# 'The Art of Death in Ancient Ireland; Neolithic and Bronze Age Funerary Practices'

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# 'The Art of Death in Ancient Ireland; Neolithic and Bronze Age Funerary Practices'

BY

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# INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the sepulehral artifacts of neolithic and bronze age Ireland. Diverse fields of research have been drawn together in order to illuminate the roles which these mysterious artifices may have held at that time. Archaeological enquiry has identified the most commonly occurring and significant sepulchral artifacts in their historical contexts. I have used anthropological information to gain an insight into the social function of these remains. Parallels in other prehistoric and primitive cultures have pointed to beliefs which may have surrounded these artifices. Mythological stories concerning some of these artifacts have offered clues about the kind of rituals and beliefs which may have been associated with them.

The tradition of building megalithic monuments to house the dead started in Ireland about 5000 years ago when early agricultural communities began to flourish. These edifices played an important role in the soci-religious life of the communities who constructed them. This thesis covers a period of about 2000 years over which time the social response to death evolved along with changing cultural patterns.

# CHAPTER ONE
## 'Wielding the Earth's Fertility'

## THE FIRST FARMERS

During Paleolithic times most of Ireland was under ice. As the climate got warmer and glaciers melted, a land bridge appeared for a brief period between Northern Ireland and Scotland as the earth heaved, being relieved of its great glacial burden. The mesolithic is the first culture that there is evidence for in Ireland, and its development appears to have been relatively insular. For the ensuing neolithic culture this insularity was not the case, the link between Northern Ireland and Scotland was close. Boats existed at this time and the seas level was much lower than it is today. Voyages between Ireland and westerly points of Britain would only have taken a few hours for the earliest immigrants in their dugout canoes. The attractions of this country would have been its rich deposits of flint and porcellainite under the Basalt of Antrim, as well as its fertile land.

The early domesticators of plant and animal would have lived a semi-nomadic way of life, there would have been little or no knowledge of replenishing the fertility of the earth. They would have had to move on every couple of years and cut down new areas of forest. Pastoralists and crop producers would have had a symbiotic relationship, where some areas of land would be suitable for grazing, others would have been more suitable for growing crops. Most available evidence indicates that early neolithic farmers relied heavily on cattle grazing rather than crop cultivation. *(25,p.104)* This shows a continuity with mesolithic times, where hunting wild animals was probably the most common survival strategy, as edible plants would have been less plentiful and would have been used only to supplement a diet mainly of meat. As these early farmers gradually established settled links with their environment, they would have grouped together and had communal property like boats and traps. Ideologies would have developed in order to sustain and strengthen these groups. This was a major step in our cultural evolution. Gordon V Chillde sees this "food producing revolution" (together with the toolmaking, urban and industrial revolutions and the incipient atomic age) as one of the five great steps in the evolution of our social and cultural history. *(3,p.196)* Early agriculture was to lead to the development of urban centres which would encourage cultural development. Early farmers had a more secure and sociable lifestyle than the nomadic lives of their hunting and gathering forefathers who were

much more dependent on the whims of nature. Farming groups would have made the land more productive, lessening the amount of land necessary to support such large groups. Social organisation would have developed and the needs and desires to acquire material possessions would have come about. A sedentary lifestyle was to lead to the development of pottery and other crafts. Surplusses in the community would have permitted the support of non-farming specialists. Undoubtedly there was much continuity in their way of life with their hunting and gathering ancestors. Presuming that these peoples practiced a division of labour (as almost all hunter gatherers do). Men being generally associated with animals and hunting, and women with gathering and growing. Women are generally attributed with the early invention and practice of cultivation. Most 'primitive' cultures today which practice swidden agriculture are matriarchal or matrilineal. It is generally not until the advent of ploughing the earth that men become involved in cultivation. Pastoral societies tend to be patrilineal or patrilocal, they tend to be more mobile than cultivators and are generally more warrior-like, often being involved in raiding and warfare. *(3,pp257 - 279)*

## ANCESTOR WORSHIP

An aspect of this early farming culture, not unlike other so called primitive societies of today who have a similar lifestyle, is the role which is played by ancestors. Ancestor worship would have been practiced for many reasons, the spirits of the dead were believed to help the living in numerous ways, particularly in hunting, fishing and agriculture. Among the benefits which the spirits of the dead can bestow are those of promoting the growth of crops and fertilising the earth.

