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Excavation of a Fulacht Fiadh at Dromnea, near Kilcrohane, Co. Cork

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This site¹ was discovered during land reclamation. A mechanical digger levelled the mound of fire-shattered stones and the archaeological importance of the site was recognized by a local landowner, Mr Donal Daly. The partial destruction was reported to the Department of Archaeology, UCC, and the site was subsequently visited. It was decided to undertake a short rescue excavation of the site in order to plan the remaining features accurately and perhaps recover some dating evidence. A small grant was received from the Office of Public Works and the excavation continued for two weeks from 21 May to 1 June 1984.

THE EXCAVATION

When first visited, the site was apparent as a spread of fire-shattered stones mixed with charcoal and ash. The north-eastern section of this spread lay closest to a small stream and this area was chosen for excavation since it was most likely to contain the trough and hearth. The site was laid out in quadrants (Fig. 1) and two of these were subsequently excavated. The proximity of recently-cut drainage channels and spoil from these limited the area of excavation towards the north of the site. The excavated features were: the mound, the hearth and the trough.

(1) *The mound*

The northern sections of the mound were excavated. It was not possible, given the limited duration of the excavation, to excavate the southern area of the mound, but it is unlikely

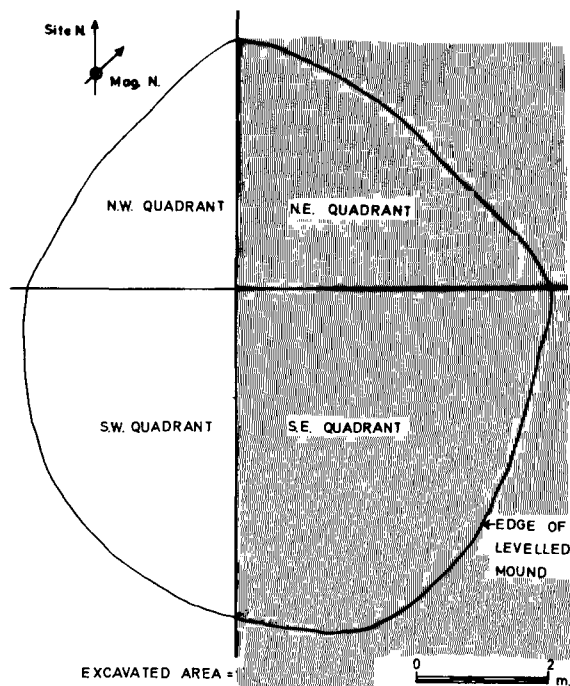


Fig. 1: Layout of Excavation

that it was much smaller than is shown on Fig. 2. Most of the burnt stones were levelled off towards the northern end of the site and these filled the trough and hearth area while the southern edge of the mound remained virtually intact. The site sloped gradually towards the north-east to a stream and the mound was at a slightly higher level than the trough (Fig. 3).

On excavation, the mound was horseshoe-shaped and had a distinct edge on the north-east side (Fig. 2). The maximum dimensions

