

Bronze Age Settlements in Co. Tipperary: Fifteen Years of Research

By Martin G. Doody

Introduction

As recently as the early 1980s there was little or nothing known of Bronze Age settlements in Co. Tipperary. When excavations began at the settlement site at Ballyveelish near Clonmel in 1981, so bleak was the archaeological record in this regard that there were no similar sites in the area with which to compare it. Co. Tipperary was by no means unique in this regard. In Ireland as a whole, if we exclude high status sites (which of their very nature cannot have been representative of the general settlement pattern) such as Emain Macha, Co. Armagh (Lynn 1986), Rathgall, Co. Wicklow (Raftery 1976), and lakeside sites such as Ballinderry Co. Offaly (Hencken 1942) and Lough Eskragh, Co. Tyrone (Williams 1978), Bronze Age settlement sites are very much under-represented in the archaeological record.

The reasons for this dearth of settlements in areas which we know were extensively occupied during the Bronze Age, based on the widespread occurrence of Bronze Age burials (Waddell 1990) and finds of metal artefacts (Eogan 1983), are many. It may be attributed largely to a lack of visibility on the one hand, sites such as Curraghatoor, Co. Tipperary (Doody 1987) being largely constructed of timber and, in the absence of large scale open excavation, remain undetected. Secondly, until recent years there has not been a concerted effort aimed specifically at locating such sites.

In the fifteen years since the excavations at Ballyveelish our knowledge of Bronze Age settlements in Co. Tipperary has been greatly enhanced. This has largely been due to the archaeological excavations carried out prior to and during the construction of the natural gas pipelines in the 1980s and to the establishment of the Discovery Programme. The Cork-Dublin and Limerick-Waterford gas pipelines (Cleary *et al.*, 1987 and Gowen 1988, respectively) afforded an unprecedented opportunity to examine a cross-section of the landscape in areas which were devoid of obvious archaeological remains. The consequent stripping of large areas of sod was on a scale not usually economically viable for the archaeologist and proved to be extremely effective in the discovery of archaeological remains and revealed a hidden archaeological landscape.

Nowhere was this more apparent than at Ballyveelish near Clonmel, Co. Tipperary (Doody 1987a), where the pipeline had been re-routed away from visible archaeological remains to an area which appeared to be free of such remains. Nevertheless the excavations which took place between 1981 and 1982 revealed the presence of a medieval moated site (Site 1), a Later Bronze Age habitation site (Site 2) and an Early Bronze Age burial (Site 3), all within a couple of hundred metres of each other.

The Discovery Programme (now The Discovery Programme Ltd.) was initiated on May 11, 1991 by the Taoiseach of the day, Charles J. Haughey. Its aim is to enhance our knowledge of Ireland's past from earliest times through archaeological and related research (The Discovery Programme – Strategies and Questions, 1992). The initial period of research focused on the

