A Cist-Burial near Rearcross, Co. Tipperary

By ETIENNE RYNNE

In May, 1963, while ploughing a rather steeply sloping field near Rearcross, Co. Tipperary, Mr. Thomas O'Toole, Belaclave, Rearcross, uncovered a small cist-grave. Because of the excavations by Professor M. J. O'Kelly of University College, Cork, in the neighbourhood during recent years, Mr. O'Toole quickly recognised the grave as a prehistoric monument and, without further disturbing it, he reported it to the Gárdai at Rearcross. The National Museum was informed by them and the site was immediately investigated by the writer.¹

FIG. 1. Cist at Bealaclave from north-west, with capstones replaced. (Scale = 1m.)

¹ The National Museum wishes to take this opportunity to thank Mr. O'Toole and the Gárdai at Rearcross, particularly Gárda James F. Nolan, for reporting the discovery so promptly. The writer would also like to thank Mr. Kenneth Madden, Dublin, for assistance in the investigation of the site.
The cist-grave is in the townland of Bealaclave, parish of Abington, barony of Owney and Arra, and can be plotted on O.S. 6-inch sheet 38 for Co. Tipperary, 17.4 cm. from the northern margin and 33 cm. from the eastern margin. The field faces southwards and the grave was at a height of about 830 ft. above O.D. The neighbouring townland to the east and south-east is Baurnadomeeny and the Wedge-shaped Gallery Grave in that townland, excavated in 1959 by Professor O'Kelly, is about 1,100 yards to the south-east of the cist-grave; the Court Cairn in nearby Shanballyedmond, excavated by Professor O'Kelly the previous year, is less than 1½ miles to the south.

The cist-grave was found at a depth of about 10-15 cm. below the surface of the field, which had not been ploughed within living memory. Owing to the disturbance caused by the ploughshare catching in one of the small capstones and to subsequent disturbance by the finder before the significance of the stones was fully realised, the.

\[ M. J. O'Kelly, NMAJ, 8 (1959), 62a-63, and JCHAS, 65(1960), 85-115. \]
\[ M. J. O'Kelly, NMAJ, 8 (1958), 34-37, and JCHAS, 63(1958), 37-72. \]
original number and positions of the capstones are uncertain. There would, however, appear to have been three small, rather narrow capstones laid transversely across the cist, perhaps somewhat as shown in the reconstruction attempted by Mr. O'Toole (Fig. 1). The cist was constructed in an oval pit which was dug into the boulder clay which was about 20-25 cm. below the present ground surface. The pit was about 30 cm. deep, its bottom being, therefore, about 50-55 cm. below the surface of the field. It measured about 50 cm. N-S and about 40 cm. E-W at its top, but as its southern side sloped considerably the N-S measurement was reduced to about 30 cm. at the bottom.

The pit was not completely lined with stones (Figs. 2 and 3). The northern half was lined with three slabs, each about 35 cm. high and about 5 cm. thick, which were set on edge resting on the bottom of the pit. There were two small slightly thicker slabs lining the upper part of the sloping southern end of the pit, each of which measured about 15-20 cm. in height. There was no stone lining at the south-eastern and south-western parts of the pit, although in the former part there were two small thin slabs laid horizontally, one partly on top of the other, on the lip of the boulder clay. It is just possible that there was originally a stone lining the south-western part of the pit which may have got accidentally removed during the initial discovery of the grave (in the reconstruction shown in Fig. 1, a stone has been placed in this part of the pit). Partly overlapping the north-western slab and filling the slight gap between it and the slab at the northern end, was a small thin slab about 10 cm. high which was set on edge in the uppermost part of the pit. About 5 cm. behind both this small slab and

FIG. 3. Plan (at top of pit) and section of cist at Bealacave.

4 Dr. John S. Jackson, Keeper, Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland, identified a sample of one of the cist-stones as "fine grained grit."
the north-western slab of the cist, was a very thin slab set on edge in the boulder clay. This slab was about 20 cm. high and did not appear to serve any useful purpose, as it was neither a lining for the pit nor a necessary additional support for the capstones. The floor of the pit was formed by the natural boulder clay.

The upper levels of the fill in the cist had suffered considerable disturbance, but the lower levels appeared to be relatively undisturbed. In the fill in the lower levels six small lumps of "vein-quartz (milky variety)" were found. The largest of these lumps measured 4.6 x 4.5 x 2.7 cm., the others being smaller and averaging about 2.8 x 2.2 x 1.2 cm. None of these showed any signs of being artificially worked.

