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PROSPECT HILL, KILLACOLLA, GLIN, CO. LIMERICK

A Cist Grave, Field Boundaries and Field Cairns

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INTRODUCTION

Archaeological features including a cist grave, pre-bog field boundaries, a *fulacht fiadh* and low cairns were uncovered during land reclamation on Prospect Hill in the early summer of 1989. The discovery was reported to the Archaeology Department, UCC, and the site was visited by R. M. Cleary. The cist had been disturbed and the contents removed. No trace of bones was found in or around the grave.

A short excavation was planned to examine the cist and to investigate the nature of the field boundaries and cairns. This was undertaken during a three-week period in September of 1989. The work was financed by a grant from the Office of Public Works.

The Site (figs. 1 and 2)

Prospect Hill is located approximately three miles east of Glin in county Limerick.¹ The hill rises to a height of 449' above OD and commands extensive views of the Shannon estuary to the north and of the Limerick plains to the south. The soil on the hill is mainly a Gley covered by a 50cm growth of peat. The bedrock is Namurian Grit which had fractured in many places along east-west bedding planes.

The landowner, Mr. Gerald Fitzgerald, undertook land reclamation involving deep ploughing with a view to converting the land to pasture. In the process several areas were graded and levelled by mechanical digger. During this activity, in addition to the cist grave, a system of pre-bog field boundaries was uncovered. These traversed the hill in a roughly north-west/south-east direction.

Several small cairns were evident on the hilltop. Some of these were apparently recent in date while others, being covered by a peat growth, were obviously of some antiquity. A *fulacht fiadh* was exposed at the base of the hill on the south-east side. This is now levelled, but the displaced mound of burnt stone remains *in situ*.

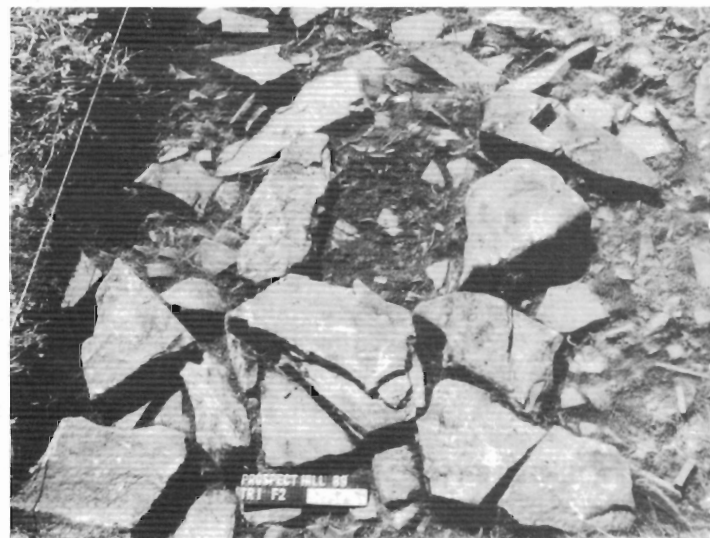
In all, six trenches were opened. Trench numbers 1, 3, 4 and 5 were in the area around the cist grave; trench 2 was opened to examine a section of pre-bog wall, and trench 6 to investigate the nature of one of the low cairns.

The Cist (features 1 and 5, figs. 2, 3, and 4; plates 1-3).

The cist had come to light when approximately 1 metre of soil was removed from the area by mechanical digger. Although badly disturbed by the time of excavation, it is described by the landowner as having been roofed in an A-like fashion by thin slabs of stone. The capstones and the contents of the cist had been removed by the time the cist was first visited, and further interference displaced some of the sidestones before the excavation commenced.

The cist was roughly rectangular in plan and the sides were made up of six thin sandstone slabs. The long axis was aligned in a roughly north/south direction. It measured 83cm north/south and 43cm east/west. It was 32cm in maximum depth. What remained of the fill was a stone-free organic soil. It was possible to outline the pit (feature 5) which was originally dug to accommodate the cist. This was oval in plan and measured 124cm north/south x 79cm east/west and was 39cm deep.





Top left — Plate 1: Trench 1, cist; hearth, feature 2 in background. Top right — Plate 2: Cist.

Centre left — Plate 3: Pit, feature 5. Centre right — Plate 4: Hearth, feature 2.

