

# A Cist-Burial at Ballynagallagh, near Lough Gur, Co. Limerick

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The site,<sup>1</sup> which is about three miles north-north-west of Bruff, Co. Limerick, was first brought to our attention by Mr. Michael Quinlan, N.T. Before excavation, the site appeared as three slabs, the arrangement of which could be construed as the remains of a megalithic tomb. The proximity of the site to other recognisable field monuments<sup>2</sup> strengthened the possibility that the structure had some archaeological significance. Because the 'monument' impeded agricultural development, its excavation before destruction was thought desirable. Accordingly, a grant was made available by the Office of Public Works, on the advice of the National Committee for Archaeology of the Royal Irish Academy. Work commenced on the 18th of September 1978, and continued for four weeks.

Ballynagallagh lies in the easy rolling lowlands of the Limerick plain, at the south-western edge of the "volcanic ring" of igneous rocks centered on Herbertstown. The nearby hills that rise sharply from the limestone lowlands vary in height; Knockderc, formed of quartz-trachyte sills, lies immediately to the south-east of the site and rises to a height of 485 feet above O.D. The 'monument' lies in the north-west corner of a fairly level field beside the Holycross-Knockainy Road. The land in the immediate vicinity is well drained and suited to dairy farming. Ballynagallagh lies in the catchment area of the Camoge and Morning Star rivers, tributaries of the Maigue.

The soil is a grey-brown podzolic belonging to the Elton<sup>3</sup> series. Elton soils are derived from dominantly limestone drift with an admixture of sandstone, shale, and volcanic materials. The bedrock is carboniferous limestone. The soil profile is characterised by gravelly loam surface horizons, overlying a gravelly clay loam.

## Site Before Excavation

The 'monument' consisted of three limestone boulders of megalithic proportions, which partially overlay each other (Fig. 1 and 3). Stone A was roughly rectangular and lay in a recumbent position; its dimensions were as follows: maximum length 1.95 m; maximum width 94 cm; maximum thickness 45 cm. Stone B rested on Stone C, with one end abutting Stone A. Stone B dimensions were as follows: maximum length 2 m; maximum width 1.40 m; maximum thickness 38 cm. Stone C, also recumbent, was roughly rectangular; its dimensions were as follows: maximum length 1.45 m; maximum width 80 cm; maximum thickness 50 cm. The 'end stone' apparently rested on modern

<sup>1</sup> Td. Ballynagallagh; Par. Knockainy; Bar. Small County; Co. Limerick: O.S. 6-inch scale sheet no. 32 (12.85 cm from W; 31.4 cm from S).

<sup>2</sup> (a) "Giant's Graves", a Wedge Tomb (S. P. Ó Riordáin and G. Ó h-Iceadha, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 85(1955), 34-50; O.S. 6" sheet 32 (20 cm from W; 18.8 cm from N).

(b) "Leaba na Muice": O.S. 6" sheet 32 (14.5 cm from W; 37.7 cm from S).

(c) "Giant's Grave": O.S. 6" sheet 32 (12.5 cm from W; 24.4 cm from S).

(d) "Giant's Grave": O.S. sheet 32 (11.5 cm from W; 25.6 cm from S).

(e) "Giant's Grave": O.S. 6" sheet 32 (5.8 cm from W; 31.5 cm from S).

<sup>3</sup> T. F. Finch and P. Ryan, *Soils of County Limerick*, An Foras Tálúntais, Dublin 1971.



