

# New light on late prehistoric ritual and burial in County Limerick

DURING THE monitoring of topsoil clearance in advance of the construction of the Adare to Annacotty N20/N21 road improvement scheme a ring-ditch was discovered in Ballybronoge South townland, approximately 1km south-west of the village of Patrickswell.

The subsequent excavation of this small monument has provided some new and interesting insights into later prehistoric ritual and burial in this part of the country and has provided an artefactual parallel for a carved bone gaming-piece from Cush in the south of the county.

The Ballybronoge South ring-ditch was a small monument, no more than 7m in external diameter. The ditch varied in width from 1m to 1.4m and had a maximum depth of 0.5m. It had a penannular plan, the entrance facing east. Unfortunately the northern terminal had been unintentionally cut away prior to discovery by an engineering test-pit. In terms of size, the Ballybronoge South ring-ditch compares well with other excavated examples; for instance, three of the four ring-ditches excavated by Valerie J. Keeley at Ballydavis near Portlaoise ranged in diameter from 6m to 8m.

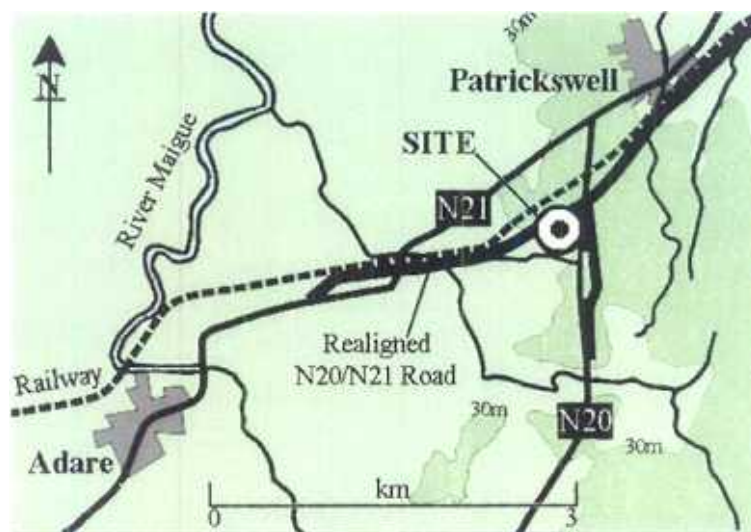
James Eogan and Damian Finn, Archaeological Development Services Ltd, describe the excavation of a ring-ditch which raises questions concerning our understanding of later prehistoric burial.

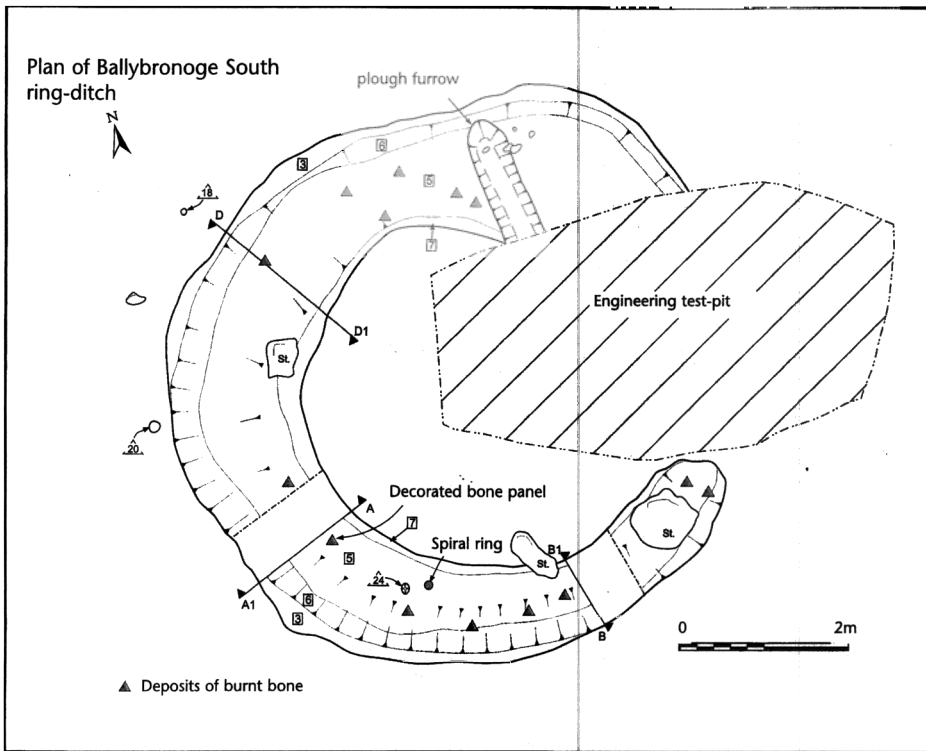
Three of the Ballydavis ring-ditches had entrances: one faced south-east, another faced east, and the third faced north-west. The entrance to a penannular ring-ditch at Lehinch, Co. Offaly, excavated by Ragnall Ó Floinn of the National Museum of Ireland also faced south-east, as did the entrance of a similar mon-

ument that was partially excavated during construction of the Cork-Limerick gas pipeline at Duntryleague, Co. Limerick.

