

Miscellanea

Burials at Ballyan, Co. Limerick

In September, 1972, human bones were discovered during the excavation of a house foundation in the townland of Ballyan, near Newbridge, on the main Askeaton-Rathkeale road, Co. Limerick.¹ The landowner, Mr. Patrick Hartigan, and Mr. Paul B. Devlin reported the discovery to Sergeant M. J. Dunleavy, Rathkeale, who contacted the National Museum. The site was investigated by the writer.²

At least nine complete and incomplete skeletons had been found in the foundation trenches which covered an area of approximately 15.40 m. by 9.40 m. According to the builder's report, it is possible to say that seven of the interments were orientated roughly East-West, while two others appeared to have been orientated North-South. It was considered better to excavate a fresh trial area rather than to re-excavate the area already dug, especially as most of the foundation trenches had already been filled in. Examination revealed that the bones were haphazardly deposited, scant attention being paid to orientation or to a standard depth of interment. It seemed as if the bones of some individuals were deposited on top of one another.

A second area, undisturbed by the builders and measuring one metre square, was then excavated. Here, at about 10 cm. below ground level and under a light mantling of humus, a thick compact layer, 8-10 cm. thick, of small limestone pebbles was revealed. This layer was regular, and was detectable elsewhere on the site in the faces of the foundation trenches which had not already been filled in. The bones had been buried in a layer of boulder-clay, 15 cm. to 25 cm. thick, which occurred below the pebble deposit and overlay the undisturbed gravel. The limestone pebbles or chippings seem to have been evenly scattered above the clay which contained the bones, presumably, as a sort of sealing to ensure the permanence of a deposition which may have been built up over a number of years and which must have been relatively exposed prior to its being sealed off.

The bones found in this trial excavation represented the leg, knee, thigh and pelvic bones of one individual, the remainder of whose skeletal remains could not be found. To the north of this skeleton and overlying it in part were the outstretched femurs of a second individual who had also been deposited in an East-West position. The leg and feet bones of the latter were also present, but in a rather fragmentary condition. To the south of the first individual, what appeared to be another pelvis as well as a right lower jaw-bone retaining three molars, two premolars, as well as its canines and incisors, was found.

¹ Ballyan td., Kilbradran par., Shanid bar., Co. Limerick. O.S. 6" Sheet 19 (25.4 cm. from southern margin and 6.9 cm. from eastern margin).

² In addition to Messrs. Hartigan, Devlin, and Sergeant M. J. Dunleavy, the National Museum wishes to thank Mr. Richard Stokes, Ballyvocogue, Askeaton, for assistance with the investigation, as well as Mr. Joseph Mulcahy, Meenoline, Templeglantine, the contractor, who was most helpful during the operation.

It is difficult to interpret this sample of the overall deposition. It would certainly seem to be representative of the site in general, and it would seem justifiable to extend to the whole site the conclusions which are based on this small trial excavation. The bodies included in the burials appeared to be of all ages and sexes. They were casually deposited, orientated in various directions and with no accompanying grave-goods—at least none that have survived. The graveyard was a communal one, and bore no evidence of its having contained individual graves, marked by stones or any type of grave structures. The overall site and the immediately surrounding area show no visible remains of any human interference. Indeed, its uniform flatness may be partly explained by the clay which contained the bones having been evenly topped by a uniform sprinkling of limestone pebbles over which an even layer of humus had accumulated.

It is almost impossible to date this site. A clay-pipe (Nat. Mus. Reg. No. 1972:184-5), broken in antiquity and incomplete at the time of its deposition or loss, and part of a perforated roof-slate (1972:186) were discovered embedded on top of the limestone layer just below the humus; they serve merely as a *terminus antequem* for the deposition date of the limestone sprinkling which overlies the bones. There is no further evidence for dating the burials.

It may be that this was some sort of mass burial of the victims of some form of plague or fatal epidemic who were buried quickly and perhaps simultaneously. They may be seen in the same context as the equally puzzling mass depositions uncovered in the recent past at Robertstown³ and Dromlohan,⁴ both of which sites are situated within a six-mile radius of Ballyan. The date of these burials must remain unsolved in the absence of datable associations until, hopefully, some literary references, either individually or collectively, can be found for them. If these burials belong to a pre-literate era, it must be hoped that the excavation of similar sites, but with archaeologically datable features or datable artifact associations, will provide us with dates.⁵

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³ Peter Danaher, "Human Skeletons unearthed near Foynes", *N. Munster Antiq. Jour.*, 9 (1962-65), 127.

