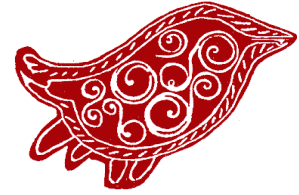


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Excavation of Cairn in Townland of Curraghbinny, Co. Cork.¹

By SEÁN P. Ó RÍORDÁIN, M.A., H.Dip. in Ed.

[The excavation dealt with in the following report was carried out in the Autumn of 1932, on behalf of and at the expense of the National Museum of Ireland].



HOUGH not recorded as a monument on the Ordnance Maps, the existence of the Curraghbinny Cairn was noted by the Surveyors in the 1842 Survey (O.S. Name Books—Parish of Carrigaline) and its position on the 6-inch map is defined by reason of its having been used as a trigometrical station. It is situate on the 25-inch Sheet, Cork XCIX., 3. Horizontal distance from top right-hand corner = 8.4", vertical distance from top right-hand corner = 1.2".

The cairn crowns the summit of Curraghbinny Hill, being 264 feet above Ordnance Datum and, prior to the growth of a wood around it, was famed for the view it commanded of the upper and lower reaches of Cork Harbour and the country surrounding it. There is record of Windele having visited the cairn and he refers to it in his *City of Cork and Vicinity* (Cork, 1849), p. 195, but there is no record of any investigations on the site, either in his printed works or in his MSS. preserved in the Royal Irish Academy.

The monument is known locally as the "Giant's Grave" but, beyond the fact that a superstitious awe caused children to dread it, no legends or beliefs concerning the mound could be got locally.

On beginning work we found the cairn thickly overgrown with bracken, brambles, etc., and when these were cleared off the size of the monument was seen to be much greater than appeared when covered with undergrowth. Its diameter was about 70 feet and its greatest height over 7½ feet above that of the surrounding area. (See Plan and Sections).

The excavation was accomplished by cutting off the cairn in vertical sections parallel to an arbitrary base line at right angles to Section F, beginning at the eastern side. Except for an outer slight accumulation of soil the Cairn was composed of stone, most of which was local sandstone, there being only two pieces of limestone which were much weathered. Infrequently through the cairn we found large boulders among the ordinary material.

¹A short account of this excavation was published in the *Cork Examiner*, 8/10/1932, but in a discussion with Dr. A. E. van Giffen, Director of the Biologisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, Groningen, Netherlands, he kindly pointed out some interesting resemblances between the Curraghbinny Cairn and some of the barrows excavated by him. For this and for the loan of blocks of illustrations from his *Die Bauart der Einzelgräber* we tender sincere thanks.



Site of Discovery of Cremated Burial. (Marked X on Plan, page 81)

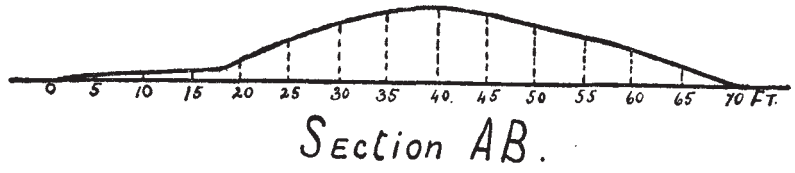
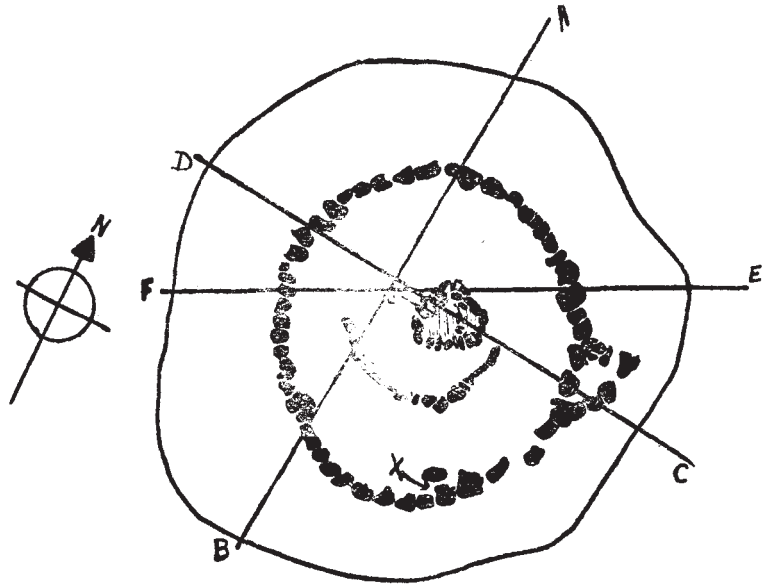