Bottom left — Plate 5: Possible cist, feature 4, trench 4. Bottom right — Plate 6: Levelled field cairn.

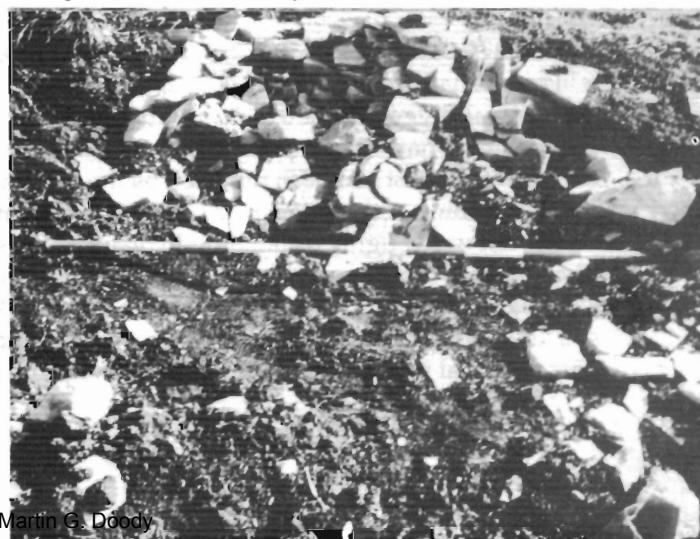




Plate 7: Length of pre-bog field wall.



Plate 8: Section through pre-bog field wall.

No artefacts or bones were recorded during the excavation. Furthermore, an examination of the soil which had been removed from the cist when it was discovered did not produce any finds.

Hearth (feature 2, figs 3 and 5; plates 1 and 4)

A rectangular setting of stones was recorded 2 metres south of the cist in trench 1. This consisted of stones laid flat on the ground in a rectangular plan and with some traces of burning. It is most likely to have been a hearth site. It measured 30cm north/south x 70cm east/west internally and was 11cm deep. The base was shattered sandstone which appeared to have been subjected to burning. There were no finds.

To examine the possibility of a cairn around the cist, trenches 3, 4 and 5 were opened to the south-east. No evidence of a cairn was uncovered; however, a possible cist (feature 4) was uncovered in trench 4, and the remains of a field wall (feature 7) were recorded in trenches 3 and 5.

Possible Cist (feature 4; fig 3; plate 5)

This feature was uncovered at the southern end of trench 4. The immediate area had been graded by mechanical digger and was consequently badly disturbed. The exposed surface was mainly the local Namurian Grit which had fractured along east-west bedding planes.

Feature 4 was an irregularly shaped feature in the bedrock. The internal dimensions were 58cm east/west x 50cm north/south at the base and 70cm north/south x 80cm east/west at the surface. Some of the sidestones were set on edge, notably on the western side. The base was solid bedrock. The feature was covered by a large flat slab. The fill was a stone free organic soil. There were no finds.

The Field Cairns (figs. 2 and 6; plate 6)

According to the landowner, a number of low peat-covered mounds were in existence on Prospect Hill prior to the land reclamation. These are now for the most part levelled. Although several cairns in the vicinity were obviously the result of recent field clearance, some of them were covered by a 50cm growth of peat.

Trench 6 was opened on the site of one of the disturbed cairns. At the time of excavation this had been almost completely levelled; however, according to the landowner it had been roughly circular in plan with a diameter of c 4-5 metres and a height of approximately 1 metre above the surrounding

bog. It was made up of sandstone blocks with a large slab roughly 1 metre square topping the cairn.

Although weather conditions prevented the complete excavation of this feature, nothing was encountered to suggest that it was anything other than a field clearance cairn which had been thrown up prior to the onset of the peat growth. The basal layer of stones rested on solid bedrock in the northern part of the trench. A single find of a broken hone stone (fig. 8, E546:1) was recorded in the levelled cairn fill, and the association with the cairn is not certain.

The Pre Bog Field Boundaries (fig. 2 and 7; plates 7 and 8)

During the land reclamation a series of pre-bog walls was uncovered. When the peat was removed these were apparent as spreads of sandstone blocks, with an average width of approximately 4 metres. The best preserved stretch of wall ran in a roughly north-west / south-east direction and could be traced over a distance of more than 140 metres.

