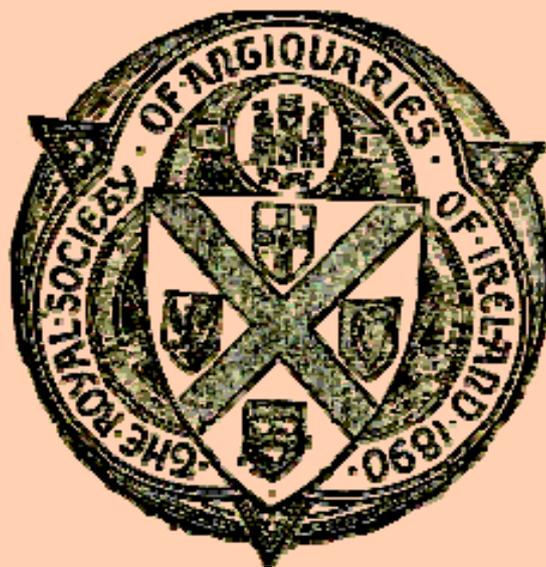


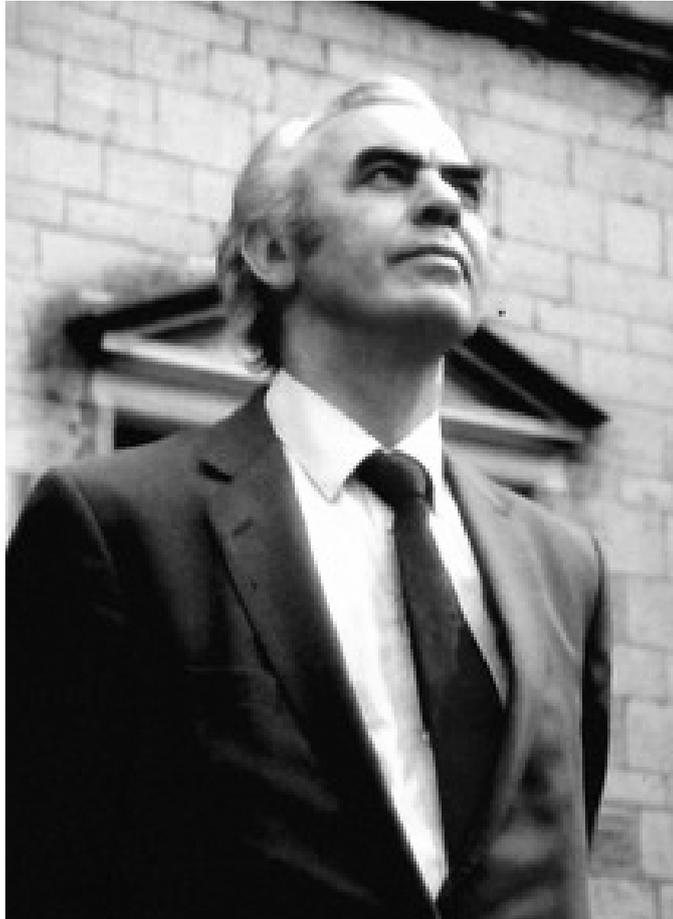
A Prehistoric Burial Site at Gortnacargy, Co. Cavan

A. B. Ó Ríordáin



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Many thanks to Breandán Ó Riordáin Esq. who gave us his permission to re-publish 'A Prehistoric Burial site at Gortnacargy, Co. Cavan'.

Photograph above of Breandán Ó Riordáin by Adrienne Corless
www.irisharchaeology.ie/2014/08/meet-the-archaeologist-breandan-o-riordain

A PREHISTORIC BURIAL SITE AT GORTNACARGY, CO. CAVAN

A. B. Ó Riordain

The existence of a prehistoric site at Gortnacargy¹ was first brought to the notice of the National Museum in December, 1956,² when decorated sherds of pottery and human skeletal remains were discovered in the course of construction of an underground water storage tank beside a newly built house. The writer visited the site and found that three separate graves (A, B, C), each of which was stated to have contained an extended skeleton, had been discovered. Close to the skull of one of the burials a rimsherd of pottery of Food Vessel type had been found. In one of the faces of the cutting made to accommodate the water storage tank pockets of dark-coloured soil suggested the presence of further burials and it was decided to carry out a systematic investigation of the immediate area. This was done during a five-week period in June-July, 1957.³

THE SITE

The site (PL 4, top) was a low, grass-covered knoll of limestone, approximately 10 m. N-S and 11m. E-W, and it rose to a maximum height of 50 cm. above the surrounding terrain. The house and water tank had been built on the south western slope of the hillock. The discovery of the three graves suggested that the rise in ground level indicated the existence of an artificial burial mound and, accordingly, excavation was concentrated in the immediate area of the highest portion of this rise. The excavation, however, showed that the apparent mound was merely a natural rise in the underlying limestone which was encountered at depths varying between 10 cm. and 30 cm. below the surface (Fig. 2).

An area of approximately 90 square metres was excavated and in the course of this work a further seven burials (D-K) were discovered (Fig. 1).

Numerous potsherds and other artifacts were discovered on the site during the excavation. Some occurred in the fill of the graves but the majority was found in other parts of the excavated area. These finds suggest the possibility that habitation had taken place in the immediate area at some time prior to its use as a burial ground. It was noticeable that the finds tended to be concentrated on and near the summit of the knoll. Due to the proximity of the natural rock to the surface and, possibly, because of the disturbance of the stratification by the insertion of the burials, it was not possible to trace any evidence of structures connected with a possible habitation period, with the exception of one small pit in the north-eastern portion of the site. The pit, which was oval in shape, measured 35 cm. by 45 cm, and it was 30 cm. in maximum depth.