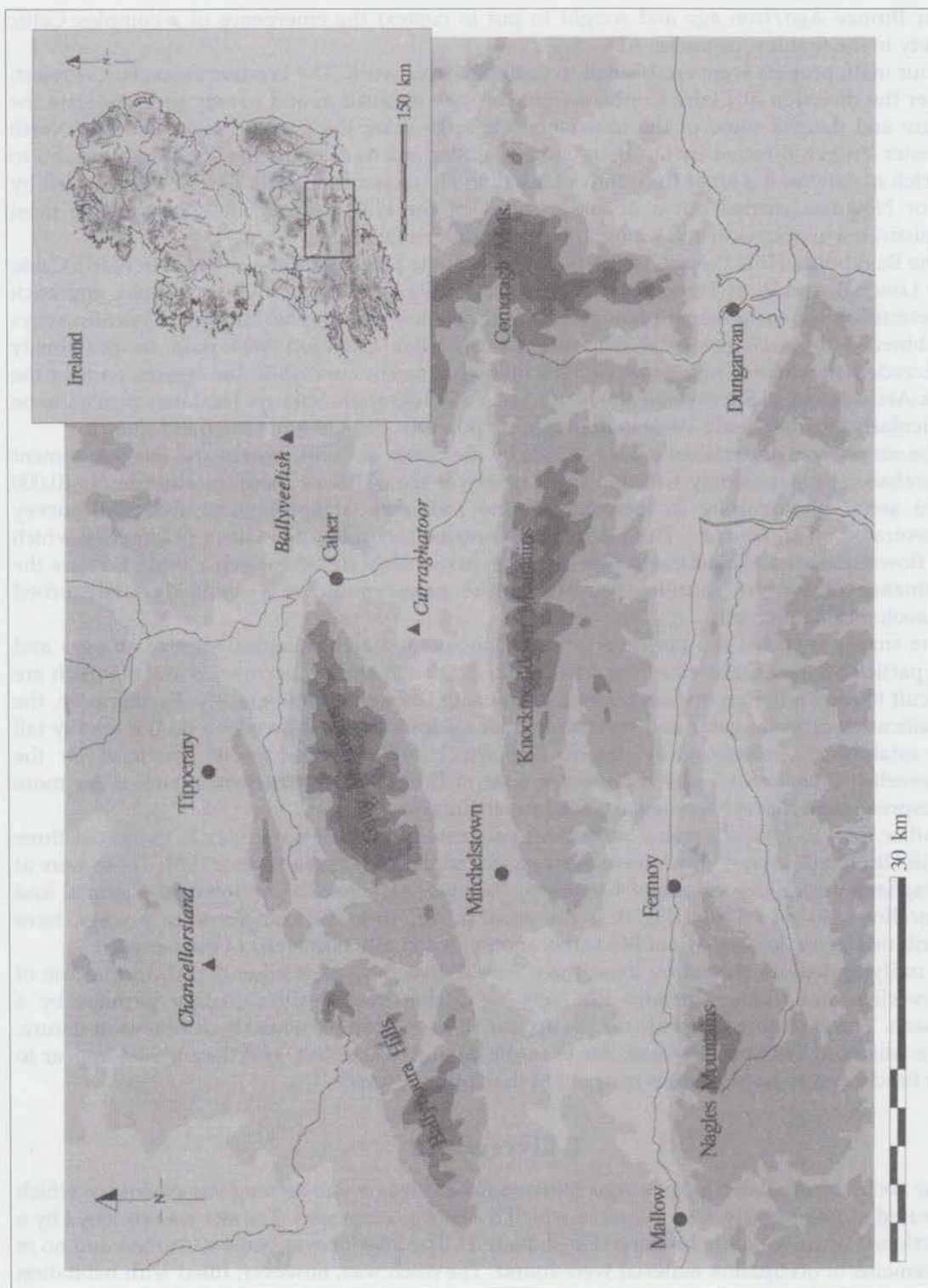


Fig. 1 – Topographic map of the region, showing the location of the excavated sites.

Later Bronze Age/Iron age and sought to put in context the emergence of a complex Celtic society in the first few centuries AD.

Four main projects were established to undertake this work. The Western Stone Forts Project, under the direction of Claire Cotter, sought through excavation and survey to investigate the nature and date of some of the massive stone forts along the western seaboard. The North Munster Project, directed by Dr. Eoin Grogan, undertook to examine the social background to the rich metalworking areas in counties Limerick, Tipperary and Clare. The Tara Project led by Conor Newman carried out a detailed survey of the Hill of Tara, incorporating the most sophisticated geophysical and topographic techniques available.

The Ballyhoura Hills Project, which is directed by the present author, is based in North Cork, East Limerick and West Tipperary and has successfully adopted an interdisciplinary approach to detecting sites, using aerial photography and detailed topographic and geophysical surveys combined with archaeological excavation. Particular attention was paid to previously unrecorded sites which had come to light following recent surveys in the region, namely the Cork Archaeological Survey and the Bruff Aerial Photographic Survey. The latter proved to be particularly useful (Doody 1993) in highlighting potential Bronze Age settlement sites.

The survey was undertaken jointly in 1986 by the Office of Public Works and the Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork to assess the value of medium altitude (1: 10,000 scale) aerial photography in locating hitherto unknown archaeological sites. The survey concentrated on an area of c. 70 sq. kilometres centred around Lough Gur, Co. Limerick which was flown under ideal conditions. The area was particularly suited to such a study because the dominance of pasture farming resulted in the preservation of a relatively undisturbed archaeological landscape.