⁴ Discovered about 1965 in Dromlohan td., Kilcornan par., Kenry bar., Co. Limerick: O.S. 6" sheet 11 (26.7 cm. from northern margin and 25.9 cm. from eastern margin). This find was not reported to the National Museum.

⁵ An attempt to deduce the date of such sites will be made by Etienne Rynne in *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, publication forthcoming; see also "Ancient Burials near Coolatore, Co. Westmeath" in *Journal of the Old Athlone Society*, 1:3 (1972-73), 184, by the same writer.

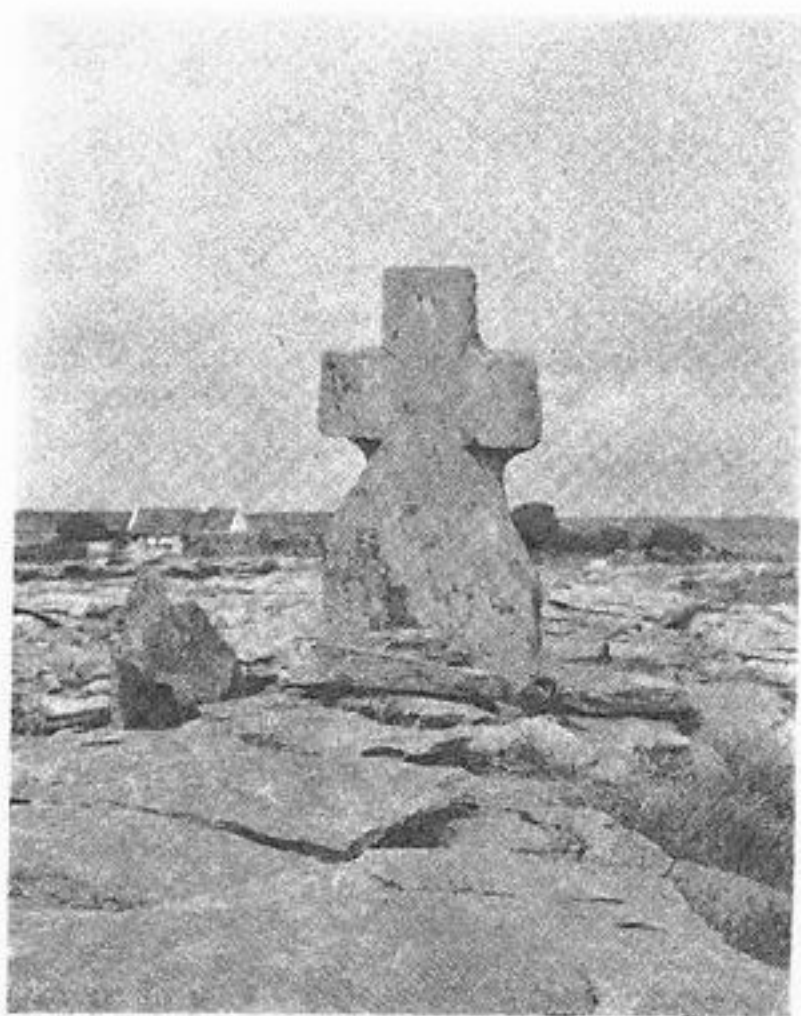
Stone Cross at Gleninsheen, Co Clare

Visitors to the three wedge-graves in Gleninsheen townland, in the Burren, often are puzzled by a curious, uninscribed stone cross which rises from the limestone about one hundred yards to the north-east of wedge-grave CL.II, and which can be plotted on Ordnance Survey six-inch scale sheet 5 at a point 16 cm. from the southern margin and 27 cm. from the eastern margin; Nat. Grid Ref. M.230.023. This cross (Plate VII, 2) is made from a single slab of the local limestone and is sited on the land of Mr. Patrick Connolan who informed me that it had been erected there by one of his ancestors. Apparently it was discovered where it now stands, lying on its face having been rejected by its carvers as unsuitable due to a slight flaw. The carver was, according to local tradition, one of the Madigans of Ennistymon, allegedly the great-grandfather of the present-day stone-cutters of the name still working in that town.

The shape of the cross is distinctive and is of a type which can readily be found in several old graveyards in the general locality. A search through some of these graveyards suggests that the type was most popular during the second quarter of the last century (c. 1825-50), and the Gleninsheen cross probably dates from that period.

The cross measures 1.20 m. in height, 62 cm. across the 21.5 cm. wide arms, and 11 cm. in average thickness.

ETIENNE RYNNE



2. Stone Cross at Gleninsheen, Co. Clare.

(Photo: E. Rynne)

