Excavation of a House-site in Fanore Sandhills, Co. Clare

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As a result of wind erosion during the Summer of 1968, a short line of stones was uncovered in the southern portion of Fanore Sandhills, on the coastline about 2\(\frac{1}{2}\) miles south of Black Head, Co. Clare.\(^1\) A little later, Mr. Pierce Maher, a Dublin holiday-maker in the area, cleared away more of the sand from around the stones, thus revealing a rectangular structure. By judicious removal of the sand from the four corners of the structure and from some other places which seemed likely to be of some significance, Mr. Maher was able to show that it was a rectangular house, orientated roughly North-South, with a dividing wall across its centre and with a paved entrance through the centre of the southern end-wall. In the south-western quadrant Mr. Maher noted what he took to be a hearth surrounded by stones set on edge, containing charcoal and burnt material, and with animal bones and sea-shells around it.\(^2\) A bone pin and a bone needle were discovered, one in the south-western and the other in the south-eastern quadrant of the house. Realising the possible importance of the site to archaeologists, Mr. Maher ceased digging there and reported his discovery to the National Museum of Ireland, generously presenting the bone pin and needle to that institution.\(^3\) Following on Mr. Maher's report, the site was excavated in early October 1968 by the writer, at the request of the National Museum.\(^4\)

Unfortunately, between the time of Mr. Maher's leaving the site and the start of the excavations considerable digging had taken place there. The western portion of the interior of the house had been emptied to a depth of about 10 cm. below the original floor-level, \(i.e.\) down to the level of the bottom of the walls. As a result, the whole western portion of the house interior, and portion of the area inside the entrance had been so badly destroyed that nothing could be gleaned there by excavation (Plate II:1). Nothing whatever remained of the hearth discovered in the south-western quadrant by Mr. Maher, nor of the western half of the transverse wall which divided the house in two. Traces of a layer, about 8 cm. thick, of dark, blackish

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\(^1\) Td. Murrooghcookey South; Par. Gleninagh; Bar. Burren; Co. Clare; O.S. 6-inch sheet 1 (14.2 cm. from S.; 21.2 cm. from E.); Nat. Grid Ref. M.137.084; less than 50 ft. above O.D.

\(^2\) Apparently at approximately the position of the E of DISTURBED in the plan (Fig. 1).

\(^3\) The Museum wishes to record its thanks to Mr. Joseph McCormack, Murroogh, the land-owner, and Mr. Patrick McCormack, Fanore, for their willing help with the actual excavation, and to Mr. Frank Tracy, University College, Galway, for assistance with the surveying. Members of the Thomond Archaeological Society who visited the site during the excavations and rendered most useful assistance included the Very Revd. Martin Ryan, P.P., Ruan, Miss P. Wilde, Ruan, Mr. Gerald O'Connell, Ennis, and Mrs. Macon Keane Lisdoonvarna.
Fig. 1. Plan and sections of house-site in Fanore Sandhills
material, remained in the interstices between some of the wall-stones, at an average height of about 10 cm. above the base of the wall; this corresponded with the level of the habitation layer uncovered elsewhere in the house.

**Structure (Figs. 1 and 2)**

The excavation revealed that the walls of the house were not evenly faced on the outside, though roughly so on the inside, and that they were not more than one stone or slab in thickness. Furthermore, the lowest course consisted of slabs set on edge, often inclining slightly outwards (i.e. leaning 'backwards' against the sand), and the approach to the entrance, midway in the southern end-wall, was a paved passage-way flanked by large, upright, slab-like stones. Everything, therefore, suggested that the house was built into the sandhills, the walls merely forming a lining to a rectangular depression in the sheltered southern slopes of a large sand-dune (Fig. 2; Plate II:2).

The structure, built of the local limestone, was roughly rectangular, averaging about 8.60 m. by 4.0 m., and was orientated NNW-SSE. The walls remained to an average height of about 100-125 cm. the average height of the slabs in the lowest course being about 55-65 cm. There was no evidence to suggest that the walls had ever been built much higher of stone—the upper portion of the house, that which would for the most part have risen above the level of the surrounding sand (except at the northern end), may have been constructed of sods, the roof perhaps being of thatch or sods. There was nothing anywhere in the structure, as investigated, to suggest that there were any openings into it, other than the entrance in the southern wall. Only in one place did the construction of the walls vary: in the eastern wall, a short distance from the south-eastern corner, where an inclined slab was used to prop up the upper portions of the wall which overhung the lowest course at that point.

The paved passage-way leading to the entrance was sunken slightly below the level of the house-floor (Plate III:1). Separating it from the entrance proper was a sill-stone about 8 cm. thick and set on edge. It rose about 20 cm. above the paving of the passage-way, but only 7 cm. above the paved area immediately inside the entrance. The western side of the entrance was flanked by a relatively large jamb-stone, rising 85 cm. above the paving and measuring 30 cm. by 25 cm. in cross-section. A 30 cm. by 25 cm. unpaved space in corresponding position suggested that a similarly shaped jamb-stone originally flanked the eastern side of the entrance. This part of the southern wall seemed, in fact, to have suffered some disturbance in antiquity, as not only was the eastern jamb-stone missing but a slab lying adjacent to the spot was clearly not part of the paving and could best be explained as having collapsed from the wall in which there was a similarly shaped gap in the lowest course (Plate III:2).