*"The earth-mother, or great goddess of fertility, governs the fate of seeds and that of the dead in the same way. But the dead are sometimes closer to man, and it is to them that the husbandman turns, to bless and sustain his work ...*

*Hippocrates tell us that the spirits of the dead make seeds grow and germinate, and the author of Geponica says that the winds (or souls of the dead) give life to plants and everything else" (10, P.351)*

Because there were very few means of communication, knowledge would have been passed down from the 'elders' Some of this knowledge would have been in the form of ritual behaviour, which describes a way of acting in the world. This world would be organised differently to the world of the nomad, for the settled farmer this world would be centred around a tangiable place, consecrated by ritual and prayer, and it is in these places, ancestral tombs being the most obvious, that communication with the ghosts of the dead is effected. By building such centres of worship, or communication, made from permanent stone rather than the transient materials with which they erected their houses, these people asserted a claim to the surrounding land which was watched over and protected by their ancestors. A settled way of life for neolithic man brought with it new concepts of ownership and inheritance. Death became not just a cessation of life but a rite for the transferance of property. A cult of ancestor worship would also have played an important part in maintaining the identity of clans or tribes whose members would often have to scatter in search of partners and land.

## COURT CAIRNS

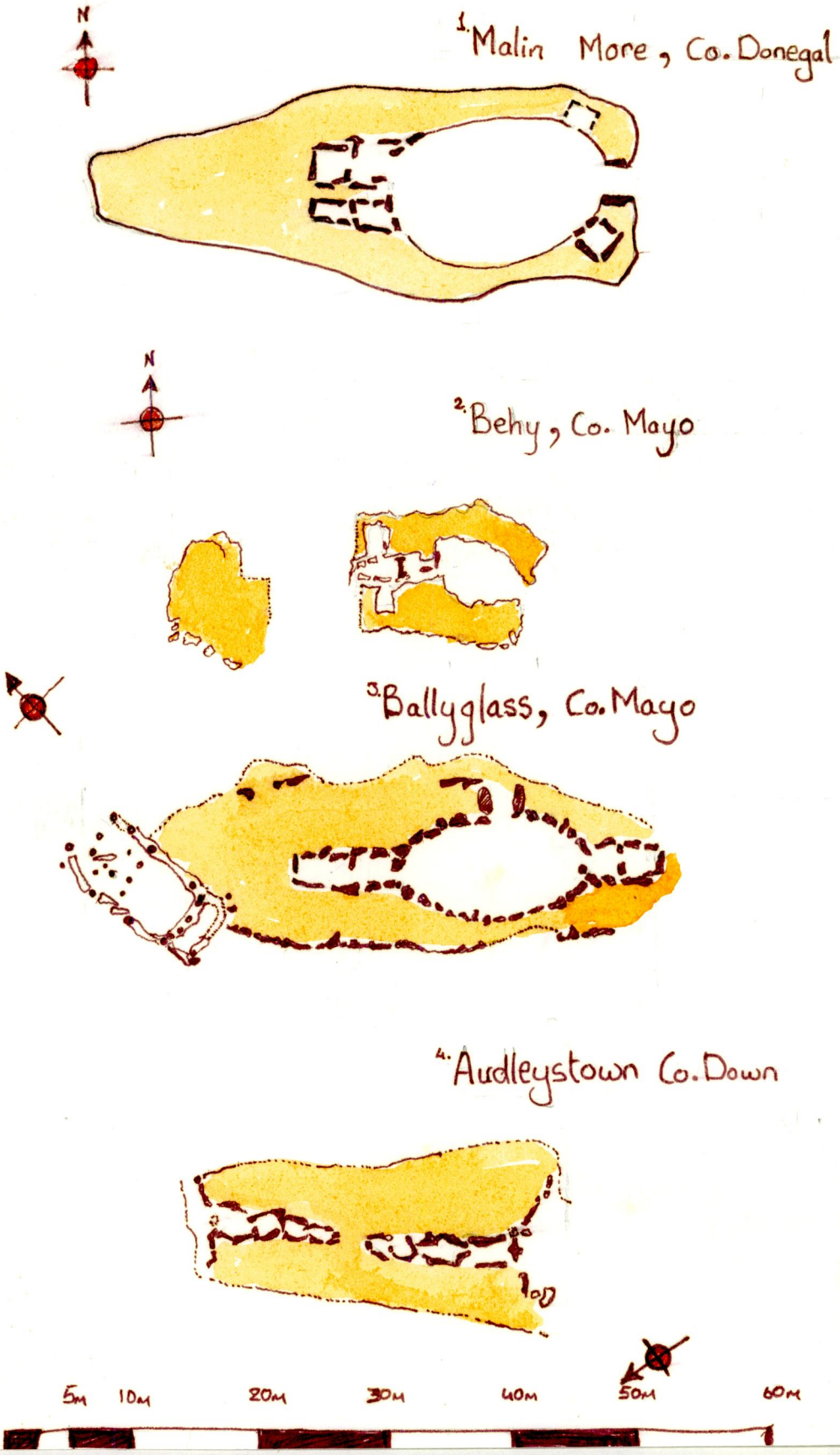
Court cairns are the earliest known tombs in Ireland. They are basically made up of an open court or courts which lead into a burial chamber or chambers. The majority of examples have a single court with a compartmented burial gallery at one end. The entrances to these courts usually face east. We can only guess at the factors which determined this orientation, but in many societies