

THE EARLY PREHISTORIC PERIOD AROUND THE IRISH SEA

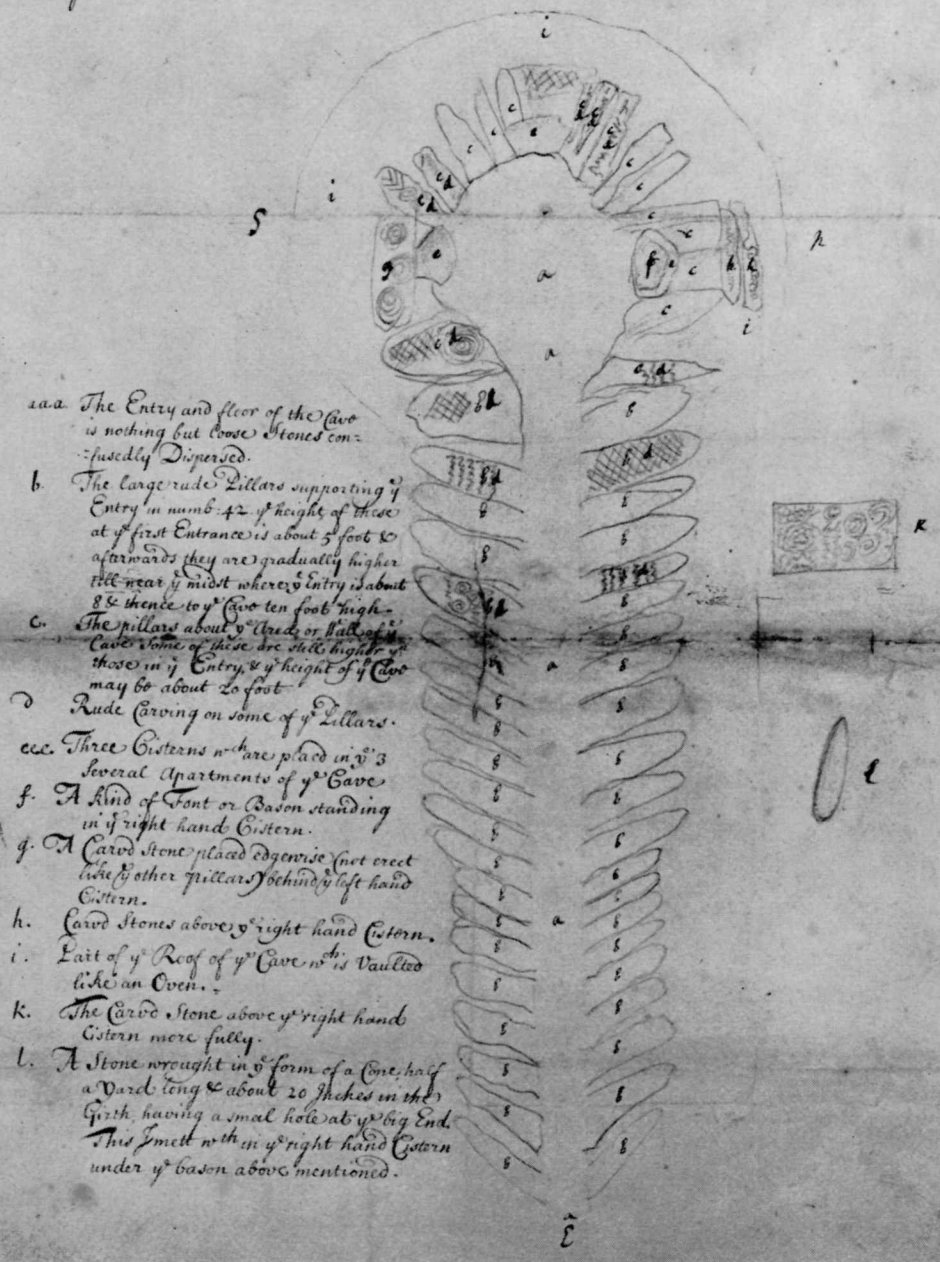
Michael Herity

Edward Lhuyd, a Welshman, was the first of the antiquaries to make a close study of our Irish antiquities. He it was, by his visits of 1699 and 1700¹ and in the letters which he wrote to my Irish antiquarian forbears, who first opened our minds to some of the principles of archaeological investigation; and who accurately described many of our monuments, best-known among them the famous Passage Grave at New Grange.² It was he, also, who recognized the two broad families of P and Q Celtic-speaking peoples of his time in these islands and in Brittany, and who in his linguistic, archaeological and botanical studies, was made sensible of the insular and provincial traits which have so dominated the traditions and cultural framework of these islands. His recognition of a principle so important for the Irish Sea area, and the largely unrecognized work which he and his team did in describing megalithic tombs—and much of what I have to say will have to do with these tombs—make it appropriate for me to pay tribute to him, and to his many Welsh—and Aberystwyth—successors who have worked on the prehistory of the Irish Sea area (*Plate I*).