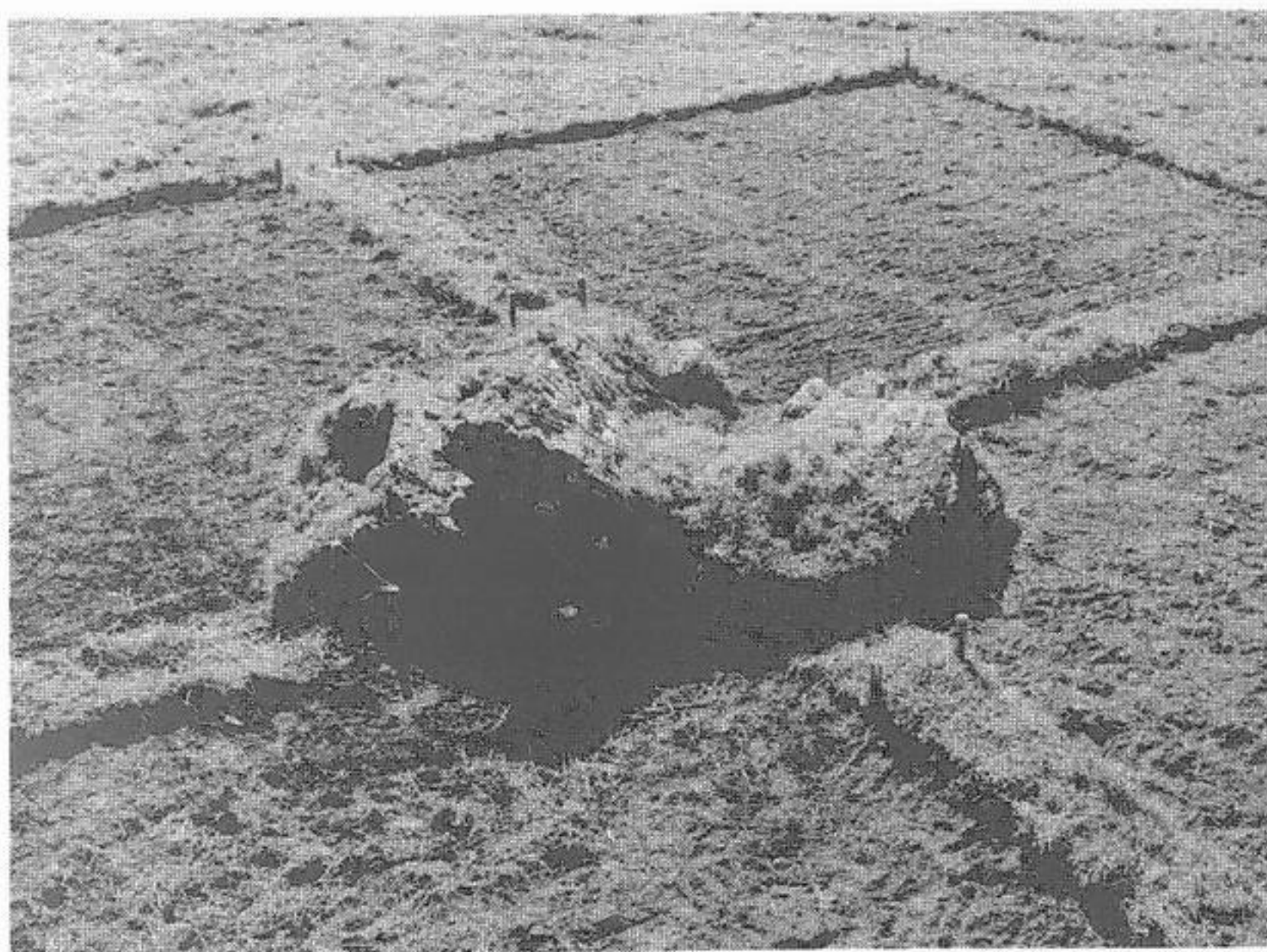


Fig. 1. The 'monument', at start of excavation; looking South.



Fig. 2. The 'monument' and cist, during excavation; looking South.

