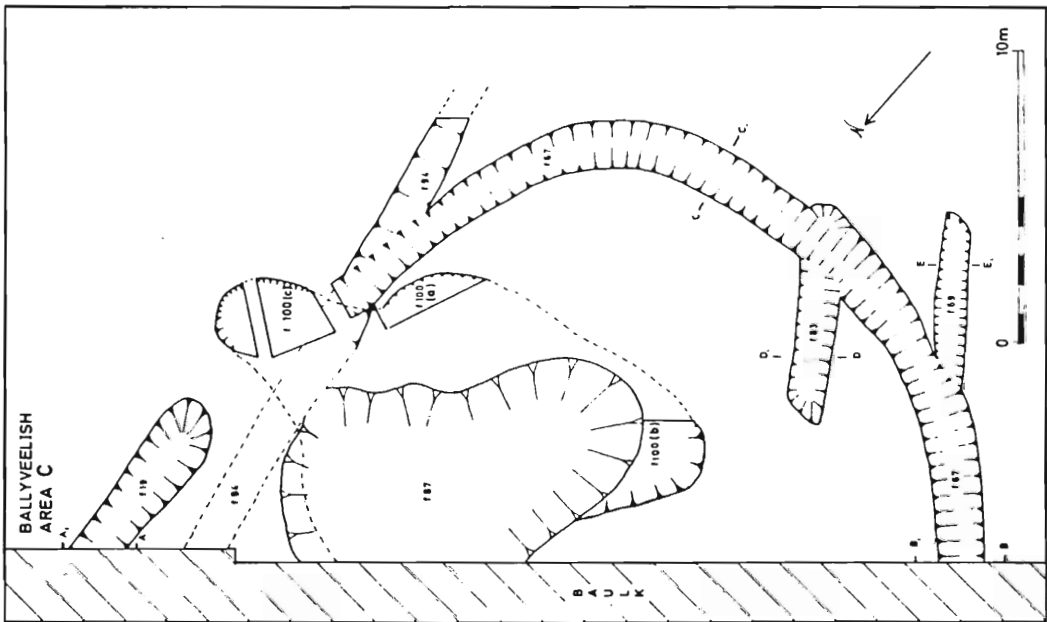


BALLYVEELISH



Fig. 1





BALLYVEELISH 2

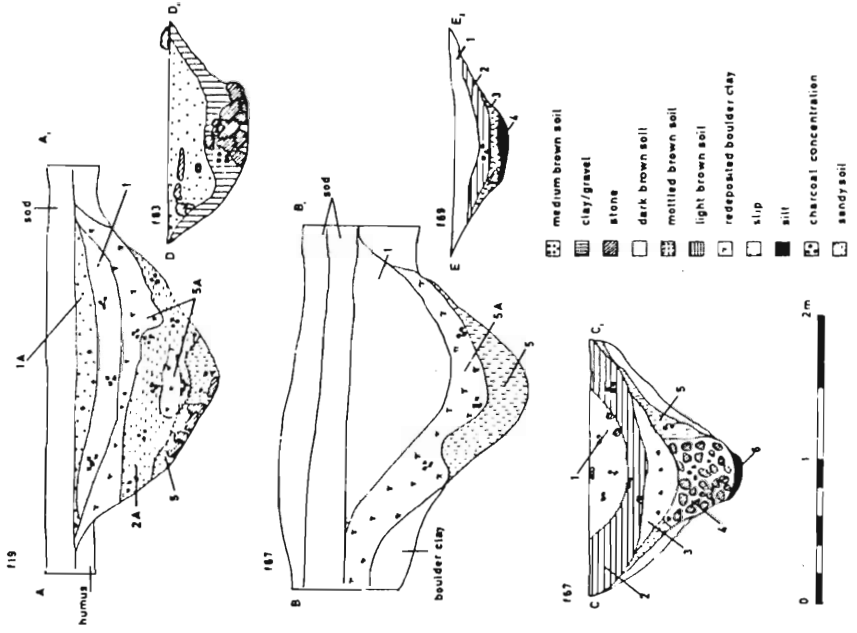


Fig 2



beneath the topsoil. It is also likely that the ditch fill was removed or truncated. There was no evidence of an associated bank. A stone drain (feature 94) and two gullies (features 69 and 83) are likely to be the result of recent agricultural activity.