MESOLITHIC

At the head of the Irish Sea, where it is at its narrowest, the Larnian flint industry is found, mainly in Raised Beaches of Post-Glacial date between Dublin and Donegal on the Irish side and in similar raised beaches in Kintyre on the Scottish side.³ Its cultural status is doubtful, though some connections exist between it and the more northerly Obanian culture.⁴ The industry is of a local type and has been accorded Mesolithic status on its relationship with certain strata of the Raised Beach and on the basis of counts of the pollen contained in these strata. An inland site at Toome Bay, north of Lough Neagh, has provided most of the few organic remains associated with the industry, and from these a radio-carbon date of 5725 B.C., which accords with the phase indicated by the pollen remains from the site, has been obtained.⁵ But there is reason for doubting the Mesolithic date of many of the Raised Beach sites, in view of the association of artifacts and animal bones of undoubted imported Neolithic tradition associated with the Larnian material found in them. A shell-midden at Sutton, just north of Dublin, contemporaneous with the maximum transgression of the Post-Glacial seas, as indicated by the storm beach which cut into it and was left overlying it in part, yielded a *petit-tranchet* arrowhead and a polished stone axe associated with typical Larnian leaf-shaped points.⁶ Remains of ox found with typical artifacts in the Raised Beach deposits at Rough Island on Strangford Lough and at Glenarm in Antrim are likely to be domesticated rather than wild in view of the absence of wild ox among the extensive faunal remains found in the many cave-sites of the Post-Glacial period investigated in Ireland.⁷ Very recently, Liversage has reported the association of Larnian artifacts and *Bos Taurus* (domestic ox) in the basal layers of the Dalkey Island middens just south of Dublin.⁸ There thus appears to be good reason at

in the County of Meath. Depth of meadow
 The Entry is sixty five foot long. The Cave 22 foot one Way and about 18 y^e other.
 This Cave is in a large Artificial Mount
 Surrounded at bottom (with huge Stones
 pitched an End.



- aa. The Entry and floor of the Cave is nothing but loose Stones confusedly Dispersed.
- b. The larger rude Pillars supporting y^e Entry in numb: 42 y^e height of these at y^e first Entrance is about 5 foot & afterwards they are gradually higher till near y^e midst where y^e Entry is about 8 & thence to y^e foot ten foot high.
- c. The pillars about y^e head or half of y^e Cave some of these are still higher y^e those in y^e Entry & y^e height of y^e Cove may be about 20 foot.
- d. Rude Carving on some of y^e Pillars.
- eee. Three Cisterns w^{ch} are plac'd in y^e 3 several Apartments of y^e Cave.
- f. A kind of Font or Basin standing in y^e right hand Cistern.
- g. A Carved Stone plac'd edgewise (not erect like y^e other pillars) behind y^e left hand Cistern.
- h. Carved Stones above y^e right hand Cistern.
- i. Part of y^e Roof of y^e Cave w^{ch} is Vaulted like an Oven.
- k. The Carved Stone above y^e right hand Cistern more fully.
- l. A Stone wrought in y^e form of a Cone, half a Yard long & about 20 inches in the girth, having a small hole at y^e big End. This smelt with in y^e right hand Cistern under y^e basin above mentioned.

PLATE I. Plan of New Grange, made by William Jones for Edward Lhuyd, 1699
 (by courtesy of the Board of Trinity College, Dublin)

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least to believe that the Larnian is best known in its para-Neolithic tradition associated with the coastal phenomena of the Raised Beaches and their middens, and perhaps even to question the Mesolithic status of the whole industry. Meantime, it can be claimed that the formation of the Raised Beach had its climax later than has been assumed up to now.

NEOLITHIC

Megalithic tombs, durable structures capable of resisting the destructive forces to which other archaeological material is so susceptible in our area, abound on both sides of the Irish Sea. They can be taken to present a fair impression of the settlement-patterns of their builders, and they also provide numerous diagnostic features of morphology, distribution and find-assemblages to be used in classification and other sensitive analyses. Analysis of these tombs and of their finds shows that, in Ireland at least, the various classes tend to be mutually exclusive,⁹ and they can be interpreted as yielding an acceptable pattern of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age colonization and settlement. The results of joint research undertaken at the Archaeology Department in University College, Dublin, the work of Professor de Valéra and our colleague in the Ordnance Survey, Mr. Ó Nualláin, largely concentrating on the tombs and their distribution, my own work tending to concentrate on the finds,¹⁰ has yielded fruitful hypotheses, some of which will be put forward in this paper.