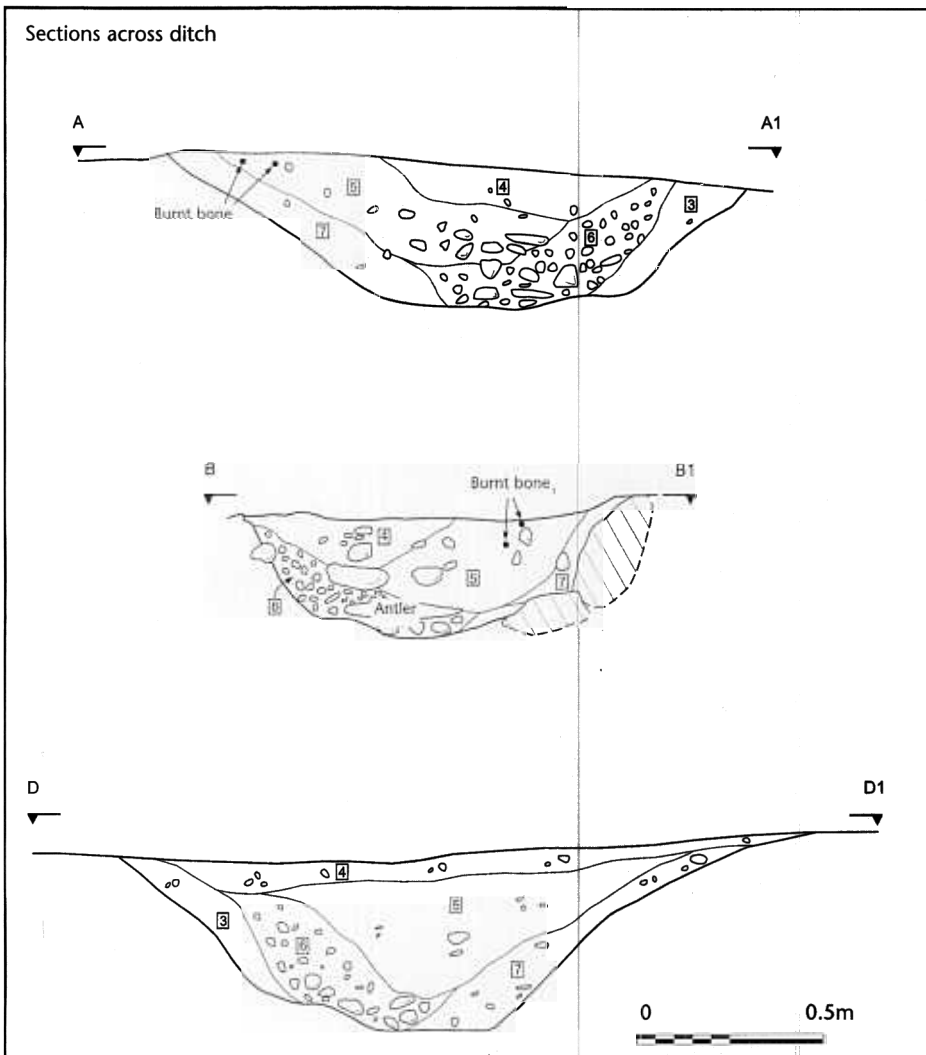
No trace of the ring-ditch at Ballybronoge South was visible above ground, but the digging of the ditch could have produced as much as 13 cubic metres of soil. This may have been used to build an internal mound or an external bank, or possibly both. By careful examination of the sequence of silting and filling of the ditch we can uncover some evidence for an external bank. The initial fills of the ditch are two layers of charcoal-flecked clayey silt. Layer 3 lay against the outer edge of the ditch and was orangey brown in colour, while layer 7 lay against the inner edge of the ditch and was greyish brown in colour (see sections). These layers can best be interpreted as the result of erosion of the edges of a freshly dug ditch brought about in the main by natural agencies such as rain, frost and wind.