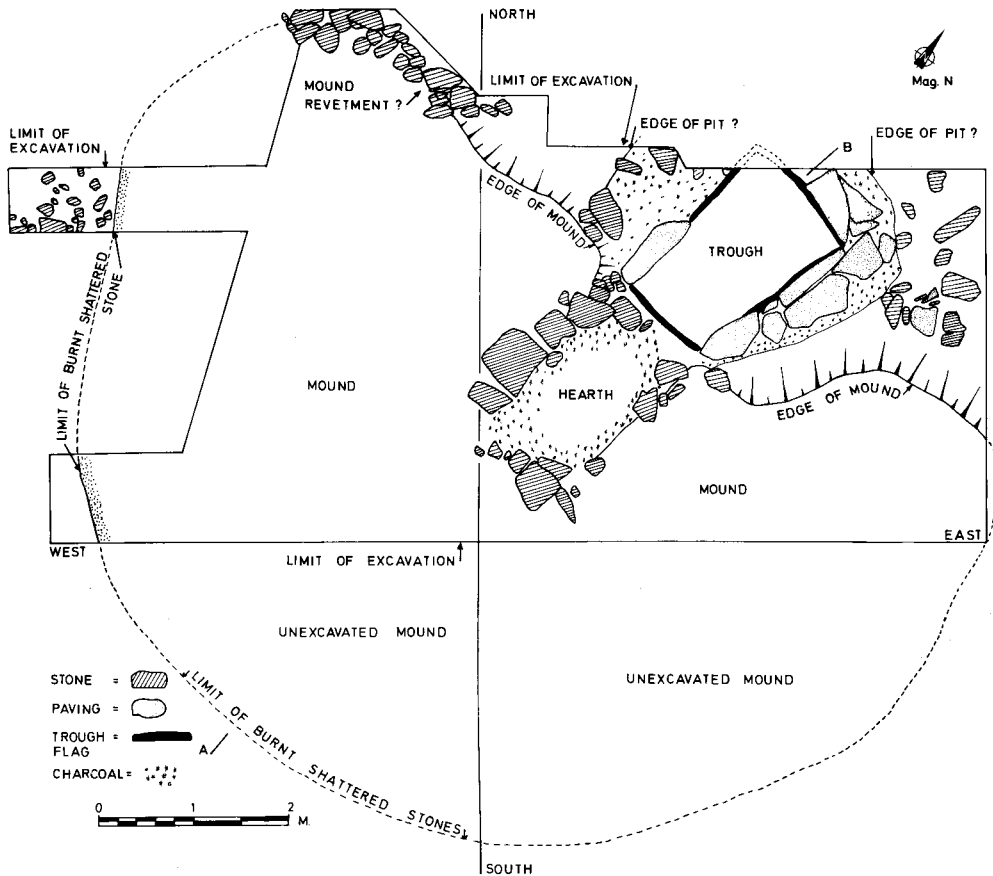


Fig. 2: Plan of Excavated Features.

were 10m (NW/SE) by 6m (NE/SW). The mound survived intact to a maximum height of 40cm, but the original height must have been *c.* 1m. Large boulders, 15-40cm in length, were recorded against the north-west edge of the mound. These may have acted as a revetment. A notable feature of the excavation was the absence of any obvious old ground level under the mound.

(2) The hearth

This was roughly rectangular in shape. The maximum external dimensions were 2.2m (NE/SW) by 1.6m (NW/SE) and the internal

dimensions 1.7m by 1.1m. The hearth was enclosed by a stone-built revetment on the NW, SW and SE sides and was open-ended on the NE where it was adjacent to the trough. The stone revetment consisted of one course of large boulders which were set in part over the fire-shattered stones of the mound (Fig. 3). This seems to suggest that the revetment was built after the *fulacht fiadh* had been in use for some time and may have been erected to prevent an already existing mound of debris from slipping into the hearth area. The revetment was partially destroyed on the SE side. This may have occurred when the mechanical

digger levelled the site. The infill of the hearth consisted of 10cm lense of almost pure charcoal intermixed with some fire-shattered stones. The recent disturbance of the site by the mechanical digger also brought some stone from the mound into the hearth area. The hearth floor lay directly on the subsoil and again there was no old ground surface apparent.

(3) The trough

This was stone-lined with slabs of green sandstone set in a large pit dug to receive the slabs. Site ground level sloped from the south-west to the north-east. The trough lay at the lowest level of the site and was roughly trapezoidal in shape, measuring 2.15m (NE/SW) by 1.25m (NW/SE). The sides consisted of four large slabs set end to end with no overlap. The long slabs measured 2m x 60cm x 8cm (NE) and 1.0m x 50cm x 8cm (SW). The north-west end of the trough was not fully excavated because of the proximity of a large spoil heap from recent drainage excavations in the adjacent stream. The south-east slab did not fully cover that side and a large quartz stone was inserted on the south end to fill a gap in the side of the trough. The floor was the natural subsoil. The trough fill consisted of humus, charcoal concentrations and fire-shattered stone. This presumably represented the remnants of the last cooking at the site.

Soil discolouration around the trough suggested that a roughly circular pit was dug to receive the stone slabs of the trough lining. The maximum length of this was 3m. This was not excavated because it would have meant removing both the trough slabs and adjacent paving. Since there was no means of restoring the site, it was considered best to leave the trough intact. The pit fill apparently consisted of charcoal-flecked grey subsoil. Areas of paving were recorded on the north-east and north-west sides of the trough over the pit fill. The paving consisted of carefully laid flat sandstone