The survey revealed the presence of many unrecorded archaeological sites of all ages and was particularly useful in detecting small-scale sites such as ring barrows, some of which are difficult to see on the ground or, indeed, even using GSI aerial photography. Furthermore, the identification of rectangular and sub-rectangular enclosures of a type which do not readily fall into established archaeological classes, and which are perhaps closely paralleled by the Ballyveelish 2 enclosure, may represent a type of Bronze Age settlement which is far more widespread than the archaeological record so far suggests.

Rather than to look at general settlement patterns, the aim of this paper is to look at three specific Bronze Age sites which have been excavated in Co. Tipperary since 1981. These were at Curraghatoor near the village of Clogheen; Ballyveelish, close to the town of Clonmel and Chancellorsland near Emly (Fig. 1). The sites, in differing and complementary ways, have contributed to our knowledge of life and economy in a family farmstead of the period.

A unifying feature shared by these three sites is that they were all enclosed. In the case of Ballyveelish and Chancellorsland this was by ditches and at Curraghatoor perhaps by a palisade. The enclosing elements do not appear to have been particularly defensive in nature. There was no indication of a bank, for example, at any of the sites, and they would appear to have functioned to keep animals in or out of the domestic area.

Ballyveelish 2

The focus of the Later Bronze Age settlement here was a sub-rectangular enclosure which measured approximately 47m x 25m, of which c. 1/3 was excavated. The site was enclosed by a V-sectioned ditch not quite 1m deep (Fig. 2, plate 1). The interior was badly disturbed and no *in situ* remains of occupation material were found. The ditch was, however, filled with habitation

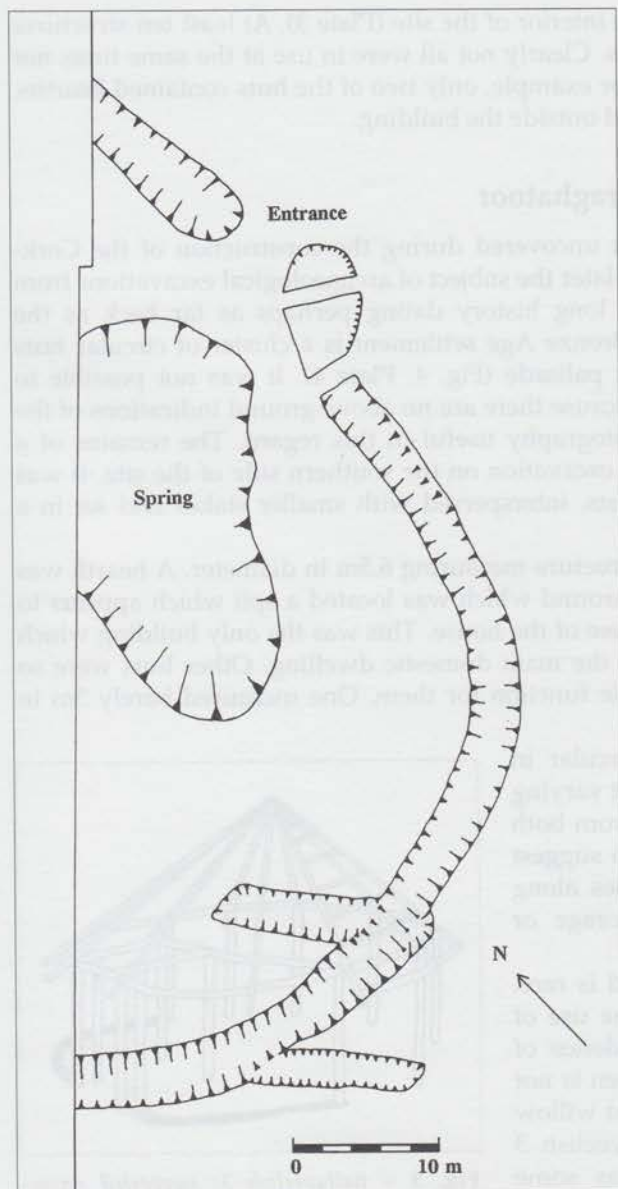


Fig. 2 – Post-excavation plan of the Later Bronze Age enclosure at Ballyveelish, Site 2.

is somewhat larger, measuring approximately 60m x 50m, while the ground plan is more oval in outline. Although the enclosure is surrounded by a double ditch, there is some doubt as to whether there was ever more than one ditch open at a time. The inner ditch is substantial, measuring in excess of 2m wide in places and 1m deep. While there was no bank there was evidence for a palisade on the inner edge of the inner ditch.