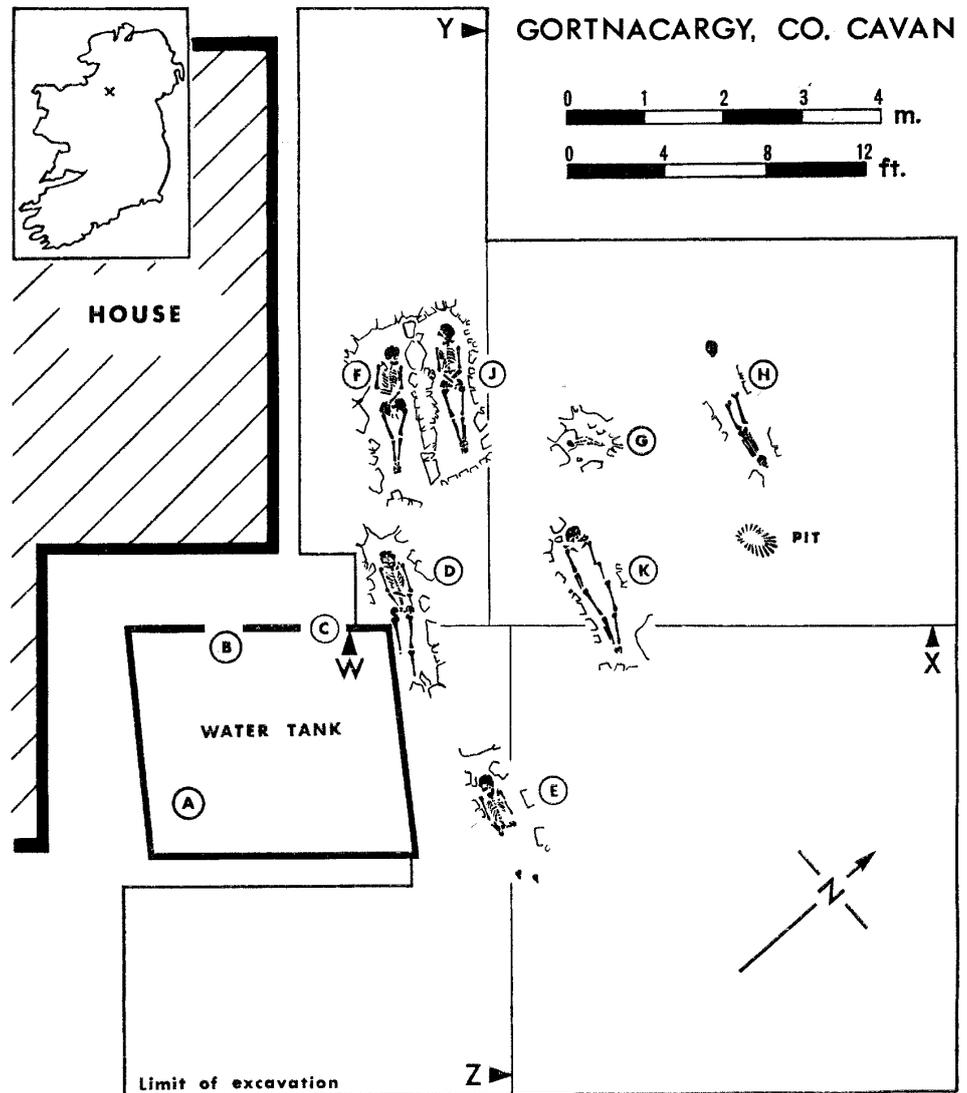


Fig. 1 Plan : Gortnacargy, Co. Cavan.

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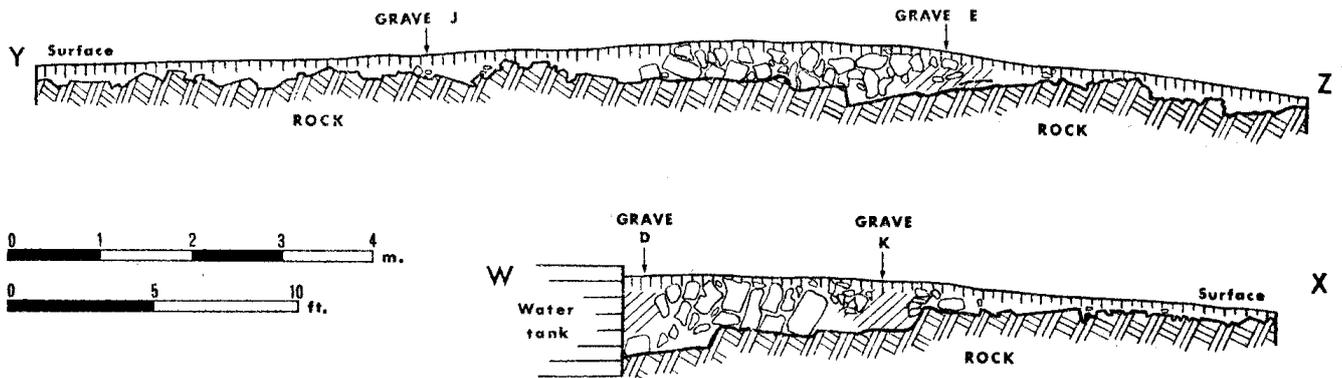


Fig. 2 Sections: Gortnacargy, Co. Cavan.

THE BURIALS

Burials A, B and C

These three burials had been discovered in the course of digging foundations for the water storage tank. Each grave had contained a single skeleton. The orientation of skeleton A had not been noted but skeletons B and C were reported to have been orientated roughly E-W with the skulls to the west; it had been noted, also, that skeleton B lay on its back. Close to the skull of B a decorated rimsherd of Food Vessel had been found; at the time of the writer's initial inspection of the site three further sherds of the same vessel were found close to the same spot. The three skeletons are said to have lain at a depth of approximately 30 cm. below the surface. Apart from the skull of B all the bones had been collected together before the site was investigated with the result that it is not now possible to indicate which skeleton belonged to which grave. The anatomical report⁴ indicates, however, that skeleton B was probably a young adult male whilst A and C represent two adult males, one a young adult and the other probably of middle age.

Burials D, E, F, G, H, J and K

All of these burials were found in individual graves which had been made by prizing or scooping out weathered limestone blocks. With one exception (G) all the skeletons were orientated NW-SE, with the skull at the NW. All lay extended on their backs.



Plate 4 top : Site during excavation. (Scale = 1 metre)
bottom : Graves F and J. (Scale = 1 metre)

Burial D

Portion of the right leg-bone of this skeleton had been unearthed during the work on the water storage tank; the remainder was uncovered during the excavation. The left arm lay aligned along the left side while the right arm was flexed at the elbow and rested on the pelvic region. The skeleton, which was at a depth of 30 cm. - 40 cm. below the surface, was that of a male probably middle age (40 - 50 years). Three potsherds⁵ and two animal bones⁶, a fragment of a rib of horse(?) and a rib of sheep(?) were found in the fill of this grave.

Burial E

The skeleton was poorly preserved; the pelvis and the major portions of the lower limbs were missing. The arms were aligned along the sides. The skeleton, which was at a depth of 23 cm. - 26 cm. below the surface, was that of a male, probably a young adult of about 25 years. A decorated potsherd⁷, a pig tooth, a fragment of a pig metacarpal and a charred nut-shell of hazel⁸ were found in the fill of the grave.

Burial F (Fig. 3; PL 4, bottom)

This burial lay in a grave which was close to but not intruded upon by the grave of Burial J. The hands were crossed over the pelvic region, the right hand resting on the left. The skeleton, which lay at a depth of 30 cm. - 35 cm. below the surface was that of a male of about 45 years. Eight potsherds⁹ and an incisor tooth of pig were found in the fill of the grave.

Burial G

The orientation of this skeleton, NE-SW, with the skull at the SW, differed from that of the other burials. The skeleton, which lay at a depth of 26 cm. - 29 cm. below the surface, was that of an infant. Eighteen potsherds¹⁰, a chert flake, a polished chip of stone and a small bead of blue glass were found in the fill of the grave.

