TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL
1992

IRISH PREHISTORIC MORTUARY PRACTICE
Baurnadomeeny Reconsidered

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Introduction

In the excavation report of the wedge tomb at Baurnadomeeny, near Rear Cross in the west of Co. Tipperary, the late Professor M. J. O'Kelly (1960, 111) drew attention to comparisons between certain features of the site and the monument at Millin Bay, Co. Down (Collins and Waterman 1955). The purpose of this paper is to suggest that these comparisons, particularly in the evidence for the nature of mortuary practice on the two sites, have wider implications for our understanding of how people used these and related sites.

Normally comparison between megalithic monuments is made on the basis of architectural features and the archaeological deposits and cultural assemblage found on the sites. Eogan (1986, 220), for example, has drawn attention to the morphological links between Baurnadomeeny and passage tombs. But central to any understanding of the role of this type of archaeological site must also be an examination of how they were actually used from the evidence remaining on the ground.

An important theoretical approach suggests that it is through human actions and performance that the structure of society is produced and reproduced, or indeed altered (e.g. Bourdieu 1977, 81; Sahlins 1987, xi-ii; Thomas 1991, 180). This occurs both through every-day life and also through the rituals or formal events and practices, often in specific locations, that mark particular turning points in society, such as death. Hence funerary practices will give an insight into contemporary social structures and relations, although it may be an idealised version of social reality that is portrayed in them.

Looking at megalithic tombs, we should remember that they may have been in use for considerable periods, and so their meaning may have focused not only on funerary activity but also on ritual surrounding the remains of the dead — the ancestors (Barrett 1988, 31-2). If sites show evidence for a similar set of mortuary activities, then this clearly is an important basis for comparison between the communities who were carrying out these practices.

Mortuary activity at Baurnadomeeny

The wedge tomb at Baurnadomeeny (Fig. 1) had a portico or ante-chamber separated from the main chamber by a slab set transversely across the width of the tomb. This would have completely sealed off access to the main chamber once the lintelled roof was in place (see reconstruction drawing in Shee Twohig 1990, fig. 36; description in O'Kelly 1960 and summary in de Valera and Ó Nualláin 1982, 84-6). There was no closing slab at the eastern end of the main chamber, and access to the main chamber may have been from this end (O'Kelly 1960, 110). Within the portico there was a small cist built against its southern side and two pillar stones supporting a roof slab, one of which formed part of the cist.

