Life and death in County Meath

Linda Clarke and Neil Carlin describe the prehistoric remains at Ardsallagh, Co. Meath

Aerial view of excavated ring-ditch in foreground, and adjacent houses, looking west.

The prehistoric site at Ardsallagh, Co. Meath, known as Ardsallagh 2 is on a small rise (51m OD) in gently undulating countryside overlooking the River Boyne to the south. The Hill of Tara is 4.5km to the south-east, and there is another recently discovered ring-ditch (Ardsallagh 1) on a more prominent rise (55m OD) approximately 718m to the north-west of Ardsallagh 2. All three sites are intervisible.

Ardsallagh 2 was originally detected by Steve Linnane during archaeological testing along the route of the proposed M3 motorway (spring 2004). Test trenches dug through the topsoil revealed a scatter of isolated pits, as well as the remains of a penannular feature, possibly a ring-ditch that would have been used for ceremonial, funeral and/or ritual purposes. The next phase of work (spring 2006) entailed the excavation of these features and a large area in the vicinity, resulting in the discovery of additional archaeological features. These included the truncated remains of a large circular ditched enclosure (which has been interpreted as a ring-ditch), two circular structures and isolated pits, some of which contained cremation burials. Centuries of agricultural activity have removed the uppermost levels of this site and only the deepest layers have survived.

Results of the excavation

The ring-ditch was almost circular in shape, with an external diameter of 21m, and was built on top of the natural rise that forms the highest point in the field. The entranceway was identified to the west in the form of a causeway of undug earth between the termini of the enclosing ditch. Two phases of activity were identified within the ditch fill. It would appear that the ditch had been deliberately backfilled soon after its construction as part of the associated burial/ritual activity. At a later stage, the infilled ditch was partially redug to form a segmented enclosure composed of three separate curvilinear gullies. This was possible because the original ring-ditch would have been visible as a ringed depression caused by the compaction of the ditch fill over time. The only finds from the fill of the original ditch were animal teeth and a few pieces of flint débitage. A small metal (iron) rod and a flake from a broken polished stone axe were recovered from the fill of the recut. One small concentration of cremated bone found above the primary fill may represent a definite burial deposit. Tiny pieces of cremated bone

Location map

were also scattered throughout the primary ditch fill. The damaged remains of two pits were found in the ring-ditch interior but produced no finds.

The two circular structures were located immediately outside the ring-ditch on the crest of the small rise. Structure 1 was to the west and its entrance was directly opposite that of the ring-ditch. It was almost circular in shape, with a diameter of 10.6m, and was defined by a shallow penannular slot-trench. Two shallow pits at the terminus of this slot may represent the remains of post-pits. The remnants of timber planks were discovered within the slot-trench to the west and south. There was a single internal feature, a cremation burial pit, but no finds were recovered from structure 1. Structure 2, to the north-west of structure 1, consisted of a penannular slot-trench with an approximate diameter of 8.2m. A single cremation pit was also located within this structure but there were no associated finds.

In total, eight cremation pits were identified throughout this site. They were not located in close proximity to each other or to the ring-ditch, with the exception of the two burials discovered within structures 1 and 2. Two of the pit cremations consisted of burnt bone

contained within pots, identified by Dr Eoin Grogan as a Cordoned Urn and a Vase Urn. These were both deposited in an inverted position, and only those parts of the pots that were lowermost in the ground survived. A sherd from a Food Vase was associated with the Vase Urn. These burials were located approximately 15m south and 30m north-west of the ring-ditch. Another pit contained the remains of a Collared Urn that had been inverted over a cremation.