The remains of a number of huts representing several phases of activity of both circular and

refuse, and from these remains we may deduce a domestic function for the site. What appears to be a natural pond or spring, which at the time of the excavation was filled with field stones and 19th century farm refuse, occupied a large portion of the interior just inside the entrance to the enclosure.

Because of the extent of disturbance to the interior no structural remains were recorded at Ballyveelish 2. However, the remains of a substantial structure were found a short distance away at Ballyveelish 3 during the excavation of an Earlier Bronze Age burial. The house consisted of two compartments – a post-built circular area 5m in diameter and a D-shaped entrance compartment measuring 5m x 2m, outlined on the ground by a narrow foundation trench, with an entrance on the south side and flanked on either side by two postholes (Fig. 3).

Chancellorsland

Excavations at the Chancellorsland complex began in 1992 and are ongoing as part of the Discovery Programme's Ballyhoura Hills Project. It consists of a small barrow cemetery located close to an oval-shaped enclosure which appears to have been domestic in nature (Plate 2). The focus of the investigation at Chancellorsland is to assess the possible relationships between burial/ritual monuments on the one hand and a settlement site on the other. The results are as yet inconclusive in this regard.

The oval enclosure, Site A, is similar in form to the Ballyveelish 2 site although it

rectangular ground plans were found in the interior of the site (Plate 3). At least ten structures have been identified close to the ditch edges. Clearly not all were in use at the same time, nor were all the structures used as dwellings. For example, only two of the huts contained hearths, while a further structure had a hearth located outside the building.

Curraghatoor

The settlement at Curraghatoor was first uncovered during the construction of the Cork-Dublin natural gas pipeline in 1982 and was later the subject of archaeological excavations from 1987 to 1991. The site appears to have a long history dating perhaps as far back as the Mesolithic period. The focus of the Later Bronze Age settlement is a cluster of circular huts which may have been enclosed by a stout palisade (Fig. 4, Plate 4). It was not possible to estimate the overall size of the settlement because there are no above-ground indications of the archaeological remains, nor was aerial photography useful in this regard. The remains of a substantial palisade were found during the excavation on the southern side of the site. It was sturdily built of a combination of stout posts, interspersed with smaller stakes and set in a footing trench.

The largest of the huts was a post-built structure measuring 6.5m in diameter. A hearth was dug into the floor at the centre of the hut, around which was located a spit which appears to have been moved several times during the use of the house. This was the only building which contained a hearth and is considered to be the main domestic dwelling. Other huts were so small that it is difficult to suggest a possible function for them. One measured barely 3m in diameter (Plate 5).

All the Later Bronze Age huts were circular in plan, although the range in size may suggest varying functions for some of them. The evidence from both Curraghatoor and Chancellorsland seems to suggest the existence of a dwelling house or houses along with smaller huts and pens, used for storage or animal shelters.

Evidence for construction techniques used is rare. A feature common to all three sites was the use of foundation or footing trenches. Direct evidence of what form the superstructures may have been is not common. There was evidence to suggest that willow and hazel wattling was used at the Ballyveelish 3 house (Lennon 1987, 29) while there was some evidence for the use of a mud daub at Curraghatoor.

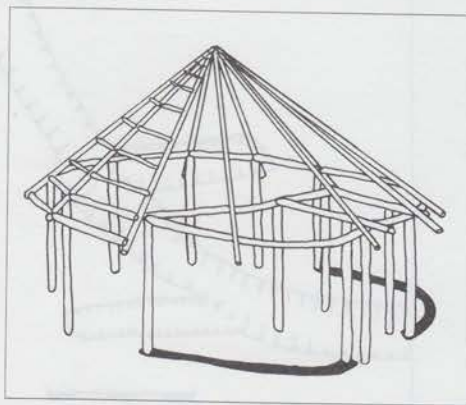


Fig. 3 – Ballyveelish 3; suggested reconstruction of framework of structure at this site.

