

Title: A stone circle, hut and dolmen at Bohonagh, Co. Cork

Author: Fahy, E. M.

*Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, 1961, Vol. 66, No. 204,  
page(s) 93-104

Published by the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society

Digital file created: May 7, 2016

---

Your use of the JCHAS digital archive indicates that you accept the Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://corkhist.ie/terms-and-conditions/>

The Cork Historical and Archaeological Society (IE-148166, incorporated 1989) was founded in 1891, for the collection, preservation and diffusion of all available information regarding the past of the City and County of Cork, and South of Ireland generally. This archive of content of JCHAS (from 1892 up to ten years preceding current publication) continues the original aims of the founders in 1891. For more information visit [www.corkhist.ie](http://www.corkhist.ie).

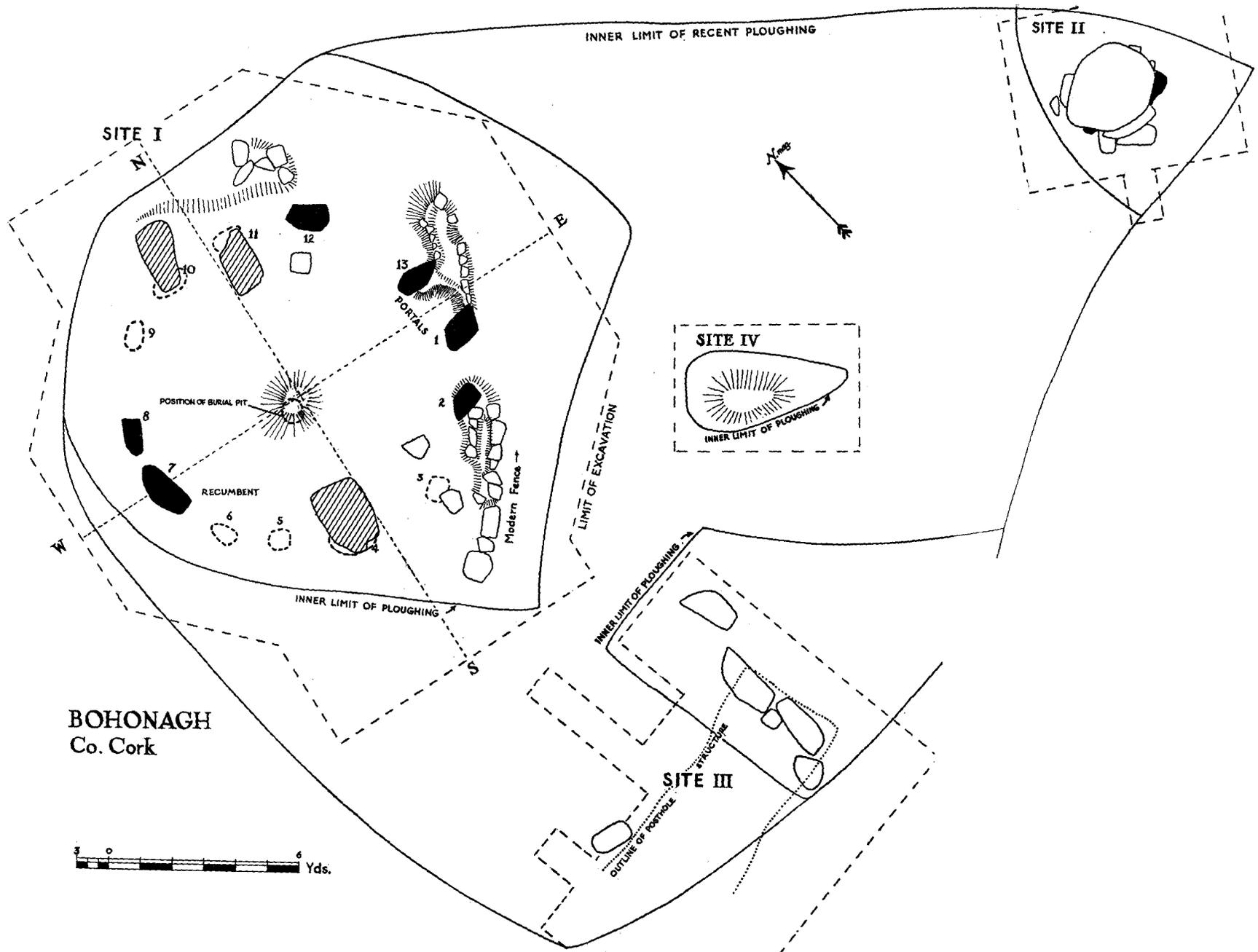


Fig. 1 — General plan

This content downloaded from www.corkhist.ie

All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions

Digital content (c) CHAS 2016

# A Stone Circle, Hut and Dolmen at Bohonagh, Co. Cork

By E. M. FAHY

The townland of Bohonagh lies to the east of Rosscarbery, Co. Cork close to the main road from Clonakilty to Skibbereen and little over one mile inland from the sea coast. The stone circle,<sup>1</sup> which is of the recumbent-stone class, and the dolmen<sup>2</sup> stand close together at 250' O.D. on the south-western slope of a hill the summit of which rises to 373' O.D. The field in which the monuments stand had been repeatedly cultivated in the past, but in recent years an elongated triangular area of ground surrounding the monuments had not been ploughed (fig. 1).