The Ditch (features 19 and 67)

The composition and dimensions of the excavated portions of the ditch were fairly uniform. The maximum width was 2.4m on the surface and 50cm at the base. The sectional profile was roughly v-shaped [sections A-A1 and C-C1]. The maximum depth recorded was 1.2m. In the absence of any occupation layer from the excavated part of the enclosure, the composition of the ditch is the only evidence available to interpret the nature of the settlement. Section C-C1 is fairly typical of the enclosing ditch. It consists of the following layers:

Layer 1: Dark brown soil with occupation refuse in the form of charcoal, bone objects, animal bone, stone objects and pottery. This layer produced two radiocarbon dates of 600±60bc (Grn11658) from charcoal samples. These calibrate between 980-390 and 1130-810 BC, respectively (calibration after Pearson *et al* 1986).

Layer 2: Light brown soil with some charcoal and animal bones.

Layer 3: Similar to layer 1 with similar finds.

Layer 4: Stony soil that is probably the result of natural slip into the ditch.

Layer 5: Boulder clay slip.

Layer 6: Mud silt. Finds included a fragment of a lignite bracelet and pottery similar to that from layers 1 and 3.

The sectional profile C-C1 suggests that the uppermost layers were lopped off when the site was disturbed in modern times.

The entrance to the enclosure consisted of a break in the ditch. The ditch was simply rounded off. No formal entrance features were recorded. The southern terminal of the ditch was obliterated by features associated with the spring and stone drain, making it impossible to determine the width of the entrance.

Features 87 and 100

Prior to excavation this was obvious as a basin-shaped hollow. During the excavation it became clear that feature 87 was made up almost entirely of irregularly-sized stones. It was not possible to fully excavate it because of the constant percolation of water from what appears to have been a natural spring.

This feature covered an area 9m north-south and 8m east-west and was excavated to a depth of 2m. The sides sloped inwards gradually. Find from the fill included a considerable quantity of 17th-19th century Buckley type ware, 8 fragments of rotary querns, modern iron objects and animal bones.

Secondary features 69, 83 and 94

Two trench-like features, 69 and 83, were found extending into the surrounding ditch. Their date and function are uncertain. Stratigraphically both were later than the primary ditch. Feature 94 was one of a network of stone-built drains at Ballyveelish. The drain was set in a trench 1.5m wide and 1m deep. Feature 94 was stratigraphically later than the ditch. Apart from that no dating evidence was recorded.