Burial H

The upper limb bones were much decayed. The skeleton, which lay at a depth of 35 cm. - 44 cm. below the surface, was that of an adult male of about 30 years. Five potsherds¹¹ were found in the fill of the grave.

Burial J (Fig. 3; PL 4, bottom)

This burial lay in a grave which was close to the grave of Burial F though at a slightly deeper level. The hands were crossed over the pelvic region, the right hand resting on the left. The skeleton, which lay at a depth of 36 cm. - 48 cm. below the surface, was that of a female of about 35 years. Thirteen potsherds¹², two fragments of sheep bones and part of the humerus and metatarsal of an ox were found in the fill of the grave.

Burial K

Part of this skeleton was poorly preserved. The skull has what, at first sight, appears to be a trephined hole in the basal region of the vault. The hole, however, seems to have been produced by the gnawing of a rodent (see Brothwell, posted). The skeleton, which lay at a depth of 33 cm. - 36 cm. below the surface, was that of an adult male of about 45 years. Two potsherds¹³, three chert scrapers and an ox tooth were found in the fill of the grave.

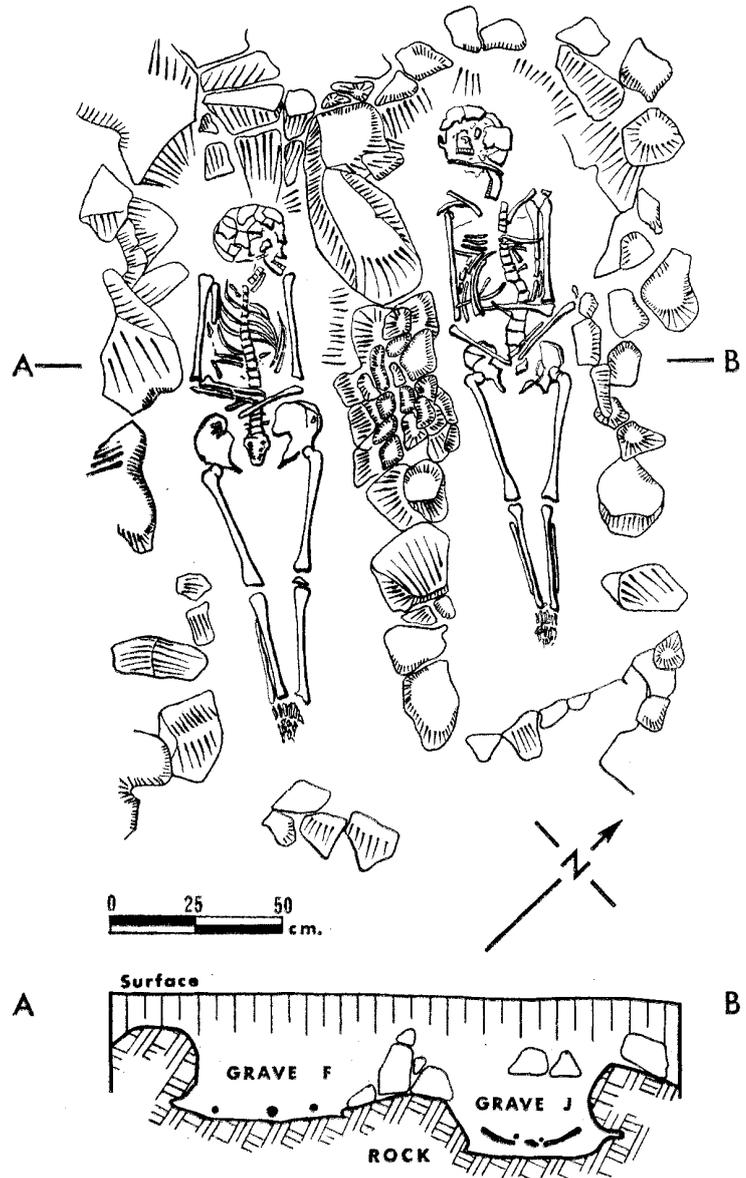


Fig. 3 Plan and section : Graves F and J, Gortnacargy

FINDS

Pottery One hundred and fifty six potsherds were found in the course of the excavation; of this number four sherds were of Food Vessel ware and these were found in Grave B.

Food Vessel E24 : 245-8 (Fig. 4)

Sufficient of the Food Vessel was recovered to allow of a reconstruction. The rim is flat and measures 11 mm. in thickness. The external surface of the neck is decorated with a scored horizontal zig-zag line; the triangular areas thus formed bear double rows of short horizontal scored lines. Below this zone there is a slight ridge or moulding which bears on its upper surface a horizontal row of spaced, inverted V-shaped impressions. The remainder of the body seems to have been decorated with short horizontal scored lines. The ware is buff-brown in colour on the exterior; the interior and the core are grey-black to brown in colour. The core contains many large grits. When complete the vessel probably measured about 13 cm. high, 13 cm. in diameter at the mouth and 6.5 cm. in diameter at the base.

The remainder of the sherds, numbering one hundred and fifty two, show considerable variety in rim form and texture and can be divided into eight groups which seem to represent at least eight different vessels.¹⁴

Group 1 is represented by twelve sherds¹⁵, the most distinctive of which are two sherds, E24:240-1 (Fig. 5), which represent portion of the rim and neck of a thin-walled (2 mm.) vessel of hard, well-fired pottery. The ware is black in colour on both surfaces and the core is grey-black. On the interior of the mouth there are three horizontal lines of cord impressions. On the lower portion of the

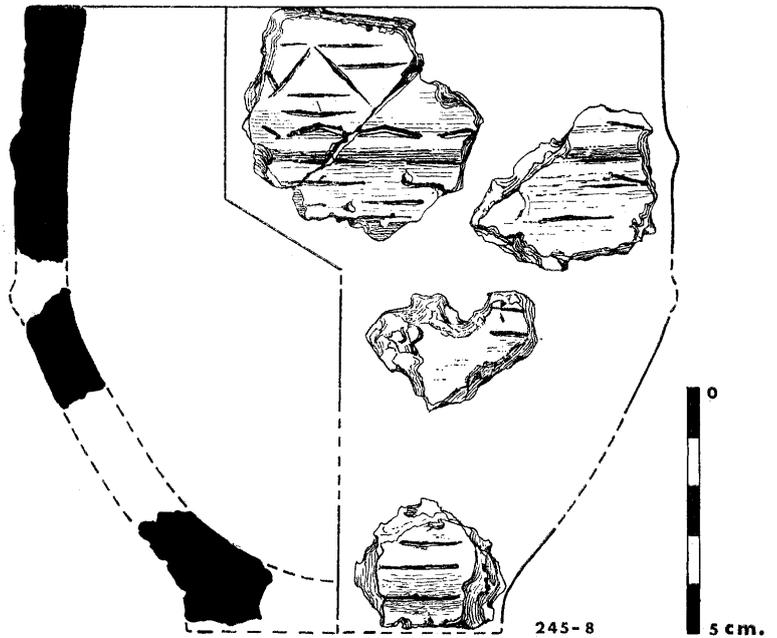


Fig. 4 Food Vessel, from Grave B, Gortnacargy.

