A Neolithic Cave Burial in Limerick

Some of the most important archaeological discoveries are made by accident and the recent discovery of a group of burials of Neolithic date in east Limerick is a case in point. Raghnall O Floinn describes the National Museum's unusual finds there.

On the evening of 27 February 1992, Mr Tom O'Donoghue was engaged in stripping topsoil in advance of quarrying operations at Madden's Quarry, Annagh, Lismagry, Co. Limerick, when he noticed a small opening in the underlying bedrock. On closer inspection he could see that the hole formed an entrance to a small cavern in which two skulls were visible. He reported the find to the Gardaí at Killaloe, who informed the National Museum. A preliminary examination of the site was carried out by Ms Celia O'Rahilly, archaeologist with Limerick Corporation, and a full-scale excavation of the site was carried out by the National Museum.

The site is located some 15km north-east of Limerick city, close to the border with Co. Tipperary, on the north flank of a low hill with commanding views to the east and north. The site consisted of an
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oval chamber, 4.50m long and 2.50m wide with its long axis running E-W. The cavern had developed along a natural fault line which was visible in the roof. Access to the cave was through a hole in the roof, originally covered by a slab which was displaced by the mechanical digger. The floor of the chamber sloped from east to west and the deepest part of the chamber was at its western end, measuring 1m in height, and it was here that the principal burials occurred.

In all, three human burials were recovered and portions of a fourth. In addition some burnt human bone was also found. The burials were placed on the floor of the cave up against its sidewalls. Two of the burials were placed in a crouched position, lying on their left sides. A third skeleton was found in a disarticulated state, that is, the bones had been collected from another location and carefully stacked side by side close to the other two bodies. Placed to one side were the bones of a fourth individual. The latter bones represented only parts of the body and were scattered along the length of the cave. It is just possible that they represented the bones of an earlier burial which was disturbed by the insertion of the other three burials. It appears that all the burials are of adult males.

A number of objects accompanied the burials. Two complete, decorated, handmade earthenware pots were carefully placed on a narrow ledge above the crouched burials. Between them were placed a small deposit of burnt human bone, a few sheep’s teeth and part of a deer antler. These objects, as well as some of the human bone, were attached to the rock by a deposit of lime and had to be carefully removed. A large flint knife or scraper was placed under one of the crouched burials and the head of a small bone pin lay close to it. Sherds of one, or possibly two, other decorated pots and of coarse undecorated pottery were also found and it appears that some of these may have fallen off the ledge at some time in the past. Small pieces of a coarse undecorated pot were found with the scatter of human bone. There is no evidence that the cave had been used for any function other than burial.

It is possible to say that the principal burials can be dated to the beginning of the Neolithic c.3500 BC. We can say this because similar burials with decorated pottery have been radiocarbon-dated to this period. A burial very similar to that from Anagh was discovered in the 1940s at Caherguillamore, Co. Limerick. In this
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each the burial chamber consisted of a large slab resting against a vertical cliff face. It too contained a crouched burial, plain and decorated pottery, a flint knife and a bone pin. The Annagh burials can also be compared to those found in a cave at Kilgreany, Co. Waterford, earlier this century. These were originally thought to have dated to the Palaeolithic because they were covered with a deposit of lime and were thought to be associated with the bones of the Giant Irish Deer. Recent radiocarbon dates show, however, that the Kilgreany burials date to the Neolithic.

The importance of this new find lies in the fact that the burials and accompanying grave goods have remained largely intact since their interment over four thousand years ago. It also emphasises the fact that in the Early Neolithic period in the south of the country, burials were not placed in easily recognisable megalithic tombs as in the north and are therefore only found by accident. The original discovery of the cave in the Neolithic period must also have been by accident and it was used by its finders as a ready-made tomb. Three of the burials at least appear to have been placed in the chamber at the one time; the fourth may represent either an earlier burial or perhaps an individual of lesser status in view of the fact that the bones were treated with less care. Another interpretation is that the two crouched inhumations were the principal burials and the other two disarticulated skeletons represent the remains of other members of the community who had died earlier and whose bodies were disinterred and reburied in the burial chamber. It is possible that the radiocarbon dates may resolve some of these problems.

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The pottery vessels and other finds are currently undergoing conservation in the Laboratory of the National Museum and it is intended that the human bones will be examined to determine the age and sex of the individuals.

(RALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND).

The National Museum would like to acknowledge the assistance and co-operation it has received from the quarry owner, Mr Tom Madden of Madden Developments Limited, Mr Bill Freaney, the quarry manager, and his assistant Mr Jim Riall, and Mr Tony Keogh and Mr Ted Little of the Office of Public Works National Monuments service who carefully removed the pottery vessels.

Raghnall Ó Floinn is an Assistant Keeper in the Irish Antiquities Division at the National Museum of Ireland