It is tempting to attribute the difference in colour of these layers to a difference in conditions that pertained on either side of the ditch. It may be that the grey-





Bone panel



ish colour of layer 7 results from the erosion of sod and topsoil. The orange colour of layer 3 could have originated from the natural orangey boulder clay which was dug from the ditch and may have been piled on its outer edge to create an enclosing bank. Further evidence for such a bank can be found in the overlying layer 6. This is a layer of charcoal-flecked mid-brown clayey silt, up to 20cm thick, which appears to have silted into the ditch from its outer edge. Where did this fill originate? If it is the result of a process of natural silting it suggests that there was a bank of material on the outer edge of the ditch which eroded. On the other hand, layer 6 may represent the deliberate partial backfilling of the ditch with soil brought from elsewhere. The only artefact from this layer is part of a naturally shed red deer antler.

The main fill of the ring-ditch was a layer of black charcoal-rich silt (layer 5), which had a maximum thickness of 30cm. Fourteen deposits of cremated human bone and some unburnt animal bone were found in this layer. The cremations ranged in weight from 3g to 131g, and totalled 646g. They form two groups, one in the southern part of the ditch and one in the northern; there is a difference of only 8g between the aggregate weight of the cremations in each group. Preliminary analysis has indicated that the cremations represent the remains of at least two individuals, one of whom was male (Lauren Buckley,



Ring-ditch viewed from east

pers. comm.). There is at least one individual in each group.

One of the deposits in the southern group contained a fragment of a decorated panel, part of a larger object. It is decorated with incised motifs on both flat faces and on the two original edges, and it has been burnt. The decoration on face 'A' consists of six concentric arcs; the outer arc is interrupted by four incised lines outlining two 'horns' which reach almost to the edge of the panel. Face 'B' is decorated with a series of very faint compass-drawn motifs. One edge is decorated with saltire motifs, while the other has five parallel lines. A spiral-coiled ring of copper-alloy wire (max. external diameter c. 16mm) and a small burnt flint pebble were also found in this layer, though neither was directly associated with a cremation deposit.

The bone panel is an unusual artefact. The closest parallel in terms of form and style of decoration is the bone artefact found accompanying a human cremation

in a central pit under Tumulus 2 at Cush in south County Limerick. This has been interpreted as a gaming-piece, akin to a domino rather than a die, and on stylistic grounds is dated to the years around the birth of Christ. It is reported that three decorated bone pieces were found in the fill of the ditch of Ballydavis Site 3, but it is not known whether these are in any way similar to the piece from Ballybronoge South. A parallel for the spiral ring comes from the so-called 'Loughey' burial from County Down, which is also dated to the same period.

Further parallels in the Iron Age can be found for the Ballybronoge South ring-ditch if we examine the way in which the cremations were deposited. At a number of ring-ditches and ring-barrows used as places of burial in the Iron Age, deposits of cremated bone have been found in the ditches. The enclosing ditches of ring-barrows excavated by Professor Etienne Rynne at Grannagh and Oranbeg in County Galway contained four

and three deposits of cremated bone respectively. Cremated bone was found in the fills of the ditches at Ballydavis Sites 1 and 3. Four deposits of cremated bone were found lying on a charcoal layer in the fill of the ditch enclosing Tumulus 8 in the ring-barrow cemetery excavated by the late Dr Joseph Raftery at Carrowjames, Co. Mayo. This repeating pattern of the deposition of cremated remains in the surrounding ditches is revealing, not only in relation to the treatment of human remains in later prehistory but also for the use of these monuments.

No evidence of any internal features was found in the area defined by the ditch at Ballybronoge South, though a large part of this area was cut away by the test-pit. Central burials are known from other ring-ditches (Ballydavis Site 1) and ring-barrows (Grannagh), but they are not always present. The lack of any burial evidence at Ballydavis Site 2 and some other ring-ditches alerts us to the probability that these monuments were not used

solely for funerary purposes.

It is clear at Ballybronoge South that the cremations in the ditch are associated with a later phase of use of the monument. The effect of depositing layer 5 in the ditch was to fill it up almost completely, and it has already been shown that by this time the possible outer bank would have substantially eroded away. In other words, an already slight monument was rendered almost invisible in its final recognised phase of use, though an attempt may have been made to recut the ditch along the south and west sides at some later date. In this regard it is also worth noting that a post was driven into the fill of the ditch on its southern side (cut 24). Two other post-holes were found outside the ditch, one opposite the entrance (cut 20) and another on its north-west side (cut 18), but these need not be of the same date as cut 24. A fourth post-hole was found in the base of the ditch on its western side; it presumably pre-dates the filling of the ditch.

The evidence from Ballybronoge South goes some way towards showing why burial in Irish later prehistory has such a low archaeological visibility. It would seem that in this case, while it took place at a monument, its effect was to lessen the physical monumentality of a small-scale structure. Furthermore, the discovery and excavation of this site shows once again the value of archaeological monitoring of large construction projects. ■

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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