Showing evidence of slip of material from inside the retaining wall

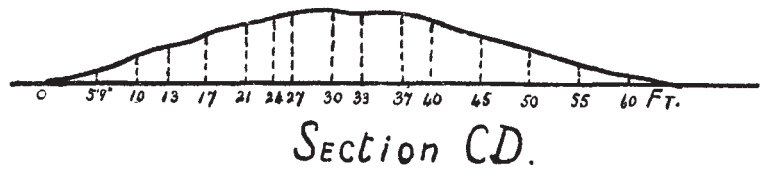
(Photos by Seán P. O Riordan, M.A.)

CAIRN AT CURRAGHBINNY, CO. CORK.

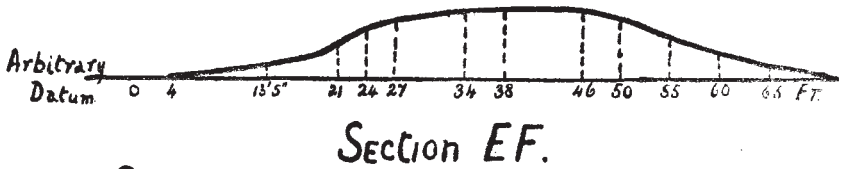
PLAN.



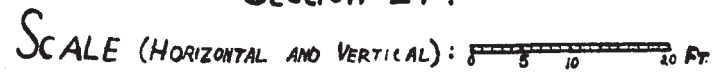
Section AB.



Section CD.



Section EF.



As we worked into the cairn several large boulders lying on the ground came into evidence and it soon became apparent that these formed part of a circle running concentric with the outer edge of the mound. Since this circle was well covered by the material of the mound, and since it lay well in from the outer edge, the problem arose whether it had been originally so covered by the cairn-builders, or if it had served as a kerb which bounded the cairn. To solve this problem we worked carefully and, although at first the former seemed the more likely solution, we were led to change over to the latter alternative during the course of the work. The considerations which led to this decision were :—

- (1) The fact that at some parts we were able to find remains of a rough dry wall constructed over the large stones which lay on the ground and which formed the circumference of the circle ;
- (2) The material outside the circle was less well packed in the angle formed by this wall and the original ground surface than it was farther out, as would be the case if the material had slipped from inside.

These reasons enable us to reconstruct the method used in building the cairn. The burial having taken place, a circle of stones was placed on the ground (larger stones being used on the east than on the west side—probably because of the exigencies of supply) to limit the extent of the monument. The material was then filled in inside this kerb, a rough wall being constructed according as the material piled up, to prevent slip. This wall was evidently built from the outside by placing the larger stones in position as a bulwark around the looser material inside (indeed, because of the limitations of space and the necessity of piling our material rather high, we built a wall of similar construction around the “ dump ” during our excavations). In the course of time the piled-up material inside the wall slipped out and in most parts of its circumference the wall itself also collapsed, until ultimately the mound became spread out over the kerb as we found it.

As we worked nearer the centre, we found a further series of stones lying *in situ* on the clay “ floor ” of the cairn. These were found to form the arc of a circle and the stones used were smaller than those in the outer circle and less continuous, part of the line being formed of an irregular mass of stones and clay (stripped portion on plan) ; one stone, though almost in the line of this inner “ circle,” lay at some distance, about 3 feet from the end of the arc. No practical purpose could, as in the case of the outer circle, be assigned to this feature and one can only conclude it to be ritualistic in significance.

This inner stone arc assumes a special interest and importance because, as Dr. van Giffen has pointed out to the writer, exactly the same type of inner stone arc has been found in barrows excavated by him in the Netherlands. Plans and photos illustrative of this will be found in his splendid work—*Die Bauart der Einzelgräber* (Leipzig, 1930) plate 14, fig. IV., plate 15, fig. 10a, and plate 71, fig. 6. Dr. van Giffen believes this feature to be a very conventionalized reminiscence of the inner ring of wooden posts or of standing stones which surrounded earlier monuments where the full quota of ritualistic features are found (cf. Stonehenge, Woodhenge, Bryn Celli