Passage Graves

The classic Passage Graves, best-known of all the megalithic groups on the Atlantic fringes of Europe, are not the earliest of our Neolithic tomb-groups, but provide a pattern which can be taken as a model in dealing with the others. Their builders appear to have arrived in Ireland about 2500 B.C., and set up their first colonies about the mouth of the Boyne, where their finest tombs are found.¹¹ The mural art of New Grange, Knowth and Dowth most closely matches that found on tombs of similar form in and near the Morbihan area of south Brittany, indicating this area as their proximate source on the Continent. Their main progression in Ireland is a westward one, embracing four major cemeteries reaching as far as Sligo. Art on the stones of a destroyed Passage Grave at the Calderstones near Liverpool¹² has many motifs which appear to be of direct Continental inspiration and which are absent in Ireland, indicating an early division of common Passage Grave tradition in Mackinder's Inland Sea or British Mediterranean. Secondary intrusion from the Boyne area into the Dublin/Wicklow region and further south and west in Ireland is matched at Bryn Celli Ddu¹³ and Barclodiad y Gawres¹⁴ in Anglesey, and, further south, by the undecorated dolmenic remains of Longhouse and Burton in Pembrokeshire.¹⁵ Balancing this southward progression into the copper and gold areas is a northward move into Down, Armagh and flint-rich Antrim in the north-east, where typical art is found on the Carnanmore tomb,¹⁶ and reaching across the Irish Sea to the White Cairn of Bargrennan in Galloway.¹⁷ The sophistication of the mural art is matched in the grave-assemblage found with the burials, with its exotic pendants, mushroom-headed antler pins and heavily-decorated pottery. Irish insularity within this segment of West European tradition, perhaps with the achievement of intervisibility as its motivation, is seen in the heights sought by Passage Grave builders for the tombs in Lough Crew, Carrowkeel and Knocknarea on the way west, at Seefin and Baltinglass Hill in Wicklow, and at Slieve Gullion in Armagh and the 2,900-foot Slieve Donard in Down. Many new discoveries in Ireland have made a more

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detailed map possible,¹⁸ though the basic lines of the distribution presented by Powell in 1938 are still largely unchanged. Evidence of habitation-material associated with Irish and Anglesey tombs indicates extensive contact with an already mature Neolithic A culture, and there are strong indications that the stage of Larnian tradition represented in the shell-middens is contemporaneous and interconnected with the Passage Grave tradition, which appears to last to about 2000 B.C. on both sides of the Irish Sea (*Plates II and III*).

Court Cairns

The Neolithic A tradition is best represented in the burial monuments of the Court Cairn builders, who arrived about 500 years earlier than those of the Passage Graves. At a conventional 3000 B.C., then, the earliest groups of this tradition arrived in north-west Ireland from north-west France, cousins of the builders of the similarly-transepted Severn-Cotswold tombs and also of the Passage Grave builders.¹⁹ But these earlier groups were simple, unsophisticated peasants; in all of the 30 or more excavated tombs of their tradition, only a handful of beads has come to light, in marked contrast to the wealth of personal ornament and mural art associated with Passage Grave burial-places. Only in the special funerary pottery they made, called Beacharra Ware from a rich Scottish site, are there signs of an appreciation of decorative form. Provincial fashions of building are apparent within Ireland, an easterly variant which at once stresses long burial elements and diminishing forecourts straddling the straits between Antrim and the Arran-Bute-Kintyre province in Scotland.²⁰ An interesting divergence is apparent in the find-assemblages in this region on both sides of the Irish Sea, Antrim's riches in flint providing a wealth of lozenge-arrowheads, Hollow Scrapers and plano-convex knives on the Irish side as opposed to the lozenge-arrowheads and plano-convex knives only (hollow scrapers being absent) found among the smaller implement-assemblages of the Scottish tombs. (The hollow scraper is not unknown in Scotland, however, being found in the Sandhills of south-west Scotland in good numbers). Southward stimuli reach the Isle of Man, at Cashtal yn Ard and King Orry's Grave,²¹ the Pikestones in Lancashire,²² Trefignath in Anglesey and the Bridestones in Cheshire,²³ while a lone tomb of debased form is found as far south as Ballynamona Lower in Waterford.²⁴

Portal Dolmens

Further links are apparent between the Carlingford region and Galloway, where tall portal-stones found at Clontygora Large²⁵ and the Carnholy tombs in Scotland,²⁶ with typical local shouldered Neolithic A pottery, are diagnostic of a regional group. The tomb of Carnholy II has been compared to the Ballyrenan tomb and its analogues, which derive in Mid-Ulster and are apparent in the Carlingford region by late in the third millennium. These Portal Dolmens share the long cairn, eastern orientation, and certain features of the reduced facades of Court Cairns, as well as their Neolithic A find-assemblage,²⁷ but differ from the Court Cairns in possessing, usually at the east end, a single dolmenic chamber more akin to the lateral chambers found in many mid-Ulster Court Cairns rather than a multiple-chambered gallery, and in the more developed character of their decorated pottery, which is typologically Late Insular, while it also displays features of form and decoration apparently introduced from the Baltic.²⁸ In their denuded state, these Portal Dolmens display a combination of excellent building and magnificence of form which are a tribute to the technical ability and aesthetic feeling of their builders. These people sought new territories right down the Irish Sea, being found in numbers in the Dublin region and on the Leinster granites as far south as Waterford, and even extending into Cork, while in Wales



