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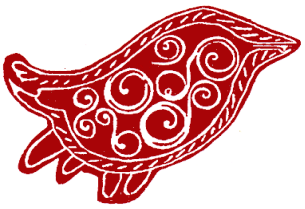

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Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society, 1965, Vol. 70, No. 212, page(s) 124-130

Published by the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society

Digital file created: May 29, 2016

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A Standing Stone in the Townland of Newgrange, Co. Meath

By

ELIZABETH SHEE and DAVID M. EVANS

About half a mile to the ESE of the Newgrange tumulus, two orthostats 85m apart stand on the gravel terrace which here forms the north side of the River Boyne gorge.[1] Coffey[2] designated them by the letters C and D and as this nomenclature has been continued by Ó Ríordáin and Daniel[3] in the latest work on the Newgrange area, it will also be used here. Orthostat C stands close to the edge of the terrace and at a height of about 50 feet O.D. Because a gravel quarry may be developed on this part of the terrace, it was thought well that an area around the stone should be excavated and this was done during July and August 1965 with the very ready co-operation of the land-owner, Mr. Patrick R. Delaney, who also presented the finds to the State. They are now in the National Museum of Ireland.

There is clear evidence of lazy bed cultivation all over the surrounding field. The beds run north-south across the terrace. As the stone had for long been used as a scratching post by cattle, the ground immediately around its base had been lowered in characteristic fashion by as much as 20 cms. Turf and humus in this area had completely disappeared exposing a hard-packed gravel surface which exhibited a marked iron oxide staining.

The maximum dimensions of the stone are : height 3.5m ; width 2.4m ; thickness 1.7m. The bedding planes of the stone are such that it has two flat faces and two very jagged edges, the latter emphasized by severe differential weathering. The stone has been identified as Old Red Sandstone (Appendix II). It is undecorated.

THE EXCAVATION

A 9 metre square centred on the stone was set out and excavated quadrant by quadrant. The intervening baulks were arranged so as to give the most informative sectional profiles, and these corresponded with the cardinal points. Excavation showed that turf and humus 15—20cms deep overlay gravel, the upper 50 cms of which was leached. Excavation was carried down to a depth of 85cms below the ground level. All finds came from the topsoil or just on top of the gravel.

The only feature exposed was the socket of the stone. As the plan (Fig 1) shows, this extended approximately 20cms beyond the side of the stone on the south, while

[1] Newgrange Townland, Parish of Monknewtown, Barony of Slane Upper, Co. Meath. Exact position of the stone : O.S. Co. Meath, Sheet No. 19, 4.45cm from S., 86.5cm from W.
[2] George Coffey, *Newgrange* (Dublin, 1912), 42.
[3] Ó Ríordáin and Daniel, *Newgrange* : (London, 1964), 81.

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View of Monument C from the west.

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on the north it ran out to about 60cms, and here the upper part of the stone overhangs the socket. The socket was filled with loose black soil and on the north side was packed with boulders. The base of the stone was not flat—there was a marked downward projection on the south side (Profile SN, Fig. 2). This had to be deeply entered into the socket while the overhanging part had to be adequately supported by a packing of boulders. The stone leaned somewhat to the north and it is probable that this is due to settlement of the packing under the weight of the stone.

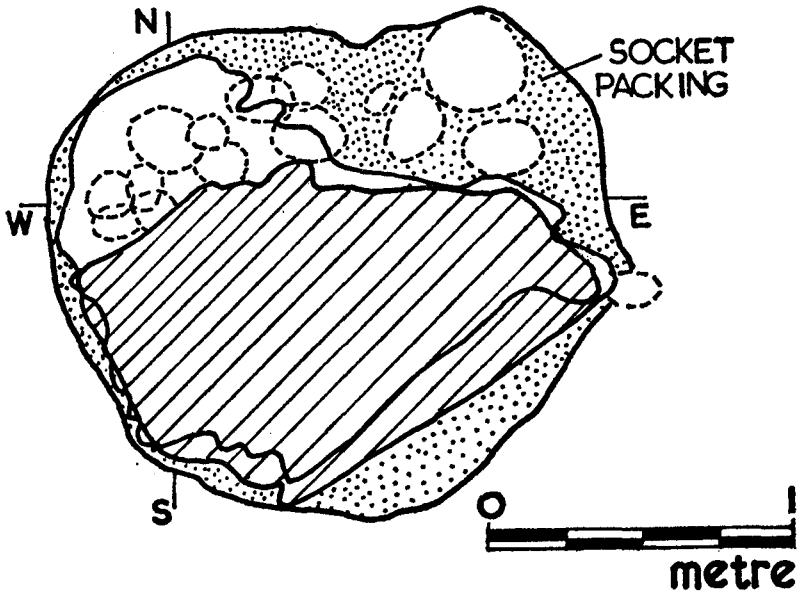

Fig. 1. Monument C. Plan of base of stone and packing.