The excavation of the site, undertaken in the autumn of 1959, revealed a cremation pit-burial in the circle, a similar burial in the dolmen; a cupmarked slab east of the circle and a rectangular posthole hut a short distance south of the circle. No datable finds were made, but the evidence obtained at the site provides an interesting comparison with that obtained at the Drombeg<sup>3</sup> recumbent-stone circle three miles to the west of Bohonagh.

## The Recumbent-stone Circle (fig. 1, site I).

Excavation showed that the stone circle originally consisted of thirteen stones—twelve orthostats and one recumbent stone. Of these, however, only six remained in position, three others had fallen and four had been taken by stone robbers. On the eastern side of the circle stood the remains of a field fence which abutted against three orthostats of the circle (fig. 1, Site I). This fence was removed during the excavation and was not replaced.

The principal axis of the circle as defined by a line drawn from the centre of the recumbent stone to the portals (fig. 1, Site I) lay almost due east-west and measured 29' 3" in length. The recumbent stone stood 53" high and the portals (fig. 1, Nos. 13 and 1) which were set radially to the circle, were 95" high.<sup>4</sup> The recumbent was not set in a socket but rested partly on the rock surface and partly on a few pad stones skilfully placed beneath its bulging western face (fig. 2, Section W.E.). The surface of the recumbent was not flat but sloped downward towards the interior of the circle. The upper edge of the recumbent was somewhat irregular, but in general the stone was set in a horizontal position. Stone No. 8 had a naturally sloping top which inclined upwards towards the recumbent (fig. 2). Stone No. 12 though set in a socket was further supported by a large quartz boulder placed beneath its overhanging side (fig. 2). Seven stone-sockets were located during the excavation and these together with the sockets of the orthostats were fully examined. All contained clean orange-

<sup>1</sup> O.S., 6" Sheet Cork 143, 3cm from N., 24cm from E. Td. Bohonagh; Ph. Ross; By; East Carbery.

<sup>2</sup> The site was originally noted by Somerville, *J.C.H.A.S.*, XV (1909), 105-8.

<sup>3</sup> *J.C.H.A.S.*, LXIV (1959), 1-27.

<sup>4</sup> Dimensions of orthostats, sockets etc., are given in Appendix 1.

brown subsoil without admixture of charcoal or humus. One slight hollow encountered between stones Nos. 12 and 13 was too shallow and too irregular to have been a stone socket.

Within the circle the turf and humus was found to lie directly upon the decayed rock surface without any intermediate soil layer. In places especially near the recumbent and stone No. 2, spreads of stone were found on the rock surface. Between stones Nos 13, 1 and 2 a distinct "step" effect was encountered (fig. 2, section W.E.) where the natural soil layer had not been removed. Here too the tops of the sockets of the orthostats conformed to the stepped effect of the ground surface. On the upper surface of the "step" was a grey layer (old turf) in which minute charcoal flecks were found.

A low mound of soil 59" wide and 8" high was located in the centre of the circle. Beneath this mound was a shallow irregular pit containing soil, pebbles and small fragments of cremated bone. On its south-western side the mound was broken down and dispersed and flecks of cremated bone were scattered on the surface of the rocky ground.

Outside the portals a shallow modern drain was found on the eastern side of the fence. The drain was cut through a 3" thick layer of dark charcoal flecked soil in which was found a small flint with a chisel-like edge. The dark layer, which covered an area measuring 10' east-west and 8' north-south immediately outside the portals, lay upon undisturbed soil. A ditch-like hollow was exposed outside the northern arc of the circle and another shallow hollow existed west of the recumbent. (fig. 2, Section W.E.). Apart from the cremated bone contained in the centre pit and the atypical flint from outside the portals, the circle produced no finds. The fallen stones Nos. 4, 10 and 11, were re-erected by us at the close of the excavation; the method used will be described below.

### **The Dolmen** (fig. 1, site II and fig. 3).

The dolmen was 20 yds. east of the circle and stood to a maximum height of 52" above ground level. The boulder capstone was supported by three low, block-shaped boulders between which on all but one side, the north-west, other small boulders and one sandstone slab had been wedged. Two of the principal supporting boulders of the capstone were of quartz while the third, in common with all other stones of the monument, was of sandstone.<sup>5</sup> At least seven cup-marks, averaging 2" in diameter, decorated the upper surface of the capstone (fig. 5a).

The interior and surrounding area of the monument were fully excavated. A 6" thick layer of field stones was removed from within the dolmen where the soil was found to be extremely dry and disturbed by rodents. Beneath the soil layer in the north-east corner of the dolmen a small shallow pit containing a few fragments of cremated bone was discovered. On the north-west, or open, side of the dolmen a well preserved stone-socket came to light. A stone slab overlay the socket and had evidently been uprooted from it.