PLATE II. Aerial view of part of Lough Crew Passage Grave cemetery, Carnbane West, Co. Meath; Cairn L in foreground
(*photograph by J. K. St. Joseph: Cambridge University Collection, copyright reserved*)

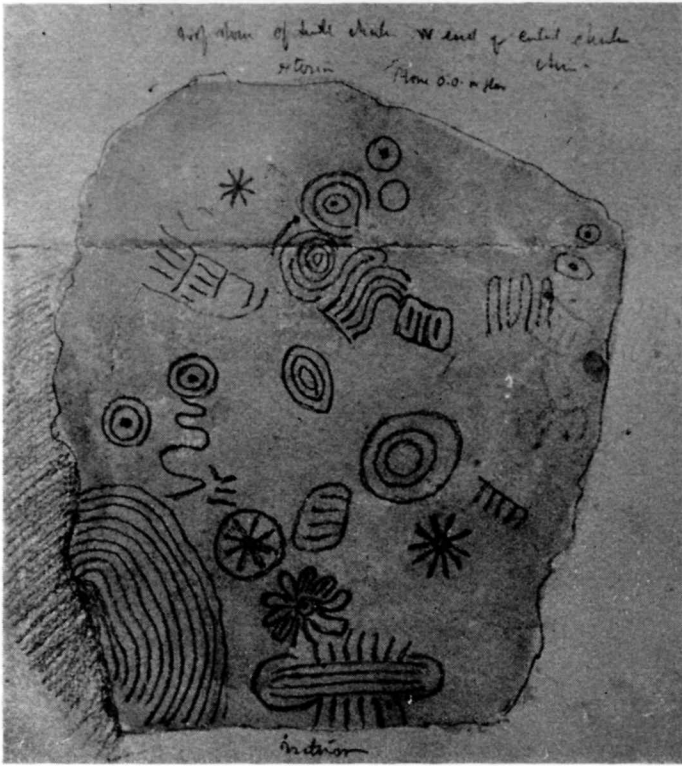


PLATE III. Passage Grave art, Lough Crew tombs, Co. Meath, drawn by G. V. du Noyer in 1865
 (a) Roofstone of back chamber, Cairn T
 (b) Stone from Cairn X Patrickstown Hill
 (by courtesy of the Royal Irish Academy)

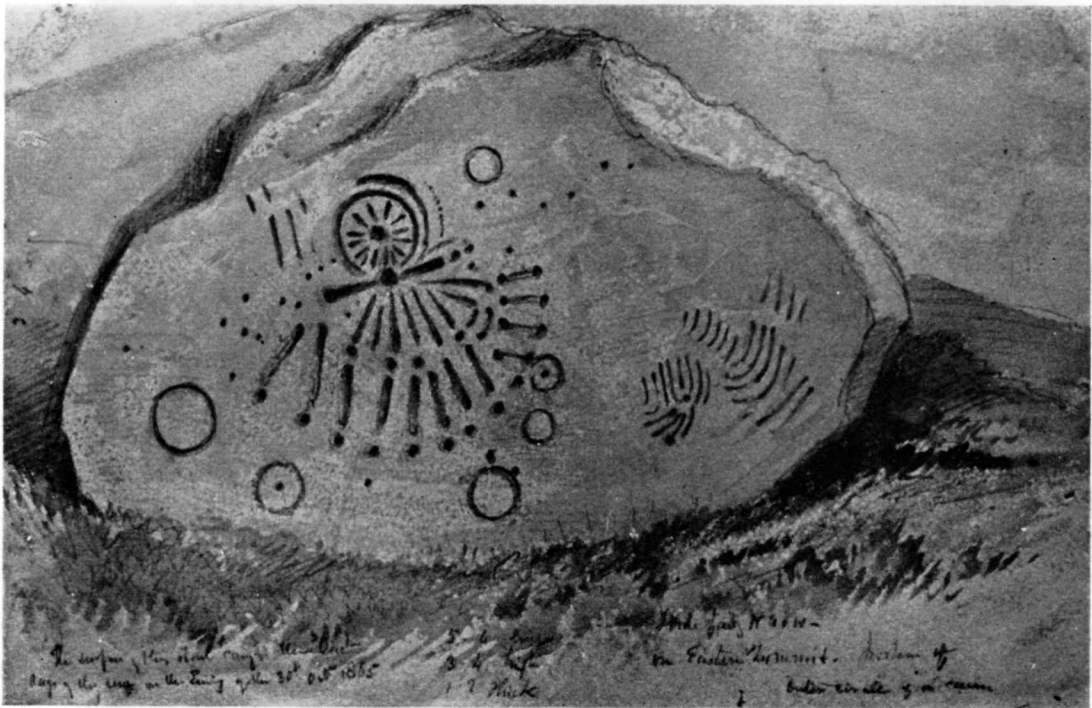


Plate III. The roofstone of the back chamber and passage of Cairn T, Lough Crew, Co. Meath, and a stone from Cairn X, Patrickstown Hill, Co. Meath, drawn by G. V. du Noyer in 1865.