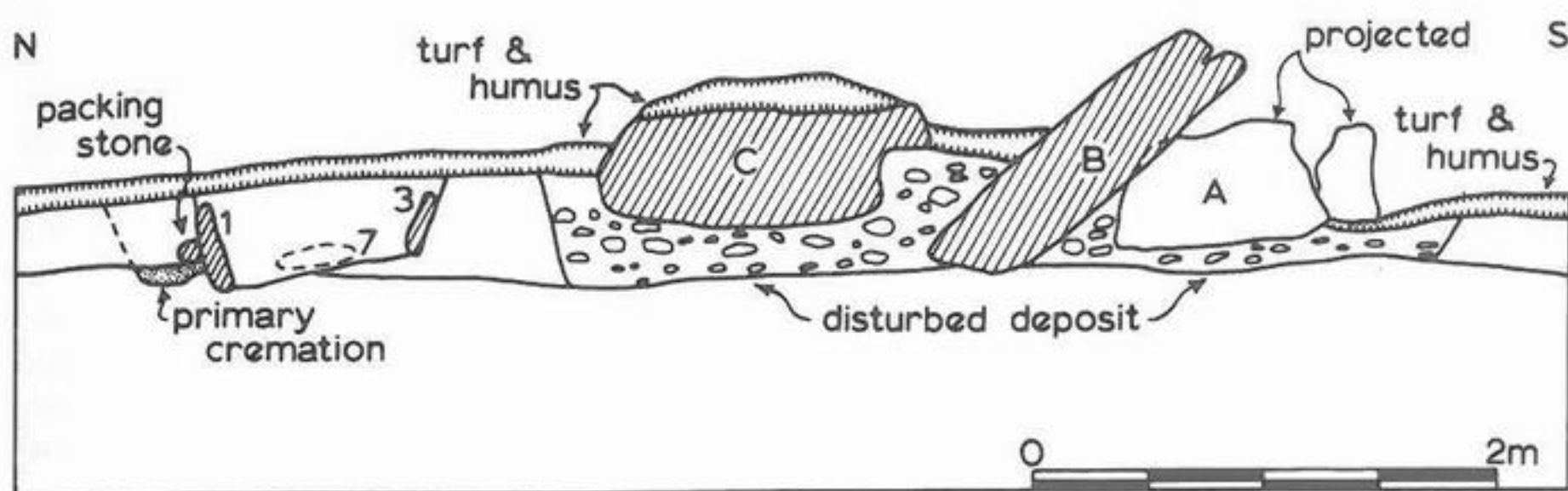


Fig. 3. Section N-S through primary cremation, cist and 'monument'.

turf, and abutted Stone A. Its dimensions were maximum length 70 cm; maximum width 40 cm; thickness 25 cm. Deposits of small stones lay strewn in and around the 'monument', probably as a result of field clearance. The activity of cattle beside the 'monument' had reduced the ground level. No other surface indications were present.

### Excavations

#### (1) Cist

During the course of excavation a polygonal cist of limestone slabs was exposed (Fig. 2). The cist lay at a shallow depth of 60 cm below the turf. It was disturbed at some period and the capstone was removed. No suitable stone which might have served as a capstone

