

Fig. 1. Overall site plan of Ardsallagh 2. (ACS Ltd)

Life and Death in Ardsallagh

Linda Clarke and Neil Carlin, excavation directors with Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd, report on a possible Bronze Age burial and settlement complex on the route of the M3.

Location of Site

A prehistoric site at Ardsallagh, Co. Meath, (designated as Ardsallagh 2) was located on a small rise, 51 m above sea-level, in gently undulating countryside overlooking the River Boyne. The Hill of Tara lies 4.5 km to the south-east and a recently discovered ring-ditch (Ardsallagh 1) was located on a more prominent rise (55 m high), approximately 718 m to the north-west of Ardsallagh 2.

Background to Discovery

Ardsallagh 2 was originally detected in spring 2004, by archaeologist Steve Linnane, during archaeological testing along the route. Test trenches were dug through the topsoil and these revealed a scatter of isolated pits, as well as the remains of a penannular feature (i.e. shaped like an incomplete ring), possibly a ring-ditch, which would have been used for ceremonial, funereal and/or ritual purposes. The next phase of work got underway in spring 2006 and entailed the excavation of these features and the surrounding area. This resulted in the positive identification of a large, circular ring-ditch and the discovery of two circular structures and isolated pits, some of which contained cremation burials (Fig. 1). Centuries of agricultural activity have removed the uppermost levels of this site and thus only the deepest layers have survived.

Excavation Findings

The ring-ditch was almost circular in shape, with an external diameter of 21 m, 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 ends of the enclosing ditch (Fig. 2). Two phases of activity were identified within the ditch fill. It would appear that the ditch had been backfilled deliberately soon after its construction as part of the associated burial/ritual activity. At a later stage, the infilled ditch was partially re-dug to form a segmented enclosure

composed of three separate curvilinear gullies. This was made 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 debitage. A small iron rod and a flake from a broken, polished stone axehead were recovered from the fill of the re-cut section. One small concentration of cremated bone found above the earliest levels may represent a definite burial deposit. Tiny pieces of cremated bone were also scattered throughout this early layer. The damaged remains of two pits were found in the ring-ditch interior, but produced no finds.

The two circular structures (Structures 1 and 2) were located immediately outside the ring-ditch on the crest of a small rise. Structure 1 was to the west and its entrance was located directly opposite that of the ring-ditch. It would have been almost circular in shape, with a diameter of 10.6 m, and defined by a shallow, penannular slot-trench. Two shallow pits at the ends of the trench may represent the remains of post pits. The remnants of timber planks were discovered within this trench to the west and south. There was a single internal feature—a cremation burial pit—but no finds were recovered from the structure. Structure 2 was located north-west of Structure 1 and was of similar shape and size. 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. These features were not located in close proximity to one another or to the ring-ditch, with the exception of the two burials that were discovered within Structures 1 and 2. Two of the pit-cremations consisted of burnt bone contained within pots, identified by prehistoric pottery expert Dr Eoin Grogan as a Cordoned Urn—a Bronze Age pot with applied cordons or raised ribs decorating the outer face—and a Vase Urn—a Bronze Age pot consisting of small, hand-made, well-decorated vases. Both of these were deposited in an inverted position and only those parts of the pots that were lowermost in the ground survived. A sherd from a Food Vessel (a heavily decorated, biconical or bowl-shaped Bronze Age pot) was associated with the Vase Urn. These burials were located approximately 15 m south and 30 m north-west of the ring-ditch. Another pit contained the remains of a Collared Urn—a Bronze Age pot with a flat base, conical body and heavy overhanging rim or collar—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