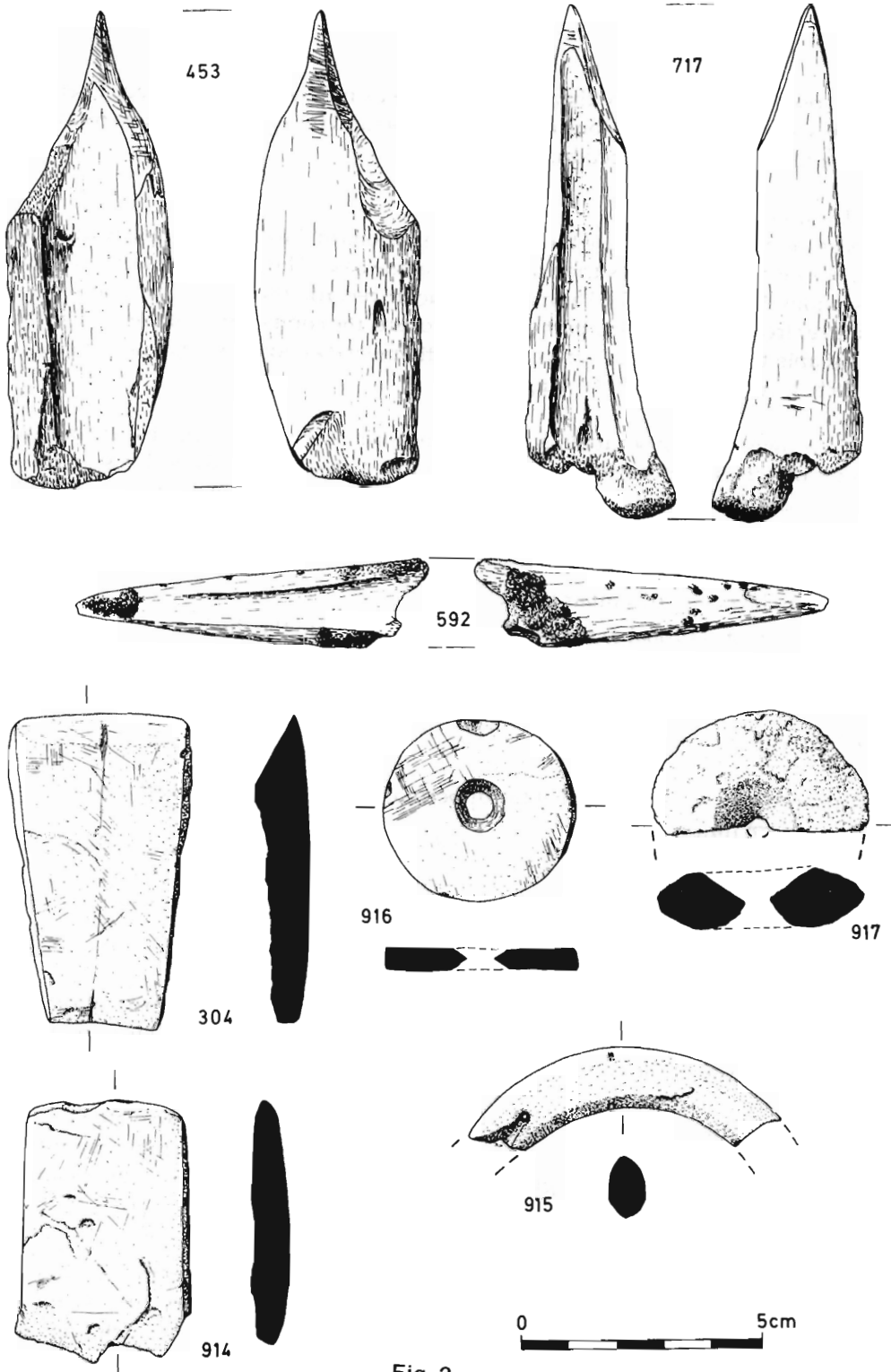


Fig 3

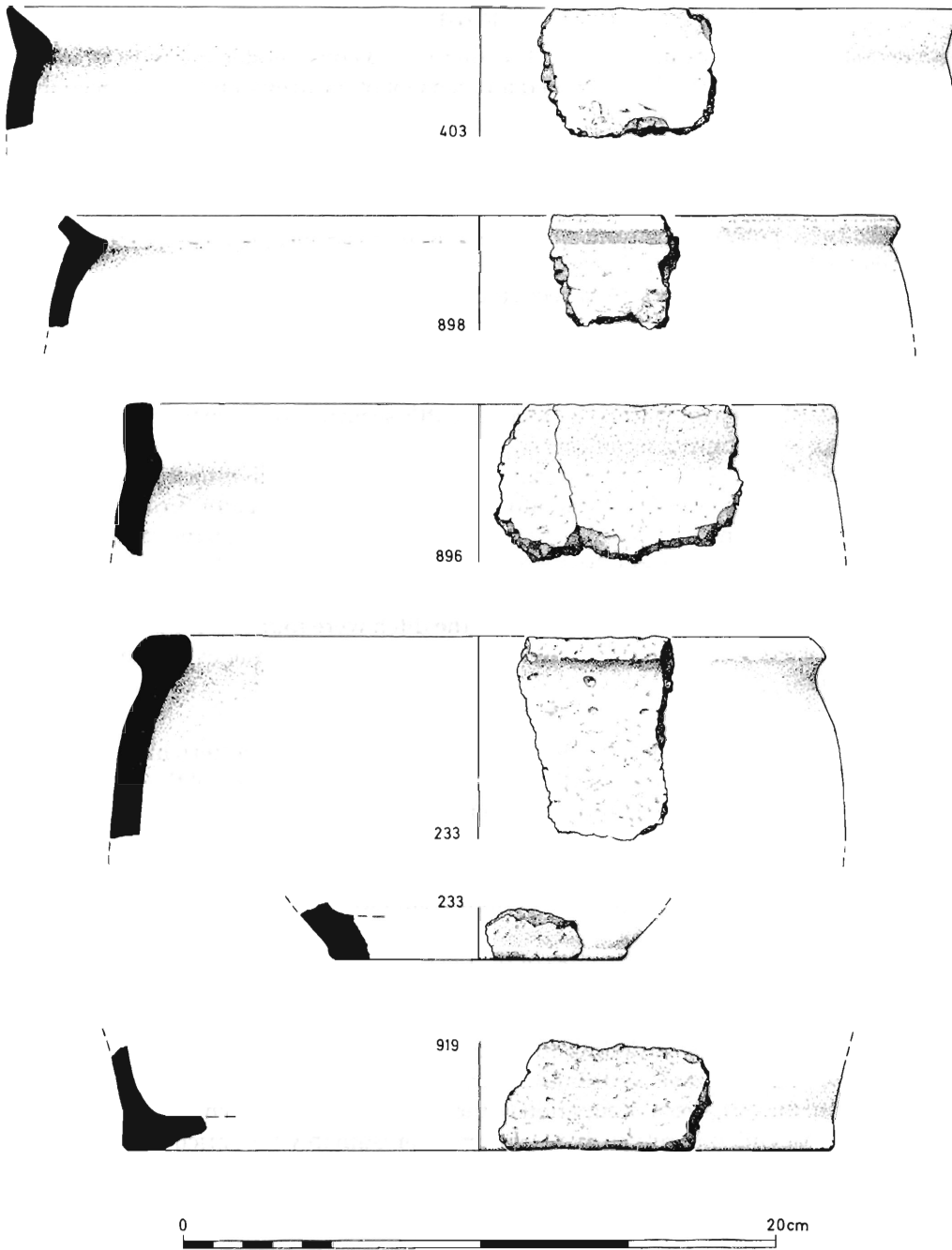


Fig 4



Finds

These included stone, bone and pottery, together with a considerable quantity of animal bone. The contents of the ditch were also examined for archaeobotanical evidence. A full account of these findings is published elsewhere.¹

Pottery (Fig. 4). A considerable amount of pottery was found in the ditch fill. It appears to have been a range of coarse domestic wares similar to Lough Gur Class 2, which is common on Neolithic and Bronze Age sites (Cleary 1987, 35).

Bone (Fig. 3). Three points made from split animal long bones were recorded in the ditch — Nos. 453, 717 and 592.

Stone (Fig. 3). Seven stone artefacts were recovered from the ditch. These included two stone chisels, nos. 304 and 914; two spindle whorls, nos. 916 and 917, a flint flake, a fragment of a lignite bracelet, no. 915 and a chert object of unknown function.

Animal bone remains. The animal bones from the ditch consisted of discarded food refuse, most of which had been broken for marrow extraction. Cattle seem to have been the predominant source of meat with pig contributing significantly.

The data from Ballyveelish suggests that the cattle-dominated livestock economy, typical of much of the Early Christian period, had already developed by the Later Bronze Age. However, unlike the evidence from the Early Christian period, it appears, based on the cattle age/slaughter patterns, that a dairying economy had not yet developed, at least at Ballyveelish (McCormick 1987, 26-29).

Charred plant remains, Soil samples taken from the ditch were found to contain grains of barley, some of which were of a twisted six-row type. There was also some evidence that wheat was grown (Monk 1987, 30-31).

Interpretation

The occurrence of a quantity of butchered animal bone and coarse pottery in the fill of the ditch appears to indicate that the site was used for habitation. The composition of the ditch may indicate that there was a break in the occupation of the enclosure.

Layers 4 and 5 were a natural slip infill. Layer 3 was a deposit of dumped occupation material. Layer 2 was a deposit of light brown soil which contained very few finds. Layer 1 also contained dumped occupation material. The paucity of finds from Layer 2 may be due to a temporary break in occupation.