The cist was constructed prior to the placement of two sill stones at the entrance to the portico and further blocking outside it. There was an outer walling set close to the sides of the tomb and a series of buttress stones set at right angles to the outside of this walling. Two revetments were found within the cairn, and its round shape was defined by a kerb. In the portico one of the
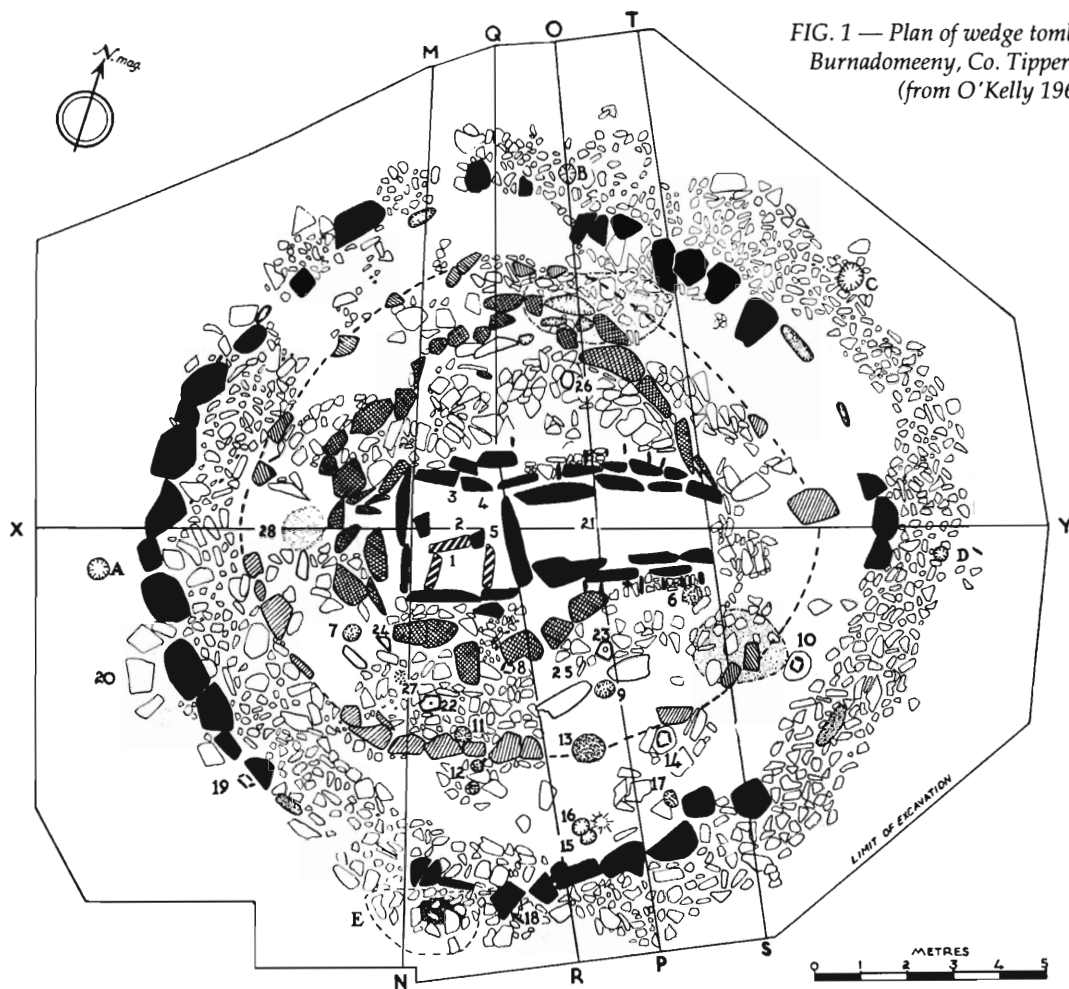
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FIG. 1 — Plan of wedge tomb at Burnadomeeny, Co. Tipperary (from O'Kelly 1960).

orthostats had incised markings; two stones with cup-marks were found in the base of the cairn and other stones had a pocked surface.