THE FINDS

A total of 80 pieces of flint was found during the excavation, the majority of which came from the NE quadrant. Of these five show signs of definite working, while twelve others have been utilized (Fig. 3). The finds are numbered as found during the excavation, nos. 1 to 12 being illustrated. The flints are indexed singly except where two or more utilized flints come from the same quadrant. No. 16 covers all waste flints and No. 17 all chips and nodules of flint. In the National Museum Register these numbers are preceded by the code E. 59. The flints were found at varying depths, but in view of the disturbance due to cultivation the measurements of actual depths can be of little significance.

No. 1. A short flake having its edges serrated from use as a knife or scraper. Max. length 4.3cms, NEQ.

No. 2. This appears to have been a parallel sided blade initially. When it fractured in use two of its edges were retouched in a fine pressure flaking technique to convert it into a scraping tool. Max. length 2.8cms. SWQ.

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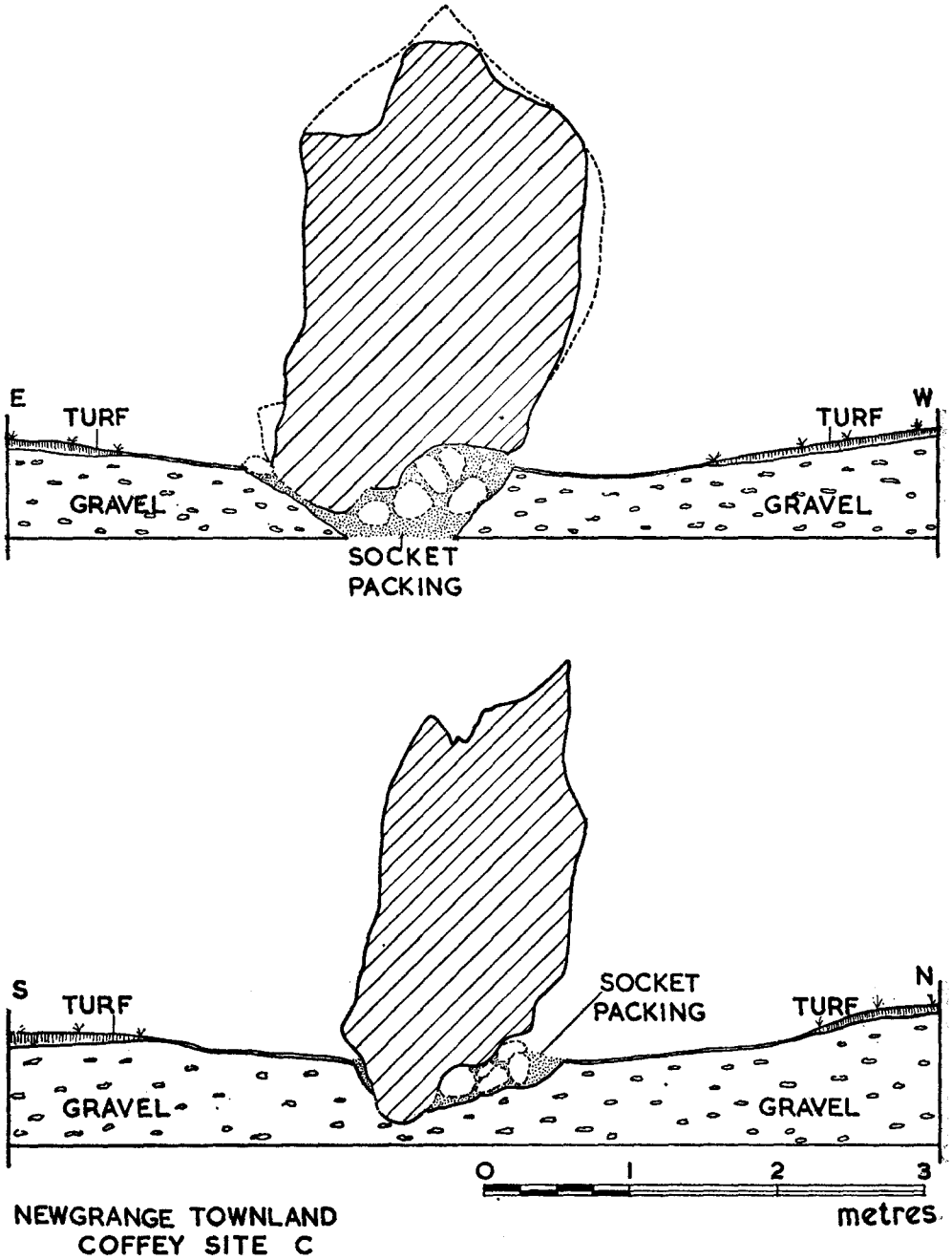