At a depth of 6" beneath the modern turf an apron of small stones lay all round the

<sup>5</sup> Dimensions of the monument are given in Appendix II.

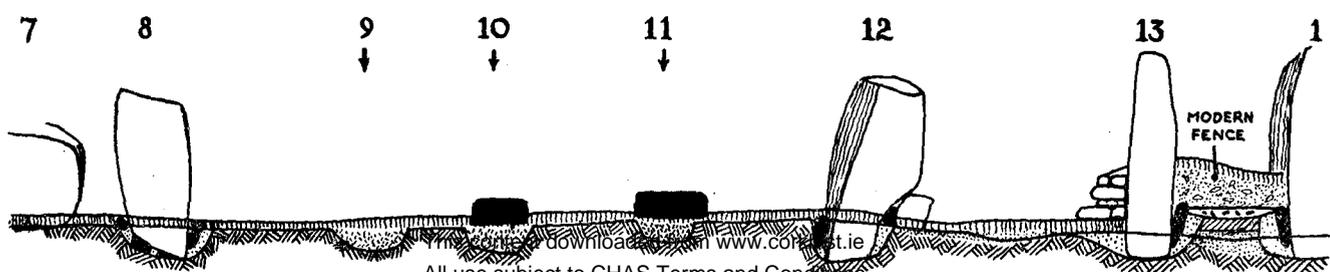
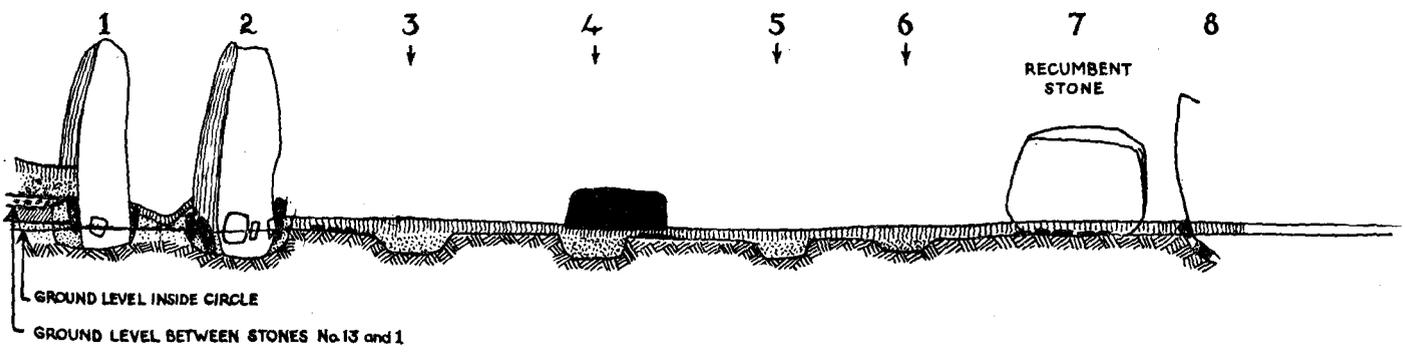
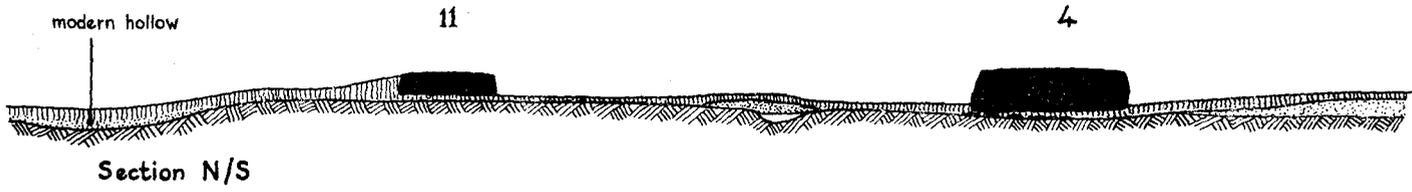
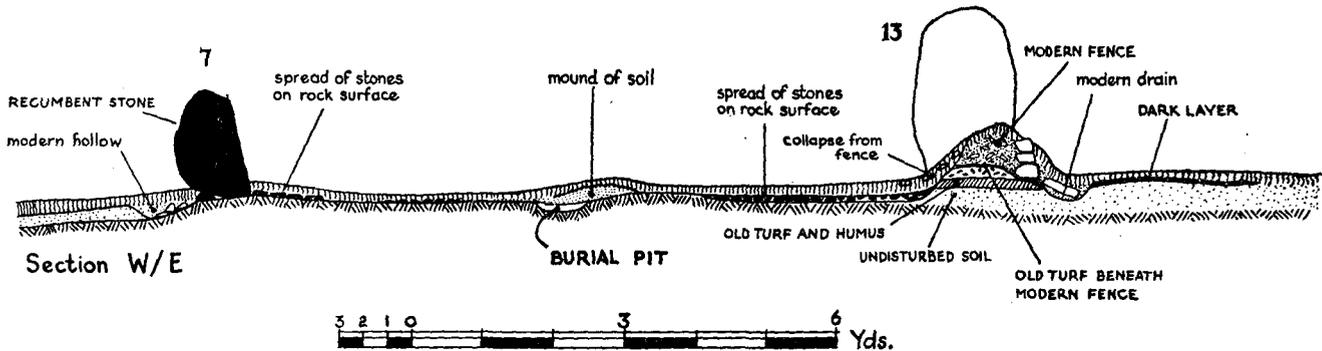