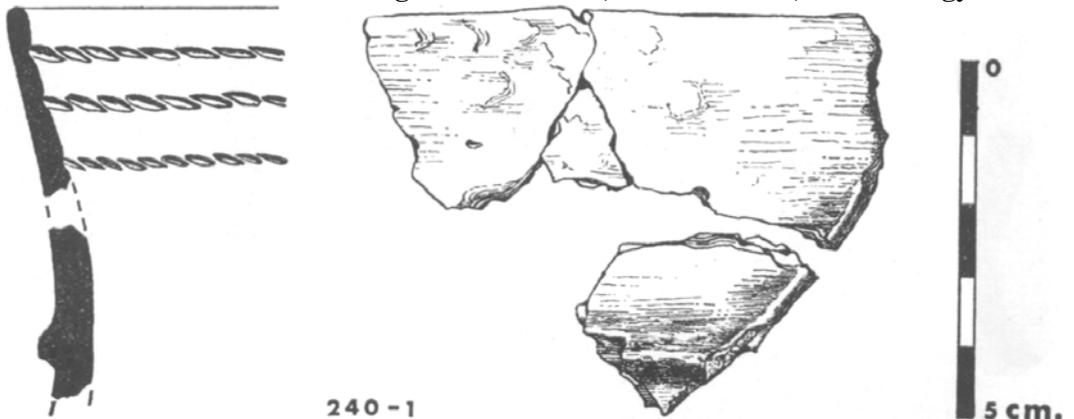


Fig. 5 Beaker-type sherds from pit, Gortnacargy,

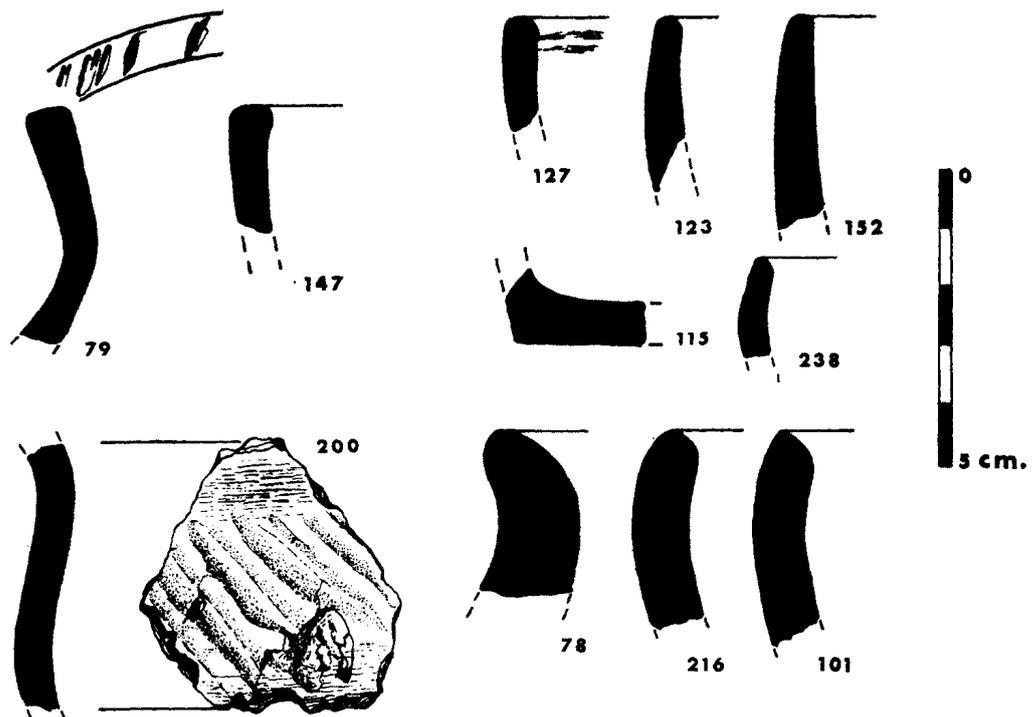


Fig. 6 Potsherds of Groups 1 to 8, Gortnacargy

neck, externally, there is a pinched-up moulding of semi-circular cross-section; it is 4 mm. wide and 2 mm. high. Although the type of moulding is not usual the quality of the ware and the decoration on the interior of the mouth are in accord with those of Beaker pottery. A good Irish parallel for the decoration on the internal surface is that on a Beaker rimsherd from Site V, Dalkey Island, Co. Dublin (N.M.I. Reg. No. E4:1408). These two sherds and one other sherd of this group¹⁶ were found in the pit in the north eastern part of the site in association with sherds of four other groups (Groups 2, 3, 4 and 6).

Group 2. There are seventeen sherds in this group¹⁷ of which two are illustrated, E24:79, 200 (Fig. 6). The sherds are of hard baked, smooth-surfaced ware, grey-black in colour on the exterior and grey-brown on the interior and through out the core. The flat rim of E24:79 is decorated with oblique, unequally-spaced scored lines. Sherd E24:200 probably represents portion of the neck and shoulder of a vessel. It is decorated with wide, shallow, oblique grooves. Average thickness of ware, 7 mm.

Group 3 is represented by twenty three sherds¹⁸ which include three rimsherds, one of which, E24:147, is illustrated (Fig. 6). The ware has a sandy texture on the outer surface and is smooth on the inner surface. It is buff to light brown externally and the core and inner surface are black. T. 6 mm.

Group 4. There are only five sherds in this group¹⁹; one is a rimsherd, E24:127 (Fig. 6). The ware is somewhat similar to that of Group 1; it is hard and well fired, black in colour on both surfaces and grey-black throughout the core. Some large grits are visible on the outer surface and in the core. T. 5 mm.

Group 5. There are twenty nine sherds in this group²⁰ which includes three rimsherds, two of which are illustrated, E24:123, 238 (Fig. 6). The ware has a sandy texture on the outer surface and the inner surface is also slightly rough; large grits are visible on both surfaces and in the core. Both surfaces and the core are buff or light brown in colour. T. 8 mm.

Group 6 consists of five sherds²¹, one of which is a rimsherd, E24:152 (Fig. 6). The ware is hard and well fired; it has a sandy texture on both surfaces. It is grey-black in colour on the outer surface and grey-brown on the inner surface and throughout the core. T. 8 mm.

