Two Urn-Burials from Cush, Co. Limerick

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During the year two urn-burials dating from Middle Bronze Age times were discovered on the lands of Mr. John Dawson, at Cush, near Kilnamo, Co. Limerick. In June, when earthing potatoes, Mr. Dawson discovered the first burial which was immediately reported to the National Museum of Ireland. Close by this burial a large rectangular limestone boulder, having the appearance of perhaps being the capstone of a cist-grave, was noticed, and when investigating the nature of this stone in September the second burial was discovered (Fig. 1). The site of these two urn-burials is slightly below the 600 ft. contour on the western slope of Slievekeagh, some few hundreds of metres below the well-known earthworks investigated in 1934-35 by the late Professor Seán P. O Riordain.

The first burial discovered consisted of a pit dug into the boulder clay and containing a Chalcolithic Urn6 inverted over cremated human bones.6 Mixed with the bones were some charcoal fragments, all of hazel (Corylus), and near the bottom of the pit was a badly corroded fragment of a bronze blade,7 while lying against the outside of the urn, at a height of about 9.5 cm. above the rim, was a fist artifact.8 Due to disturbance before the nature of the discovery was realised, the basal portion of the urn had been sheared off. The outline of the pit could be traced for almost half of its circumference and to a remaining depth of about 10 cm. The bottom of the pit coincided with the mouth of the urn and the highest remaining part of the pit was 5 cm. out from the wall of the vessel.

Fig. 1. Urn Burials at Cush, Co. Limerick: plan and section.

Fig. 2. Finds from the first urn-burial.

1 Td. Cush: Par. Ennyraneen; Bar. Cushlea; Co. Limerick; O.S. 6-inch sheet 48 (23.4 cm from E. and 25.3 cm from S.); Nat. Grid Ref. R.897.236.
2 Both burials were investigated on behalf of the National Museum of Ireland, the first by J.C.O.'s and the second by P.B. The Museum authorities acknowledge their thanks to Mr. Dawson, to Mr. Daniel O'Shaughnessy, Kilnamo, and to Mr. S. O Coghlain, Cork Public Museum, for bringing the initial discovery to notice. The writers would like to acknowledge their thanks to Mr. Conalaid O Daraich, Coimisin Bheacháin Eireana, to Dr. John M. P. Conlan, Department of Archaeology, Glasgow University, and to Miss Bridget Crowe, Kilnamo, for assistance with the actual investigations.

3 PRIA, 48, C (1949), 83-161.
4 Nat. Museum reg. no. 1937:139.
5 Nat. Museum reg. no. 1957:142.
6 The writers wish to thank Miss Maura Scannell, Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland, for kindly identifying the charcoal fragments.
7 Nat. Museum reg. no. 1957:143.
8 Nat. Museum reg. no. 1957:144.
Cinerary Urn (Fig. 2, A)

Of the Cordoned type. Its basal portion is entirely missing but, judging from its present shape, it may originally have been about 36 or 35 cm. high. The mouth is oval, 26 cm. by 26.5 cm. and the rim has a 1.4 cm. wide internal level. The vessel widens outwards from this rim, reaching a maximum width of 31.8 cm. at a distance of about 10 cm. from the rim. The vessel then narrows again to the 1.4 cm. wide rim. The base is a circular, domed portion forming a design of running triangles. Immediately below the cordons, the vessel widens out to a diameter of 34 cm. and the base is decorated with impressed ornament, the pattern being a series of horizontal bands, each containing a design of running triangles. The average thickness of the wall of the vessel is 1.2 cm. The ware is coarse, friable, and contains many grits and small stones.

Bronze Blade (Fig. 2, B)

This fragment of a cutting edge appears to belong to the type of blade commonly referred to as a razor or razordike. Its present maximum measurements are 6.2 cm. long by 3.8 cm. wide by 2.3 mm. thick.

Flint Artifact (Fig. 2, C)

Of bluish-grey flint showing signs of having been subjected to heat. Long and slender, and worked from the non-bulbar face only. Made from a primary flake, a large portion of which is still present. The core of the flake is still intact, but the working surface is rough and the cortex is completely removed. The flake is 6.5 cm. long, 3.5 cm. wide, and 1.8 cm. thick.

During the investigation of the above-described urn-burial, some fragments of cremated human bones were discovered in the vicinity of the large boulder, 1.25 m. to the E.N.E. This boulder measured 100 cm. by 70 cm. by 45 cm. in maximum length, breadth, and thickness, respectively, and on excavation proved to be a natural feature and not the capstone of a cist-grave as had been suspected.