Fig. 2 Sectional profile

All use subject to CHAS Terms and Conditions  
 Digital Content © CHAS 2016



(a) Bohonagh stone circle after excavation and restoration.

(b) Bohonagh dolmen after excavation. The frontal slab has been replaced in its socket.

pl. IX]

[to face p. 95



Sunset at Bohonagh on 25 September 1959

monument (fig. 3). A few of the boulders forming the walls of the dolmen stood upon this apron and the socket referred to above penetrated it. In places, especially on the north and west sides, the stones lay upon the shaly rock surface but on the south they overlay a shallow, soil-filled hollow.

Though excavation was extended to the ploughed area surrounding the monument no evidence of the former existence of a kerb was brought to light.

**The Hut Site** (fig. 1, site III).

Three slabs of rock and a few boulders, forming an irregular north-south line 21' long, lay 27' south of the circle. While it was reasonable to assume that these stones represented broken orthostats robbed from the circle, it was decided to excavate the area about them in the hope that they formed part of a further structure. The slabs and boulders were found to lie on 9" of modern humus beneath which some postholes were discovered. The excavation was extended and in all, a group of twenty-one postholes, forming three sides of a rectangle, were exposed (fig. 4). Within the rectangle, which measured 23' by 10', a single centre-posthole came to light, while on the same level two split flint pebbles were discovered. One of the flints which lay close to the northern line of postholes was glazed and superficially cracked from the effects of heat and many of the nearby postholes contained charcoal.

The northern, and part of the eastern line of postholes were set in a narrow foundation trench (12" wide by 8" deep), whereas the southern line of postholes were individually set in the ground.<sup>6</sup> No postholes were found at the western end of the site. A distinct gap, perhaps a doorway, occurred in the northern line of postholes and at that point a sandstone boulder with smooth upper surface—lightly peckmarked in places—lay upon the foundation trench (fig. 4, a). Some of the packing stones in the northern foundation trench were plough-scored but apart from that there was ample superficial evidence that the greater portion of this site had been repeatedly ploughed over (fig. 1).

**The Cup-marked Slab.** (fig. 1, site IV).

A slight but distinct mound was detected a short distance south east of the circle. Excavation revealed a sandstone slab<sup>7</sup> on the upper surface of which were seven small cupmarks arranged in two irregular lines (fig. 5, b).

## DISCUSSION

**The Stone Circle** (pl. VIII, a).

This monument is one of a group of ten recumbent-stone circles in the Glandore, Dunmanway, Clonakilty area of West Cork. Its situation on a hillside open to the western horizon is common to many of the circles. The positioning of the recumbent on the western arc and the portals on the eastern, is also a general feature and as usual, the portals are the tallest stones of the group. Also, as at Drombeg, the top of the

<sup>6</sup> Dimensions of all postholes are given in Appendix III.

<sup>7</sup> This slab was noted by Somerville: *J.C.H.A.S.*, XXXV (1930), 75. Dimensions are given in Appendix III.

