

Neolithic/Bronze Age cemetery site at Ballyconneely, Co. Clare

Archaeologist Christopher Read describes the initial results of the excavation of a cremation cemetery during road construction near Newmarket-on-Fergus, Co. Clare.



Burial, looking south-east, showing burnt stone removed during excavation

The excavations at Ballyconneely took place from July 1999 to April 2000 as part of the N18/19 road improvement scheme. The work, carried out for Valerie J. Keeley Ltd, began as a routine investigation of potential field boundaries and a dubious standing stone. However, at the extreme southern end of the complex, a stone and gravel trackway was revealed heading towards a natural platform with panoramic views of the Shannon/Fergus estuary. What followed was the discovery of intensive prehistoric activity across an area measuring roughly 30m by 30m and consisting of over 600 cut features, including pits, post-holes and slot-trenches.

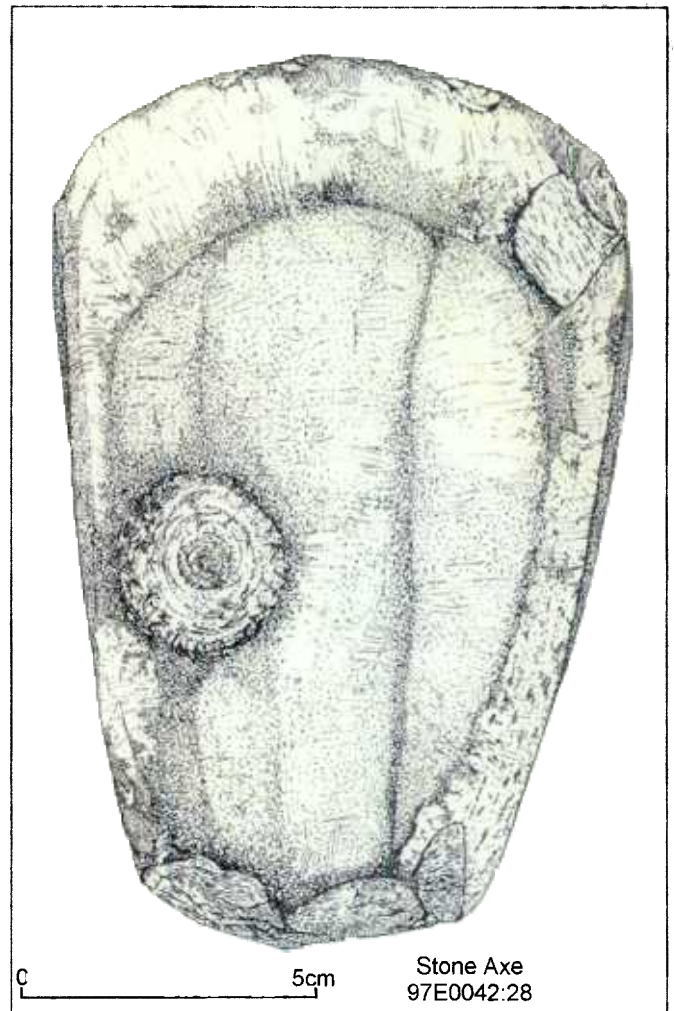
Excavation revealed that over 80 of the pits, varying in size from 10cm to 1.5m in diameter, were in fact token cremations, containing small amounts of cremated crushed bone (yet to be positively identified as human), some unburnt animal bones and, in half a dozen cases, artefacts. The finds included several sherds of coarse pottery, a tiny serrated copper-alloy blade, polished bone pins and a beautiful ground stone axe. The site appeared rather like a large Middle/Late Bronze Age flat cemetery.

Pottery from three of the pits has been positively identified as fragments of Early Neolithic Carinated Bowls. The remaining



pottery is typical Later Bronze Age coarse-ware. Unfortunately, there are few stratigraphic relationships on the site, with all of the features cutting the subsoil. Thus the question of whether we are looking at a multiperiod site and a common burial rite practised for over 3000 years (!) or some form of intentional reuse and retention of ancient items during the Later Bronze Age remains to be answered.

The site also contained an extensive cluster of post-holes and slot-trenches forming two or more possible structures, two large burnt spreads possibly representing the remains of cremation pyres, and a copper-smelting furnace. The absence of occupation debris from the structures indicates that they may have been associated with the burial rites rather than with habitation. ■



Stone Axe
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Above—The site, looking south-west

Right—Stone axe