Group 7. There are eighteen sherds in this group²²; two are rimsherds and one, E24:78, is illustrated (Fig. 6). The ware is heavy and coarse and contains many large grits. It is buff or brown in colour on both surfaces and the core is grey-black. T. varies from 11 mm. - 15 mm.

Group 8 is represented by forty two sherds²³; two are rimsherds, E24:101, 216 (Fig. 6). The ware is light brown in colour on the outside and grey-black on the inside. It has a sandy texture on both surfaces. T. 1 cm. Only one base sherd, E24:115 (Fig. 6), is present in the assemblage; it may belong to Group 3, 5 or 8. It is a sherd from a flat-based vessel. It is brown in colour on both surfaces and throughout the core. T. 8 mm. It is of interest to note that sherds belonging to different groups were found together in the pit, in the graves and over the remainder of the excavated area.

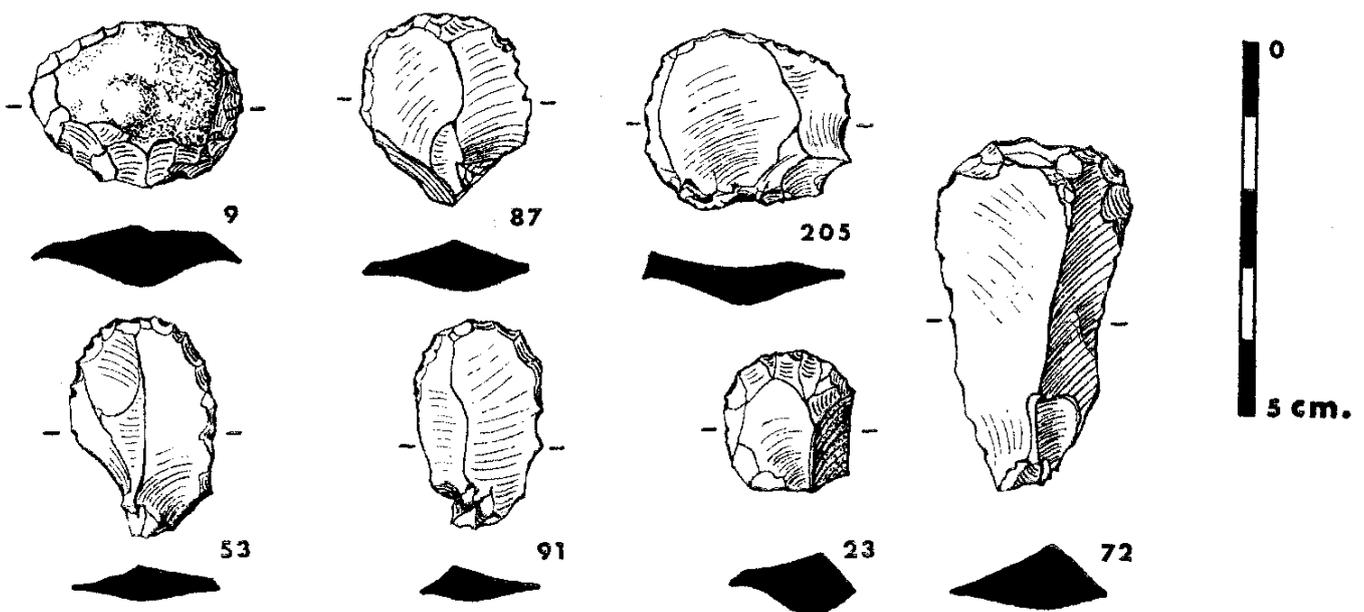


Fig. 7 Flint and chert scrapers, Gortnacargy, Co. Cavan.

Flint and Chert

Thirty one scrapers, thirty seven flakes and a number of waste fragments were found in the course of the excavation. Some were found in the fill of the graves, some in the pit and the remainder were found in various parts of the area excavated. All the scrapers, with one exception (an end-scraper, E24:72), are of the thumb-nail variety (Fig. 7). Many of the artifacts appeared to be classifiable as flint but, as will be seen from the following comments supplied by Dr. J. S. Jackson, almost all of them are of local chert.

"There is considerable variation in the chert represented in the artifacts: the colour ranging from very dark through mottled grey to almost pure white. The mottled grey material, in particular, shows original sedimentary structure of the primary limestone. Most of the structure is obliterated in the white chert. White chert can be obtained in the immediate area of Gortnacargy either from superficial deposits or from actual outcrops. Some of the white chalcedonic material has mottled patches of honey-brown colour closely resembling Cretaceous flint and it is possible that such material occurs as drift pebbles in the area and that some of the artifacts may consist of this material."

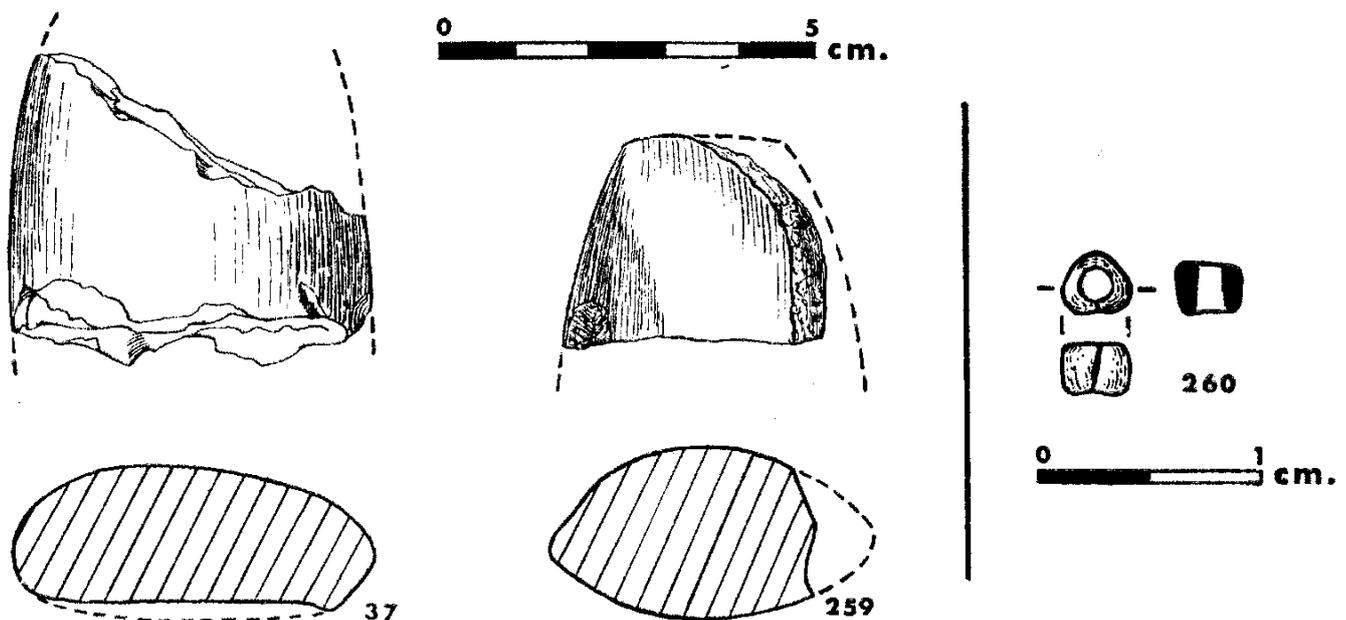


Fig. 8 Fragments of stone axeheads and glass bead, Gortnacargy.