Site Economy

Evidence from a growing number of Bronze Age settlements suggests that a broadly based mixed farming economy was practised where livestock was kept and crops grown. At Ballyveelish 2, where conditions in the ditches favoured the preservation of organic remains, the data is indicative of an economy where cattle formed the bulk of the meat consumed, with pig and sheep also contributing (McCormick 1987, 28). Horse and dog appear to have been occasionally eaten, while hunting played a comparatively minor role in the diet. The cattle age-

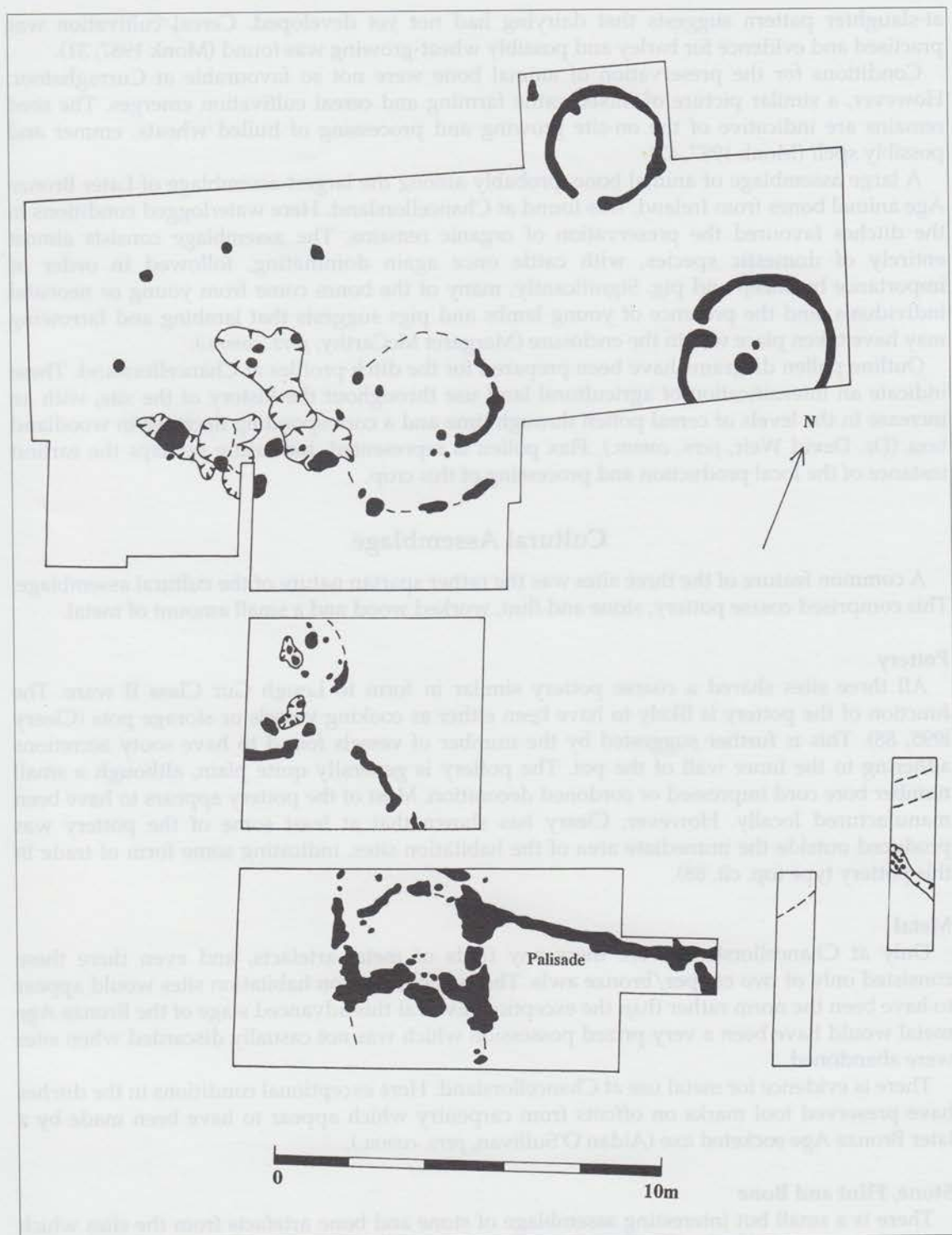


Fig. 4 – Post-excavation plan of Curraghatoor site.

at-slaughter pattern suggests that dairying had not yet developed. Cereal cultivation was practised and evidence for barley and possibly wheat-growing was found (Monk 1987, 31).

Conditions for the preservation of animal bone were not so favourable at Curraghatoor. However, a similar picture of mixed cattle farming and cereal cultivation emerges. The seed remains are indicative of the on-site growing and processing of hulled wheats, emmer and possibly spelt (Monk 1987, 42).

