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 Kilfinane, 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-

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

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1 Td. Cush; Par. Emlygrennan; Bar. Coshlea; Co. Limerick; O.S. 6-inch sheet 48 (23.4 cm from E. and 25.3 cm from S.); Nat. Grid Ref. R.697.256.
2 Both burials were investigated on behalf of the National Museum of Ireland, the first by J.C. O’S. and the second by E.R. The Museum authorities acknowledge their thanks to Mr. Dawson, to Mr. Daniel O’Shaughnessy, Kilfinane, and to Mr. S. O Coigligh, Cork Public Museum, for bringing the initial discovery to its notice. The writers would like to acknowledge their thanks to Mr. Caoimhín Ó Danachair, Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann, to Dr. John X. W. P. Corcoran, Department of Archaeology, Glasgow University, and to Miss Bridget Crowley, Kilfinane, for assistance with the actual investigations.
burials is slightly below the 600 ft. contour on the western slope of Slieveroeagh, some few hundreds of metres below the well-known earthworks investigated in 1934-35 by the late Professor Seán P. Ó Riordáin.\(^3\)

The first burial discovered consisted of a pit dug into the boulder clay and containing a Cinerary Urn\(^4\) inverted over cremated human bones.\(^5\) Mixed with the bones were some charcoal fragments, all of hazel (Corylus)\(^6\), 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 flint 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.

\[\text{Fig. 2. Finds from the first urn-burial.}\]

\(^2\) PRIA, 45, C (1940), 83-181.
\(^4\) Nat. Museum reg. no. 1967:139.
\(^6\) Nat. Museum reg. no. 1967:142.
\(^8\) Nat. Museum reg. no. 1967:140.

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. 1967:140.
\(^8\) Nat. Museum reg. no. 1967:141.
Cinerary Urn (Fig. 2, A)

Of the Corded type. Its basal portion is entirely missing but, judging from its present maximum height of 28 cm., it may originally have been about 34 or 35 cm. high. The mouth is oval, 24 cm. by 26.5 cm. and the rim has a 1.6 cm. wide internal bevel. The vessel widens outwards from the rim, reaching a maximum width of 31.5 cm. at a distance of about 10 cm. below it. Encircling the vessel at this point is a low cordon and 7.2 cm. nearer the base is another similar cordon. The 9.3 cm. wide ‘collar’ of the vessel is decorated with impressed twisted-cord ornament forming a design of running triangles. Immediately below the cordon bounding the ‘collar’ is an irregular row of large roughly circular depressions, averaging about 5 mm. in diameter, which give the impression of having been produced by stabbing the unfired ware with the end of a small twig or bone. The average thickness of the wall of the vessel is 1.2 cm. The ware is rather coarse, friable, and contains plenty of grits.

Bronze Blade (Fig. 2, B)

The fragment now remaining is very thin, but still retains portion of a cutting-edge and evidence of having originally been double-edged; it had a pointed oval cross-section. It appears to belong to the type of blade commonly referred to as razors or razor-knives. Its present maximum measurements are 3.2 cm. long by 2.2 cm. wide by 4 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 the worked surface still retaining the cortex. The secondary flaking is of poor quality and is confined to the sides. The pointed end is rounded and worn smooth, apparently from use, a feature typical of the type of flint tool known as a fabricator. It measures 7 cm. in length, 1.8 cm. in width and 1.6 cm. in maximum thickness.

During the investigation of the above-described urn-burial, some fragments of cremated human bones were discovered in the vicinity of the large boulder, 1.75 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 17 cm. 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 rim portion of the vessel had been damaged during the potato-digging earlier in the year or perhaps during previous years, but several sherds belonging to it were recovered from its vicinity. It contained cremated human bones, many fragments of which were also found in its vicinity, likewise disturbed by the earlier potato-digging—the bones discovered near the boulder during the investigation of the first urn-burial probably also belong to this burial. A small fragment of very thin and corroded bronze, probably portion 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

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* See E. Binchy, "Irish Razors and Razor-Knives of the Middle Bronze Age", North Munster Studies (ed. E. Rynne), Limerick 1967, pp. 43-60.

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100 cm. from the boulder and about 60 cm. across, contained many small rounded 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 sherd (5.5 cm. by 5 cm.) remaining. This sherd cannot be fitted to any part of the vessel at present remaining, but the approximate original height of the urn can be estimated as about 30 cm.; the urn was originally about 26.5 cm. in diameter at the rim. The vessel widens outwards from the internally bevelled rim, reaching a maximum width of about 28 cm. at a distance of about 5 cm. from it. Two low cords encircle the vessel, one 9.6 cm. and the other 17.5 cm. from the base. The base is 12.7 cm. in diameter. The ‘collar’ of the vessel, between the rim and the uppermost cordon, is decorated with impressed twisted-cord ornament. Insufficient of the design survives to form a recognisable pattern, but it seems to have been based on diagonal lines perhaps forming triangles. The average thickness of the wall of the vessel is 1.1 cm. The ware is coarse, friable and contains large angular grits.

**Bronze Fragment** (Fig. 3, B)

Small and much corroded, but appears to be portion of a thin blade. No part of the original edge remains, but a segment of a circular rivet-hole survives, the original diameter of which was about 3 mm. The width of the fragment at this point is such as to suggest that the blade is more likely to have been a razor-knife than a razor. Its present maximum measurements are 1.15 cm. long by 1.05 cm. wide by 2 mm. thick.

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15 E. Binchy, *op. cit.*, p.44: "Razor-knives have short, broad tangs . . . . Razors have narrow-tangs . . . ."
Two potsherds\textsuperscript{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,\textsuperscript{17} e.g. at Glenaree, 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{16} Nat. Museum reg. nos. 1967:130 (a and b).
\textsuperscript{17} For a list of the finds associated with Irish Cordoned Urns see A. B. Ó Ríordáin, *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.
\textsuperscript{18} S. P. Ó Riordáin, *NMAI*, 1 (1936-39), 34-35.
\textsuperscript{19} W. F. Wakeman, *JRSAI*, 15 (1879-82), 200, fig. 6.3; 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.