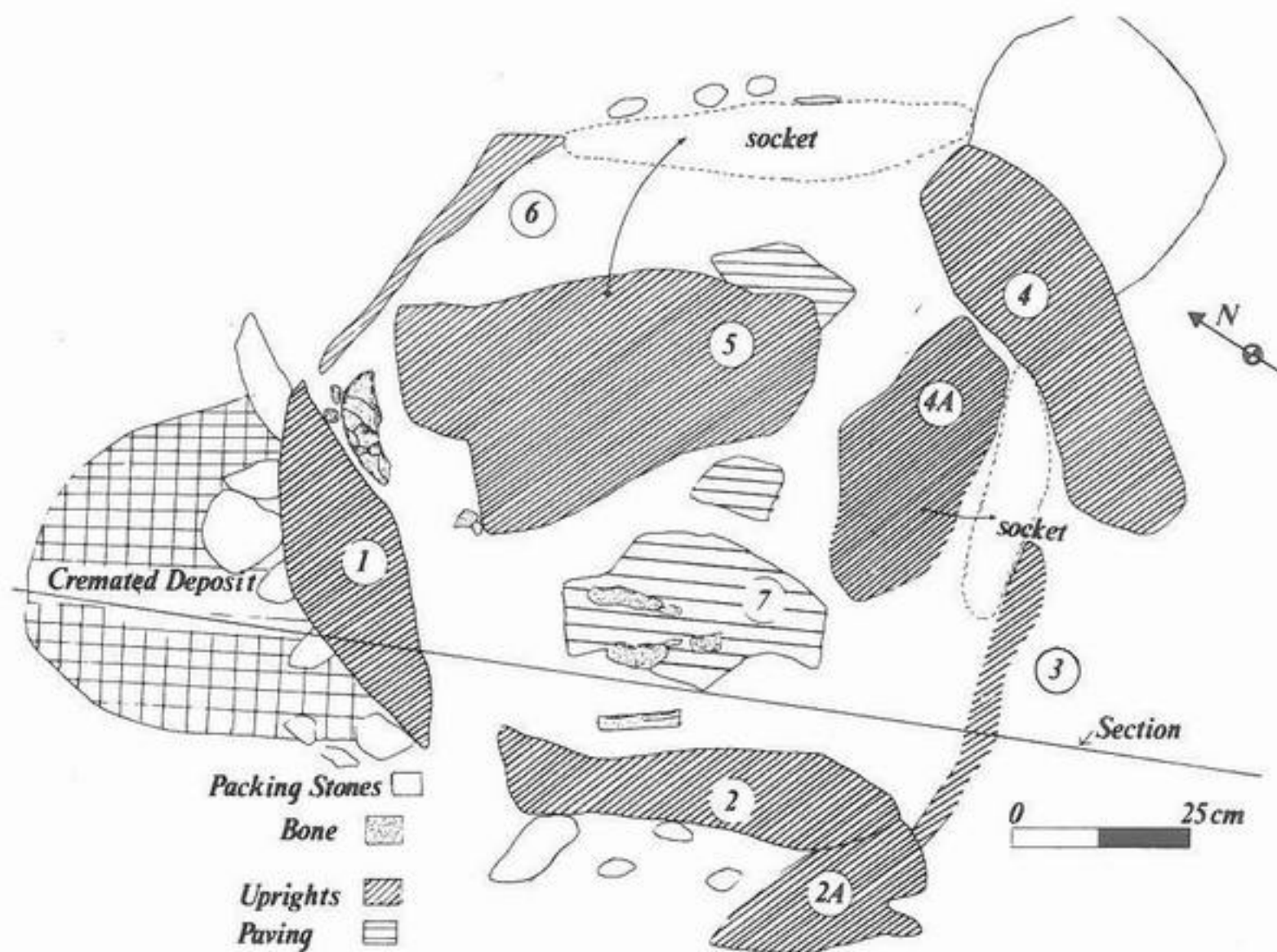


Fig. 4. Plan of cist and primary cremation.



was found during excavation. The side stones were set in an imbricating fashion (Figs. 2 and 4). A side stone (No. 5) had collapsed inwards. Stone 2A was used to close the gap between Stones 2 and 3, and to provide additional height since the top of Stone 2 slopes downward towards the South. Packing stones were used to support Stones 1, 2 and 5. The cist contained the remains of an unburnt burial which rested partially on a flat stone (No. 7 on plan, Fig. 4). Stone 8 is a natural feature.

The inhumed burial apparently had been in a flexed position, with the skull positioned close to Stone 1. The lower limb remains lay on and near Stone 7. The skull was at the North. The anatomical report is inconclusive (see Appendices I and II).<sup>4</sup> The dental report on the remains of an upper right maxilla suggests that the person was aged between 30-40 years.

## **(2) Primary Cremation**

The cist had disturbed an earlier, cremated burial (Figs. 3 and 4). This burial consisted of a very fragmentary cremated bone deposit. It was not possible to age or sex this cremation.