At least two further walls joined this at roughly right angles. Another section of wall was recorded in trenches 3 and 5 (feature 7). This also extended in a north-west / south-east direction. The distance between the parallel lengths of wall was 38 metre. Trench 2 was opened to examine a section of one of the walls.

A section was excavated across the wall at a point where it was least disturbed (fig. 2, trench 2). At this point the wall collapse measured 4 metres in width. The construction was almost entirely of large to medium-sized sandstone blocks of a type which is abundant on the hillside. Some of the stones measured over 50cm across.

The wall was covered by a layer of peat, which, although badly disturbed, was originally approximately 50cm thick (fig. 7, layers 1 and 2). The section was made up of a relatively undisturbed wall core which was 1.28 metres wide and survived to a maximum height of 49cm (fig. 7, layer 3). This probably represents the original width of the wall.

The boundary appears to have been constructed on the old ground surface (fig. 7, layer 5), except where a shallow trench was dug through this, perhaps to serve as a foundation or to mark out the line of the proposed construction. This feature measured 44cm in width and was dug through the old ground surface to a depth of 11cm. The wall had been knocked down or had collapsed, and this was apparent as a built-up of material (fig. 7, layer 7) which tapered out on either side of the wall core. The collapse of the wall had evidently occurred some time prior to the initial peat growth as a second old ground layer (fig. 7, layer 6) overlay the collapse to a maximum thickness of 9cm.

A shallow gully (feature 6) was recorded 60cm to the west of the wall. This measured 52cm in width and was 19cm deep. It was U-shaped in profile and the fill was a silty soil with some stones. It underlay the collapse from the wall and appears to have cut the pre wall old ground surface (layer 5). As only one section was taken through the field boundary, it was not possible to determine if feature 6 was a consistent feature running parallel to the wall or if, perhaps, it represented an isolated or unrelated feature.

Finds (fig. 8)

Two stone objects were recorded during the excavation.

E546:1. This is a portion of a hone stone which was found with the levelled cairn material in trench 6. It measures 12.5cm in length, 6.4cm in width and 3.4cm in maximum thickness. One surface is flattened from use and is bevelled at both sides. The stone is Namurian Grit.

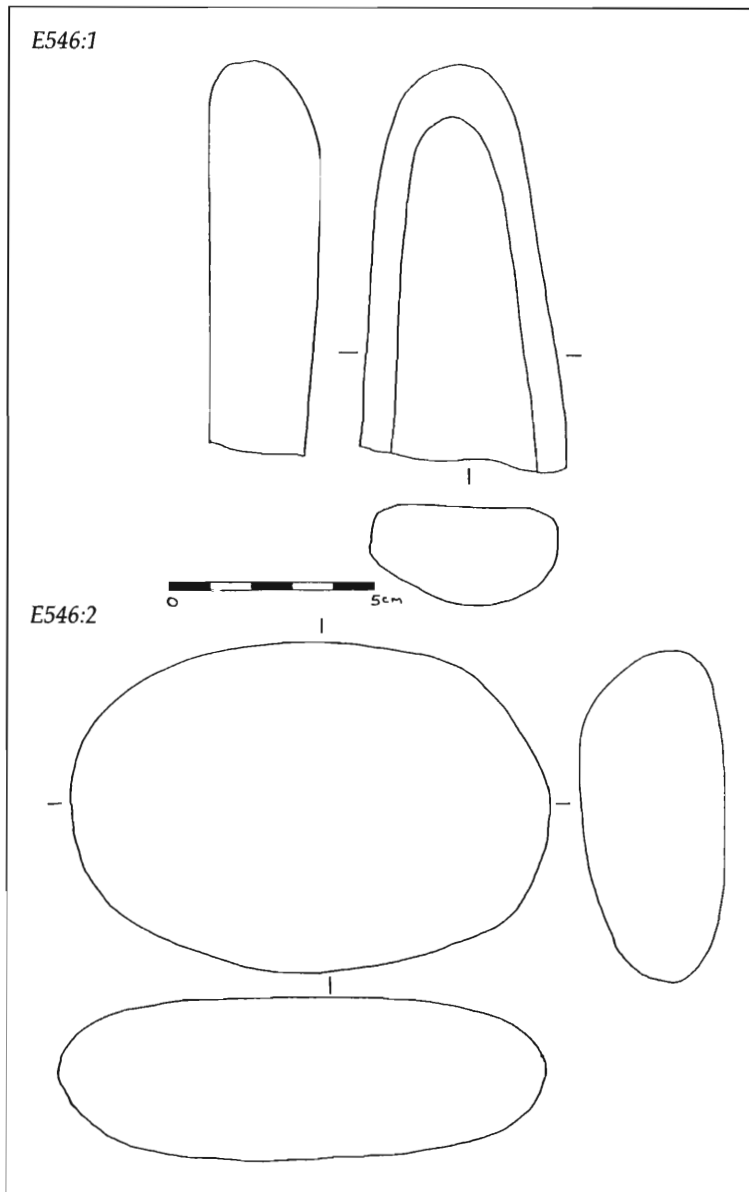
E546:2. This is an oval-shaped object which may have been used as a hammer stone. There are signs of wear at one end. It measures 14.7cm. in length, 10.3cm in width and 5.1cm in maximum thickness. It was found close to the cist in trench 1. The stone is Namurian Grit.

