

9. Pagan or Christian? Excavation of a hilltop cemetery at Cross, Co. Galway

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Illus. 1—Location of Cross, Co. Galway (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map)

The discovery of a previously undocumented burial-ground attracts human interest. We feel a certain sensitivity among the surroundings, unfortunately all too often from some deep-rooted memory of our own attendance at the funerals of family or friends. Deep within ourselves we realise that we too, in some form, will come to rest in a similar environment. The nature of that final rest will depend on the culture of the community and of the society in which we have lived. Modern culture allows us to choose how we are disposed of following death—the new emphasis being on ‘disposal’. Until recently it was more important that the deceased be buried in the community burial-ground and repose there awaiting the day of judgement, following which the faithful of the community would be reunited.

That cultural view of burial is slowing passing away in our own society but is still within the living memory of many. It is also well documented. We are somewhat less familiar with the culture of those buried at Cross in east County Galway (Illus. 1). But we should be aware that although tradition and culture might change, human nature does not. To contemporary society, and to pagan or Christian alike, the burial-ground at Cross, even if it was only used by a small proportion of the population, was as familiar to them as the local graveyard was to mid-20th-century churchgoers.

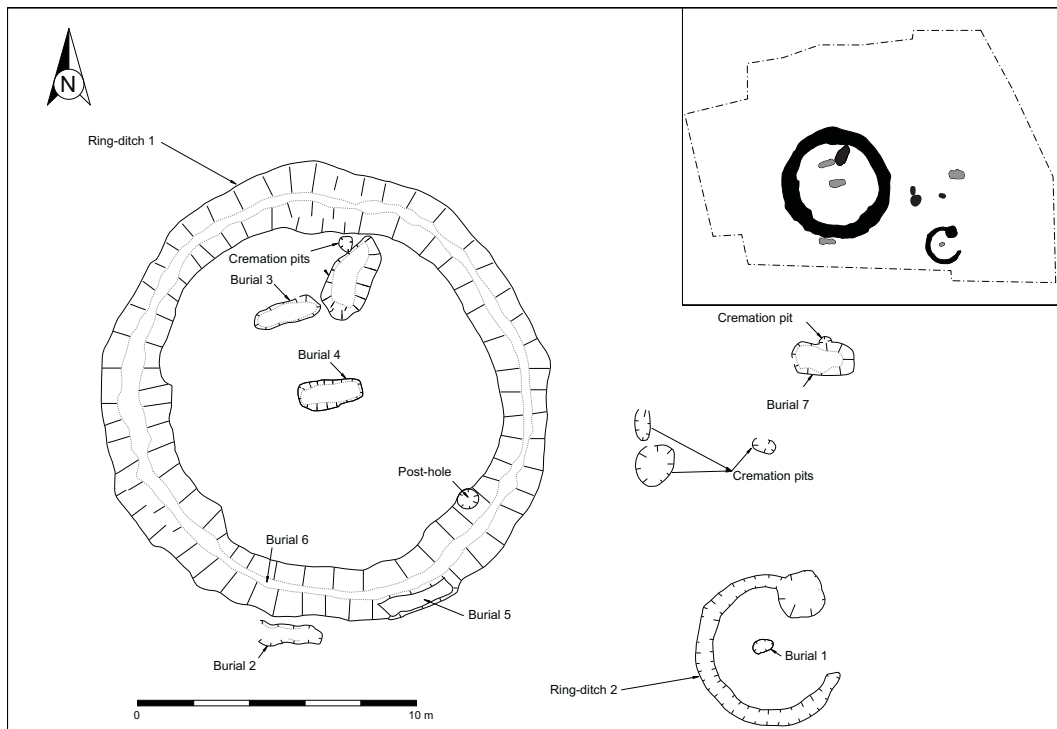
It is the job of the archaeologist to attempt to reconstruct the mind-set of the communities that used and reused Cross, based on the preserved material evidence. Some archaeologists have studied modern social patterns in order to gain a better understanding of the past (e.g. Tarlow 1999; Parker Pearson 1999). Material culture associated with death has been regarded as very relevant in this area. Social and religious changes within a society may lead to changes in mortuary practices. An increasing awareness of hygiene and new church-building programmes led to the abandonment of many medieval churchyards during the 19th century. Changing religious and social attitudes over the past quarter-century have allowed a resurgence in the popularity of cremation. The burial-ground at Cross, once central to the culture of the local community, was abandoned following a period of similar social change in Ireland. It was then forgotten and remained hidden until our investigations in 2005.