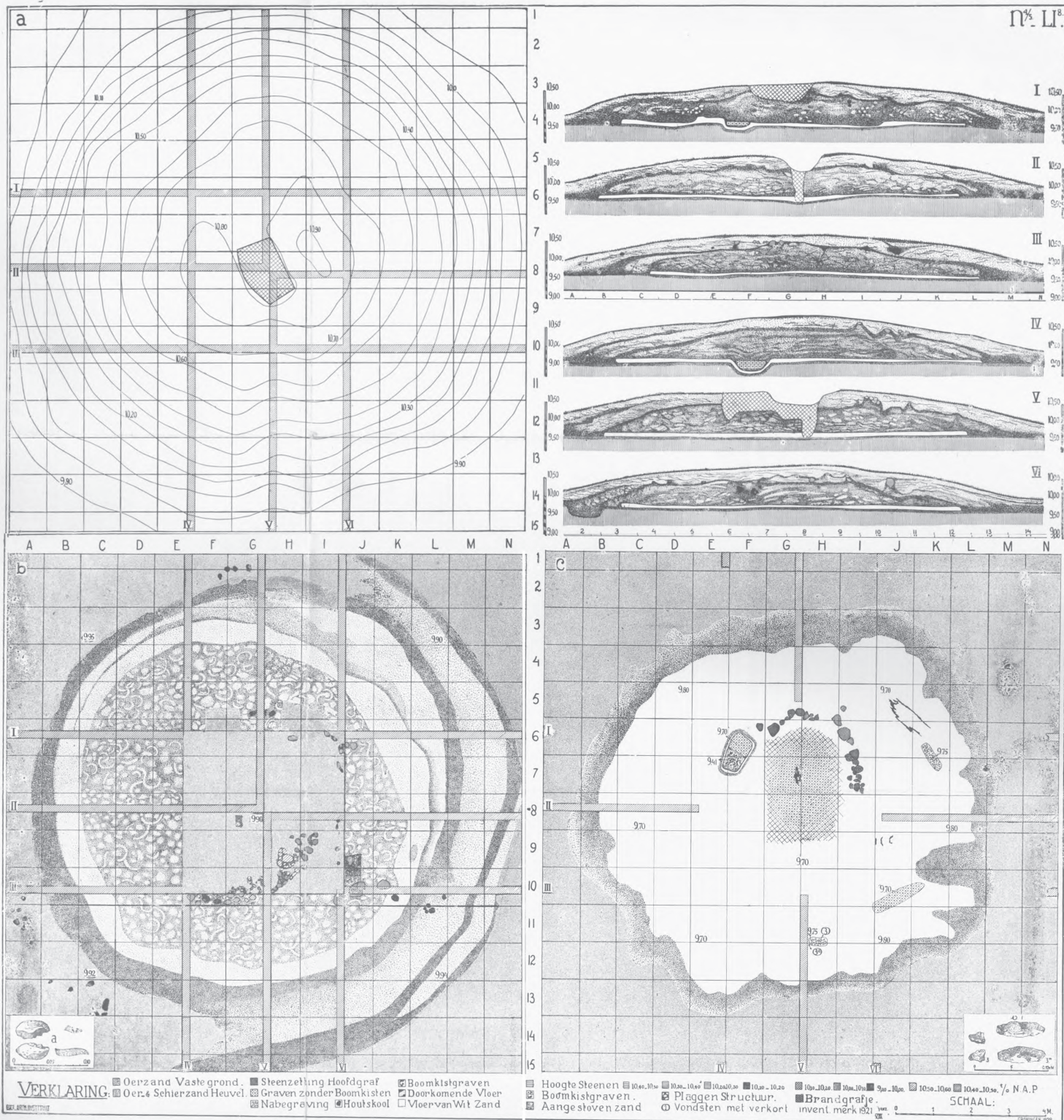


Showing outer Kerb with remains of retaining wall and inner Stone Arc.

Photo by Seán P. O Riordain, M.A.)



From: Die Bauart der Einzelgräber (van Giffen); plate 15, fig. 10a.
BARROW IN THE NETHERLANDS SHOWING STONE ARC AS AT CURRAGHBINNY



BARROW IN THE NETHERLANDS SHOWING STONE ARC AS AT CURRAGHBINNY.
 By kind permission, from "Die Bauart der Einzelgräber," plate 14, IV.

Ddu, and the Netherlands barrows²—as illustrated in *Die Bauart*. . .) This is not the place to institute a discussion on the matter and we content ourselves with pointing out an interesting link with European pre-history.