What is particularly interesting about the human bone deposits is that they occur within the tomb structure, beneath the cairn and outside the kerb of the cairn (Fig. 2). The main burial chamber had been dug out prior to excavation, and there were only a few fragments of cremated bone (21 — bone deposit numbers here given as in O'Kelly 1960 and on Fig. 1) found, but in the portico there was a deposit of cremated human bone (1) on the paving stones of the cist, accompanied by sherds of coarse pottery, and another (5) just to the east of the cist covered by small flags and boulders.
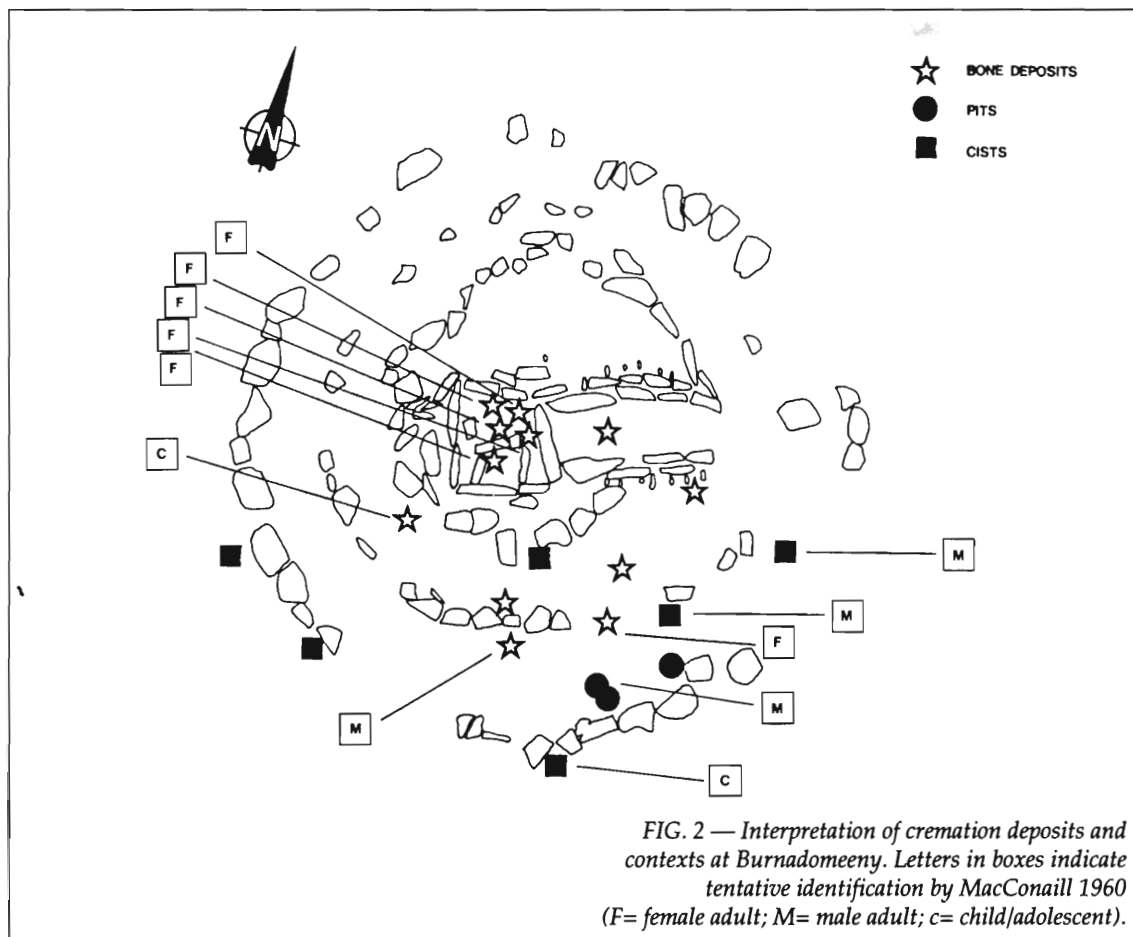
Three other small deposits of bone (2-4) were placed on the packing boulders which were used to support the north side of the cist. From the stratigraphical evidence it appears that these three latter deposits were put in place after the first two.

Outside the tomb structure on its southern side were a series of 'burials', predominantly defined by the presence of deposits of cremated human bone. There were 15 in all (O'Kelly 1960, 96-101, 110-11); five scatters of cremated bone on the ground surface beneath the cairn (7, 9, 11, 12, 13), six small cists set in pits dug into this old or original ground surface (8, 10, 14, 18, 19, 20); three pits in the same

context contained cremated bone (15, 16, 17) and a 'burial' was placed close to the southern wall of the tomb relatively high in the cairn material (6); this appears to have been inserted after the cairn was competed. With the exception of this latter deposit and three of the cists, all the other placements of cremated bone predate the building of the outer part of the cairn but their position appears to be defined and delimited by the presence of the tomb and the elaborate construction within the inner revetment consisting of the blocking at the west end, the outer walling, buttress stones, small slabs between the buttresses and a bank of clay.

Three of the cists lie outside the kerb of the cairn. One of these is covered by a displaced kerb stone and the other two by stones probably taken off the cairn. It seems highly probable that these three cists postdate the completion of the cairn.

There is an interesting contrast between the deposits / scatters of relatively clean cremated bone found within the tomb structure and on the original ground surface to the south and the deliberate mixture of bone, soil and charcoal found in the cists and pits in the same area. One of the cists (8) contained no trace of bone; in another case the cist was placed above the cremation deposit (10), and in another the fill between the sides of the pit and the cist also clearly contained small chips of cremated bone (14). This mixed deposit of cremated bone and soil (and in some cases charcoal) occurred in five of the cists, including the three outside the kerb.

FIG. 2 — Interpretation of cremation deposits and contexts at Burnadomeeny. Letters in boxes indicate tentative identification by MacConaill 1960 (F= female adult; M= male adult; c= child/adolescent).