Site description

During archaeological testing by Cultural Resource Development Services Ltd (CRDS Ltd) on the proposed route of the N6 Galway to East Ballinasloe PPP scheme in November 2005, a curvilinear ditch, provisionally identified as a ring-barrow, was discovered by archaeologist Aisling Collins. Two human burials were revealed within the confines of the enclosure, and a further scatter of human bone was exposed immediately south of the enclosing ditch. The site was previously unknown and was not recorded in the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP). Some 1,667 m² of topsoil were later removed, exposing the full extent of the archaeological remains (Illus. 2). These included two ring-ditches, seven inhumation burials, eight token cremation burials, pits, a post-hole and a series of pre-Famine cultivation furrows that truncated much of the older archaeology. Cross was excavated during the late winter and early spring of 2006 (NGR 164775, 225449; height 89 m OD; ministerial direction no. A024/007). The excavations were undertaken by CRDS Ltd on behalf of Galway County Council and the National Roads Authority.

The townland of Cross (*Crois*) is situated c. 3.5 km south-west of New Inn village (*An Cnoc Brea*), in the civil parish of Grange in the barony of Kilconnell. The excavation site was approximately 0.1 km east of the R350, connecting the village of Bullaun and Ballyfa crossroads. The Rafor River runs c. 1.5 km directly north of the site. The site is on a hill that forms part of a larger area of elevated ground between the valley of the River Suck to the east and the Galway lowlands to the west and is known as Kilreekill ridge. Cross is on the western flank of the ridge. Access to the site was through pastureland. The ring-ditches and burials were identified on reasonably dry ground. In spite of its relatively low altitude, the site commands a wide view of the surrounding countryside, especially to the west and south. It is obvious to anybody standing at Cross that the location was chosen as a burial-ground owing to its prominence within the landscape (Illus. 3).

Prior to the discovery of this site, one RMP site was listed in Cross townland, an unclassified earthwork (RMP no. GA089-084) c. 1 km to the east on the boundary between Cross and Rahally townlands. Most of the recorded archaeological sites in the area are medieval in date; prehistoric sites are not as numerous. A ringfort and field system (GA086-211 & -213) at Rahally are visible towards the north-east. Two ringforts (GA086-088 & -089) occur in the neighbouring townland of Cloonyconaun. A holy well, moated site and ringfort (GA097-015, -016 & -056) are located in adjacent Caraun More.



Illus. 2—Site plan showing the principal archaeological features at Cross, Co. Galway (CRDS Ltd)



Illus. 3—Elevated view of the burial-ground at Cross, looking west (Hany Mazouk)

Token cremations

During the excavations it was noted that few features were stratigraphically related. Many pits and burials were dug in isolation directly into the natural gravelly subsoil. Based on the chronological order of archaeological features on the site, however, it was evident that at least some cremation burials represented the earliest evidence of activity in the area. This proposition was supported by the recovery of Neolithic pottery sherds from a cremation pit and by the cutting of a cremation by a later inhumation. Of the eight cremation pits identified, four were located adjacent to the northern perimeter of the larger ring-ditch—Ring-ditch 1. They all contained burnt material, including small amounts of burnt bone. Three pits were identified between 3 m and 7 m east of Ring-ditch 1, two of which were severely truncated by a cultivation furrow. All three pits produced small amounts of burnt bone. In one instance the bone was accompanied by pottery sherds and a small copper-alloy artefact (Illus. 4). The eighth pit, cut by a later inhumation, was situated 8.5 m east of the ditch.