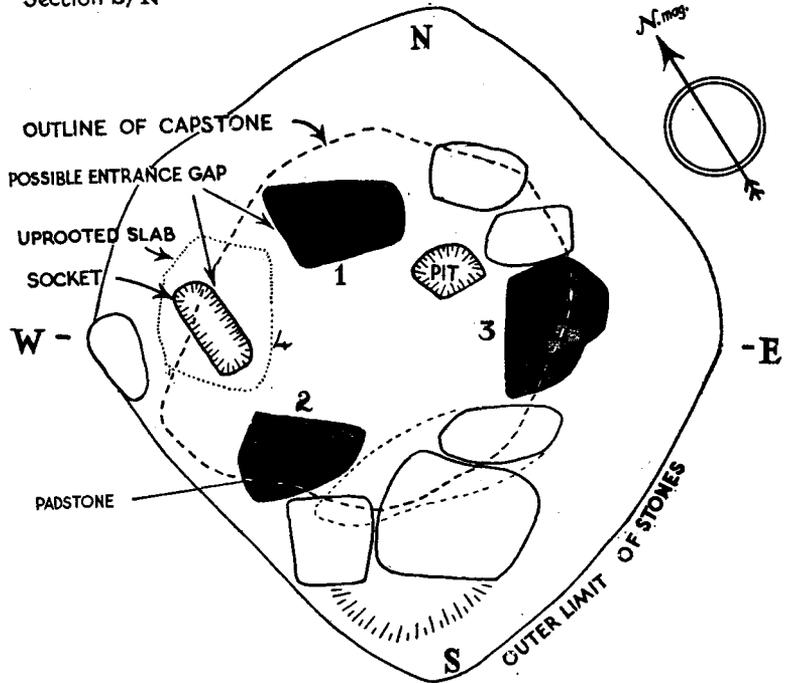
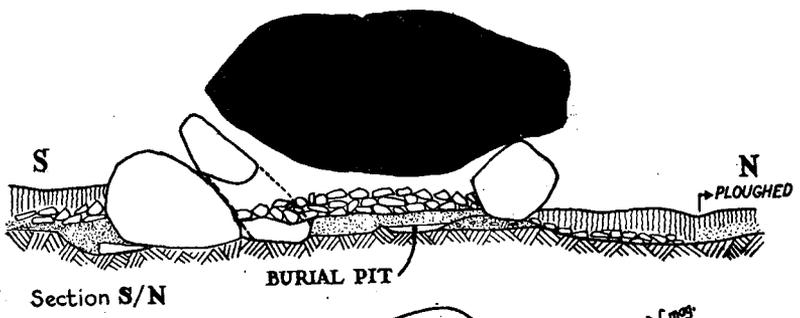
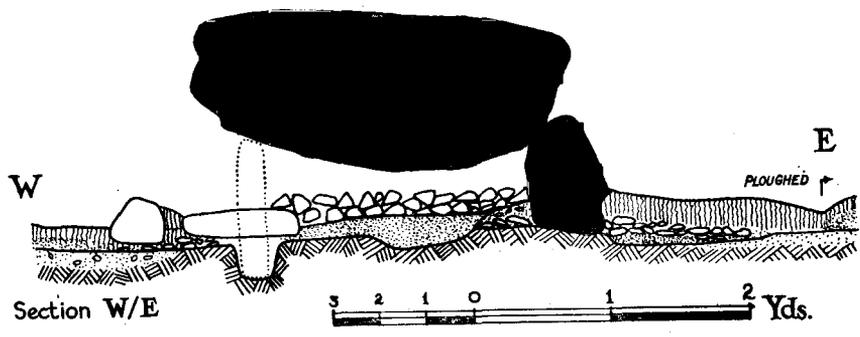


Fig 3—The dolmen

stone flanking the recumbent sloped upwards towards the recumbent stone. The Bohonagh circle differs from that at Drombeg<sup>8</sup> in having its portal stones radially set. Bohonagh is not unique in this respect as similar radial portals have since been recognised at Maulatanvalley and Knocks, both of which are in this group of recumbent-stone circles.

While the central burial at Bohonagh confirms the evidence already obtained at Drombeg it differs in being unaccompanied by pottery and by being so casually placed in the shallow pit. The pit was carelessly formed in the decayed rock surface. It was not dug through the mound of covering soil which therefore must have been placed in position after the pit was dug. This fact, taken in conjunction with the almost complete absence of subsoil within the circle and the clear-cut "step" in the vicinity of the portals suggests that the interior of the circle was deliberately stripped of turf and subsoil at an early date.

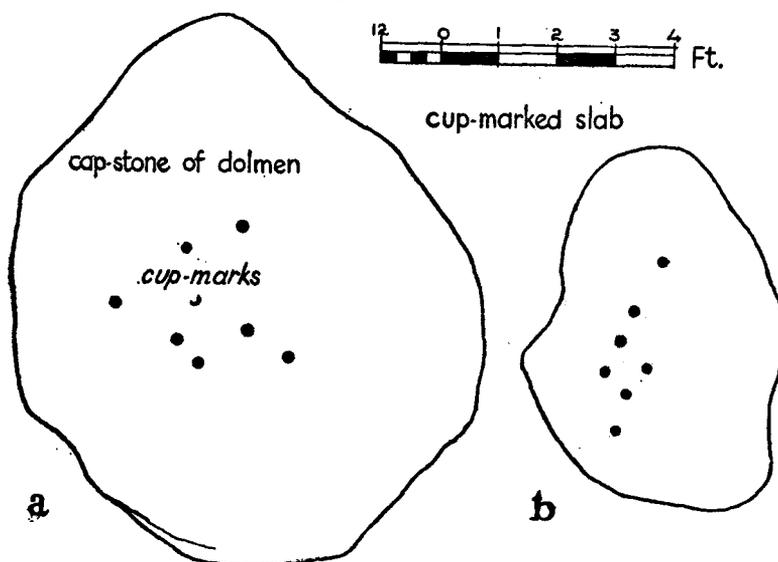


Fig 5—cup marks

When did this stripping take place? There was no soil layer beneath the recumbent so that it seems reasonable to assume that stripping had taken place in that area before the recumbent was set in position. In the portal area, however, the packing stones of the sockets protruded above the floor of the circle and it may be that the levelling in that zone was subsequent to the erection of the orthostats. It seems clear that the centre of the circle had been stripped before the insertion of the cremation, otherwise it would not have been necessary to introduce a quantity of soil to cover the burial. That the stripping of the interior of the circle was effected during the erection of the monument and before the insertion of the burial, would appear to be a reasonable deduction from the evidence obtained.