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Identification of individuals or age and sex from this type of deposit is very difficult, as pointed out by MacConaill in the excavation report (1960, 114). Given the small quantities of bone in many of the 'burials', it is also possible that the same individual's remains may be represented in more than one of the deposits. For example, MacConaill suggests that all of the deposits (1-5) within the portico could represent adult females. This, however, could be one individual (allowing for the stratigraphical distinctions between the deposits) or alternatively might represent more than one (two to five).

Similarly, in the seven other instances where some information could be gleaned from the deposits (see Fig. 2), MacConaill tentatively indicated that in four cases (10, 12, 14, 16) these might represent adult males, an adult female in another (13) and sub-adolescents / adolescents in the other two deposits (7, 18). While these may represent a number of adults and juveniles (Shee Twohig 1990, 55-6), it has to be borne in mind that perhaps only a few individuals are present. On the other hand, in each of the deposits it would appear that only the (partial) remains of one individual is represented.

Baurnadomeeny and Millin Bay compared

The details of the Baurnadomeeny evidence have been presented at some length because they are of particular importance in showing the deposition of human remains in different kinds of contexts on the same site. They take on a wider significance when compared to those from Millin Bay (Collins and Waterman 1955) (Fig. 3). What is interesting in comparing the two sites is not only that there are features that can be directly compared, but also that there is a similar series and sequence of activities.

On the other hand, there are definite contrasts between the sites in the way these activities were carried out. For example, the cremation deposits in cists outside the central long cist at Millin Bay were of clean cremated bone, unlike the deposits in the cists and pits at Baurnadomeeny. Perhaps one way of viewing the two sites is to suggest that we are seeing two variations on a recognised theme of mortuary practice in which the emphasis shifted from the placement of human bone in a tomb structure to the formal deposition of cremated bone outside the tomb.

The burial evidence from Millin Bay has recently been discussed (Cooney 1992, 137-40). Here it is intended to draw out the main points of interest in relation to Baurnadomeeny. There is a broad similarity in the structural and behavioural sequence on the sites. At Millin Bay the long cist and small cist to the south west of it were placed to the west of a pre-existing dry-stone wall, within an oval setting of slabs supported on the exterior face by a bank of shingle. This area was covered by a low mound of shingle and flagstones sealed with clay.

Either before or after the construction of this mound an outer setting of individual standing stones was constructed and eight small cists with associated baetyls were placed in the ground between the outer setting and the inner structure. Four of the cists contained unaccompanied cremation deposits, and there was also one uncisted cremation deposit. The cremations were of single adults, with one exception consisting of an adult male and female together. This outer area was covered by a low mound of sand.

At Baurnadomeeny the sequence of tomb construction, cremation deposit placement and completion of the cairn were seen as a continuum, and it can be suggested that the same was the case at Millin Bay. A specific parallel can be made between the three axial stones placed on and emphasising the long axis of the wall, the long cist and the cairn at Millin Bay (Collins and Waterman 1955, 18-9) and the fact that the largest stones of the kerb at Baurnadomeeny appear to have been placed to mark the orientation of the tomb with the completed cairn (O'Kelly 1960, 108).