The rite of cremation burial was widely used throughout the Bronze Age. Many of these cremation pits were isolated and it is not uncommon to note an absence of grave-goods and large bone fragments. Deposition of a token bone sample is common to many cremations during this period, and indeed several barrow excavations have produced no burial evidence (Grogan 2005, 66–7, 184). Cremation was also the predominant burial rite during the later centuries BC and the early centuries AD. During this period cremation burials were sometimes deposited directly into the ground, unaccompanied by grave-goods (O'Brien, forthcoming). Cremation burial continued to be practised by some in Ireland until the fifth or sixth century AD, an example being Furness, Co. Kildare (*ibid.*, 3). During the summer of 2005 the excavation of a ring-barrow cemetery at Ask, Co. Wexford, produced a cremated burial dated by an associated artefact to the eighth century AD (Stevens, this volume).



Illus. 4—Pottery sherds and copper-alloy artefact recovered from token cremation burial (Gerry Mullins)

Inhumation and post-hole

An inhumation burial (Burial 5) and a post-hole both pre-date the digging of Ring-ditch 1. The post-hole was c. 2–3 m NNE of the burial; its function is not known, although its dimensions were large enough to have supported a substantial marker. Documentary evidence confirms the practice of placing crosses on burial sites during the early medieval period (O'Brien, forthcoming) and this practice may have been the source of the present townland name, Cross (*Crois*). Joyce (1923, 327) states that there are 30 such townland names in Ireland and that a further 150 placenames use 'Cross' as a prefix. In Joyce's opinion, many refer to a crossroads, but others are so named for the location of an actual cross on the site. O'Brien (forthcoming) refers to an incident recorded by both Muirchú and Tirechán in the seventh century. This relates how St Patrick encountered two graves, one of which was marked by a cross. A pagan was buried in one grave and a Christian in the other—hence the cross, to distinguish them. Although this does not confirm the practice to be contemporary with Patrick, it does substantiate familiarity with the practice in the seventh century.



Illus. 5—Inhumation burial showing skeleton disturbed by the digging of Ring-ditch 1 (CRDS Ltd)

Burial 5 has been identified as that of an adult male aged 36–45 years (Illus. 5). The grave was originally roughly stone-lined. O'Brien (1990, 40) suggests that this type of burial is of Late Iron Age date and might be responsible for the evolution of lintel-covered graves. But there was no evidence in this case to suggest that lintels had covered the grave, nor was the base of the grave-cut lined. The digging of the ring-ditch destroyed the northern portion of the stone lining. Although loose stone, perhaps fallen from the lining during the original digging, was located in the ditch, none of the dislodged bone was found. The recovery of a burnt human bone fragment and an unburnt human toe bone in the grave fill indicates that other burials had probably taken place in the area prior to the interment.

Ring-ditches

The main element of the burial site at Cross is generally referred to as a ring-ditch, a ring-barrow or a ring-bank. These terms are derived from the monument's form and structure. Sometimes a low, circular outer bank surrounds an inner ditch, which in turn encloses a low mound or barrow. Examples have been recorded with an entrance through the bank and a causeway through the ditch, neither of which occurred at Cross. But it is often difficult to determine the precise category to which a monument belongs. Perhaps a once-existing bank or inner barrow has been levelled by centuries of agricultural activity or in the course of land improvements, in which case only the ditch is preserved. Waddell (2000, 368) recognises a relationship between the variants of this monument type, regardless of their current state of preservation. There is evidence that this monument type was being constructed, used and reused from the Early Bronze Age in the middle of the third millennium BC to the middle of the first millennium AD.