the orientation of a tomb points out the path for the spirit to take upon leaving the body. The court itself is delineated by drystone walling and / or orthostats. *(See Fig 1)* Post holes have been discovered around this delineation in some courts, suggesting the presence, at one time, of a surrounding wooden structure. Court cairns average about thirty metres in length, fifteen metres wide at the front and seven metres at the rear where the burial gallery is located. The entrance to this gallery is through impressive full length portal stones which are often closed over with a doorstone slab. The gallery chambers are divided from each other by a low sill between two upright jambs, and are usually roofed with a corbelled vault. A diversity of cairn plans shows that there was no rigid formula in the construction of these cairns. The

1 The remains of a court tomb at Creevykeel, Co Sligo

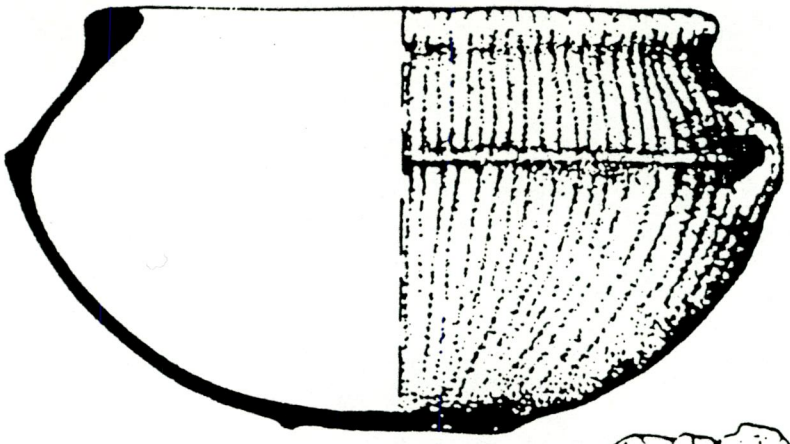
basic elements were often changed around. There are dual court cairns with a central gallery, there are single courts with galleries placed at either end. In some cases the galleries are cruciform in plan. It is quite possible that some of the more complex sites could have been built over a period of time. *(See Fig 2)* There are 316 known examples in Ireland. All of them except for six are in the northern third of the country. They are rarely placed near each other, such solitary placement gives us a picture of small farming communities. Although these tombs are considered to be insular forms in terms of architecture and burial rites, there are many similarities with southern Scottish types. They have in common their predominantly easterly orientation, the court feature of their plan, the frequency of additional chambers and their preference for cremation as opposed to the British and European preference for inhumation. Irish court cairns have some similarities with the cairns of the Isle of Man, those found around the Severn estuary in Britain and the cairns of north west France *(28, pp.85-92)*

