Life and death in the later Neolithic and early Bronze Age at Ballynacarriga, Co. Cork

John Tierney of Eachtra Archaeological Projects reports on the discovery of significant prehistoric settlement and funerary evidence in north Cork.

The corrugated landscape of Cork and east Kerry is bounded on the north by the roughly 150km-long Blackwater valley. Between the N41 and the Ballyhouna hills this valley is almost 15km wide but it narrows to less than 3km at the Kilworth hills, north of Fermoy, Co. Cork. Chief among the tributaries of the Blackwater are the Allow, the Adrigle and the Furnish, and these big rivers are obvious landscape markers, contenders for prehistoric territory centres, boundaries or routeways. In the course of a series of road projects in recent years we have begun to realise that smaller streams and rivulets have a longevity that has influenced prehistoric settlement. In tandem with large-scale road projects, landscape archaeology has come to the fore for many Irish archaeologists. We have been able to sample the landscape using the masts as belt transects—extending the relevance of our findings beyond the limits of the hand shoulder. This article outlines one of a series of Neolithic sites excavated on the N8 Fermoy to kilkittenstown road project that allow us to consider themes of territoriality and sustainability in the prehistoric period.

The route of the new N8 between Fermoy and Kilkittenstown was chosen deliberately to avoid the known archaeological sites in the Kilworth hills. Nonetheless, in a 6km area stretching from the banks of the Furnish in the south, through the confluence of the Furnish and the Glencomra stream, along the upper glen steps and out into the northern side of the Kilworth hills we found evidence of four Neolithic settlement clusters, at Gortore, Ballynacarriga, Ballingskenna and Caherfinemy, west of the village of Kilworth.

The only enclosed Neolithic settlement in that group was located overlooking the confluence of the Glencomra and the Furnish at Ballynacarriga townland. As its name implies, the townland is, in parts, distinguished by a shallow topsoil over limestone bedrock, almost karstic in nature and favouring ash trees as its mature tree cover.

Results of excavation

Excavation at Ballynacarriga 3 revealed a multi-period site with several phases of activity, including a large, rectilinear enclosure that surrounded a series of pits and post-holes where the remains of seven possible structures were found. While pottery that dated from the middle Neolithic and the Beaker period was found, the assemblage was dominated by late Neolithic pottery. Outside the enclosure two ring-ditches and associated cists and post-holes were found. Early Bronze Age pottery was associated with the ring-ditches and the burials.

The Neolithic enclosure

The rectilinear enclosure at Ballynacarriga 3 comprised four ditches; no extant bank was recorded. The ditches were all linear with concave bases and ranged between 19.3m and 43m in length, between 0.55m and 0.9m in width and between 0.29m and 0.63m in depth. They were shallow and narrow but, with an accompanying earthen bank topped by fencing or hedging, could have formed a boundary 1–2m in width and height, thus clearly demarcating and visually enclosing the settlement. Two gaps in the enclosure were present in the southern corners, perhaps representing a main south-eastern entrance and a smaller south-western entrance.

Internal arrangements

Within the enclosure, habitation features were tightly packed into the southern section, while the northern section may have been delineated by a fence. The southern section of the site contained at least six structures of varying morphology and one central, open area.

Structure 1 comprised a double arc of post-holes (ten each in the inner and outer rings), 0.16–0.45m in length, 0.14–0.4m in width and 0.09–0.32m in depth. One pit contained fourteen flint pieces, including six scrapers, which were probably used in hide-processing. The presence of relatively large quantities of flint and some broken pottery may indicate that the area had been covered by a thick carpet of occupation material, and that within the negative features that had been dug into the subsoil

Archeology Ireland Winter 2009

These post-holes originally held upright posts, probably of a small, subcircular structure that was U-shaped in plan. Alternatively, it is possible that it was a subcircular structure and that some post-holes at the north-west of the building did not survive. It is more likely, however, that it had an open side at the north-west, where there were no post-holes.

Structure 2 was a subrectangular building, approximately 3.8m long by 2.2m wide, formed by seven possible post-holes. These measured on average 0.47m long, 0.36m wide and 0.28m deep, varying in shape between oval, subcircular and subrectangular. The largest of the possible post-holes represented the corner posts of the building.
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Archeology Ireland Winter 2009

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Structure 2 was a subrectangular building, approximately 3.8m long by 2.2m wide, formed by seven possible post-holes. These measured on average 0.47m long, 0.36m wide and 0.28m deep, varying in shape between oval, subcircular and subrectangular. The largest of the possible post-holes represented the corner posts of the building.

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Left: Late Neolithic settlement, habitation area. Below: Early Bronze Age ring-ditches and cist-like burials.