The eastern half of the wall dividing the house in two was uncovered during the excavation—the western half had been noted by Mr. Maher but had been removed in the interval, during the destruction of that half of the house. The remaining portion consisted of two large slabs set on edge and a short stretch of dry-stone walling where it joined with a jamb-like stone near the centre of the house; the latter was directly in line with the eastern side of the entrance and was, presumably, the eastern jamb of a gap through the dividing wall. The partition-wall averaged about 45 cm. in height (maximum height was 55 cm.) and its relative thinness suggested that it could never have been any higher; the jamb-stone was 75 cm. long, rising 60 cm. above the floor.
Fig. 2. View of house-site from South, after excavation
Down the centre of the house, passing through the gap in the partition, was a shallow trench, about 4.10 m. long, averaging about 1.0 m. in width, and varying between about 15 cm. and 25 cm. in depth. This was filled with burnt material, was partly stone-lined, and had flat slabs (less regularly flat in the northern half) covering it. The contents of the trench were mainly bright red in colour at the southern end, graduating to black at the northern end; below the burnt material at the southern end the sand had been burnt to a depth of about 5 cm. or more, thus indicating the intensity of the heat generated at this end of the trench. The trench splayed slightly at the southern end and had a thin slab set on edge dividing it unequally down its middle; the eastern portion was filled with bright red-coloured burnt material and also with some burnt limestone fragments. In some places where the trench was not lined with slabs set on edge, large slabs were laid on the floor alongside of it, their edges following the edge of the trench. Elsewhere there did not seem to be any attempt at demarcating the edge of the trench.

Rough and very irregular ‘paving’ or ‘cobbled’, intermixed with blackish material and shells (mainly limpet and periwinkle), was uncovered in most of the north-eastern quadrant of the house. These did not appear to form a floor, strictly speaking, and their presence remains enigmatic.

A good vertical section through the material filling the north-eastern quadrant was obtainable (see Fig. 1). This revealed a layer, 20 cm. thick, of clear sand immediately above the habitation level, with above it a darker layer, 20-25 cm. thick, containing numerous white snail-shells of two sizes, and with above that the uppermost layer, at least 50 cm. thick, which was of clear sand. The clear sand of the bottom and uppermost layers was such as would have been blown in from the surrounding dunes, while the darker, snail-containing sand was such as would have been washed in during a flood, most probably of fresh-water from the Murrogh River6 which runs past it at about 40 or 50 m. to the south.

**Finds (Fig. 3)**

1968:443—Bone pin with somewhat spatulate head (now partly defective) which is pierced by a rectangular perforation. 9.2 cm. long; head, originally about 8 mm. in maximum width and 2 mm. thick; stem, 4 mm. by 3 mm. in cross-section near centre.

1968:444—Bone needle with flat, round-pointed head which is pierced by a large circular perforation. 5.4 cm. long; head, 6 mm. in maximum width and 1.5 mm. thick; stem, 3.5 mm. by 2.5 mm. in cross-section near centre.

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6 Little more than a stream; this is the name given to the last kilometre, from Fanore Bridge to the sea, of the Caher River.
Discussion

The very nature of this site, amateurishly built in a hollow in a sand-dune about 350 m. from the sea, suggests that it can never have been intended as a permanent or even semi-permanent residence. It presents more the appearance of being a makeshift, temporary structure, but whether for use as a dwelling-place or as a working-place is not clear—the peculiar flue-like hearth would perhaps favour the latter supposition. The date of the structure is equally uncertain, no closely datable artifact having been found at the site. Although the bone pin and needle can be paralleled amongst the material found at several sites in Ireland which can be dated to within the first twelve centuries after Christ, it is also possible, though perhaps less likely, that they could date from a considerably more recent period.

Unfortunately, the type of house itself is of no help in suggesting a date or purpose for it, neither its type of construction nor plan being previously recorded. The flue-like hearth—possibly some form of oven or roasting-hearth?—is not really like anything hitherto encountered in Irish archaeology,\(^6\) while the position of the entrance in one of the narrower ends (a ‘gable’ end) of the house is a feature more characteristic of an oratory or church than of any of the traditional Irish house-types. The Murroghtoohy house was clearly built to fit in with the nature of the site rather than with any normal house-plan.

\(^6\) A possibly related structure might be the long hearth containing differently coloured material and, at one point, stones which was found in the 7th century rath at Ardslohn, Co. Mayo [cf. Rynne, *JRSAI*, 86 (1966), 206]; the furnace with flue extending from it which was discovered in the Early Iron Age/Early Historic Period house-site at Glannafeen, Co. Cork [cf. Ó Cuileáin, *JRSAI*, 85 (1955), 95-97] is a less likely parallel.
1. Murrooghtoohy South, Co. Clare: view from North, before excavation
(Photograph: E. Rynne)

2. Murrooghtoohy South, Co. Clare: view from South, during excavation
(Photograph: E. Rynne)
1. Murrooghtoohy South, Co. Clare: passage-way leading to entrance
(Photo: E. Rynne)

2. Murrooightoohy South, Co. Clare: entrance, from within
(Photo: E. Rynne)