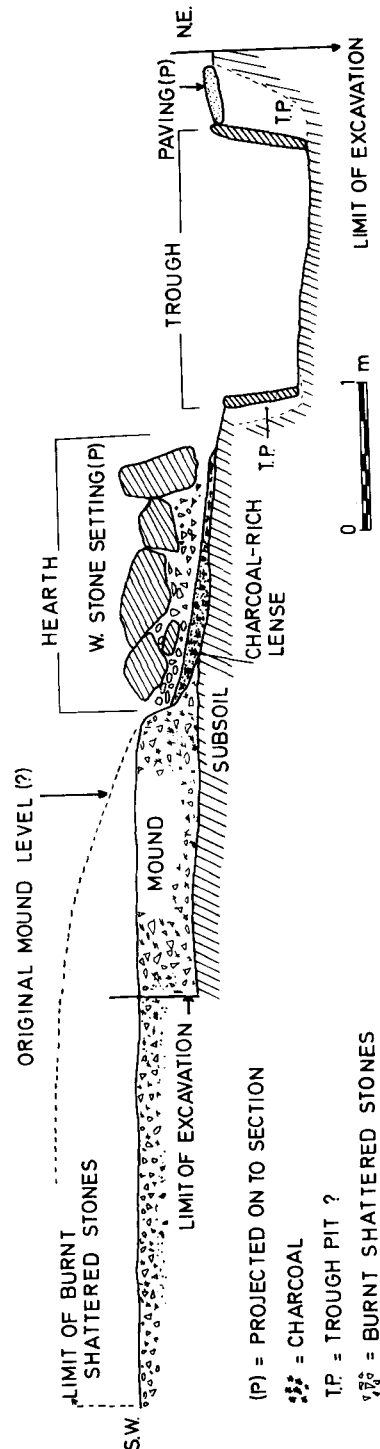


Fig. 3: Sectional Profile SW/NE Mound, Hearth and Trough.

slabs and it probably functioned as a walk-way for anyone cooking at the site. The paving slightly overlapped the trough slabs (Fig. 2).

Other features

Eleven large boulders, 20-40cm in length were recorded to the north-east of the trough. These did not form any distinct pattern, though it is possible that they served some function at the site. A scatter of smaller stones, 5-20cm in length, was recorded in the north-west quadrant outside the mound edge. These were unburnt and set in the subsoil but again did not form any pattern.

FINDS

No datable finds were recovered. An animal bone was found in the disturbed mound and may not be directly associated with the site. Numerous samples of charcoal were taken from the hearth and trough fill.

DISCUSSION

Much of this discussion is based on previously excavated sites but mainly on the information compiled by Mr D. Ó Drisceoil in his unpublished MA thesis, 'Fulachta Fiadha: A Study' (1980), to whom I am grateful for access to this work.

The siting of the *fulacht fiadh* at Dromnea in the south-west peninsula north of Dunmanus Bay is in an area that has not been intensely surveyed. The nearest hitherto recorded *fulachta fiadh* are on the peninsula south of this in the Schull district.² Ó Drisceoil (1980, 111) suggests that the physical topography of the south-west area of Co. Cork was not favourable to the location of *fulachta fiadh*. This may be the case, but information from a local man, Mr Donal Daly from Dromnea, suggests that several mounds of burnt stone had been uncovered in the area. The altitude of the site at Dromnea, — *c.* 200' above OD — is slightly lower than the average for Co. Cork where over 50% of the sites are recorded

over 500' OD (Ó Drisceoil, 223). The *fulacht fiadh* at Dromnea was near a stream which is again a typical siting in Co. Cork.

The *fulacht fiadh* at Dromnea, though disturbed by a mechanical digger, was fairly typical, consisting as it did of a horseshoe-shaped mound of burnt stone, charcoal and ash, with the concave section of the mound accommodating the hearth and trough. The mound at Dromnea was 10m in maximum diameter — slightly larger (by 1m) than those recorded by Ó Drisceoil for Co. Cork.

The central feature of a *fulacht fiadh* is the trough. This was set in the lowest part of the site at Dromnea. When excavated, the trough did not fill automatically by water seepage and was apparently above the water table.³ It may be that the adjacent stream provided water during cooking. The clay floor was impervious and this was visible after rain. The stone lining in the trough is an unusual feature in Irish *fulachta fiadh* though more common in Scotland (Ó Drisceoil, 30ff). Previous examples include Drombeg, Co. Cork (Fahy, 1960). The trough at Drombeg was slightly smaller and the slabs were both slate and sandstone, whereas the slabs at Dromnea were green sandstone with the quartz boulder inserted to fill a gap left by the south-east slab. Another difference is that the floor of the trough at Drombeg was paved in contrast to the unlined floor at Dromnea. A recently recorded site at Derryduff, Co. Cork,⁴ also has a slab-lined trough. Other examples of the use of stone in troughs include Ballyvourney I (O'Kelly, 1954). Ó Drisceoil (31) suggests that the use of stone in the trough was probably due to the absence of suitable wood. This is likely to have been the case at Dromnea where today the adjacent area is mainly bare rock.

The hearth at Dromnea was enclosed by a stone-built revetment on three sides and the north-east side facing the trough was open-ended. This compares with a hearth excavated at Drombeg (Fahy, 1960).