\* *J.C.H.A.S.*, LXIV., (1959), fig. 2.

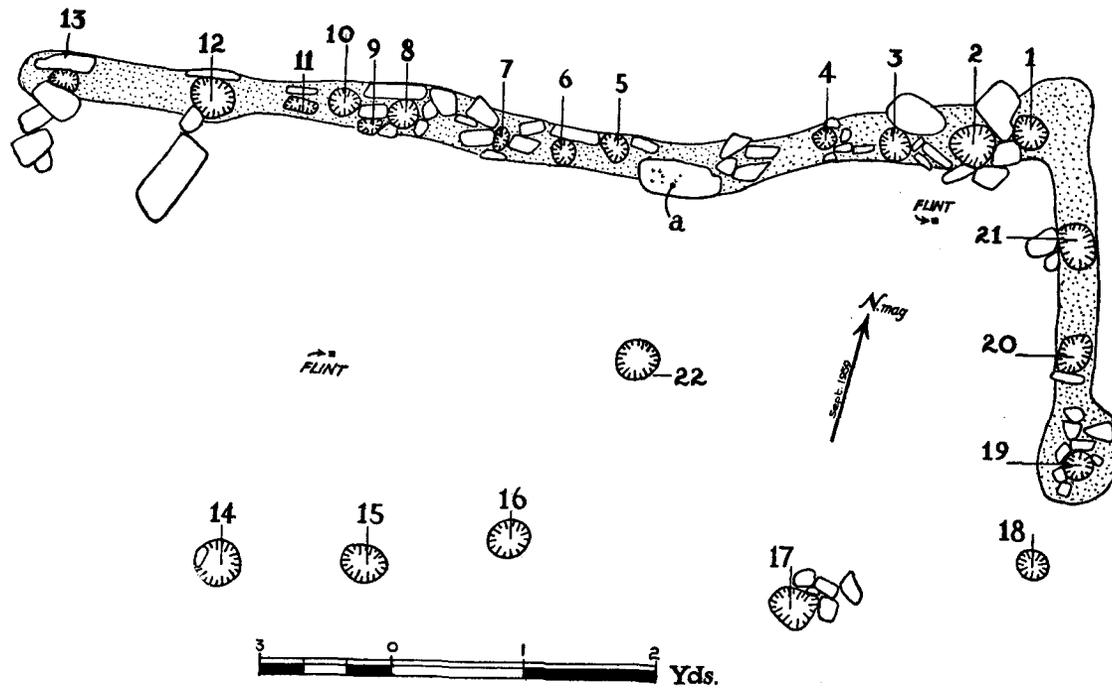


Fig 4—The post-hole hut



Hut-site at Bohonagh during excavation, showing post-holes

The interior of the Drombeg circle had also been levelled and subsequently gravelled. At Bohonagh a few patches of stones occurred on the cut-away ground surface, but if a continuous layer of gravelling had been laid down it did not survive intact.

At the Drombeg circle an area of dark soil containing minute charcoal flecks was located, outside the portals. A similar zone of dark soil  $2\frac{1}{2}$ " thick in which was found the small chisel-edged flint (fig. 7, b), existed immediately outside the portals at Bohonagh. The drain associated with the modern fence near the portals had been cut through this dark layer (fig. 2, section W.E.).

### Purpose of the Circle

In discussing Irish stone circles<sup>9</sup> the late Professor S. P. Ó Ríordáin expressed the opinion that circles which did not contain burials were "purely ritual sites" and that the presence of "special features" (recumbent and outliers) in certain instances "emphasize their purpose." More specifically he said "we must allow for" the use of recumbent stone circles "as observatories or as centres of sun-worship." On the other hand he said, circles which contain burials "remain as they began, ritual enclosures around burials, though the burials no longer under magnificent tombs . . . . may be merely dedicatory in purpose."

In face of the evidence obtained at Drombeg and Bohonagh, and more recently at Reanascreena,<sup>10</sup> Co. Cork, allowance must be made for the possibility that the recumbent-stone circles of West Cork are "purely ritual sites" containing in each case a single burial which may be dedicatory in purpose.