A large assemblage of animal bone, probably among the largest assemblage of Later Bronze Age animal bones from Ireland, was found at Chancellorsland. Here waterlogged conditions in the ditches favoured the preservation of organic remains. The assemblage consists almost entirely of domestic species, with cattle once again dominating, followed in order of importance by sheep and pig. Significantly, many of the bones come from young or neonatal individuals, and the presence of young lambs and pigs suggests that lambing and farrowing may have taken place within the enclosure (Margaret McCarthy, *pers. comm.*).

Outline pollen diagrams have been prepared for the ditch profiles at Chancellorsland. These indicate an intensification of agricultural land use throughout the history of the site, with an increase in the levels of cereal pollen through time and a corresponding decrease in woodland taxa (Dr. David Weir, *pers. comm.*). Flax pollen is represented, indicating perhaps the earliest instance of the local production and processing of this crop.

Cultural Assemblage

A common feature of the three sites was the rather spartan nature of the cultural assemblage. This comprised coarse pottery, stone and flint, worked wood and a small amount of metal.

Pottery

All three sites shared a coarse pottery similar in form to Lough Gur Class II ware. The function of the pottery is likely to have been either as cooking vessels or storage pots (Cleary 1995, 88). This is further suggested by the number of vessels found to have sooty accretions adhering to the inner wall of the pot. The pottery is generally quite plain, although a small number bore cord impressed or cordoned decoration. Most of the pottery appears to have been manufactured locally. However, Cleary has shown that at least some of the pottery was produced outside the immediate area of the habitation sites, indicating some form of trade in this pottery type (*op. cit.* 88).

Metal

Only at Chancellorsland were there any finds of metal artefacts, and even there these consisted only of two copper/bronze awls. The lack of metal on habitation sites would appear to have been the norm rather than the exception. Even at this advanced stage of the Bronze Age metal would have been a very prized possession which was not casually discarded when sites were abandoned.

There is evidence for metal use at Chancellorsland. Here exceptional conditions in the ditches have preserved tool marks on offcuts from carpentry which appear to have been made by a later Bronze Age socketed axe (Aidan O'Sullivan, *pers. comm.*).

Stone, Flint and Bone

There is a small but interesting assemblage of stone and bone artefacts from the sites which includes stone chisels, spindle whorls, struck flint, a lignite bracelet and bone points (Fig. 5).



Plate 1 – The enclosing ditch at Ballygoelish, Site 2, post-excitation.



Plate 4 – Palisade trench during excavation at Curraghatoor.

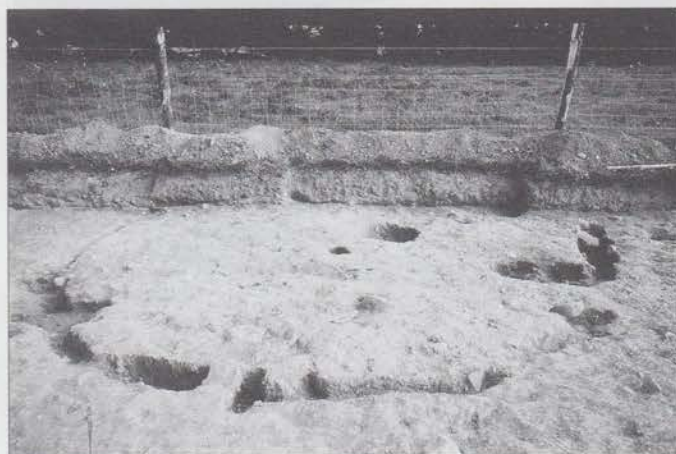


Plate 5 – Circular hut during excavation at Curraghatoor.

The lithic assemblages were generally quite small despite large-scale open excavation. Indications are that several lithic traditions are reflected in the assemblage, presenting difficulties in clearly identifying a Later Bronze Age technology.

For example, at Curraghatoor the only diagnostic artefact was a barbed and tanged arrowhead, while among the tools recovered at Chancellorsland are a leaf-shaped arrowhead, a Neolithic hollow scraper and a number of small tanged arrowheads. These latter would also belong to a Beaker/Early Bronze Age stone-working tradition (Elizabeth Anderson, *pers. comm.*).