FIG. 9. Irish Sea Portal Dolmens by M. Herity (Welsh tombs after Grimes, 1936, and Daniel, 1950; Cornish tombs after Thomas and Wailes, 1967)

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they can be recognized in a coastal spread into Anglesey, Merioneth and Pembrokeshire, reaching further south into Cornwall and Dorset.²⁹ An interesting compromise, the two-chambered Portal Dolmen, is found at Brenanstown in Dublin and Gwern Einion in Merioneth. The builders of the late court cairn of Ballynamona Lower may have travelled south with them. Provincial development is again apparent in the colossal capstones of Leinster tombs like Brownshill in Carlow, reputed to weigh 100 tons, but ancestral features like the twin caps of Knockeen and Ballynageeragh³⁰ in Waterford, the reduced courts or flankers of Pentre Ifan³¹ and Zennor I, and the presence of a small subsidiary in the long mound of Lanyon Quoit in Cornwall are still apparent. The axis of movement is now no longer east and west, but firmly aligned north and south the length of the Irish Sea and now extending even further south into Cornwall (*Fig. 9* and *Plate IV*).

Single Burials

Another movement, less easy to define because of the relative difficulty of its discovery, appears to be distributionally coincident with that of the Portal Dolmens, at least on the Leinster side of the Irish Sea, and can also be traced north into Armagh, Down and Antrim and back into Scotland and beyond.³² The burial mode of this group is often crouched single inhumation in a cist, sometimes found under a round mound or the remains of one, and the pottery accompanying the body has frequently the characteristics either of provincial Irish Neolithic A or of the developed form of Becharra pottery with Nordic characteristics which is also found in Portal Dolmens and late Court Cairns.³³ It appears that both the Portal Dolmens and this single burial mode are contemporaneous, and that their hand-in-hand progress down the Irish Sea may owe much to a common impetus from Nordic sources and ultimately to Central European corded ware stimuli.³⁴ It may even be that it was the lure of Leinster and Cornish metal that attracted them southwards.

Houses, Habitations, Sandhills Sites, Industries

Elements of Neolithic culture which are better represented on the Irish Sea than elsewhere, though the chance nature of their finding makes firm interpretations difficult, are the rectangular post-built houses found at Ronaldsway in the Isle of Man, Clegyr Boia in Pembrokeshire, Sant-y-Nyll and Mount Pleasant Farm in Glamorgan, and Haldon in Devon.³⁵ Lough Gur in Ireland had both rectangular and round houses of similar style,³⁶ and two round post-houses have recently been discovered on the hillside of Slieve Breagh in Meath.³⁷ The round stone-built huts of Carn Brea in Cornwall may bear some relationship to these. The definite linking of any group of houses with any one of the burial groups described above is difficult because of the differing functions of the two kinds of site and because of the disparity in representation of the houses in relation to the more durable burial-vaults, but the occurrence of a number of the Lough Gur sites of heavy-rimmed pottery of a developed Neolithic A tradition (there termed Class 1a) similar to that found with Single Burials at Linkardstown³⁸ and at Site C in Lough Gur itself probably suggests a late date for at least this habitation (*Fig. 10*).

Heavy pottery, unsatisfactorily termed Sandhills Ware, and characterised by massive rims of Lough Gur 1a/Linkardstown type is found at many coastal and some lowland sites, as at Lambay³⁹ and Dalkey Islands off the Dublin coast and Dundrum Bay in Down.⁴⁰ Ehenside Tarn in Cumberland has yielded what may be similar ware. This might be linked