Central work area

A number of features were located within the centre of the habitation area, including two sub-artificial hearths, both defined by burnt soil. One of the hearths contained sherds of Grooved Ware pottery. An adjacent pit also contained Grooved Ware. As all of the structures are situated around the central hearths, it seems likely that this activity area was in use throughout the lifespan of the settlement.

The northern half of the enclosure contained less archaeological remains and included what could be the remains of a fence separating it from the southern half. One pit in this area did contain Grooved Ware, but the function of the northern half is uncertain; if fenced, it could have held livestock, or vegetable plots, or could have served as an area of communal activity.

A group of four large pits in the south-east corner of the enclosure contained deposits of heat-shattered stone but their date has not yet been determined. Their presence at the main enclosure entrance could indicate that they represent later activity, unrelated to the hillfort. A number of features in the contained Middle Neolithic pottery sherds that these appear to have been redeposited; for example, the base filled with a pit in structure 4 contained Middle Neolithic pottery, while middle Neolithic pottery was present in the upper fills. This can be explained by the fact that prehistoric settlements would have had thick, medium-like occupation layers that would generally degrade and erode, becoming archaeologically invisible except where material pooled in hollows or pits.

While the southern half of the enclosure contained most of the archaeological remains, other feature groups were found to the south, east, and north-west, beyond the boundary ditches, and appear to represent a range of prehistoric activity. The most interesting was a group of eight post-holes that may represent a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age structure just outside the line of the southern enclosure ditch.

Bronze Age

An area of early Bronze Age burial activity was identified to the south of the late Neolithic settlement. The burial site comprised four feature groups, including two penannular ring-ditches, one (ring-ditch 1) larger than the other, a possible structure or wimple north of the ring ditch (ring-ditch 2) and a cluster of cist-like burials immediately to the north of the ring-ditches.

Ring-ditch 1

Ring-ditch 1 was defined by a large penannular ditch with a circumference of 25.3m. The ditch was 1.81m wide and 0.64m deep and had an internal diameter of 2.4m. There was an opening in the south-east, in contrast to the smaller ring-ditch, which had an entrance at the south-west. No intact mound was found. The ditch was filled with sandy silt that generally contained inclusions of stones and charcoal. It has been calculated that an average cremation pyre would need at least 120kg of fuel, and one of the ring ditch layers was so rich in charcoal that it would be easy to hypothesise that it represents some kind of burning out of pyre debris. One large internal pit had signs of in situ burning. Could the pyre have been set in this pit and cleared out into the ditch?

Nine internal pits were surrounded by the ditch of ring-ditch 1, and a further two pits were cut into the fills of the ring-ditch. The average dimensions of these eleven pits were 0.62m by 0.59m and 0.24m deep. They were all circular or oval in shape, with the exception of the smallest pit, which was square.

Structure 3 consisted of an arc of fourteen possible post-holes forming a possible sub-circular/suboval structure that was located approximately 6m to the east of structure 2. A fourth possible structure, structure 4, comprised a footing trench and six possible post-holes that formed a rectangular shape in plan.

An arc of seven possible post-holes formed a small, semi-circular building, structure 5, to the east of structure 4. Pottery from the fills of the three post-holes identified as late Neolithic Grooved Ware. One pit had a perforation just below the rim, which seems to indicate that it was suspended. This modification, along with a build-up of carbonised residue on the interior surface, indicates construction, usage, modification and further usage.

Another possible rectangular structure, structure 6, comprised six possible post-holes, pits and two slot-trenches. This structure was aligned south-west to north-east, to the east of structure 5. Seven sherds of pottery were recovered from one of the post-holes and have been identified as the remains of three separate vessels.

Archaeology Ireland Winter 2009

The main pit at the centre of the ring-ditch contained two decorated early Bronze Age ceramic vessels: a large Encrusted Urn and a small decorated Vase Food Vessel. Both pots appeared to be primary deposits, as no recuts were evident in the burial pit fills. The inverted urn was in a very friable condition and contained the cremated bones of a young adult female (20-29 years old) accompanied by the remains of a mid-term foetus. The foetus was probably cremated in situ; this is one of the few recorded historic examples of cremation in situ. Foetal remains from western Europe, and the only known example in Ireland. A second, large, pit was located to the north-east of the central cremation burial. This contained eight fills, the lower ones revealing evidence of burning in situ in the form of charcoal and red clay at the base. There was also evidence for in situ burning in another internal pit.