Ring-ditch 1 was subcircular in plan and varied from approximately 14 m to 14.5 m in external diameter. The ditch itself averaged 1.45 m in width and 0.52 m in depth. Stratigraphic evidence suggests that the ditch was deliberately backfilled, rather than that the fills slumped inwards from the sides. This again suggests that there never was an outer bank. Some disarticulated human and animal bone and two small ferrous metal objects were retrieved from the ditch fills. Ring-ditch 2 measured 4.8 m in diameter and was located 6.5 m south-east of the larger ring-ditch. It was 0.46 m wide and varied between 0.1 m and 0.25 m in depth. Again, there was no evidence for a bank or inner mound. The eastern side of the ditch had been heavily truncated by agricultural activity. A large animal bone and two beads were recovered from the ditch fills.

Burials within Ring-ditch 1

A partial human male skeleton and skull (Burial 6) of indeterminable age were discovered within the fills of Ring-ditch 1. There was no grave-cut; the bones lay stratigraphically between two of the ditch fills, indicating that the partial skeleton had been lodged in the ditch rather than being formally buried. The remains were aligned west–east (i.e. the head was positioned to the west in the Christian fashion). Two similarly oriented inhumations (Burials 3 & 4) were located in graves within Ring-ditch 1. Burial 3, with an 80% probability of being an elderly female, was located near the northern perimeter of the enclosure. Two ferrous metal objects and fragments of burnt human bone were recovered from the grave fill. A small pit had later cut the grave but left the skeleton intact. Burial 4

(Illus. 6), identified as a female aged 26–35 years, was centrally located within the ring-ditch. The skeleton lay in a rough stone-lined grave (Illus. 7) and was in good condition, except for disturbance to the skull and the stone lining by the later digging of a pit. As with Burial 3, there was no evidence to suggest that the later pits represented token or neonate (a baby from birth to four weeks) burials. Their function is unknown. No artefacts were recovered from Burial 4.

Burials external to the ring-ditches

Two west–east-aligned inhumations (Burials 2 & 7) were located outside the ring-ditches. Both were in dug graves. Burial 2, identified as a female aged 18–25 years, was located 0.5 m south of Ring-ditch 1. The digging of a cultivation furrow had disturbed the burial. It became evident during the excavation that the furrow-diggers had avoided the skeleton upon becoming aware of its location: the furrow was interrupted to leave the remains undisturbed within the cultivated ground. Burial 7, identified as a female aged over 45 years, occurred in isolation some 8.5 m directly east of Ring-ditch 1 in a roughly stone-lined grave. No artefacts were retrieved from either burial.

Burial within Ring-ditch 2

Burial 1 was centrally located within Ring-ditch 2. It was the skeleton of a child aged about 2.5 years, aligned west–east, and it lay in a roughly stone-lined grave. Small stones in the



Illus. 6—Excavation of Burial 4 (CRDS Ltd)



Illus. 7—Burial 4, disturbed by the cutting of a later pit adjacent to the skull (CRDS Ltd)

area of the skull had possibly been used as a pillow. The shallow grave was truncated on the eastern side by past agricultural activities. Some white quartz pebbles were found within the grave fill but no artefacts were recovered.

O'Brien (1990, 37–40) has described the introduction of inhumation burial to Ireland from Britain during the first century AD. Originally, the rite was in the form of crouched burials, a practice associated with the indigenous British people before and after the Roman conquest. Irish examples have been found on Lambay Island, Co. Dublin, and were identified as being contemporary with cremation burials at the Rath of the Synods at Tara, Co. Meath. O'Brien (forthcoming) states that the earliest extended inhumations identified in Ireland are intrusive. They were discovered at Bray, Co. Wicklow, in 1835, and are datable to the second century AD by Roman coins placed with the burials. Extended inhumations in Ireland more generally date from the early fourth century AD. West–east alignment and the lack of grave-goods initially suggest that the inhumations at Cross belong to the

Christian tradition, but these factors alone are not conclusive evidence. The wrapping of the body in a winding-sheet is a Christian practice, however (ibid., 14). With this in mind, the positions of the bones of the hands and feet were closely examined to ascertain whether they had been bound, but it was not clear that any of the bodies buried at Cross had been wrapped in a shroud or winding-sheet.