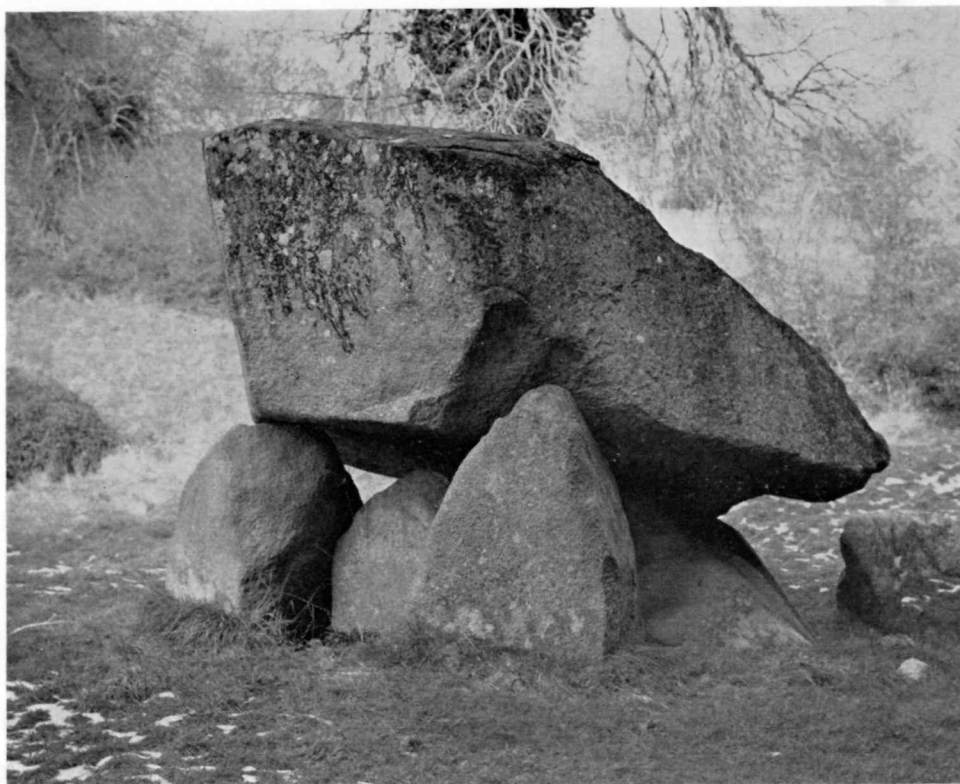


PLATE IV. (a) Brenanstown Portal Dolmen, Co. Dublin

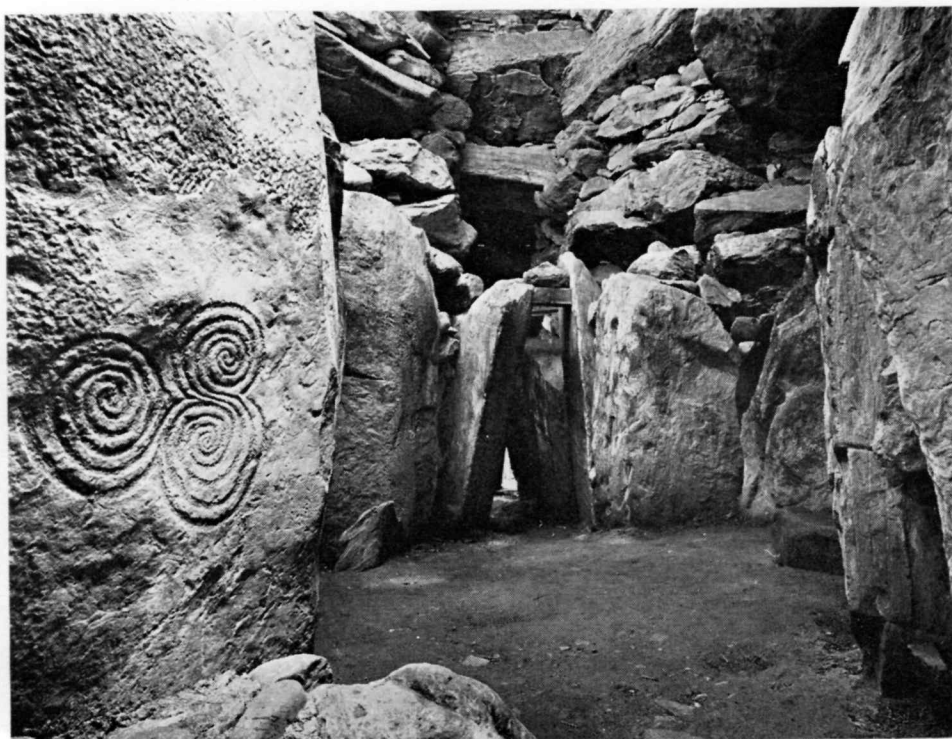


PLATE IV. (b) Triple spiral, chamber and passage, New Grange, Co. Meath
(by courtesy of the Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland)