## GRAVE GOODS

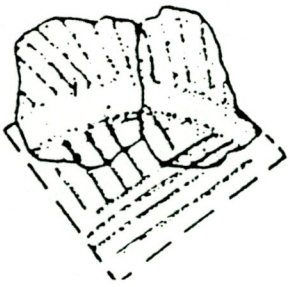
Due their unenclosed nature, many court tombs have been disturbed over the centuries. Similar objects have been unearthed from many of these graves and indicate a tradition where grave goods were left to accompany the dead to their afterlife. Such traditions are common through-out the world but by analysing the elements which make up an assemblage of grave goods in a particular tomb and comparing their assemblage with those of other tombs, specific burial traditions can be identified and the function of these objects in a ritual context can be considered. The most commonly occurring flint artefacts in court cairns are arrows, javelin heads, and scrapers. Pottery associations are of numerous types, but the types associated with primary interments are known as Beachara ware. *(See Fig 3)* These elegant shouldered bowls, which would seem to have been made specifically for sepulchral use, have parallels with certain Danish types. They are often decorated with impressed chord patterns and appear to be a translation of basketry designs. It is interesting to note here, that many early neolithic burials from the Netherlands were cremations which were placed in wicker baskets. Much of the pottery which has been found was broken, this may suggest ritual breakage, a practice which was quite common in antiquity, and was done in order to discourage spirits