There is also a striking parallel in the orientation of activity on the sites. On both sites the cremation deposits in or on the ground are deliberately placed to the right of the putative entrance
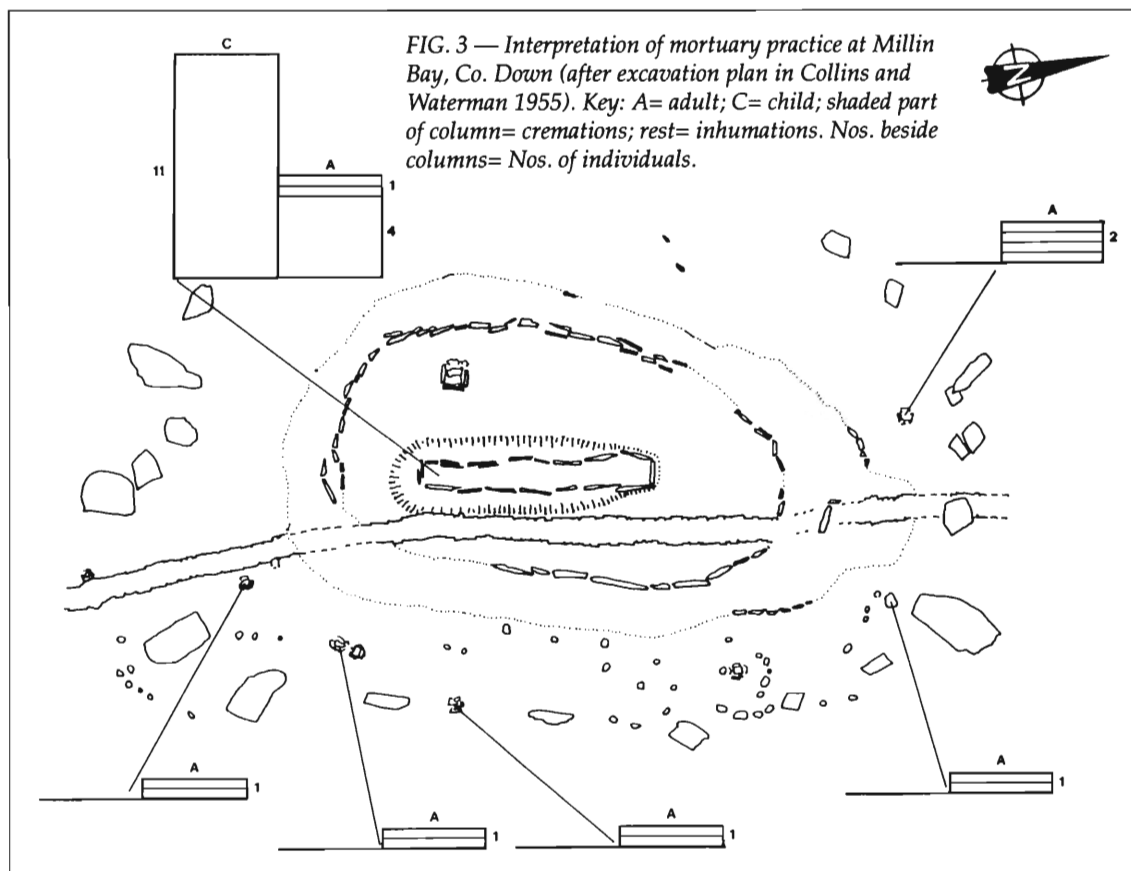
to the tomb structure. This suggests that there was an established pattern of movement and deposition rather than that the deposits were placed at random.

Looking at the tomb structures on the sites, the 'entrance' areas in both cases were used for deposition of human remains. At Millin Bay there is the group inhumation deposit, including the remains of at least 15 individuals (seven children, four adolescents and four adults), with the cremated remains of one adult male at the southern end of the long cist and at Burnadomeeny there are the cremation deposits in the portico. The importance of providing specific structures to receive human remains is seen in the cist inside the portico at Baurnadomeeny and probably in the infilled cist outside and to the south west of the long cist at Millin Bay.

It is clear that in the central area of each site we are looking at the final result of what may have been a varied series of activities. In broad terms, an integral part of this final act was a closing-off and blocking of access to areas which had been previously used for the deposition of human remains. Hence there was the placement of the roof over the long cist at Millin Bay and the infilling of the wider 'chamber' end of the structure and the sealing off of the portico at Baurnadomeeny with the sill stones and blocking stones and the addition of a cairn / mound to the central areas.

A final point of comparison is the occurrence of decoration on stones at both sides. This is a much more common feature at Millin Bay where 64 decorated stones were found, with decoration occurring on stones in all the major structural components of the monument (Collins and Waterman 1955, 28-43).

FIG. 3 — Interpretation of mortuary practice at Millin Bay, Co. Down (after excavation plan in Collins and Waterman 1955). Key: A= adult; C= child; shaded part of column= cremations; rest= inhumations. Nos. beside columns= Nos. of individuals.