There was evidence that some of the pits had been reused over a long period of time. One pit just to the north of the central burial pit contained cremated human bone, identified as the remains of two young individuals. The first was one year old or younger, and the second was aged 4-7 years. Two individuals within the same age range were also identified from a cist-like pit found to the north, outside ring-ditch 1 (see below). The osteologist conducting the post-excavation analysis argues that the remains from both of these pits may represent the same two individuals, as there was no duplication of bone type for each age range. If this was the case, it suggests that the remains may have been interred within the pit inside the ring-ditch. This pit was recut and the bones selectively redeposited within a pit outside ring-ditch 1, 1.5m to the north-west of the internal pit.

Archaeology Ireland Winter 2009

Ring-ditch 2

Ring-ditch 2, c. 9m to the west of ring-ditch 1, again had no intact mound. The ditch was 0.76m wide and 0.35m deep, with steep, concave sides and a concave to tapering base. It had four different fills but, unlike ring-ditch 1, none showed signs of burning or pyre rake-out. The ring-ditch had an internal diameter of 3.2m and an external diameter of 4.8m. The entrance was defined by a south-west-facing gap.

There was no evidence to indicate that this ring-ditch surrounded a burial, but there was a hearth and a solitary stakehole at the centre of the monument. The hearth was subcircular and a flat base and measured 1.15m in length, 1.15m in width and 0.25m in depth. The absence of a burial within ring-ditch 2 suggests that it played a different role in the burial rites practiced at this site. It is not implausible that the two ring-ditches and the cists are temporarily and functionally related.

Cist-like pits

A group of ten cist-like pits were situated approximately 5m to the north of the ring-ditches, ranging from simple earth-cut pits to stone-lined pits associated with some pottery sherds. They varied from circular to rectangular and subcircular in plan and were generally concave or flat bases. They measured 0.49-1m in length, 0.37-0.50m in width and 0.18-0.52m in depth.

Eight of the cists were stone-lined. In most of these the stones were arranged in a more or less rectangular shape, with a flat stone at the base; in one cist, however, the stones were arranged in a subcircular fashion, and another cist was partly lined. Only one of the cists had a capstone.

Three of the cists contained remains of early Bronze Age pottery vessels, including the remains of Food Vessels in the Vase Tradition and an Encrusted Urn. Cremated bone was recovered from four of the cists, representing the remains of a total of seven individuals. One cist-like pit contained cremated bone on top of a large stone at its base. The bone survived as a neat pile, as if it had formerly been in an organic container of some sort. The cremated remains included two young individuals, possibly the same individuals as those extracted from a pit within ring-ditch 1. The first was aged 3-7 years old and skull, long bones, ribs and
Structure 3 consisted of an arc of fourteen possible post-holes forming a possible subcircular/suboval structure that was located approximately 6m to the east of structure 2. A fourth possible structure, structure 4, comprised six possible post-holes and a slot trench. There are no indications of a Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age settlement at this site.

Central work area
A number of features were located within the centre of the habitation area, including two subcircular hearths, both defined by burnt subsoil and containing fine flint. One of the hearths contained sherds of Grooved Ware pottery. An adjacent pit also contained Grooved Ware. As all of the structures are situated around the central hearth, it seems likely that this activity area was in use throughout the lifespan of the settlement.

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A group of four large pits in the south-east corner of the enclosure contained deposits of heat-stratified stone but the date has not yet been determined. Their presence at the main enclosure entrance could indicate that they represent later activity, unrelated to the habitation. A number of features also contained middle Neolithic pottery sherds but these appear to have been re-deposited. For example, the basal fill of a pit in structure 4 contained late Neolithic pottery, while middle Neolithic pottery was present in the upper fills. This can be explained by the fact that prehistoric settlements would have had thick, midden-like occupation layers that would generally degrade and erode, becoming archaeologically invisible except where material pooled in hollows or pits.

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Section of central burial pit which contained the cremated female and in utero fetus.

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Eight of the cists were stone-lined. In most of these the stones were arranged in a more or less rectangular shape, with a flat stone at the base; in one cist, however, the stones were arranged in a subcircular fashion, and another cist was only partly lined. Only one of the cists had a capstone.

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The main focus of early Bronze Age activity at Ballymacarriga 3 consisted of a four-part burial site. Two ring-ditches with potentially different functions, a small structure or tripod and a cist burial area were tightly clustered on the edge of the stormy ground that gives the townland its name. For such a dense concentration of archaeological features only seven or eight cremated individuals have been confirmed. The most significant of these burials consisted of a female in her mid-to late twenties and an infant fetus.