Discussion

Material evidence suggests that the site at Cross was in use during the Late Neolithic period and was periodically reused for funerary purposes until the early medieval period. It subsequently ceased to function as a burial-ground and the location reverted to agricultural use, evident from the numbers of cultivation furrows that stratigraphically post-date the ring-ditches and burials. Interpretation at this stage is preliminary: the close dating of the site and its sequence of activities will depend on specialist analysis of the artefacts and on the scientific dating of suitable samples of charcoal and bone.

The stratigraphic position of Burial 5 indicates that construction of Ring-ditch 1 post-dates the introduction of extended inhumation burials into Ireland. Documentary evidence, again from the writings of Tirechán in the seventh century, supports the archaeological evidence that ring-ditch construction continued for some time after the initial introduction of Christianity. Tirechán refers to a visit by St Patrick to Cruachain, Co. Roscommon, where he converted two daughters of King Loégair. After their deaths, both were buried in a traditional manner within a newly excavated round ditch (O'Brien 1999, 56).

It is currently unknown whether a larger ring-barrow/ditch cemetery is located on slightly higher ground immediately north of the site, outside the remit of this excavation. But based on the available evidence, both ring-ditches at Cross are potentially contemporary. Two centrally located inhumations occur (Burials 1 & 4)—one within each ring-ditch (Illus. 2). They represent a child and a young woman. Is it probable that the ditches were excavated to accommodate both of these burials, perhaps knowingly slighting at least one previous burial (Burial 5) in the area?

Although the inhumations date from the early medieval period they are not located on a church site, which was considered to be the normal culture prior to the beginning of modern excavations and studies (O'Sullivan 1998, 185). In common with the token cremations, the burials are far from being representative of a general population; the skeletal remains represent only four women, two men and a juvenile. Segregated burial based on social or some other special status is widespread throughout Irish prehistory, and the continuation of the practice is again indicative of an earlier culture's survival into the early medieval period. The burial of this minority, probably the elite of society, in *fertá*, or ancestral burial-grounds, perhaps had political implications, including territorial claims. In a changing political or social climate, burial at Cross might have confirmed the status of an old family, or indeed it may have enhanced the social position of a newly ascended group. The new Christian church accepted the importance in the Irish tradition of burial among the ancestors (O'Brien, forthcoming). Religion might not have been an issue within these burial-grounds and there is no obvious difference between pagan and Christian graves during this period. The culture of burial in *fertá* continued until the introduction of legislation by the church requiring Christian burial within church grounds (ibid., 18–19)

c. AD 700. The church's wish was fulfilled, and by the eighth/ninth centuries, excepting occasional examples, burial in traditional grounds had ceased.

Most cultures oppose change, and it is not inconceivable that the church may have had to encourage populations to adopt new burial practices. An incident recorded in *Senchas na Relec*, a text from *Lebor na hUidre*/The Book of the Dun Cow (a manuscript written before AD 1106 by an unknown author), indicates probable opposition to cultural change. As with the writings of Tirechán, the author is likely to be portraying a contemporary situation rather than his pseudo-historical setting. We are told that, before his death, Cormac Mac Art, one of three Christians in Ireland prior to the coming of Patrick, expressed a wish not to be buried with his pagan predecessors. But there was opposition to his request and his enemies, the representatives of the old religion, used magic to prevent his body being carried to his chosen resting place. A great wind then took Cormac's body and dropped it in the River Boyne. It was carried by the water to Rosnaroigh (*Ross na Rí*), where it was later formally buried. St Columba later found the king's head and buried it, and had a church built on the site (O'Connor 1857, 293–6).

It is evident from the above passage that the newly emerging Christian church in early medieval Ireland emphasised the necessity for society's leaders to abandon their ancient *fertra* and that the dogma was carried a stage further by associating the new burial-grounds with church-building. Whether or not there was controversy associated with the abandonment of Cross we will never know, but archaeological evidence proves that the site, once central to the local community, was abandoned and vanished from consciousness until it was rediscovered in the course of investigations for a new roadway.

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