Other features included a number of isolated pits scattered throughout the site. Unburnt animal bone and tiny fragments of cremated bone were recovered from most of these pits, one of which contained a single sherd of early–middle Bronze Age pottery. A blue glass bead of probable early medieval date found during general site clearance was the only other artefact recovered.
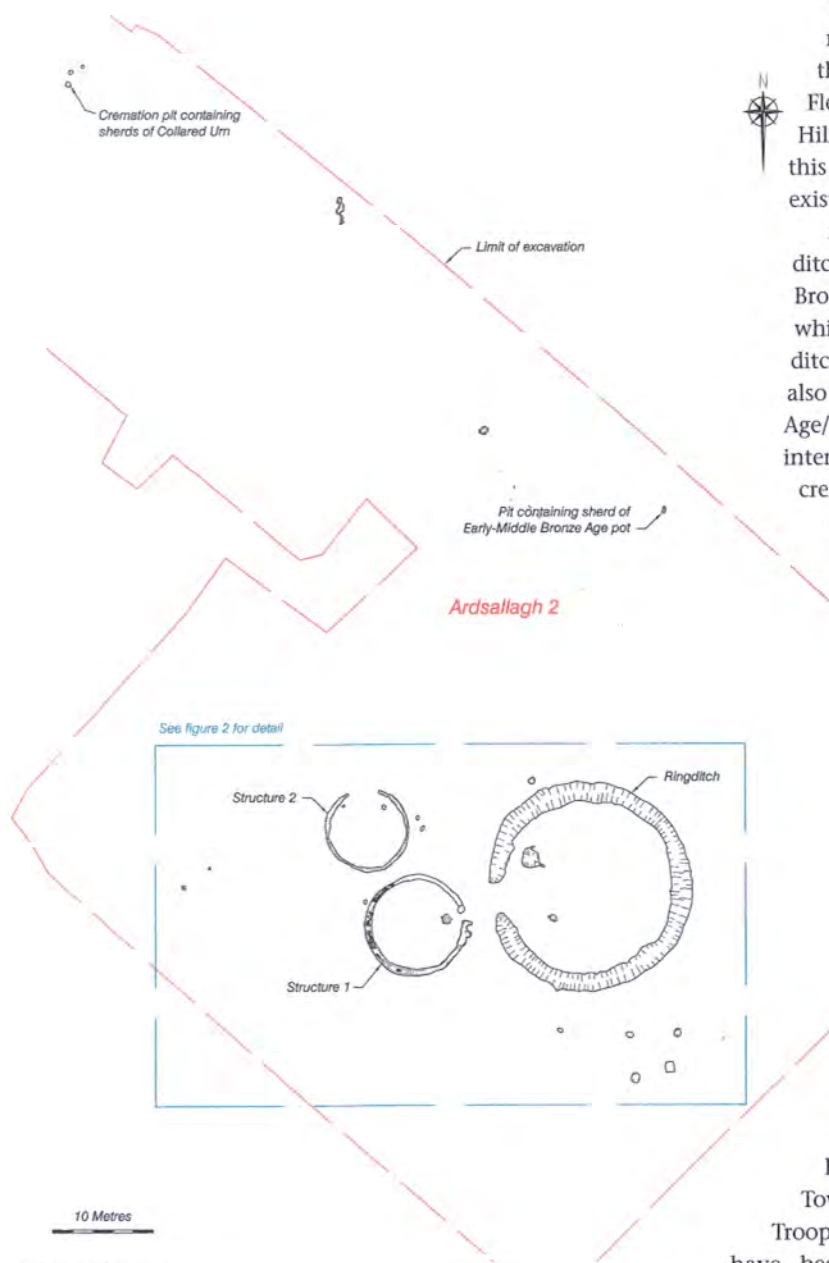
Discussion and interpretation

The large ditched enclosure is a ring-ditch. Ring-ditches are a typically Bronze Age site type that originated in the Neolithic and continued to be constructed, used and reused into the early medieval period. They can range in diameter from 3m up to 90m. Many would originally have been encircled by an external bank and possibly would have contained a low internal mound, built up with the upcast from the ditch. There was no evidence at this site for either feature, a situation paralleled at many other excavations. This form of monument is likely to have fulfilled a sepulchral, ceremonial or ritual function.

The paucity of burial evidence directly associated with this ring-ditch may suggest that human bone was being used or manipulated in a complex manner that is unlikely to have been exclusively funereal. The placing of bone in the ditch appears to have been deliberately selective: the lack of charcoal from the ring-ditch indicates that an effort was made to separate bone from the pyre debris after the act of cremation. The small size of the fragments recovered may suggest that they had been ground down. It has been suggested that these monuments may have served as memorials to the dead without the need to include large quantities of human remains.

The burial of cremated human remains in an inverted vessel within a pit was the dominant funerary rite towards the end of the early Bronze Age. All four of the pottery types recovered are of that era: Vases (2100–1900 BC), Vase Urns (2050–1750 BC), Collared Urns (1950–1500 BC) and Cordoned Urns (1750–1400 BC). Thus it is likely that the cremation cemetery at Ardsallagh developed over the course of the early Bronze Age between 2050 and 1700 BC. A concentration of early Bronze Age activity in this area is demonstrated by the reuse of the Mound of the Hostages passage tomb (on the Hill of Tara) as a cemetery from 2000 to 1600 BC and by the recent discovery of Beaker pottery at Ardsallagh 4.