Stone (Fig. 8)

E24:37. Portion of a polished stone axehead. Oval cross-section. Of horn felsic porcellanite of Tievebulliagh lithology. L. 3.9 cm.; max. W. 4.9 cm.; T. 2 cm.

E24:259. Portion of the butt-end of a polished stone axehead. Pointed oval cross-section. The material is similar to that of E24:37. L. 2.8 cm.; max. W. 3.5 cm.; T. 2.2 cm.

Glass (Fig. 8)

E24:260. A tiny ring-bead of light blue translucent glass. It has a cylindrical perforation and the cross-section is D-shaped. D. 3 mm.; W. 2 mm.; D. of hole, 1 mm. The bead was found close to the toe-bones of Burial G.

Animal Bones

A small quantity of animal bones and teeth was found on the site; those which were found in the graves have already been noted. The majority are of ox (12 bone fragments and 16 teeth), sheep (11 bone fragments and 1 tooth) and pig (4 bone fragments and 13 teeth) but a few bones and teeth of hare, rabbit and other rodents were also found.

Charcoal

A small amount of charcoal and two charred nuts of hazel (*Corylus*) were found. One of the hazel nuts was found in the fill of Burial E. The following varieties of wood have been identified: hazel (*Corylus*), 3 pieces; ash (*Fraxinus*), 1 piece; yew (*Taxus*), 1 piece.

COMMENT

As has been mentioned, it is possible that the potsherds, stone artifacts and animal remains represent a period of occupation on the site which was selected, at a later stage, as a burial site. However, the absence of hearths and post-holes also suggests the possibility that the potsherds found in the graves and elsewhere on the site may represent a ritual breaking and depositing of pottery as has been recorded at Grange Stone Circle and other sites²⁴; this would indicate that the pottery is contemporaneous with the burials. The pottery of Groups 1-8, on the basis of texture and rim form and because of the presence of the Beaker-like sherds, would appear to belong to the Early Bronze Age. The Food Vessel is also attributable to this period and a parallel for the association of a Food Vessel with a long cist which also probably contained an extended skeleton is known from Cush, Co. Limerick²⁵. Beaker and Food Vessel, however, are normally found associated with crouched skeletons, and extended skeletons in long stone cists or in shallow graves are usually attributed to the Early Iron Age or later periods²⁶.

Plain blue glass beads are known from Bronze Age contexts abroad²⁷ and in Ireland they have been recorded on at least one site²⁸ although, in general, they are held to belong to the Early Iron Age or later periods.²⁹

Having viewed all the possibilities, it is the opinion of the writer that the evidence from the site is not sufficient to allow of a firm conclusion being reached; on the one hand, the burials may be contemporaneous with the potsherds and other artifacts and be dated, accordingly, to the Early Bronze Age, but on the other hand, the pottery and other artifacts may represent a period of Early Bronze Age occupation on the site which was at a later stage, possibly during the Early Iron Age, used as a cemetery.

NB: Numbers in superscript refer to annotations on page 14

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



**Author Breandán
Ó Riordáin**

The writer wishes to thank Mr. James McGoldrick, the landowner, for many kindnesses during the excavation and for donating the finds to the National Museum; Mr. Frank Dolan, Lakefield, Bawnboy, Mr. Michael Dolan, Ballyconnell and Mrs. James Heery, Kildoagh, for their help in making local arrangements; Mr. Gabriel McCarron, B.Arch., Dublin, and Mr. Norbert Shannon, B.Arch., Dublin for assistance with the planning and surveying of the site. I also wish to thank Miss G. Roche, Miss Maura J. P. Scannell, Dr. John S. Jackson for the specialist reports incorporated above and Mr. D. R. Brothwell for the report on the skeletal material.

The excavation was financed by means of a grant administered through the Special Employment Schemes Office on the recommendation of the Royal Irish Academy.



**Jim & Marion McGoldrick,
Gortnacargy (2006)**



Plate 5 Gortnacargy. Skull E. (left) Norma facialis, (right) Norma lateralis.

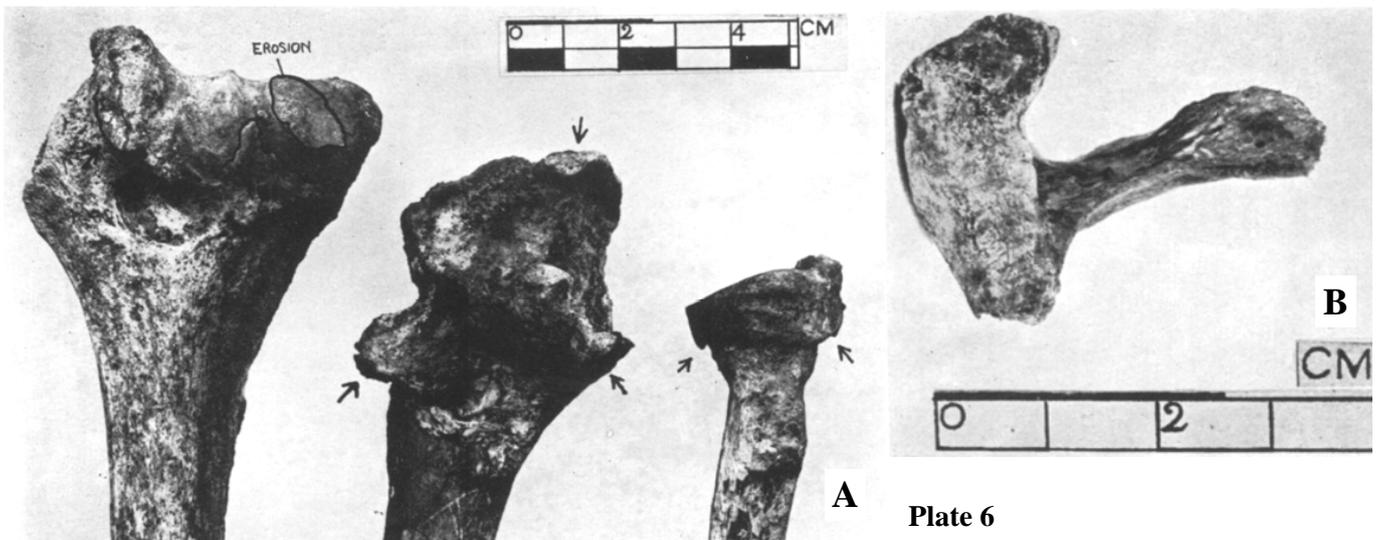


Plate 6

(A) Distal portion of the right humerus and proximal portion of the right ulna and radius from a Bronze Age male, Ballybrennan, Co. West meath. Arrows point to noticeable areas of arthritic change, and one area of bone 'erosion' is shown.