DISCUSSION

The Cist

The cist at Prospect Hill falls into the category of short cist as defined by Waddell (1970). The construction is fairly typical except in the nature of the capstones, which, although destroyed by the time the site was visited, were described by the landowner as having been erected over the grave in the manner of a pitched roof. In a study of the bronze age burials in Munster by the present author (Doody 1986) no other grave was seen to have this feature, but then much of the sample was not found by scientific excavation.

The fact that the grave was devoid of bones is not an unusual occurrence. In the same study (*ibid*, 156-157) graves at Curraghbinny, Coolhill, and Moneen, Co. Cork; Cush, Co. Limerick; Ballynagranna, Co. Tipperary; and Killeenagh Mountain, Co. Waterford (among others) were similarly lacking in bones. It is possible that inhumed bones had been present in the cist and that these had subsequently dissolved in soil conditions unsuitable for the preservation of bones. This was the explanation put forward by Sean P. O Riordáin to



account for the absence of bone at Rathjordan barrows (O Riordáin 1948).

Had there been cremated bone in the cist it is likely that this would have survived. The possibility of token graves or cenotaphs must be considered in at least some cases. Notable in this regard is the vase urn burial at Coolhill, Co. Cork, where the urn contained no bones but only a fist-sized lump of fired clay which arguably stood in for the body of some individual whose remains were not recovered after perhaps an accidental death, by drowning for example. In several societies cenotaphs with or without replicas of the dead were erected for those who died by drowning etc. (Herskovitz 1938, 384). In view of the position of the grave on Prospect Hill overlooking the Shannon Estuary, this possibility should not be dismissed out of hand.

The Cairns

The land at Prospect Hill is strewn with stone. This represents a serious obstacle to farming today, and undoubtedly the same was true in ancient times. There is evidence of clearance cairns of recent date on the hill. The most likely explanation of the peat-covered cairns is that they represent attempts at field clearance at a time before the initial growth of peat in the area.

The Pre Bog Field Boundaries

Although much of the field boundaries are now destroyed, sufficient evidence was uncovered during the land reclamation to suggest the presence of an extensive system of land division on the hill in ancient times. The exact nature of the system is not now clear, although the closeness of two of the walls (38 metres apart) might perhaps suggest quite narrow strip fields.

It was a tradition in the area to plan the line of a field boundary by first turning the sod along the line of the proposed fence. This may explain the trench, which was apparently dug prior to the construction of the wall. The overall picture is one of careful land management at the time when the walls were built.

Date

No evidence was recovered from the excavation to date any of the features recorded. The *fulach fiadh* at the base of the hill, two other possible examples nearby and a standing stone some short distance away testify to the presence of Bronze Age activity in the immediate area. Such a date would be acceptable for the cist grave.

All that can be said regarding the date of the cairns and the field boundaries is that they were constructed (and in the case of the latter had collapsed or been destroyed) prior to the initial growth of peat on the hill.

FOOTNOTE

1. Exact location: OS 6 inch sheet for Co. Limerick no. 18, 28.2cm from the west, 47.2cm from the south. The height above OD is 449'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to R. M. Cleary, who undertook the initial investigation of the site, for her help in preparing this report. I also wish to thank the landowners, Messers Gerald and William Fitzgerald, for their co-operation during the excavation.

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