The presence of early Bronze Age pottery in pits in the vicinity of the ring-ditch may suggest that it also dates from this period and that the cremation pits were deliberately located around it. While it is possible that this layout is coincidental, the proposed association may be strengthened by the fact that the ring-ditch does not truncate any pre-existing features. Nevertheless, the characteristics of the ring-ditch, in terms of its size, entrance, finds, associated features and evidence for funeral activity, are more typical of the middle to late

Cremation pit containing
sherds of Collared Urn

Limit of excavation

Pit containing sherd of
Early-Middle Bronze Age pot

Ardsallagh 2

See figure 2 for detail

Structure 2

Ringditch

Structure 1

10 Metres

Plan of the entire site

Bronze Age than the early Bronze Age. As a general rule, early Bronze Age ring-ditches enclose a cist or pit burial and tend not to contain cremated bone within the enclosing ditch. It may be the case that it was possible to carefully position the ring-ditch in relation to the earlier burials because the local people knew the history of activity in their area. It is plausible that the other cremation pits without artefacts outside the ring-ditch may represent a continued use of the cemetery into the middle Bronze Age, as this form of simple burial is more typical of that time.

The recutting of the ring-ditch represents a later use of the monument, and the presence of the iron object suggests that this activity is of Iron Age date. The digging of three long segments into the ditch may have been undertaken in order to redefine the ditch, but it is almost certain that this act of alteration was also an attempt to create a link between the past and the present. It is quite common to find evidence for the reuse of Bronze Age monuments in the Iron Age; examples of this include the ring-ditches at Kilmahuddrick, Co. Dublin, and Flemington, Co. Meath. Many of the monuments on the Hill of Tara testify to intense activity in south Meath at this time and also to the deliberate incorporation of pre-existing Bronze Age sites.

As mentioned above, another recently excavated ring-ditch within Ardsallagh townland may also date from the Bronze Age. This enclosure has a similar western entrance, which may suggest a local tradition of constructing ring-ditches in this way. Small amounts of cremated bone were also present within the fills of this ditch, and late Iron Age/early medieval inhumations within the ring-ditch interior indicate reuse of the site. A late Bronze Age cremation burial in an urn was discovered just outside the ring-ditch, as were a number of cremation pits that lacked any associated grave-goods.

The discovery of carbonised timber within the slot-trench of structure 1 is paralleled by its occurrence within the fills of a number of ring-ditches, including examples at Lusk, Co. Dublin, Gortnascarry, Co. Limerick, Donaghmore, Co. Louth, Ferns, Co. Wexford, and Rathdooney Beg 2, Co. Sligo. This may suggest that structure 1 represents the truncated remains of a small ring-ditch, and support for such an interpretation is supplied by the presence of an internal cremation pit. Despite this, the narrowness of the slot-trench, the straight sides and the flat base are much more characteristic of the foundations of a roundhouse, and it seems more probable that the carbonised timbers represent the remains of the superstructure. Identical buildings of similar size, composed of a penannular wall-slot and lacking any internal post-holes for roof supports, have been excavated at Townparks, Co. Antrim, Ballyhenry, Co. Down, and Troopersland, Co. Antrim. Similar buildings of smaller size have been excavated quite frequently, for example at Curraghatoor, Co. Tipperary, and Colp West, Co. Meath. All of these structures have been dated to the late Bronze Age and it is probable that the Ardsallagh structures also date from this period. The absence of finds and of a hearth and the presence of a northern and eastern entrance are common features. Both structures are located very close together, but each appears to physically respect the other and thus it is most likely that they were in use contemporaneously.

The occurrence of a cremation burial in a pit just inside the entrance of each structure is not atypical of the Bronze Age and raises some significant possibilities. A very clear and close link between life and death can be observed in the findings from the excavations of settlement sites of this period. There is recurrent evidence for the deposition of human bone in pits and post-holes of houses and in cremation pits and ring-ditches in close proximity to domestic structures. Pit cremations have been found at the centre of Bronze Age structures at Kerlogue, Co. Wexford, Knocksaggart, Co. Clare,