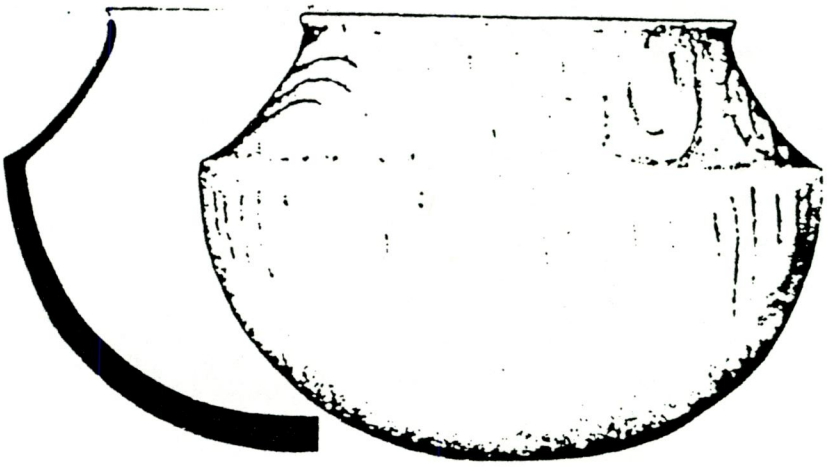



2 Court tomb plans, (3) also showing the remains of a neolithic house

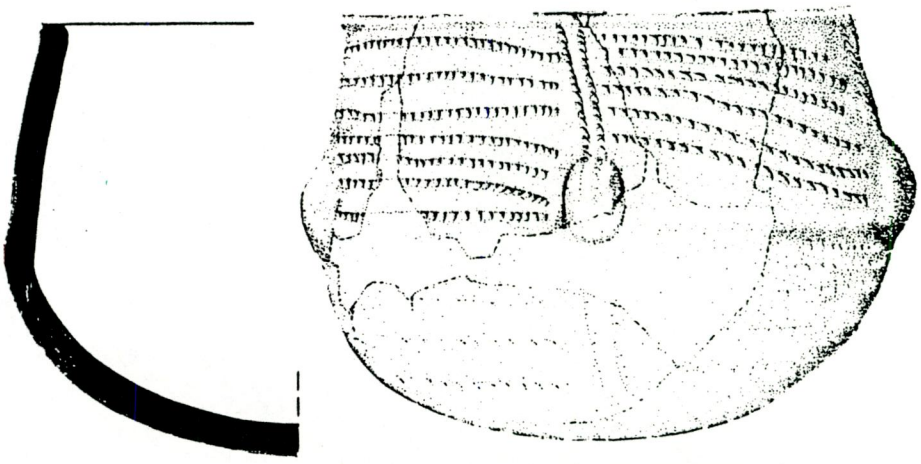


Clontygora large, Co. Donegal





Ballyalton, Co, Down



Becharra, Kintyre

3 Vessels from Irish and Scottish court tombs

from returning to use their property. Suspension holes in some of the pots suggest that they might also have been hung in the tombs and when the string disintegrated the vessels fell and smashed. The wide range of pottery types associated with late neolithic and bronze age times which have been found in these places shows the persistent use of these tombs. Also associated with court cairn interrals are polished stone axeheads and stone beads. On a few occasions these axeheads have been found under the entrance to these courts. There appears to have been some kind of magical property associated with stone axeheads which frequently appear throughout the prehistoric era. *(See Fig 4)* They are often found in contexts which suggests that they were believed to hold protective powers. Ceremonial axes appear throughout Europe during this era. The double headed axe is an omnipresent symbol in early Cretan religion and is associated with the mother goddess. It was also common for protective inscriptions to be placed on ancient tombs. Some of the cairns on the Orkney Islands even have false entrances built into them presumably to mislead would be robbers.

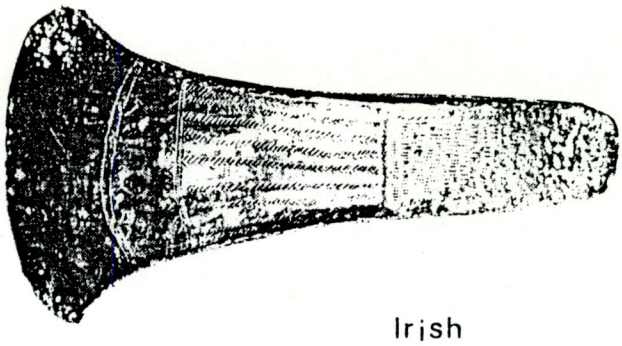
**BURIAL RITES**

Court cairns, although they are communal burial places, do not show any evidence for the interal of most of whole communities. The presence of relatively few remains, indicates that there must have been a selective process in gaining entry to the tombs. Court tombs appear to be modestly furnished, but one must remember that most objects at this time were made from organic degradable materials. That the courts were used for some form of function or ritual is apparent. The presence of bones of oxen, sheep and other animals shows that burial feasts may have been held. An interesting feature was discovered at Dooley's cairn in Ballymacaldrack in County Antrim. It was a stone lined trench placed behind the stone chamber, it contained three deep pits which had been subjected to intense heat. A large quantity of charcoal and a lesser quantity of cremated bone in it has caused it to be called a "cremation passage". *(28,p91).*

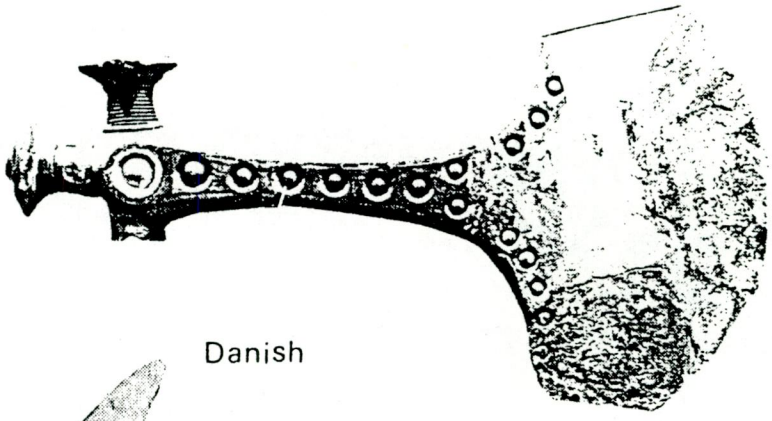
Stone hoard from Smerric, Baffinshire.