## **(3) The Large Stones**

The three large stones, stones which originally appeared to form some structure, were shown to rest on a filling of loose gravelly material, and were clearly deposited in their present position during land clearance, probably in fairly recent times. It may be that they originally formed part of a megalithic structure associated with the cist, but the extent of the disturbance was such that this interpretation cannot be substantiated. The presence of the loose fill around the three large stones suggests field clearance activities.

## **(4) Surrounding Area**

Some animal bone fragments were found (see Appendix III), but not in any recognisable stratigraphical relationship with the large stones or the cist, and were probably the remains of land manuring. The presence of nine modern clay pipe fragments suggests the bone fragments were of recent deposition. A posthole was found in the SW quadrant, but this may have originally held a fence-post and does not have any apparent relationship to either the cist or the large stones.

## **Discussion**

As the cist did not produce anything other than the bones, no date can be ascribed to it. However, cists of this kind can be placed in a Late Neolithic/Bronze Age context.

Ballynagallagh is the only unburnt burial as yet recorded from a polygonal cist.<sup>5</sup> The excavation showed that the cremated burial was earlier than the cist.

## **Acknowledgments**

We are indebted to Mr. Michael Quinlan, N.T., for bringing the site to our attention; to Mr. Francis O'Loughlin, the landowner, for allowing us to excavate the site and for many facilities given during the course of the work; to our student colleagues who worked on the excavation; to Professor J. P. Fraher, Dept. of Anatomy, University College, Cork,

<sup>4</sup> The full bone report is deposited in the National Museum, with the bone fragments.

<sup>5</sup> J. Waddell, "Irish Bronze Age Cists, a survey", *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Soc.*, 100(1970), 91-139.

for his report on the inhumed bones; to Dr. V. R. O'Sullivan, Dept. of Anatomy, University College, Cork, for his report on the dental material.

Limerick County Council kindly made available to us all necessary site equipment. Our sincere gratitude is due to Mr. Patrick Henchy, B.E., and several other members of the staff of Limerick County Council who made such arrangements possible.

Finally, our thanks to Professor M. J. O'Kelly, Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork, for his constant interest and advice.

## **APPENDIX I**

Report on the skeletal material from the cist, by John P. Fraher, Professor of Anatomy, University College, Cork.

The quantity and poor condition of the material precluded an assessment of age and sex of the inhumation. Several fragments of long bones were present, including one which is very slightly suggestive of an old fracture. The cranial material was very fragmentary and indignant. One fragment is from the maxilla.

## **APPENDIX II**

Report on dental and associated material from the cist, by Dr. V. R. O'Sullivan, Department of Anatomy, University College, Cork.

An examination of the dental material revealed sockets for the second and third molars, and part of the socket for the palatal root of the first molar. The roots of the second and third molars had penetrated the bone, and lay in close proximity to the maxillary air sinus. There is evidence of periodontal disease in the alveolar bone, with some lipping of the alveolar margins. I would estimate this subject to have been aged between 30 and 40 years on this evidence.

## **APPENDIX III**

Report on the animal bones, by Judith Monk, B.A.

148 fragments of animal bones were examined. Due to considerable wear and a high degree of fragmentation a large number (94) were unidentifiable to species level. Given the small number of bones and their low concentration, little can be said about them save that cattle bones were predominant in all areas of the site. The majority of the bones were found in and around the cist-like structure. These were comprising 25 fragments of cattle bone and 61 unidentifiable fragments. In and around the three large stones were found 5 cattle bones, 1 pig bone, 7 sheep bones, 1 bird bone, 2 frog bones and 33 unidentifiable fragments. The topsoil only produced 2 sheep bones. The posthole produced 1 cattle bone. No dog bones were found but three bone fragments showed signs of gnawing by a dog or fox. Excepting the bird and the frog bones, there was no other evidence of non-domestic animals present.

Signs on the bones indicating the age of death were confined to cattle. Most of the bones seemed to be from immature animals, perhaps aged from 6-18 months. Only one bone was well enough preserved to show butchery marks, and this had been sawn. A full report is deposited in the National Museum.