Fig. 2. Sectional Profiles.

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No. 3. A roughly semi-circular flake of poor quality flint exhibiting a large area of cortex. The whole of its curved edge is abraded from use as a scraper and two notches on its straight side appear to have been rough hollow scrapers. Max. length 5.1cms. SWQ.
No. 4. Small flake, possibly part of an imperfect parallel sided blade. A serrated notch on one of the long edges is due to use as a hollow scraper, while the opposite edge is also abraded. Max. length 2.8cms, NEQ.
No. 5. Small rectangular flake with fine pressure flaking along one short slightly curved edge. Max. length 2.1cms, SEQ.
No. 6. Irregular fragment with some of the edges battered and abraded from use as a scraping tool. Max. length 2.9cms, SEQ.
No. 7. Part of a scraper in fine quality flint. Curved working edge is achieved by expert pressure flaking. Max. length 2.6cms, NEQ.
No. 8. Flake of fine quality flint, with a small area of cortex remaining. Retouched on two sides for use as a scraper, and with a notch showing signs of use as a hollow scraper. Max. length 3.4cms, NEQ.
No. 9. Pick-like implement with some cortex, and patches of iron oxide staining. The edges are battered from use. Max. length 7.2cms, NWQ.
No. 10. Flint core of brownish colour, patinated in some of the flake scars. A small area of cortex remains. Max. dim. 4.8cms, SEQ.
No. 12. Flint fragment of no recognisable shape exhibiting a small area of expert ripple flaking which resulted in the production of a short scraping edge. Max. length 2.4cms, SWQ.
No. 13*a*. Angular fragment, edges show serration from use as a scraping tool. Max, dim. 2.9cms, NEQ.
No. 13*b*. Small broken flake, edge serrated from use as a scraping tool. Max. dim. 2.3cms, NEQ.
No. 13*c*. Small fragment, edges serrated, Max. dim. 1.4cms, NEQ.
No. 14*a*. Angular fragment, one edge serrated from use as knife or scraping tool. Max. dim. 2.6cms, NWQ.
No. 14*b*. Angular fragment, edges abraded from use as a scraping tool. Max. dim. 2.3cms, NWQ.
No. 15. Small broken flake, edges serrated from use. Max. dim. 1.6cms. SWQ.
No. 16. 38 waste flakes, some with cortex remaining, colour grey, white, brown and red. Two show signs of having been burnt. 30 are from NEQ, the rest scattered over the site and at varying depths, none more than 25cms below ground level.
No. 17. 25 chips and broken nodules; many are patinated and therefore probably broken by glacial action. Some show signs of burning. Colour grey, white or brown. All except one from NEQ.

The flint is of varying quality, but all of it could have occurred locally as nodules in the boulder clay of the area. Similar nodules can be picked up today in any ploughed field in the vicinity.

Glass object (Fig. 4, No. 11).