Jadeite axes from Roxburshire.

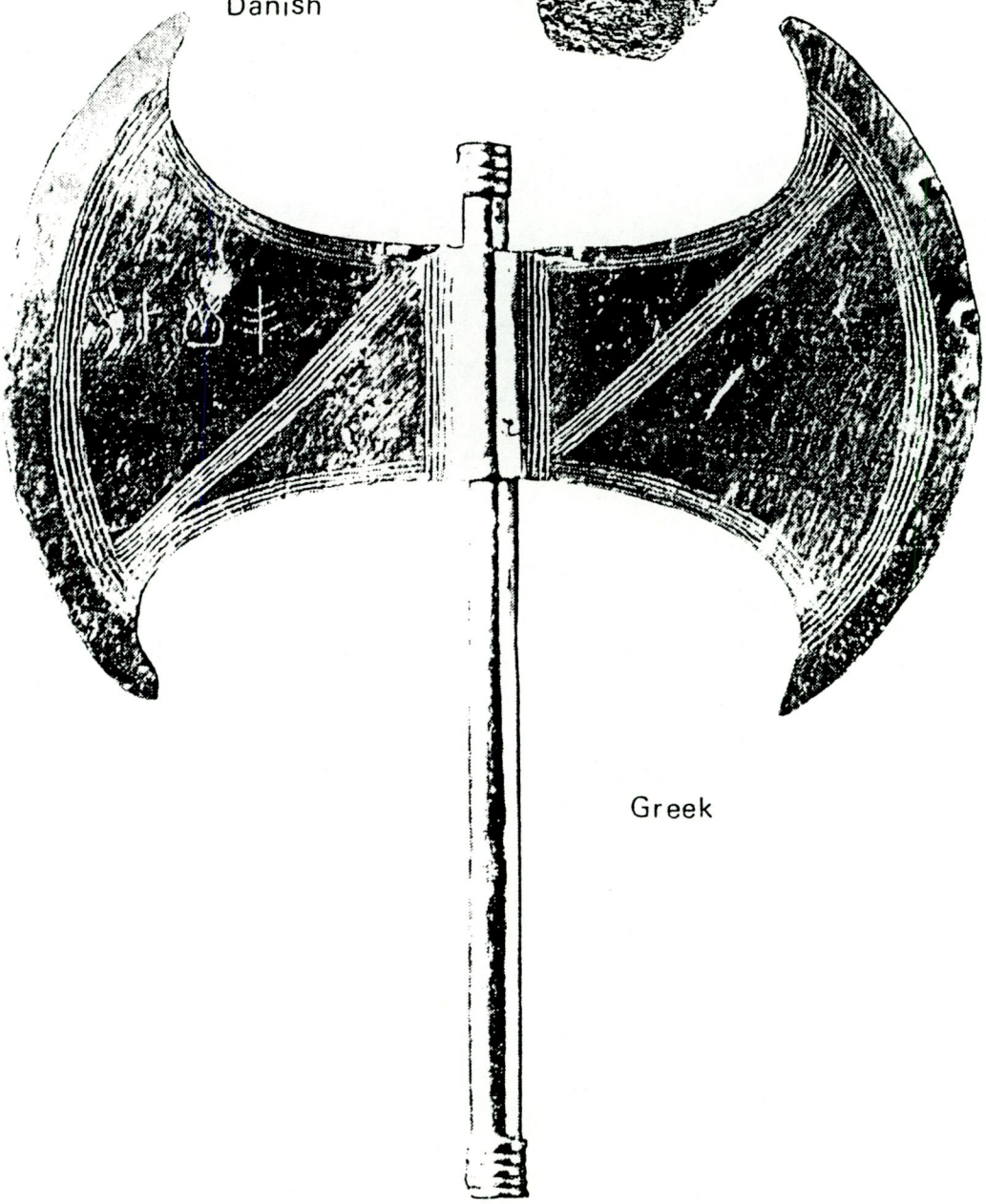
Chalk axes from Wiltshire.