Discussion

Having described some of the complexity of mortuary practice on the two sites, what does it all mean? In the excavation reports the authors commented on the fact that the sites combine elements of the megalithic and multiple cist/pit burial traditions (Collins and Waterman 1955, 49-56; O'Kelly 1960, 110-1). To generalise, they encapsulated the switch from a form of mortuary practice dominated by communal deposits within a monumental structure to predominantly individual, sometimes token, cremation deposits placed in specific graves or on the ground.

In chronological terms this change could be viewed as something that occurs within the developed Neolithic, say around 3000 BC, and the emphasis on grave and individual can be said to be the major characteristic of the burial record in Ireland for the rest of the prehistoric period, although collective deposition is continued. On the other hand it should also be stressed that there is evidence from a number of passage tombs that the first burial deposits placed on the sites were individual burial deposits (Eogan 1986, 135-6), preceding the deposition of collective cremation deposits, and that the celebration of particular individuals in death by the construction of tombs of the Linkardstown and related type was going on in the Tipperary area from at least 3500 BC (e.g. Manning 1985, 80).

But more significantly, if the sequence of activity at Millin Bay and Baurnadomeeny can be seen as single processes, as argued by the excavators in both cases (Collins and Waterman 1955, 55; O'Kelly 1960, 108), we are seeing the changes in mortuary practice actively being brought about by the human actions, events and performances taking place at the sites. In turn this reflects changing attitudes to role of the dead and the use of these sites.

One way of describing the changes taking place is to see them as a transition from an emphasis on a monument which could be re-entered and bones deposited or shifted in rituals giving respect to the ancestors to one where we are seeing the remains of individuals placed in a grave — the final stage in a complex funeral process (Barrett 1988, 39-40). Greater emphasis was being placed on the dead person retaining an identity in death, even if in some cases their physical representation in the earth was only a token one. At the same time this representation puts more emphasis on the finality of death and the separation of the dead from the living. In this context it is important to stress the continuity in the use of the two sites. The transition described above is legitimated by being carried on in the same place and with respect to traditional forms of mortuary practice and architecture. The past was used to serve changed purposes.

In the case of both sites, and most other Irish megalithic tombs, the evidence that we have consists of a secondary stage in burial practice. We do not know where the disarticulated bones at Millin Bay were primarily buried as individual corpses or where the cremation of the bones at Millin Bay and Baurnadomeeny took place.

There is a clear difference in practice between the deposition of clean cremated bone and the deliberate mixture of cremated bone, charcoal from the funeral pyre and earth in the ground, as happened in cists and pits at Baurnadomeeny. What is interesting about this latter practice is that it is becoming recognised as a characteristic of Middle Bronze Age mortuary practice in Ireland, as is the deposition of sherds of pottery with the bone (Grogan 1988, 154) which occurs in the cist within the portico at Baurnadomeeny. This point is made because it stresses the long time-frame within which elements of the mortuary practice at Millin Bay and Baurnadomeeny were current. It is certainly not possible to see a straight chronological change, and people in different parts of Ireland at different times had different strategies and practices for the treatment of the dead (cf. Thomas 1991, 107). Thus at Baurnadomeeny and Millin Bay we can see the elements that bring us back to the passage tomb tradition of the Neolithic and forward to mortuary practice in cemeteries of the established Bronze Age.

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It is perhaps appropriate to end by stressing the complexity of mortuary practice during the Neolithic and Bronze Ages in Ireland with reference to a site which, while not a megalithic structure, has practical affinities within Millin Bay and Baurnadomeeny. This is the earthen enclosure of final Neolithic date at Monknewtown, Co. Meath (Sweetman 1976). The burials in cists and pits along the perimeter of this site have similarities with those at Baurnadomeeny (Grogan 1989) and Millin Bay, and included a cremation in a Carrowkeel pot — the ceramic classically associated with passage tombs. At Tara a Carrowkeel bowl was used as a container for cremated bone placed just outside the passage tomb but prior to the construction of the mound (Eogan 1986, 135). At Monknewtown the Carrowkeel pot literally served, and was deliberately used, as the basis for a very different mortuary practice within a very different kind of monument.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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