While ring-ditches are a typical Bronze Age site-type, they have their origins in the preceding Neolithic period. Evidence also indicates that they may have been constructed, used and re-used into the early medieval period. Ring-ditches can range in diameter from 3 m to 9 m. Many would originally have been encircled by an external bank, built of the upcast from the ditch, and some may have had a low internal mound. There was no evidence at Ardsallagh 2 for either feature, however; a situation paralleled at many other ring-ditches. This form of monument is likely to have fulfilled a funereal, ceremonial or ritual function. The lack of burial evidence directly associated with this ring-ditch may suggest that human bone was being used or manipulated in a complex manner, which was unlikely to be exclusively funereal. The placing of cremated bone in this ditch appears to have been deliberately selective. Evidence for this is provided by the lack of charcoal from the ring-ditch, which indicates that effort was made to separate bone from the funeral-pyre debris after the act of cremation. The small size of the fragments recovered may suggest they were ground down. Dr Grogan has suggested the possibility that these monuments may have served as memorials to the dead, but 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 pottery types from Ardsallagh 2 date to that era and the established duration of use for each type is as follows: Food Vessels, 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, that is between 2050 and 1700 BC. Early Bronze Age activity in this region is demonstrated by the re-use of the Mound of the Hostages passage tomb (on the Hill of Tara) as a cemetery from 2000 to 1600 BC, and by the discovery of Beaker pottery at another newly discovered site, Ardsallagh 4.

The presence of Early Bronze Age pottery in pits in the vicinity of the ring-ditch could suggest that it, too, dates to this period and that these cremation pits were deliberately located around it. It is possible that this layout is coincidental, but the proposed association is strengthened by the fact that the ring-ditch avoids earlier archaeology. The characteristics of the ring-ditch, however—in terms of size, entrance, finds, associated features and evidence for funereal activity—are more typical of the Middle to Late Bronze Age than of 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 that it was possible to carefully position the ring-ditch

in relation to the earlier burials because the local community knew the history of activity in their area. It is also plausible that the other cremation pits outside the ring-ditch, those without artefacts, may represent a continued use of the cemetery into the Middle Bronze Age as this form of simple burial is more typical of that period.

The re-cutting of the ring-ditch represents a later use of the monument and the presence of the iron rod suggests that this activity is of Iron Age date. The digging of three long segments into the ditch may have been undertaken to re-define 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 re-use of Bronze Age monuments in the Iron Age. 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 in Ardsallagh townland may also date to the Bronze Age. This enclosure (Ardsallagh 1) has a similar western entrance, which might suggest a local tradition of constructing ring-ditches in this fashion. Small amounts of cremated bone were also present within the fills of this ditch and the site was re-used in the form of Late Iron Age/early medieval burials within the ring-ditch interior. A Late Bronze Age cremation burial was discovered in an urn just outside the ring-ditch, as were a number of cremation pits that lacked any associated grave-goods.

The discovery of burnt timber within the slot-trench of Structure 1 is reflected in its occurrence at a number of ring-ditches excavated throughout the country. This may suggest that Structure 1 represents the disturbed remains of a small ring-ditch, an interpretation that is supported 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