It is apparent from the sectional profiles of the enclosing ditch that the occupants of the site did not clear out any silt to maintain the depth of the ditch. On the contrary, Layers 1 and 3 suggest that the ditch was disregarded and allowed to fill with domestic refuse. It may be that the ditch was originally only of token value to delimit the settlement site.

The adjacent spring may have contributed to the silting up of the ditch and is likely not to have been conducive to the long-term occupation of the site. The hollow in which the spring is located was deliberately backfilled in relatively recent times, presumably for agricultural purposes.



Plate 1 *Ballyveelish 2 after excavation.*

Plate 2 *Section through the enclosing ditch at Ballyveelish 2.*



Conclusion

The enclosure of Ballyveelish 2 is a significant addition to the archaeological record in a number of ways. Its location in Co. Tipperary is all the more important because of the comparative scarcity of prehistoric sites in that area. The fact that there were little or no surface traces of the site prior to excavation is an indicator of the importance of archaeological monitoring of large-scale earth-moving operations, even in areas where there is no apparent archaeology.

The enclosure is a welcome addition to the growing range of sites documented for the Irish Bronze Age. Although the evidence in Ireland for settlements of this period is still quite sparse compared to the numbers of contemporary sites in Britain, it is emerging that there is a considerable variety in settlement types. Hut clusters are recorded on sites such as Curraghatoor, Co. Tipperary (Doody, 1987 and in preparation) and Downpatrick, Co. Down (Pollack and Waterman, 1964). To what extent these may be similar to village-like communities as at Itford Hill in Sussex (Burstow and Holleyman 1957) remains to be seen.

A range of radiocarbon dates for the *fulachta fiadh* now places them firmly within the Bronze Age. Their numbers suggest that, rather than being specialised features related to hunting, they were perhaps an integral part of settled Bronze Age society. From the Later Bronze Age, lakeside sites such as Lough Eskragh, Co. Tyrone (Williams, 1978) and Ballinderry 2, Co. Offaly (Hencken, 1942) become common.

Hilltop settlements, perhaps the beginnings of hillforts, are an important aspect of the settlement pattern of the closing stages of the Bronze Age. Some of these must have been of considerable size and, as in the case of Rathgall, Co. Wicklow (Raftery, 1976) could have been permanently occupied industrial and settlement sites.

Enclosed sites of a variety of types are also known. At Cullyhanna Lough, Co. Armagh (Hodges, 1958) a circular pallisade enclosed an area which contained a circular house. A sturdily built stone house which was oval in plan was found at Carrigillihy, Co. Cork (O'Kelly, 1951). It was surrounded by a yard and oval-shaped stone enclosure. Similar structures were excavated at Aughinish Island, Co. Limerick (Kelly, 1974).

Bronze Age houses have been recorded at Lough Gur, Co. Limerick on Knockadoon hill. The hill itself was almost surrounded by the lake and can in that sense be regarded as an enclosed or protected site. Recent excavations on Knockadoon of three Bronze Age houses were post-built structures situated on a small platform on the hillside (Cleary, forthcoming). Other Later Bronze Age houses at Lough Gur had once more substantial remains, and sites such as G and H had at least stone footings to the walls.

Ballyveelish 2 is unique in the Irish archaeological record, as there is no known parallel in this country for a rectangular ditched enclosure of Later Bronze Age date. This is hardly surprising given that the ditch, which even during the period of use of the site would have been slight, would leave very little surface remains once it had silted up. Detailed aerial photographic reconnaissance under ideal conditions, together with geophysical prospection, would undoubtedly increase our knowledge of the occurrence of such sites.

FOOTNOTES

1. A full account of the pipeline excavations may be had in Cleary, R.M. *et al*, eds., 1987; *Archaeological Excavations on the Cork-Dublin Gas Pipeline, 1981-'82*.
2. Exact location: OS 6 inch scale sheet no. 77 Co. Tipperary; Barony of Iffa and Offa East; Townland of Ballyveelish North; Parish of Newchapel; Map Reference: W 12.5cm, S 24cm; Elevation 76.73 above OD.



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