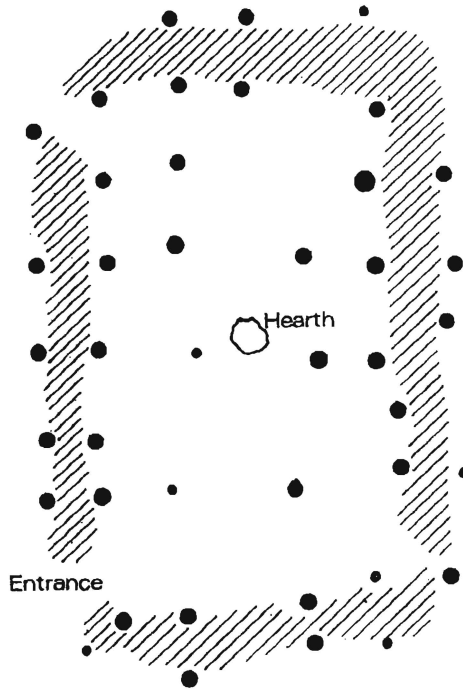
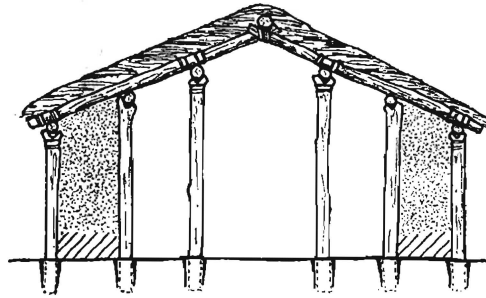


FIG. 10. Rectangular house, Site A, Lough Gur, Co. Limerick, after Ó Ríordáin, 1954

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with the similar large heavy-rimmed vessel of Piggott's Beacharra A class found at the eponymous site in Kintyre and further north at Rothesay in Bute.⁴¹ It is not unlike some of the vessels found in habitation deposits under round mounds at Lyles Hill in Antrim⁴² and at Mount Pleasant Farm.

Axe-factories where suitable igneous rocks were worked tend also to have an Irish Sea distribution, from Tievebullagh in Antrim to the many sites in Cornwall, and may represent an early industrial tradition developed by Passage Grave builders and later still by the Portal Dolmen and Single-Burial communities.

Recent work has extended the known Irish distribution of stone fences,⁴³ of the type known at Beaghmore and Millin Bay in the north, standing on the pre-Raised Bog soil. Frequently these appear to represent territorial divisions, long fences running down hillslopes and creating relatively vast radial divisions roughly from the 800-foot contour down. Others enclose smaller areas of about an acre or less in extent, and appear to have had a more specialised function. The sites discovered in a recent campaign are distributed in the west and north of Ireland, but difficulties of survey and of differential destruction of bog have to be taken into account at this preliminary stage of investigation. In Mayo, many of them appear to be associated with Court Cairns, but there are apparent associations with later monuments elsewhere. This field of study, now about to be intensively investigated by interdisciplinary research, promises to bring a leap forward in our knowledge of the economic sub-stratum of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age in Ireland.

BRONZE AGE

Beaker-bearing Wedge-shaped tombs,⁴⁴ 400 of which are known in all, are found mainly in south-west and west of Ireland with a trickle into the north but are sparsely represented in Leinster, and appear to have crossed the Irish Sea only to Bedd-Yr-Afanc in Pembrokeshire,⁴⁵ probably because of the presence of rival groups in the area when their builders sought expansion eastwards. It is most likely that Food-Vessel single-burial metallurgists had already risen in the area by this time.

The latest continental megalithic move towards the Irish Sea penetrates only to Cornwall, the Scillies and Waterford: this is the small group of V-shaped Passage Graves covered with extremely economical round mounds and retaining the old Passage Grave cemetery pattern.⁴⁶ The date assignable to them is roughly 1500 B.C.⁴⁷ and their penetration only as far as the lower mouth of the Irish Sea may be function as much of their satisfaction with Bunmahon copper and Cornish/Scilly tin as of the resistance offered by a now considerable population of metal-users in the Irish Sea itself.

This story, which began at the head of the Irish Sea, in the straits north of his British Mediterranean, reaches its ending, appropriately enough, in Mackinder's Marine Antechamber.

NOTES

¹ Gunther, *Life and Letters of Edward Lhwyd*. Oxford, 1945; Campbell, *Celtica V* (1960), 218.

² An account of his drawings and descriptions is given in Herity, *Studia Hibernica* 7 (1967), 127. Little or no reference has been made to the fact that many of the drawings in John Anstis's notebooks at the British Museum, Stowe 1023 and 1024, and published, though largely without identification, in the second edition of William Stukely's *Itinerarium Curiosum*, which was issued posthumously.