This glass object is made in the same way as "cable beads", that is by wrapping a cable of glass around a central core and rolling while still soft so as to produce a smooth surface. This particular example has a cable made from light-green transparent

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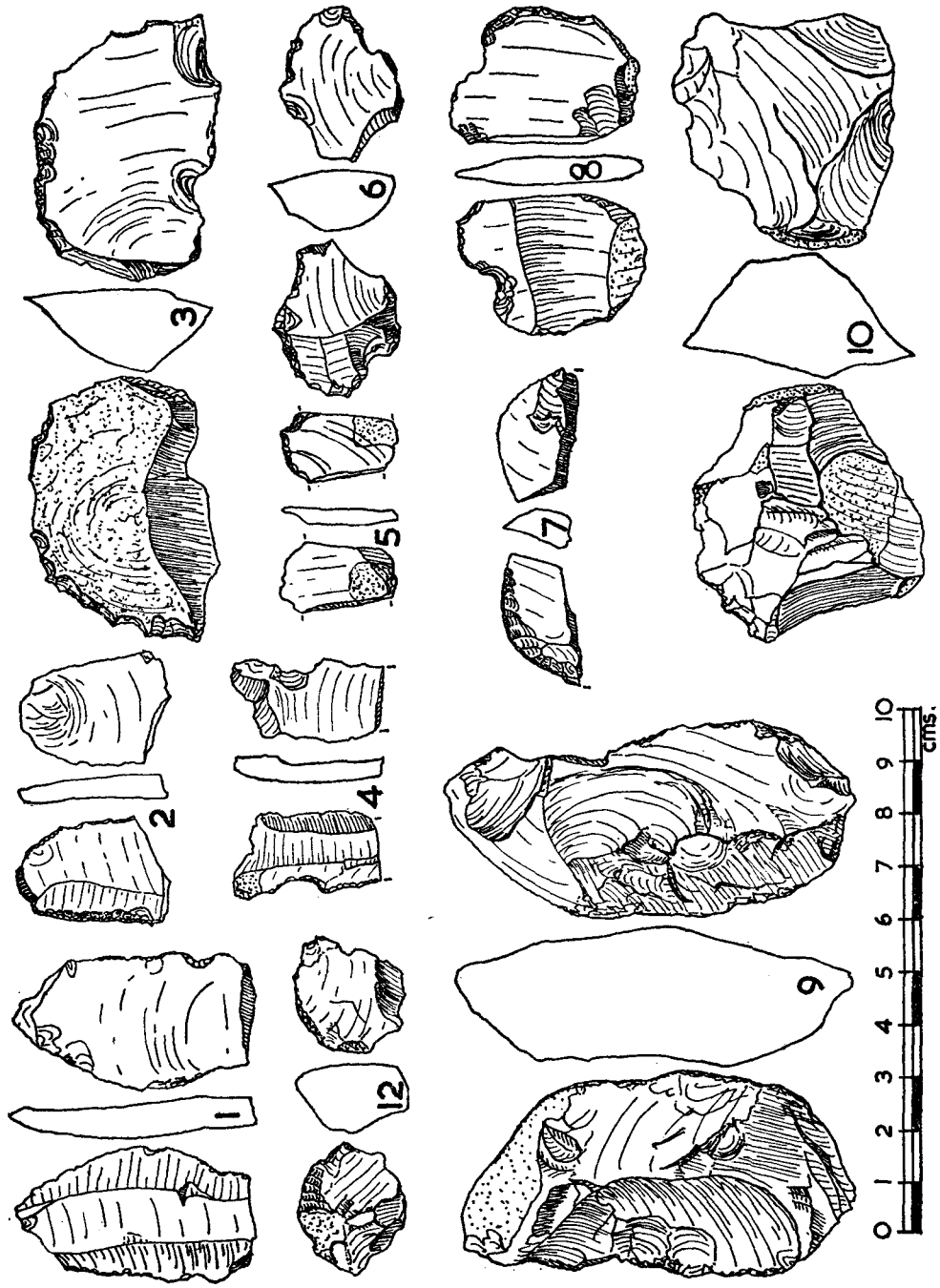

Fig. 3. Worked flints from area excavated around Monument C.

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glass which has been twisted in a helix with two finer cables of white opaque glass. The entire cable was then wound helix-wise around a central spherical core of the same green transparent glass and rolled. This latter process caused a slight flattening at the " poles ". Finally it was partially perforated, probably for the insertion of a pin. The measurements are : Max. diam. 1.2cms ; min. diam. 1.1cms. It is likely that this object was a hatpin-head of comparatively modern date. Cable beads are, however, known from Early Christian and other sites.[4]

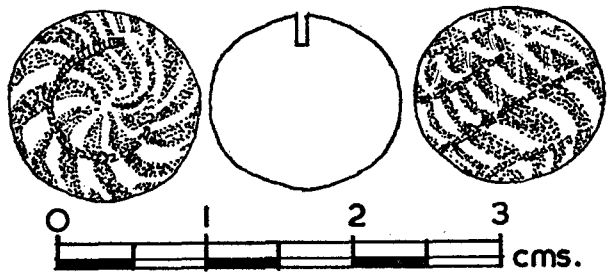

Fig. 4. The glass pin-head.