(B) The dorsal aspect of the right ramus from Gortnacargy, burial H. Arthritic deformity of the condyle can be clearly be seen.

(C) Detail of part of the basal region of Gortnacargy skull K. The pseudo trephine hole is clearly seen.

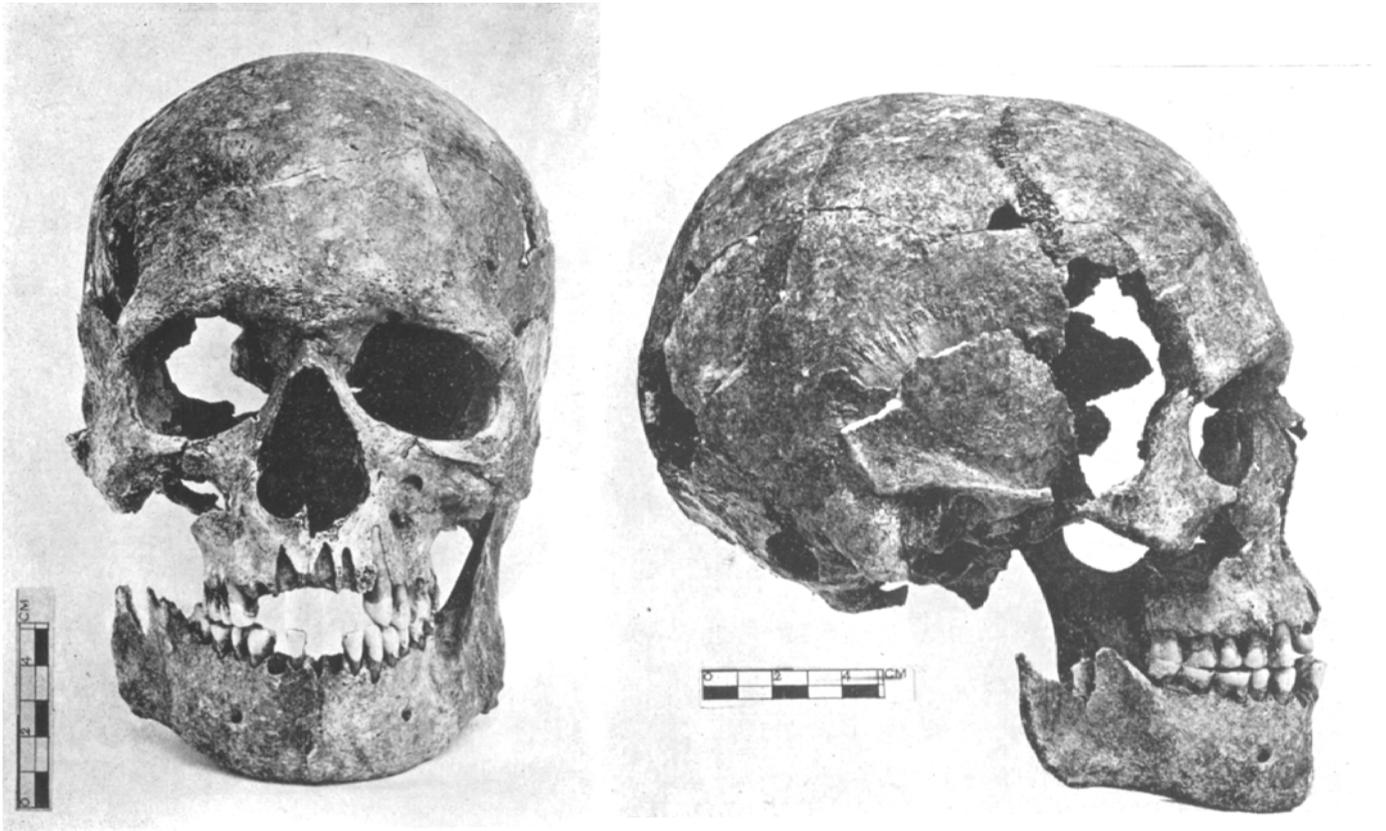


Plate 7

Gortnacargy, Co. Cavan. . Skull K. (Left) Norma facialis, (Right) Norma lateralis. The pseudo-trephine hole is seen just behind the right mastoid process.

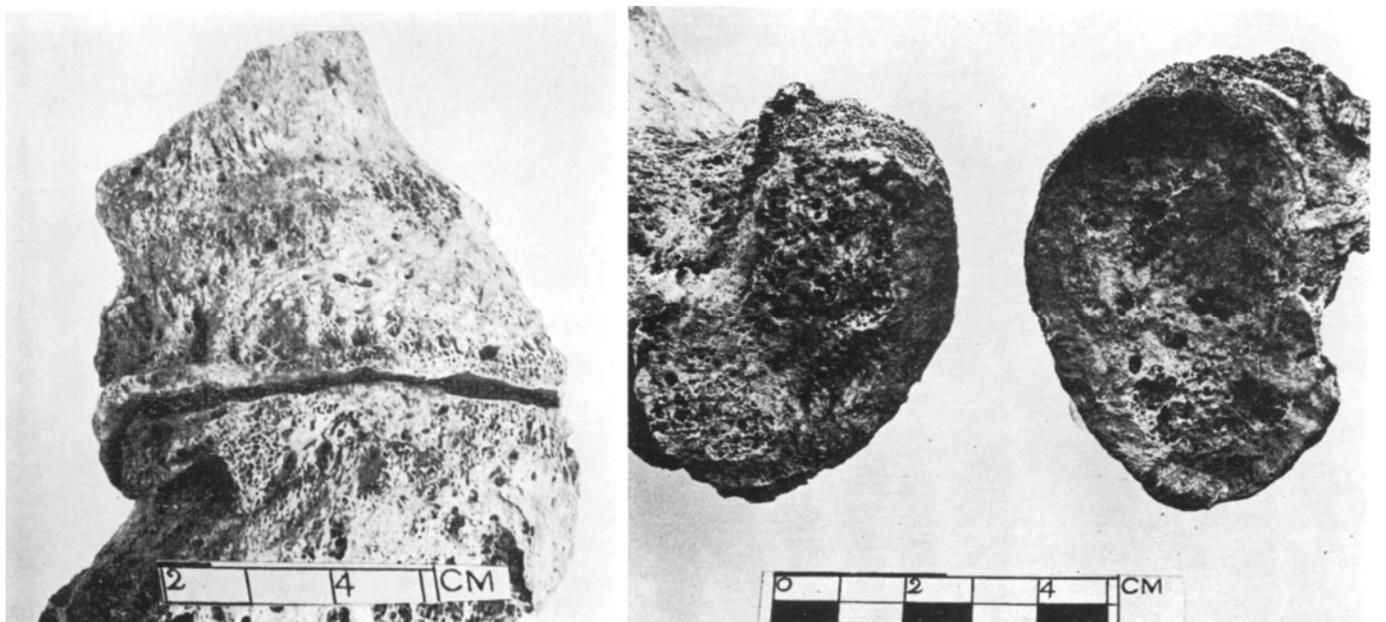


Plate 8

Gortnacargy, Co. Cavan. Skeleton K. (left) Lateral view, (right) condylar view, of the arthritic knee, showing irregular new bone formation, lipping and pitting