A small quantity of cremated human bones, obviously of an adult, was found at the bottom of the cist. These were few and in a very poor state of preservation due to the acid nature of the soil, and rested on a rather thick layer of charcoal. This charcoal layer appeared to be fairly uniform under the bones and, in places, it extended slightly beyond the area covered by the bones, but nowhere was there clear evidence of charcoal on, above, or among the bones. The charcoal, however, extended under the northern and north-eastern side-slabs lining the pit, most noticeably under the former, showing that it had been placed in the pit before the stones were inserted.

Discussion:

The small size and rather unusual shape of this cist are worthy of further comment. It is considerably smaller and less well made than the average Bronze Age cist-grave found in Ireland. The more orthodox cist is not only much larger but is generally of regular box-like shape. Small cists are, however, known in Ireland, and it is perhaps significant that such graves are generally found in a very early context, either Late Neolithic or very early in the Early Bronze Age. The polygonal plan of the Bealacave cist, with one side sloping, may also be of significance in attempting to estimate the date of this burial. Perhaps the closest parallels for this grave are the small cists, some polygonal and with sloping sides, which were discovered during the excavation of the nearby Wedge-shaped Gallery Grave in Bannadomeeny, mentioned above, and, as pointed out by Professor O'Kelly, during the excavation of the enigmatic megalithic monument at Millin Bay, Co. Down.

The charcoal layer under the bones also calls for discussion. It is perhaps significant that this charcoal was neither mixed with the bones nor anywhere above them and it would seem unlikely, therefore, that the cremated bones were placed down, unless extremely gently, on a loose carpet of charcoal. It seems possible, to the writer, that this charcoal does not owe its carbonised condition to contact with fire, but rather that it is due to "the chemical disintegration of the carbohydrate or allied compounds of the original substances whereby little else but carbon remains." The presence of the carbonised object (a larva?—See footnote 6) with this charcoal layer argues strongly against burning by fire and in favour of the above theory. It would appear likely,
to the writer at least, that the cremated bones were placed on a wooden tray of some sort before being laid on the bottom of the pit—probably because the pit was slightly too small at its bottom to accommodate the "tray" and the stones, two of the latter were placed on the edge of the former. Cremated burials resting on charcoal at the bottoms of pits or cists are quite common, particularly in Middle Bronze Age contexts in England where the carbonised wood is generally described as being evidence for a wooden coffin, box, or plank.\(^\text{10}\) A fairly close parallel to the Bealaclava burial in this regard is the pit-burial discovered under a small cairn during a recent excavation in Co. Dublin,\(^\text{11}\) which can probably be dated to the Neolithic Period or to the Early Bronze Age.

Since the fill of the cist above the bones may have been somewhat disturbed, it is not certain that the lumps of quartz were found in a primary position. It would appear likely that they were, however, as only the upper levels of the fill definitely suffered disturbance, the lower levels appearing undisturbed. Although quartz is found locally it is not common enough\(^\text{12}\) for six lumps to have fallen into the cist unless they were deliberately collected and placed in it. This suggests, therefore, that the cist had been deliberately filled to a depth of at least about 15-20 cm. and that the quartz had been thrown into the cist with this filling before the cist was closed. The ritual deposition of quartz in graves of all periods, from earliest to contemporary times, has several times been discussed, and the quartz in the Bealaclava cist-grave is but one more instance of this ancient custom.\(^\text{13}\)

**Conclusions:**

Probably towards the end of the Neolithic Period or the beginnings of the Early Bronze Age,\(^\text{14}\) an adult individual was buried in a small cist-grave on the southern slopes of a low hill at Bealaclava, near Rearcross, in an area where collective burial certainly was practised at about the same period (e.g. in the Wedge-shaped Gallery Grave at Bauarnadomeeny). The corpse had been cremated and the bones then placed on a tray-like piece of oak-wood. A small oval pit with one sloping side had been dug and the "tray" and bones placed on its bottom. Next the pit was partly lined with stones and completely(?) filled with soil, some quartz lumps which had been collected locally being deposited with the soil in the cist. The cist was then closed with three(?) small capstones and covered over with the soil which had been removed in digging the pit.

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\(^{10}\) Several such are included in the list of Wessex Culture burials given by S. Piggott in *PPS*, 4(1938), 102-4.

\(^{11}\) Site K, Piperstown, Co. Dublin; see E. Rynne and P. Ó hEaileidhe, *PRIA*, forthcoming.

\(^{12}\) Mr. O'Toole believed that quartz was not found anywhere in the vicinity.

\(^{13}\) For a list of some references to this custom see E. Rynne, *JRSAI*, 93 (1963), 177, fn. 19, to which A. D. Rees, *Bull. Board Celtic Studies*, 8 (1935-7), 87-90 should be added.

\(^{14}\) The charcoal has been retained in the National Museum for possible radiocarbon dating in the future.