DISCUSSION

The presence of working or utilization on some of the flints indicates some sort of human activity in the area of the standing stone. We cannot conclude, however, that habitation took place nearby or that the flints are to be associated directly with the monument or with those who erected it. In a casual walk through any field in the Newgrange area during ploughing, similar flints can be picked up. The general character of those from the vicinity of the stone is nevertheless so similar to that of several found in the excavations at Newgrange tumulus that one is tempted to suggest that they belong to the same general background.

Only two other standing stones appear to have been excavated in Ireland. These are Punchestown[5] and Furness[6], both in Co. Kildare and belonging to a well defined group of standing stones in that county, all of granite, narrow and very high. Each of these had a cist just beside the base of the stone but Punchestown produced no finds. The finds from Furness, where the standing stone and cist were situated in the centre of a circular embanked enclosure with external ditch, include an archer's wrist guard. Another group of standing stones which has received attention are the artificially grooved standing stones in North Co. Carlow[7] and an outlier of the group in Co. Kildare[8]. Urns, burnt and unburnt bones, a bone pin and " curiously formed graves " are reported from two or three of these stones.

[4] O'Kelly, *PRIA.*, LXIII, C, 1962, 75, and references therein.
[5] Leask, *JRSAI.*, LXVII, 1937, 250.
[6] Macalister, Armstrong and Praeger, *PRIA.*, XXX, C, 1913, 351.
[7] O'Toole and Mitchell, *JRSAI.*, LXIX, 1939, 99.
[8] Mitchell, *JRSAI.*, LXX, 1940, 164.

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Standing stones are usually thought to indicate graves, boundaries or places of ritual, and Monument C may have been either of the latter. Monuments C and D could together have been an alignment, probably with other orthostats in between, although the distance (85m) would mean a longer alignment than is normal in Ireland. Detailed discussion as to the function of standing stones can serve no useful purpose in the absence of sufficient excavation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work was carried out under the general direction of Professor M. J. O'Kelly, and as an offshoot of the excavation of the Newgrange tumulus. Thanks are due to the landowner, Mr. Patrick R. Delaney, for his ready permission to excavate, and for allowing us every facility during the excavation. Thanks are due also to Miss Hilary Richardson for the drawings of the finds: to Dr. J. S. Jackson, Keeper, Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland, for his report on the petrology of the stones: to Miss Geraldine Roche, M. Sc., of the same for her report on the animal bones. The work was financed by a State grant, administered through the Royal Irish Academy and the Office of Public Works.

Appendix I

Report on animal bones found during excavation, by Miss Geraldine Roche, M.Sc., Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland.

Two species of animals, were present—ox and pig.

Ox. One adult ; Molars and Pre-molars from lower jaw. A fragment of acetabulum seems to be ox, too large and heavy for pig.

Pig. Two animals were present in this case—adult and young. 1. Adult, one lower canine, one lower incisor. Fragment of bone, possibly an immature long bone.

Appendix II

Report on two specimens submitted for petrological identification, by Dr. J. S. Jackson, Keeper, Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland.

Standing Stone Site ' C ' near Newgrange. Co. Meath. Virtually monomineralic ferruginous quartzose grit with very occasional flakes of muscovite mica ; limonitic iron (after hematite ?) is not uncommon. The dominant, almost exclusive, mineral is quartz occurring as sharp, angular, elongated grains. Stratification is good. Lithology is typical of Old Red Sandstone, the nearest outcrop of which is a pericline to the north of Killucan, Co. Westmeath to the west and, to the south, in the Portrane-Donabate area of the Swords anticline. To the north the nearest outcrops are those in the Fintona area of Co. Tyrone. It will be seen therefore that, unless one invokes glacial transport, which in this case is not without difficulty, the stone must have been carried a considerable distance.

Standing Stone, Site ' D ', townland of Dowth, Co. Meath. Dark green, micaceous grits lithologically approaching a greywacke. The mica is muscovite (white mica) and is abundant on certain bedding planes imparting to the rock a marked fissility. Rock of this lithology occurs in the vicinity of Newgrange.

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