During the exploratory excavation of the boulder, a second urn-burial was discovered, 1.45 m. distant from the first burial and 1.75 m. from the boulder. This vessel was also a Cinerary Urn but was not inverted; it rested at a slight tilt on its flat bottom. The lower portion of the vessel had been damaged during the potato-digging earlier in the year or perhaps previous years, but several sherds belonging to it were recovered from its vicinity. It contained cremated human bones, and many fragments of which were found in its vicinity, likewise disturbed by the earlier potato-digging—these bones discovered near the boulder during the investigation of the first urn-burial probably also belonged to this burial. A small fragment of a fragment of a blade which had accompanied this burial, was found among some cremated bones 20 cm. from the vessel. No clear trace of any pit was noticed, but the area surrounding the burial, extending about 100 cm. from the boulder and about 60 cm. across, contained many small round stones, varying between about 5 cm. and 10 cm. in thickness, which may perhaps be interpreted as packing-stones filling a pit.

Fig. 3. Finds from the second urn-burial (A and B) and from nearby (C and D).

Cinerary Urn (Fig. 3, A)

Of the Cordoned type. The rim is almost entirely missing, only one small shard (6.5 cm.) remaining. This shard cannot be fitted to any part of the vessel at present remaining, but the approximate original height of the urn can be estimated at about 30 cm. The vessel widens outwards from the rim to a diameter of about 30 cm., reaching a maximum width of about 30 cm. at a distance of about 10 cm. from the rim. Two low cordons encircle the vessel, one 9.5 cm. and the other 17.5 cm. from it. The base is 12.5 cm. in diameter. The collar of the vessel, both at the rim and base, is decorated with impressed cord ornament. The design consists of a series of horizontal bands, each containing a design of running triangles. The average thickness of the wall of the vessel is 1.1 cm. The ware is coarse, friable, and contains many large grits.

Bronze Fragment (Fig. 3, B)

Small and much corroded, but appears to be part of a thin blade. No part of the original edge remains, but a segment of a circular, riveted handle survives. The original diameter of which was about 3 cm. The width of the fragment at this point is such as to suggest that the blade was more likely to have been a razor-knife than a razor. Its present maximum measurements are 1.15 cm. long by 2.05 cm. wide by 2 mm. thick.

"E. Birch, op. cit., p. 44: "Razors have short, broad tangs.....Razors have narrow tangs...."
Two potsherds\(^{16}\) assignable to neither of the Cinerary Urns discovered were also found, one (Fig. 3, C) amongst the broken potsherds in the disturbed soil in the vicinity of the second burial, and the other (Fig. 3, D) close to the south-eastern corner of the boulder. Whether these two sherds belonged originally to two different vessels or to the same vessel is difficult to judge, though both are very similar in fabric and colour, being coarse, friable, gritty and having a reddish tinge on the light-brown exterior surface.

**DISCUSSION**

Cordoned Urns are generally attributed to the Middle Bronze Age, as also are bronze razors/razor-knives and flint fabricators. Cordoned Urns are frequently found in association with bronze blades,\(^{17}\) e.g. at Gleneree, Co. Limerick, only about three miles to the South-East of Cush, where a Cordoned Urn was found covering a cremation and a bronze razor-knife.\(^{18}\) Flint fabricators have also occurred in urn-burials elsewhere, the best Irish example being one associated with an Encrusted Urn and a plano-convex flint knife with serrated cutting-edges found in a cist-grave in a tumulus at Killycarney, Co. Cavan.\(^{19}\)

Although the two burials differ in at least one apparently significant respect, namely in that one of the urns was inverted while the other was not, it seems clear that they must be contemporary. The two potsherds from another vessel would seem to indicate the presence of other, as yet undiscovered, urn-burials in the immediate area, and it may be that the two burials discovered are but part of a group of such graves; the boulder may, indeed, have been chosen by a prehistoric family as a focal point around which to bury their dead.

\(^{16}\) Nat. Museum reg. nos. 1967:130 (a and b).

\(^{17}\) For a list of the finds associated with Irish Cordoned Urns see A. B. Ó Riordáin, *JRSAI*, 97 (1967), 42-43, and for a list of the finds associated with Irish bronze razors and razor-knives see E. Binchy, *op. cit.*, p.46.


\(^{19}\) W. F. Wakeman, *JRSAI*, 15 (1879-82), 200, fig. 63; the object is described as “a knife-like implement” and is poorly illustrated. The writers are grateful to Mr. John Waddell, Irish Antiquities Division, National Museum of Ireland, for drawing their attention to this association and for other assistance in the preparation of this paper for publication.