The excavation at Dromnea was a rescue one by nature and confined to a limited area. Any features outside the area of the mound remain uncovered. The revetment on the north-west edge of the mound may suggest that it was built to prevent loose mound stones from slipping into an occupation area. The random scatter of stones adjacent to the trough (NE quadrant) and outside the mound (NW quadrant) may also indicate activity outside the limit of excavation.

There was no definite indication of the type of fuel used at Dromnea, though the rich charcoal deposit in the hearth suggests wood. The absence of an old turf horizon from under the mound may indicate that the surface of this area was stripped prior to building up. Local tradition in the area of the *fulachta fiadh* at Derryduff, Co. Cork, suggested that peat was used. Here the landowner referred to the use of a *barrfhód* or top sod (turf) being used as fuel. This may account for the absence of an old turf horizon at Dromnea.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the excavation at Dromnea was to salvage information on the essential details of the site, and concentrated on the mound, hearth and trough. The site was slightly larger than other Co. Cork *fulachta fiadh* but was otherwise fairly typical. The stone-lined trough and enclosed hearth can be best paralleled by the *fulacht fiadh* at Drombeg.

APPENDIX I

Report on a charcoal sample submitted for radiocarbon dating to the Laboratorium voor Algemene Natuurkunde of the Rijksuniversiteit at Groningen, Netherlands

One sample was submitted to Dr Jan Lanting for a radiocarbon determination. This was from the hearth site. The determination is as follows:

GrN - 12915, the sample was a mixture of oak (*quercus*) and hazel (*corylus*) charcoal: 3090 ± 35 B.P.

The botanical identification of the charcoal was by Mr R. Neef of the Biologisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, Rijksuniversiteit, Groningen.

The radiocarbon determination places the site at Dromnea in a Later Bronze Age context for Irish Archaeology.

APPENDIX II

By MADELINE DUGGAN

Hearth sample

A 2000cc sub-sample of the archaeological sediment from the hearth was wet-sieved for archaeobotanic remains. The weighed sub-sample was washed through a graded stack of sieves, ranging from 1mm to 300mm and left to air-dry at room temperature.

The residues were examined and found to contain a large proportion of charcoal, roughly 500cc in all. There was a number of large fragments of logs and a few large fragments of whole twigs. The remainder of the charcoal component was made up of a great deal of small and very small charcoal fragments.

The residues also contained a medium amount of shattered stone fragments (a number of which were burnt) and a small amount of intrusive root material.

The fine sieve fractions were sorted under magnification but no seeds were recovered from the residues.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to record my thanks to the following: Office of Public Works for financial aid; Mr D. Ó Drisceoil for access to his research material on *fulachta fiadh*; Mr B. Ó Donnabháin, Ms Elizabeth Anderson, Ms Rosemary Ahern and Mr William O'Brien who freely gave their time and expertise to complete the excavation; Mr Donal Daly and family, Dromnea, for assistance during the excavation and Ms Angela Desmond who typed this manuscript.

NOTES

1 Exact location: OS 6" sheet No. 129, Co. Cork. Td. Dromnea; Ph. Kilcrohane; By. West Carbery (West Division). 5mm from E. margin; 8-8cm from S. margin; c. 200' above OD. South-facing slope.

2 No. 908 (Ó Drisceoil, 1980): OS 6" sheet No. 139, Co. Cork. Td. Derryfunshion; Ph. Schull; By. West Carbery (West Division). 53.0cm from west margin; 59.9cm from south margin; *c.* 200' above OD.

No. 909 (Ó Drisceoil, 1980): OS 6" sheet No. 139, Co. Cork. Td. Dunmanus East; Ph. Schull; By. West Carbery West Division) 13.6cm from west margin; 13.1cm from south margin. *c.* 700' above OD.

3 This may have dropped because of a dry spell during the weeks previous to the excavation.

4 OS 6" sheet No. 132, Co. Cork. Td. Derryduff; Ph. Dromdaleague; By. West Carbery (West Division). 10.8cm from east margin; 16.5cm from north

margin. *c.* 150' above OD.

This site was visited by the author in May 1984 and consists of at least three *fulachta fiadh*. One had been disturbed by the landowner and the top of a stone-lined trough was exposed.

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Fahy, E.M. 1960. A hut and cooking place at Drombeg, Co. Cork, *J. Cork Hist. and Arch. Soc.*, 65, 1-17.

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O'Kelly, M.J. 1954. Excavations and experiments in ancient Irish cooking-places, *J. Royal Soc. Antiq. Irel.*, 84, 105-55.

Spread of
burnt stones

Hearth

Trough

Paving



Spoil from drainage trench

Plate 1 : Excavated Trough and Hearth

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