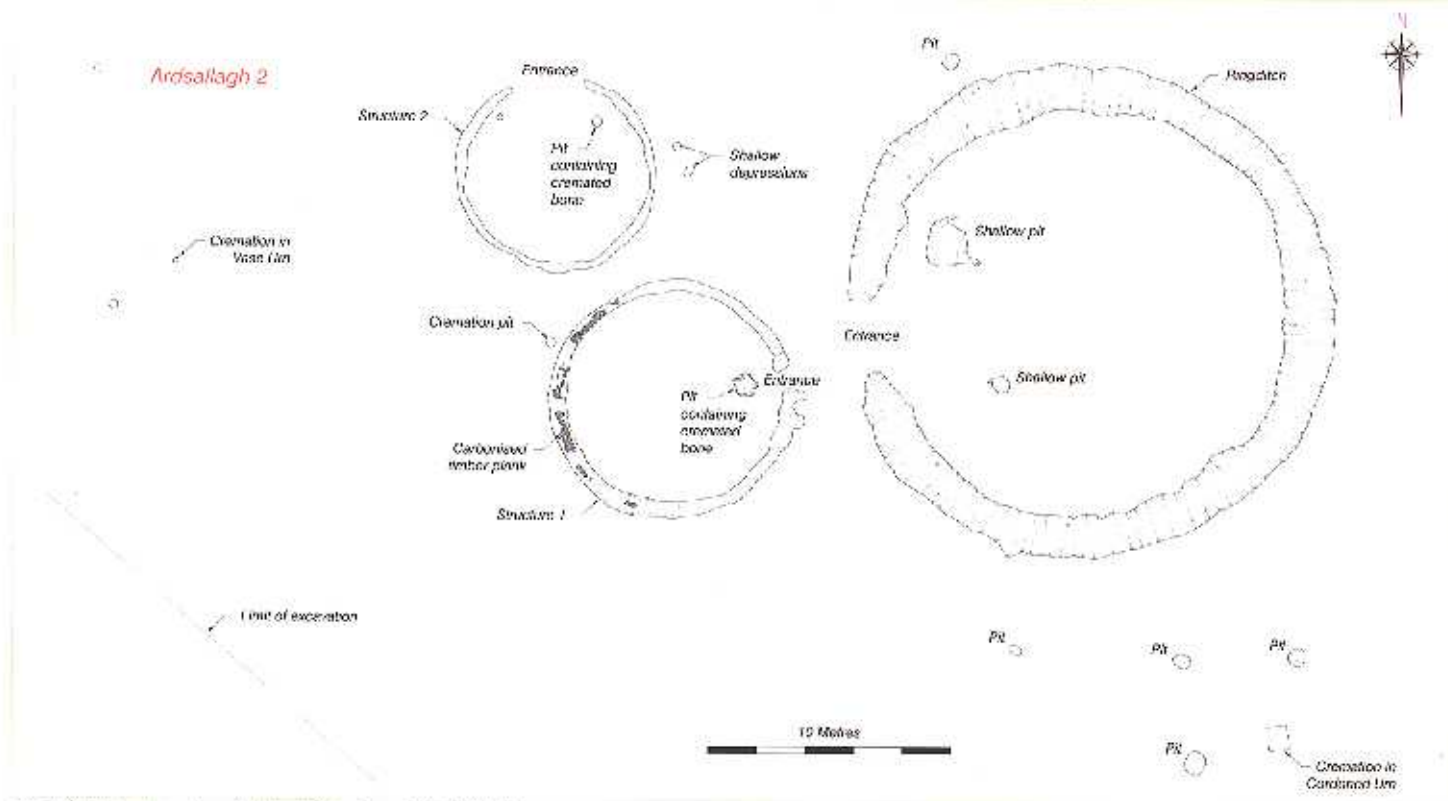


Fig. 2. Detailed plan of ring-ditch and Structures 1-2. (ACS Ltd)

the foundations of a roundhouse, and it seems more likely that the burnt timbers represent the remains of that superstructure. Similar buildings of smaller size have been excavated elsewhere in Ireland. All of these structures have been dated to the Late Bronze Age and it is probable that the Ardsallagh structures also date to this period. The absence of finds or 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 at the same time.

The occurrence of a cremation burial in a pit just inside the entrance to each structure is not unusual, although it does raise some significant possibilities. In the findings from the excavations of settlement sites from this period there is a very clear and close link between life and death. There is recurrent evidence for the placing of human bone in pits and post-holes of houses, and in cremation pits and ring-ditches in close proximity to domestic structures.

It has been noted previously that entranceways were of particular significance to people in the Bronze Age and were often emphasised by particular deposits. Dr Joanna Brück, School of Archaeology, University College Dublin, has suggested that these entrance deposits may have served to distinguish spatial boundaries, such as between the structure interior and the area outside, and would have lent meaning to the act of moving from one space into another. She has proposed that the lifecycle of a settlement was connected to the lifecycle of its occupants and their possessions. It may then be the case that the burials within the structures at Ardsallagh contain the remains of a previous occupant and represent a closing deposit

signifying the end of his/her life and dwelling. It is also possible that these cremation pits represent foundation deposits positioned deliberately within the houses to function in much the same way as modern-day relics.

Ring-ditches have been found in close proximity to other structures excavated in Ireland and Britain. At Ardsallagh it appears that the ring-ditch predates the structures. If this is the case, then it would seem that the people who used these structures gained social esteem and a sense of identity from being able to build and live in 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 could be viewed as a conscious attempt to create a continuous link between the living community and its ancestors. Dr Grogan has observed that the integration of domestic, funerary and ceremonial sites within a clearly defined cluster such as this suggests a close social structure, which confirms the importance of kin-groups at both a social and an economic level.

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

Post-excavation analysis is still at an early stage, but will greatly enhance our interpretation of this site once completed. 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 reveal to us the types of activity carried out there. We look forward with great interest to unravelling the rest of Ardsallagh's fascinating story.

Fig. 3. Elevated view of ring-ditch and Structures 1-2. (ACS Ltd)