Date and Continuity

There is evidence for the long-term occupation of all three sites, but not necessarily continuous occupation. At Chancellorsland this is well attested by the episodic nature of the ditch digging and by the sequence of structural remains within the enclosure and is further borne out by the lithic assemblage, as mentioned above, and by the results of the pollen analysis which suggest a gradual change in the function of the site through time. The radiocarbon evidence suggests occupation of the site perhaps as early as 4085 ± 60 BP (2882 – 2470 BC AA10279), with the latest date occurring around 2978 ± 248 BP (1870 – 553 BC UB3628).

At Ballyveelish the earliest evidence comes from the encrusted urn burial, which dates to 3580 ± 50 BP (2125 – 1776 GrN11657), while the Later Bronze Age dates from Site 2 are 2550 ± 130 BP (986 – 390 BC GrN11445) and 2770 ± 60 BP (1060 – 810 BC GrN11658). Evidence for later occupation in the same field is seen in what appears to be an Early Christian ringfort and a medieval moated site.

A similar picture emerges at Curraghatoor, where the radiocarbon and stratigraphic evidence shows that the site was in use over a long period of time. The earliest visible activity on site appears to have been a circular ditched enclosure which was visible through aerial photography. This was shown through excavation to predate the Later Bronze Age activity, and a radiocarbon date from the fill of the ditch of 7130 ± 70 BP (6170 – 5848 BC GrN19563) may indicate even earlier activity during the Mesolithic period in the vicinity.

A rectangular house which also predated the Later Bronze Age phase may be contemporary with the early enclosure and has produced a radiocarbon date of 4190 ± 50 BP (2914 – 2614 BC GrN 19564). The dates for the latest phase of activity between 2940 ± 50 BP (1370–1000BC GrN11660) and 2730 ± 50 BP (1000810 BC GrN19562) themselves represent a succession of construction phases during which the settlement appears to have expanded beyond the limits of the palisade.

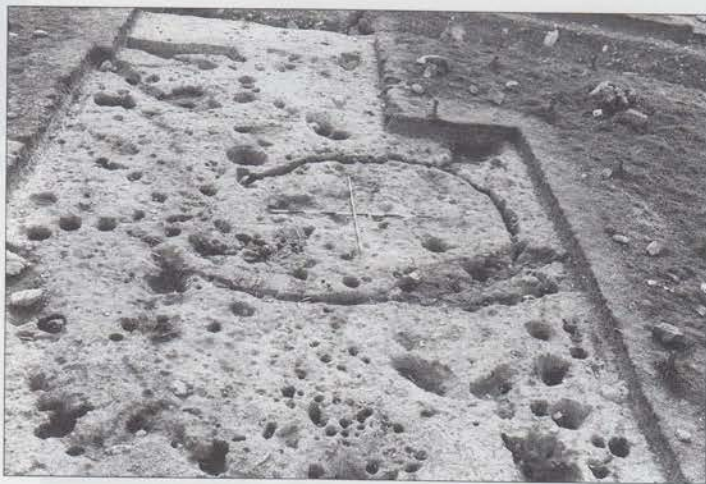


Plate 3 – Circular hut during excavation at Curraghatoor.



Plate 2 – Hill-shaded model of Chancellors-land complex, with Site A in foreground.