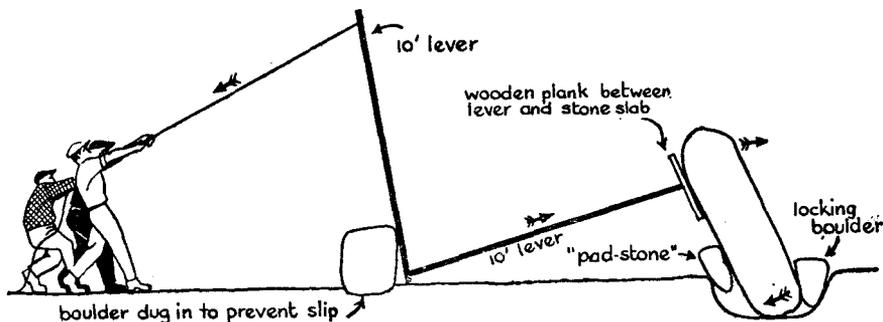


Fig. 6—Re-erection of fallen orthostats

At Bohonagh as at Drombeg, the relationship between the axis of the monument and local sunset was observed. On the 19 September the sun was seen to set north of the recumbent stone and by 25 September—the next clear sunset—it had "moved" to the southern edge of the stone (pl. IX). The sun therefore set over the recumbent stone during the period *c.* 21-24 September and it is possible that the axial orientation of the circle did, in fact, have calendrical or other significance in relation to the

<sup>9</sup> *Antiquities of the Irish Countryside*, (Lond., 1953), pp. 92-3.

<sup>10</sup> Excavated 1960. Report pending.

Autumnal, (and of course, Spring) equinox. In this connexion it is notable that the dark patch of soil outside the portals could indicate a certain concentration of activity in the vicinity of the portal stones on the principal axis of the circle.<sup>11</sup>

If these sites, Drombeg and Bohonagh, were not of purely ritual significance the only alternative theory which could be applied to the circles is that they were sepulchral monuments in their own right and were strictly reserved for single burial. So exclusive would they have been regarded by their builders, and those who came after them, that at no subsequent period were they reused as burial sites. Indeed, there must have been a large degree of mutual exclusiveness at Bohonagh where neither the dolmen builders nor the circle builders trespassed in each others' monuments.

### Re-erection of the Fallen Orthostats

On completion of the excavation at Bohonagh three of the fallen orthostats were re-erected by means of levers and ropes. One of the stones, No. 4, measuring 7' long by 5' wide by 22" thick presented a greater problem than the smaller stones. As at Drombeg,<sup>12</sup> one end of the slab was levered upwards stage by stage and at each lift was underpinned with boulders. On reaching an angle of 35° the slab slid into its socket. A locking boulder was then dropped into the open, i.e., outer, side of the socket and the leverage applied as before. As the stone was raised the underpinning with boulders was continued. The locking boulder settled down into the open socket and prevented the foot of the slab from kicking upwards. When the slab had reached an angle of 55° secondary leverage then had to be applied and it became necessary to introduce a few large pad stones into the other side of the socket to ensure that each successive gain in elevation was held (the underpinning with boulders was no longer effective). When the stone stood at 60° we found that our 10' long principal lever was elevated to an almost vertical position in order to become effective, but at such an angle we were unable to apply adequate direct manual force to the lever to move the slab by a fraction of an inch. An ordinary tent rope (manilla; 1 inch circumference; breaking strain 10½ cwt) was then affixed to the upper end of the lever and by pulling on this, three men were able to move the slab, with great ease, into a vertical position. (fig. 6).

### The Dolmen (fig. 3 and pl. VIII, b).

The Bohonagh dolmen is one of three which stand almost in sight of each other in this area. All three have large, boulder capstones resting on other low boulders. Before excavation the dolmen seemed to present a polygonal plan, opening at its north-west end. Excavation showed that this open end was originally partly closed with an upright slab set in a well shaped and carefully rock-cut socket. The dolmen was thus provided with a fixed closing slab. The stone layer which surrounded the dolmen also floored the gap between the closing slab and stone No. 1 so that this gap could have been the effective entrance to the tomb while the fixed slab was in position. When the side stones were removed the basic structure of the dolmen was found to be tripod in plan. It seems incongruous that a monument with a vertical clearance of only 14" in its chamber should be provided with an entrance, yet there can be no

<sup>11</sup> The Reenascreena excavation has produced striking evidence of activity in the vicinity of the portal stones there.

<sup>12</sup> *J.C.H.A.S.*, LXIV (1959), fig. 8.

doubt that the stone with the oblique passage beside it distinguishes the north-western end of the tomb as its functional end.

It is regrettable that no dating evidence came to light during the excavation. The presence of cupmarks on the capstone cannot be taken as close indications of cultural affinities since similar markings occur on wedge shaped gallery graves, some stone circles and also on free-lying boulders in the West Cork area, and as matters stand, none of these monuments has been dated.

#### **The Posthole Structure** (fig. 4 and pl. X).

The discovery of this structure was, in part, fortuitous as the boulders which drew our attention to the site were not, in fact, associated with it. As exposed, the formation of postholes defines a rectangular area 23' long by 10' wide with one centre posthole where a roof support could have stood. Yet the structural difference between the north and south walls is striking. It is tempting to suggest that the southern postholes could have supported a ridge pole and that a second foundation trench, now ploughed out, could have existed some distance to the south. Such a hut measuring 23' by 20' would not be unduly large—an early Bronze Age hut at Carrigillihy<sup>13</sup> measured 33' by 22' internally.