Right: Detailed plan of ring-ditch and structures
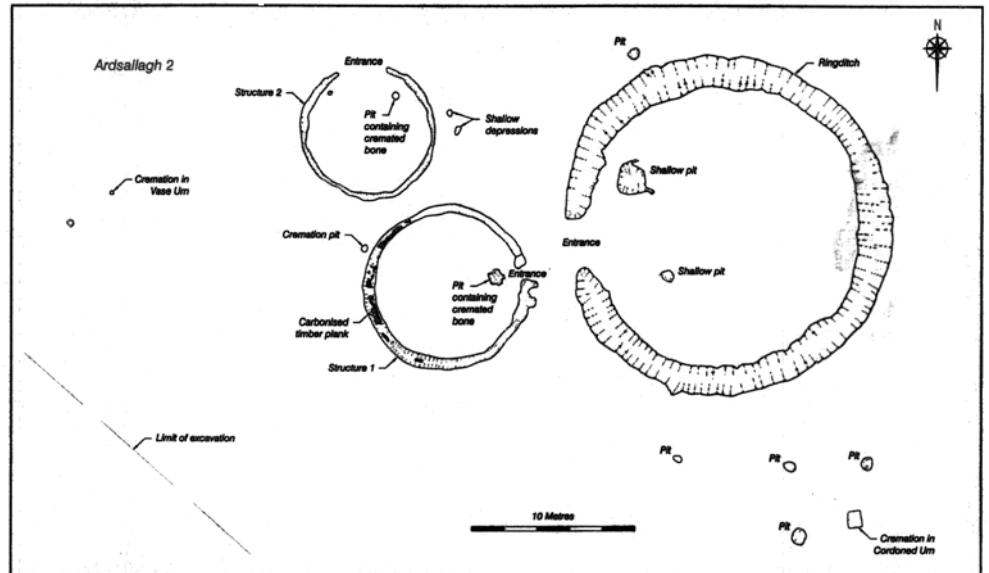
Below: Conservator Susannah Kelly wrapping vase urn in resin strips prior to lifting for excavation in the laboratory

and Rathgall, Co. Wicklow. At Ballyveelish 3, Co. Cork, an early Bronze Age polygonal cist burial was found at the centre of a roundhouse that appears to be of later Bronze Age date. It has been previously noted that entranceways were of particular significance to people in the Bronze Age and were often emphasised by the placing of particular deposits. These entrance deposits may have served to distinguish spatial boundaries, such as between the structure interior and the area outside it, and would have added significance to the act of moving from one space into another. It has been postulated that the life cycle of a settlement may have been connected to the life cycle of its occupants and their possessions. Perhaps the burials within the structures at Ardsallagh contain the remains of a previous occupant and represent a closing deposit that signified the end of their life and that of their dwelling. It is also possible that these cremation pits represent foundation deposits that were deliberately positioned within the houses in order to function in much the same way as modern-day relics.

Ring-ditches have been found in close proximity to structures at sites like Charlesland, Co. Wicklow, Castleupton, Co. Antrim, Inch,

Co. Down, Ballyveelish 3, Co. Cork, and Chancellorsland, Co. Tipperary. Many British Bronze Age settlement sites have an associated small cemetery nearby, and it is likely that this is reflected at Ardsallagh, where it would appear that the ring-ditch pre-dates the structures. If this is the case, the people who used these structures may have gained social esteem and a sense of identity from being able to build and live in such close proximity to an ancestral burial-ground. The fact that the entrance of structure 1 faces into the entrance of the ring-ditch may indicate that these people were very conscious of the preceding function of this location and of the symbolism of such an act. This can be seen as a conscious attempt to create a continuous link between the living community and their ancestors. It has been observed that the integration of domestic, funerary and ceremonial sites within a clearly defined cluster such as this suggests a close social structure, reflecting the importance of kin-groups at a social and economic level.

The evidence from the Ardsallagh complex suggests that this locale continued to be seen as a suitably important place to be buried from 1900 BC until perhaps as late as c. AD 700. While such a location would have been desirable because of its physical geography, it is clear that much prestige would have been gained from its clear association with the visible ring-ditch cemetery on the northern and western sides of Tara. The results of this excavation afford a tantalising glimpse of the complexity of the relationship between life and death, past and present, and the sacred and the profane in prehistoric Ireland.

Post-excavation analysis is at an early stage and its completion will serve to enhance our interpretation of this site. The proposed chronological sequence of events will be confirmed by radiocarbon dating, and the identification of the species of the unburnt animal bone and the cremated bone will increase our understanding of the types of activities that were carried out.

Acknowledgements