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- ³ Movius, *The Irish Stone Age*. Cambridge, 1942; Lacaille, *The Stone Age in Scotland*. London, 1954.
- ⁴ Lacaille, *ibid.*, 196. 'Limpet-scoops' of Obanian type have been found by Mitchell in the excavated middens at Rochmarshall in Louth and Sutton, north of Dublin. Refs. in Mitchell, *JRSAI* 86 (1956), 1.
- ⁵ Mitchell, *UJA* 18 (1955), 1; the radiocarbon date given is 5725 \pm 110 B.C. (Y - 95).
- ⁶ Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 18-25.
- ⁷ Movius, *op. cit.*, 74, 91.
- ⁸ *PRIA* 66C (1968), 172.
- ⁹ de Valéra and Ó Nualláin, *Survey of the Megalithic Tombs of Ireland, Vol. I, Co. Clare*. Dublin, 1961, xii-xiv.
- ¹⁰ I wish to acknowledge the generous help of the Board of Directors and the Director of Research of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, by which I was enabled to study the Irish material and much of the comparative material abroad.
- ¹¹ Powell, *PPS* 4 (1938), 239.
- ¹² Forde-Johnston, *PPS* 23 (1957), 20.
- ¹³ Hemp, *Arch.* 80 (1930), 179.
- ¹⁴ Powell and Daniel, *Barclodiad y Gawres*. Liverpool, 1956.
- ¹⁵ Daniel, *Prehistoric Chamber Tombs of England and Wales*. Cambridge, 1950, 201; 202.
- ¹⁶ *Prelim. Survey of the Anc. Mons. in Northern Ireland*. Belfast, 1940, 14-15.
- ¹⁷ Piggott and Powell, *PSAS* 83 (1948-9), 144.
- ¹⁸ Ó Nualláin, *JRSAI* 98 (1968), 1.
- ¹⁹ de Valéra, *JRSAI* 95 (1965), 5.
- ²⁰ de Valéra, *PRIA* 60 C (1960), Pl. XXI; Corcoran, *PPS* 24 (1960), 130.
- ²¹ Daniel, *op. cit.*, 179.
- ²² Lynch, *PPS* 32 (1967), 347.
- ²³ Daniel, *op. cit.*, 181; 185.
- ²⁴ Powell, *JRSAI* 68 (1938), 260.
- ²⁵ Davies and Paterson, *PBNHPS* 2nd Series 1 (1936-37), 20.
- ²⁶ Piggott and Powell, *op. cit.*, 103.
- ²⁷ de Valéra, *PRIA* 60 C (1960), 64; Herity, *JRSAI* 94 (1964), 123.
- ²⁸ Collins, *UJA* 28 (1965), 68; Herity, *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Pre- and Proto-Historic Science, Prague, 1966*, forthcoming.
- ²⁹ Daniel, *op. cit.*, 94; see revised list of Cornish tombs by Thomas and Wailes in *Cornish Archaeology* 6 (1967), 19.
- ³⁰ Ó Ríordáin, *Antiquities of the Irish Countryside*, London, 1954, Pl. 70.
- ³¹ Grimes, *Arch. Camb. C* (1948), 3.
- ³² Ó Ríordáin, *Congres Int. des Sc. Préhistoriques et Protohistoriques, Actes de la III^e Session, Zurich, 1950*. Zurich, 1953, 188.
- Herity, do. Seventh Session, Prague, 1966, forthcoming.
- ³³ The well-known 'Larne' pottery at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford which shows many of these Northern characteristics is discussed by Herity, Evans and Megaw *PRIA* 67 (1968), 9.
- ³⁴ Childe's note on the affinities of Vessel I from the Court Cairn at Tamnyrankin, Co. Derry, in Herring, *JRSAI* 71 (1941), 46 is eloquent: 'The pendant triangles in cord technique . . . are extraordinarily Central European or even Russian . . .'. Can this movement represent the earliest Indo-European contact with Ireland?
- ³⁵ For a general account of these sites see Piggott, *Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles*. Cambridge, 1954, 32-37.
- Sant-y-Nyll: *CNST, LXXXIX* (1959-60), 9-30.
- Mount Pleasant Farm: Savory, *CNST, LXXI* (1950-52), 75-92.
- ³⁶ Ó Ríordáin, *PRIA* 54C (1954).
- ³⁷ Excavated by Ó h-Eochaidhe and Danaher and the author; publication in preparation.
- ³⁸ Case, *PPS* 27 (1961), 208.
- ³⁹ Macalister, *PRIA* 38C (1928-29), 240.
- A discussion on the Neolithic material from this site is being prepared by the author.
- ⁴⁰ Hewson, *JRSAI* 65 (1935), 231; 66 (1936), 154; 68 (1938), 69. Collins, *UJA* 15 (1952), 2; 21 (1958), 5.
- ⁴¹ Scott, *PPS* 30 (1964), 134.
- ⁴² Evans, *Lyles Hill, A Late Neolithic Site in Co. Antrim*. Belfast, 1953.
- ⁴³ The author and Mr. Séamus Caulfield have collaborated in a survey by questionnaire, which has yielded a large number of new sites. These have been examined in the field, and it is hoped to publish an essay on the present position in 1969.

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⁴⁴ de Valéra and Ó Nualláin, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Grimes, *PPS* 2 (1936), 130.

Daniel, *op. cit.*, 203.

⁴⁶ First described as a group by Powell, *PPS* 7 (1941), 142-3.

⁴⁷ O'Neil, *Ant. Journ.* 35 (1955).