If this structure, as exposed, was a normal domestic habitation it cannot have been occupied for long as otherwise one would expect some deposit of habitation refuse; but none was present. The stone-built hut near the Drombeg circle was also devoid of habitation refuse.

It is impossible to say whether the Bohonagh hut was in anyway associated with the circle.

#### **The Cup-marked Slab** (fig. 5).

This slab which evidently lay on the surface in 1909 when seen by Somerville had become fully overgrown with turf in the interval. It could have originally come from the stone circle but there can be no certainty. Where it lay it served no practical purpose. As already indicated cupmarks are common in West Cork and occur on dissimilar monuments none of which has been closely dated in this region.

### **FINDS**

In all, thirteen flints were found at Bohonagh—eight came from the hut-site, three from the circle and two from the vicinity of the dolmen. Of these, however, only two could be regarded as implements; one a flake (fig. 7, a), derived from a nodule, the other a stumpy chisel-edged portion of a flint pebble (fig. 7, b). The remaining flints were chips, flakes and cores of pebbles. Of the flints found at the hut site, two were found in the foundation trench, two near the "doorway," two near the northern postholes and two, including the flake mentioned above, on the floor of the hut. All

<sup>13</sup> O'Kelly, M.J., *J.C.H.A.S. LVI* (1951), 73.

three flints from the circle were found on old ground level near the portals. The flints from the vicinity of the dolmen were found beneath the modern turf on the apron of stones.

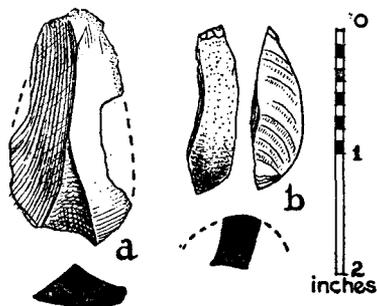


Fig. 7—The flints

### SUMMARY

The excavation of this interesting group of monuments, though unproductive of dating evidence, produced valuable comparative typological evidence. A distinct variant of the stone circle plan has been recognised and the Drombeg evidence of cremation pit-burial within the circle has been confirmed.

The dolmen was established as a tomb, enclosed on three sides and equipped with a frontal closing slab. It would appear that as the slab was set firmly in a socket it was intended as a permanent fixture and that the real entrance to the tomb chamber was by way of the oblique gap (fig. 3, Plan) to the north of it.

As at Drombeg a hut has been discovered in the vicinity of a stone circle but unfortunately the lack of dating evidence on both sites poses, rather than solves, problems.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer wishes to record his thanks to the following : Mr. G. Vickery, the land-owner, for permission to excavate and for valuable assistance on the site ; to Miss Tiiu Mets and Miss Margareta Linderoth, Uppsala University and to Mr. M. Flahavan and Mr. W. Lorschach for assistance during the excavation ; to Professor M. J. O'Kelly and the Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork, for much material assistance and to my wife for assistance on the site and for typing the manuscript.

The excavation was financed by means of a government grant administered through the Royal Irish Academy and the Special Employment Schemes Office. Assistance was also given by the Cork Public Museum.

**APPENDIX I** (The Stone Circle)

All measurements are taken from ground level within the circle and are given in inches. In the case of fallen stones the full length is given.

<i>Stone No.</i>	<i>Height</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Thickness</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Sockets Width</i>	<i>Depth</i>
1	95	53	30	51	43	12
2	87	39	26	67	55	16
3	—	—	—	40	35	10
4	85 (fallen)	41	24	34	32	12
5	—	—	—	26	24	12
6	—	—	—	30	28	6
7	53 (recumbent)	71	32	—	—	—
8	69	41	22	48	47	16
9	—	—	—	55	36	12
10	79 (fallen)	39	13	32	32	14
11	70 (fallen)	40	17	29	30	20
12	75	50	30	43	39	20
13	113	55	25	58	55	14

Burial pit : *Diameter* 25    *Depth* 5.

**APPENDIX II** (The Dolmen).

All measurements are given in inches.

Capstone	114 long	94 wide	43 thick
Stone No. 1	28 high	36 wide	22 thick
„ No. 2	31½ „	27½ „	27½ „
„ No. 3	24 „	31½ „	23½ „
„ No. 4	36 long	30(max) „	7 „
Socket	28 „	11 „	10 deep

**APPENDIX III** (The Hut Site).

All measurements are given in inches.

---

<i>Posthole No.</i>	<i>Max. dimensions</i>	<i>Depth</i>	<i>Posthole No.</i>	<i>Max. dimensions</i>	<i>Depth.</i>
1	10	4	12	12	7
2	12	4	13	8	6
3	9	8	14	13	3½
4	6	5	15	12	6
5	8	4	16	12	4
6	7	4	17	14	5
7	6	4	18	8	4
8	8	5	19	8	6
9	6	4	20	9½	6
10	5	4	21	13	5
11	3 x 5	4			

---

Cup-marked Slab. 74 long, 52 wide, 6 thick