Acknowledgements

The excavation director at Ballymacarriga 3 was John Leehane, the senior archaeologist was John Tierney and the NRA project archaeologist was Ken Hanley. The excavations were funded by the NRA through Cork County Council. Post-excavation works are nearing completion and the post-excavation team includes John Tierney, Jacinta Kelly, Penny Johnston, Sarah Campbell (finds), Mauricio Toscano (GIS and illustration), Eada O'Mahoney and external specialists Ian Magee (human skeletal remains), Helen Roche and Eoin Grogan (pottery), Susannah Kelly (conservation), Farina Sterke (iliics), Tim Young (metallurgy) and John Sunderland (photography).

Clariﬁcation

The last issue of Archaeology Ireland (Autumn 2009) included an article entitled ‘Preservation by destruction’. This made reference to an excavation report entitled ‘Bronze Age burial at Ballymacarriga 1’, which appeared in issue 3 of Seanda (the NRA archeology magazine). Our article stated that ‘. . . the authors of the report, unfortunately including an osteoarchaeologist, were presumably present at the destruction and will have no doubt stand over their decision to destroy’. It has since been clarified by one of the Seanda report’s authors, Ian Magee, that he was not an osteoarchaeologist for the time of the excavation of the Bronze Age burial at Ballymacarriga 3, that he was not present at the excavation and that he had absolutely nothing to do with any decision on the technique employed to excavate the site.

Professor Roger Stalley gave two ground-breaking talks on the Cross of the Scriptures. Dr Hardison spoke on ‘Sculpture on Irish high cross bases’, presenting more ideas on the influences for many of these decorative bases. He noted that many of the classical mythological animals, chariots and figures that appear on the base pads have parallels in ivories, manuscripts and mosaics from continental Europe, in particular at the time of Charles the Bald in the ninth century.

The final presentation of the day was by Gus Claffey, Niall Lowney and Tom Moore, all members of the working group on the ClonmacnoisePleasement Project, spearheaded by local historian Danny Edwards. Described as what could be considered the ‘Cinderella’ of the day’s proceedings, Heather King’s recognition that placenames in Clonmacnoise parish can contain a great wealth of information, with many being of considerable antiquity, has been central to this ongoing project.

Heather King spoke briefly about the extensive evidence for iron-working at Clonmacnoise, while iron specialist Dr Tim Young explained the methods used in non-manufacturing and compared his findings from Clonmacnoise with other recently discovered sites, including one at Clonlann, Co. Westmeath.

The second session of the day brought into play the use of geophysical prospection and gaming technologies. Kevin Barton, James Bonsall and Heather Gimson of Earthsound combined their collective expertise in geophysics to illustrate the hidden Clonmacnoise for a production commissioned by RTE entitled ‘Secrets of the Stones’. The seminar audience were privileged to see a lot more than what appeared on the TV screens last spring. Gavin Duffy of RedSwan was able to build on these results and bring the spectators on a 3D virtual-reality tour of the site in the early medieval period. He also examined the possible spread of the belief in Goddess worship from the Shannon and was able to indicate how the course of the river has changed through the centuries.

A new method of recording the vast collection of cross-slots at Clonmacnoise by laser scanning is currently being undertaken as part of the Inscribed Stones of Ireland Project. This research comes under the umbrella of the Foundations of Irish Culture project based in the Moore Institute in the National University of Ireland, Galway, Professor Diáblín Ó Cróinín, who heads up the project, explained the programme, and Dr Thierry Dubois, post-doctoral researcher in the Centre of Astronomy and School of Physics, used his Magic wand, the Pathfinder Fast Scan, to demonstrate the scanning to a fascinated audience.

The afternoon session kicked off with Professor Diáblín Ó Cróinín examining what could be the earliest known documentary material on Clonmacnoise. Con Manning followed with a very well argued essay on the possibility that Temple Rignín was actually a second Nuns’ Church.

Dr Griffin Murray, Kerry County Museum, revealed in a very entertaining lecture that the commonly held belief that a crossing (if not two) had been found in Clonmacnoise was nothing but a rather scholarly fabrication. Rahgrail Ó Floinn of the National Museum of Ireland then talked about the so-called artifacts that have been handed into the NMI over a very long period of time. Many of these finds turned up while digging graves in the New Grange—not surprisingly, perhaps, as the excavations undertaken in the 1990s by Heather King found extensive evidence of habitation there over a period of almost 400 years.

Dr Philip McInerney began the penultimate session with an in-depth examination of a very well-known painting by George Petrie entitled ‘The Last Circuit of Clonmacnoise’. Professor Thomas Charles-Edwards followed with a paper on Irish and British inscriptions on cross-slots, noting contrasts and similarities. Dr Peter Horblas and

Archeology Ireland Winter 2009