Plate 9 above left: Curragh, Co. Laois. Skull 3.
Arrows point to the depressions at bregma and lambda

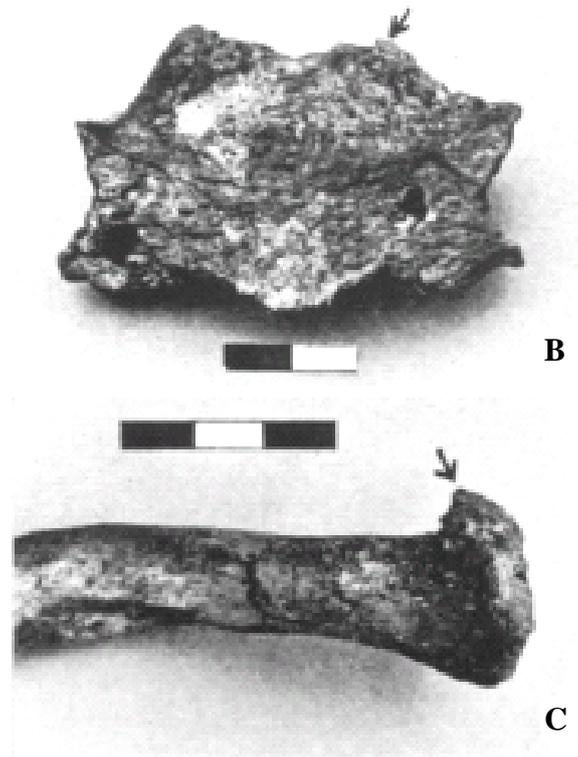


Plate 10 above right:
(B) Moone, Co. Kildare.
Manubrial fragment. Showing minor
arthritic changes.
(C) Moone, Co. Kildare. Sternal end of the
clavicle.



Plate 10 (A) Faddan Beg, Co. Offaly. Skeleton 7 (144F).
Faddan Beg, Co. Offaly. Skeleton 7 (144F). A cervical, thoracic, and
lumbar vertebra, showing various degrees of osteo-arthritic change.

Annotations & bibliography

1. *Townland, Gortnacargy; parish, Corlough; barony, Tullyhaw; Co. Cavan; O.S. 6-inch sheet 9, 42.1 cm. from W. and 38.6 cm. from N.; Nat. Grid Ref. H.194.190.*
2. *Thanks are due to the landowner, Mr. James McGoldrick, Gortnacargy, and to Mr. Michael Dolan, Ballyconnell, for reporting the discovery.*
3. *Interim reports on the result of the excavation have already appeared in Proc. Preh. Soc. 24, 1958, 212, and Council Old World Arch. 1, 1958, Area 1, p. 11. In the light of subsequent research on the artifacts and skeletal remains from the excavation a number of comments in these reports require revision.*
4. *The human skeletal remains were examined by Mr. D. R. Brothwell, M.A., Sub Department of Anthropology, British Museum (Natural History);*
5. *Reg. Nos. E24-.81, 115 and 151.*
6. *The animal bones were identified by Miss G. Roche, M.Sc, Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland.*
7. *Reg. No. E24:200.*
8. *The charcoal was identified by Miss M. J. P. Scannell, B.Sc, Assistant Keeper, Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland.*
9. *Reg. Nos. E24:123-4, 170-2, 201-203.*
10. *Reg. Nos. E24:81, 126A-I, 127-131, 176-7, 204.*
11. *Reg. Nos. E.24:152-154, 217, 225.*
12. *Reg. Nos. E24:125, 135-138, 147-150, 155-6, 197-8.*
13. *Reg. Nos. E24:207, 214.*
14. *I am indebted to my colleague, Mr. Etienne Rynne, M.A., Irish Antiquities Division, for assistance with the classification of the pottery and other aspects of this report.*
15. *Reg. Nos. E24:19, 34, 120, 129, 174-5, 179, 239-242, 244.*
16. *Reg. No. E24:242.*
17. *Reg. Nos. E24:60, 75, 79, 90A-D, 130, 144, 146, 156, 159, 160, 190. 195, 200. 201.*
18. *Reg. Nos. E24:65, 89, 96, 102, 117, 119A-B, 125, 128, 131, 135, 142, 147-149, 153, 161 218, 229-230, 232-234.*
19. *Reg. Nos. E24-.124, 127, 155, 198A, 237.*
20. *Reg. Nos. E24:7, 39, 44D, 56, 56A, 56C, 67, 81, 83A, 86, 90E, 90G, 95, 97, 107, 118, 123, 138, 150, 154, 171-2, 178, 183, 192, 207, 219, 231, 238.*
21. *Reg. Nos. E24:98, 152, 203, 217, 225.*
22. *Reg. Nos. E24:63, 74, 77-8, 92, 94, 104, 114, 116, 151, 170, 186-7, 197, 202, 213, 226. 227.*
23. *2Reg. Nos. E24:18, 38, 40, 44, 44A-C, 51, 52A-D, 66, 76, 83, 90F, 93, 101, 106, 108, 111, 121, 126A-I, 136-7, 141, 176-7, 181-2, 204, 214, 216, 243.*
24. *Proc. Roy. Ir. Acad. 54C, 1951, 74 and references therein.*
25. *Proc. Roy. Ir. Acad. 45C, 1939-40, 136.*
26. *Proc. Roy. Ir. Acad. 46C, 1940-1, 299-315. 2/ For example, at Melk, Austria, for which see Praehistorische Zeitschrift, 25, 1934, 144 and at Knackyboy Cairn, Isles of Scilly, Ant. J., 32, 1952, 33 and references therein.*
27. *For greenish-blue beads from Bronze Age levels at Knockadoon, Co. Limerick, see Proc. Roy. Ir. Acad. 56C, 1954, 354 but note H. Case's cautionary remarks in Proc. Preh. Soc. 27, 1961, 207.*
28. *Ulster Journal. Arch. 20, 1957, 84.*