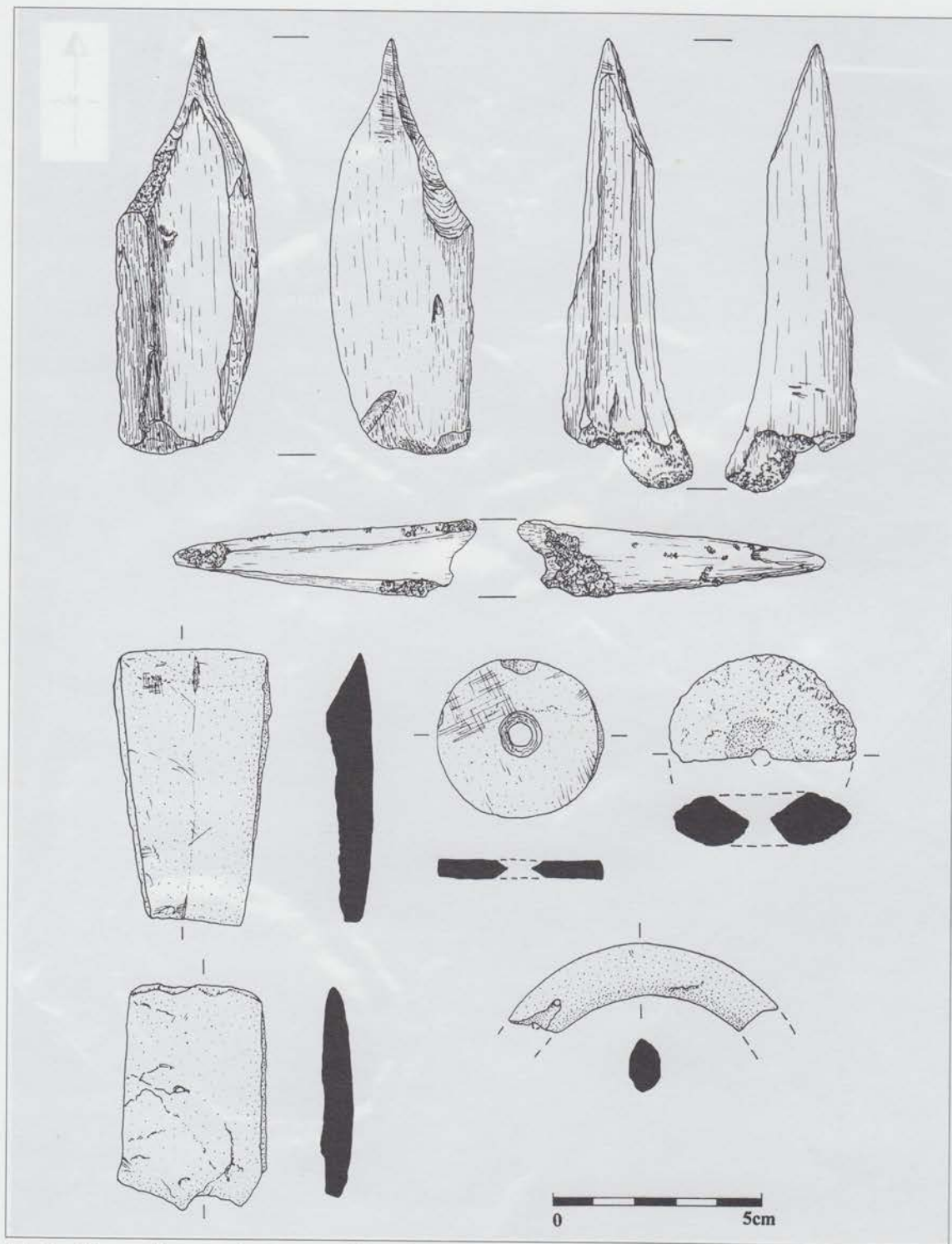


Fig. 5 – Stone and bone artefacts recovered from the ditch at Ballyveelish, Site 2.

Conclusions

Excavations at all three sites have significantly enhanced our understanding of Later Bronze Age settlement in Co. Tipperary and beyond. The sites are ordinary farmsteads of the period and as such close a gap in the archaeological record, which has tended to focus on the high status sites and the artefactual evidence. One of the major problems associated with the recognition of Bronze Age settlements is the difficulty in recognising them as such in the field. The outcome of the excavations at Chancellorsland and Ballyveelish at least provides a type site with obvious consequences for Bronze Age settlement visibility, while the excavations at Curraghatoor are a salutary reminder of the hidden archaeological landscape.

The picture which emerges is of single family farmsteads, either enclosed or not, where a mixed farming economy of beef production and cereal cultivation was practised. The focus of the settlement appears to have centred round one main house, with outlying buildings, perhaps used for storage or animal shelter. Apart from the coarse bucketshaped pottery the cultural assemblage, in the absence of metal artefacts, may not be readily recognisable as Bronze Age in character. Furthermore, it now appears that these sites saw continuous use throughout the Bronze Age, thus displacing the accepted view of the abandonment of settlements after a short period of time.

Although the excavations have contributed to our understanding of various aspects of Bronze Age settlement, many questions remain unanswered. In particular, the possible association of settlements with burial ritual monuments, which can occur in close proximity to each other, and other problems relating to distribution patterns can only be solved by the excavation of a greater number and diversity of settlement sites.

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