At the centre of the mound we came at ground level on what was evidently the principal grave. Since no human bones were found within the structure we must conclude that the burial was by inhumation and that the body had completely disintegrated. The underlying clay was not disturbed and therefore the burial must have taken place by laying the body on the ground and heaping clay and stones upon it. When we uncovered it, the grave showed in the form of a platform (about 9 feet by 4 feet, irregular in outline and raised to a height of 4½ inches) which was composed of clay with stones embedded through it. Upon the grave was a thick deposit of charcoal and in the stones above it were found two teeth and a piece of bone, all of a cow (see below). Again we note the similarity in the relative position of the grave and inner stone arc with that of those in Dr. van Giffen's plate 14, fig. IV., and it is interesting to note that in similar cases he has been able to trace in the clay the silhouette of the inhumed body, but that was, of course, impossible in the stony material in which we worked.

The next feature which calls for comment is a suggestive arrangement of stones found outside the S.E. portion of the circle. It must here be noted that a further support for the idea that material had slipped from the inside outwards was afforded by the fact that the large stones found outside were all lying on loose stray material and not bedded on the underlying soil. The exception to this rule is found in the feature to which we now refer (see plan) which was a group of stones standing outside the surrounding circle and forming with it a small (3 feet in diameter) and irregular chamber. It would appear as if those stones had been placed in position at or soon after the building of the cairn because they lay on the ground surface and immediately beneath them was found charcoal which showed that they were so placed at a time after the burning of a fire on the spot before the soil had time to accumulate over the charcoal. A further thick deposit of charcoal was found between the stones, but no other object. The purpose of this group of stones is very problematical; one can only suggest that they may have contained a burial, though no further evidence can be cited to support this.

Finds.

Bronze Ring—about ½" in diameter—found outside the stone kerb at the S.E. side.

Two Teeth—of a cow. These were found over the central grave and about 3 inches above it.

Shells—At various places through the cairn and at depths varying from 9 inches under the surface of the cairn down to 6 inches above ground level,

* No chronological considerations are implied by the mention together of these various monuments. It will be remembered that Mr. Hemp in excavating Bryn Celli Dhu found the two circles so connected as to form a gigantic spiral.

shells were found, mostly oyster (*ostrea edulis*) with some cockle (*cardium edule*) and pelliwinkle (*littorina littorea*).

It may here be remarked that on the cliff above the sea-shore at Curraghbinny is a kitchen-midden of considerable extent composed almost entirely of oyster-shells.

Bone—Near the spot where the teeth mentioned above were found we also got, near ground level, two fragments of bone, which have been identified as cow.

Cremated Human Bones—At the south east side of the circle of large boulders, lying in a space between two of the boulders forming the circle and one which lay inside it (spot marked X on plan) we found some very fragmentary pieces of cremated human bone mixed with a thick charcoal deposit which lay between these stones.

It is interesting to note that the charcoal deposit with which the bones were found mixed did not extend under the neighbouring large stones, which showed that the fire was lighted after the boulders had been placed in position.

Pebbles—Two groups, in one case about 100 and in the other about 40, of pebbles (2"–3" in diameter), water-rolled and such as might come from a brook, were found. The larger group lay on a flat stone which formed part of the inner "circle" near its northern end, and the second group lay farther to the north, beyond the "circle."

Here and there through the material of the cairn we found white quartz pebbles, but no particular significance need necessarily be assigned to these, as such would in all probability be found in an equal quantity of similar material anywhere in the locality.

Traces of fire were found on ground level in several places, but the charcoal was found most thickly around the stones of the outer circle and near the principal grave.

A stake hole was discovered near the centre (S on plan); this was the only one found though we searched throughout for post-holes of any sort.

Thanks is due to the owners of the property—Miss M. E. Hobart, Mr. H. O. Hobart and Mr. E. G. Hobart—who, through their father, Dr. N. H. Hobart, trustee, very kindly gave permission for the excavation and every possible assistance otherwise. The work was made pleasant by the hospitality of Mrs. L. Daly, The Bungalow, Curraghbinny.

Addendum—Examples of similar grave constructions to that found at Curraghbinny are given by Montelins (*La Civilisation Primitive en Italie*) from the early iron age necropolis at Bura, Tolentino, province of Marerata, Italy. Cf. his Part II., plate 157, fig. 16 :—