Irish



Danish



Greek

5 Ceremonial bronze axes

## A NEW APPROACH TO THE ENVIRONMENT

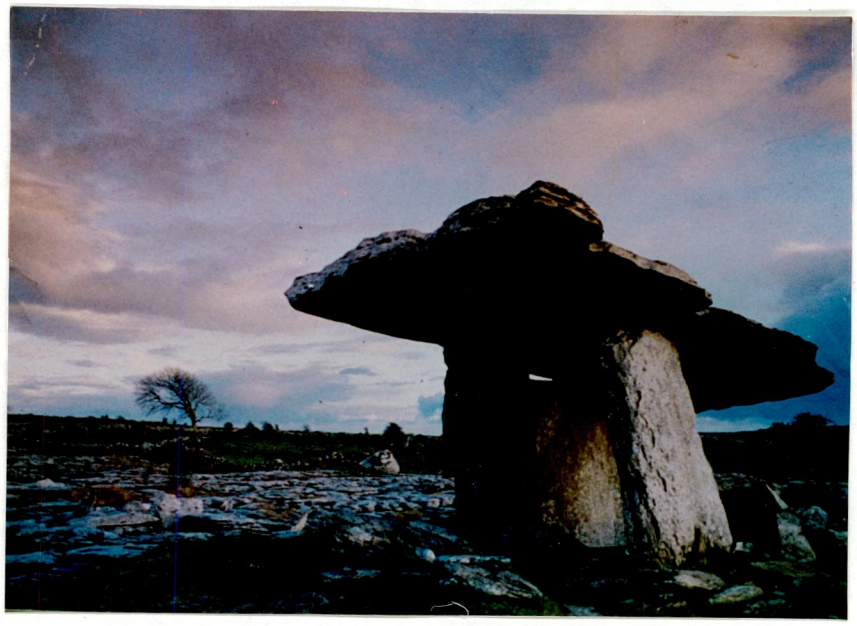
Hunting and gathering religious systems are characterised by a oneness with nature in an environment which cannot be controlled. There is a compelling kinship with nature. When there is no technology which permits or requires manipulation of the environment, religious systems tend to develop which situate people within the processes of nature. The domestication of plants and animals gave rise to a religious revolution because of the development of a more manipulative approach to the envinonment. In an age before science governed mans' approach to the environment an understanding of the mysteries of the earth would have had major religious significance.

*"To the primitive, agriculture, like all other basic activities is no merely profane skill. Because it deals with life, and its object is the marvelous growth of that life dwelling in seed, furrow, rain and the spirits of vegetation, it is therefore first and foremost in ritual" (10,p.331)*

Farming is seen by many "primitive" peoples as a rite which is performed upon the body of the earth, in order for it to unleash its powers of growth. This activity involves the danger of angering the spirit who was master or mistress of the land before. The earth is frequently seen as under the jurisdiction of the dead. The origin myths of most "primitive" agriculturalists back up these beliefs. These myths have the same basic elements where edible tubers and fruit trees are born out the body of an immolated divinity and Marcea Eliade points out that "*As for the myths concerning the origin of cereal culture, they feature a primordial theft: Cereals exist, but in the sky: Jealously guarded by the Gods: A civilising hero ascends into the sky, makes off with a few seeds, and bestown them on mankind" (11,p.39)*

## PORTAL DOLMENS

In the late neolithic period court cairns were superseded by a new form of megalithic tomb known as The Portal dolmen. *(See Fig 6)* Its classic form has two huge upright portal stones; flanking walls become lower as they approach the back wall. This structure is roofed by an enormous capstone which rests upon the portals and corbels. The roof soars upwards from

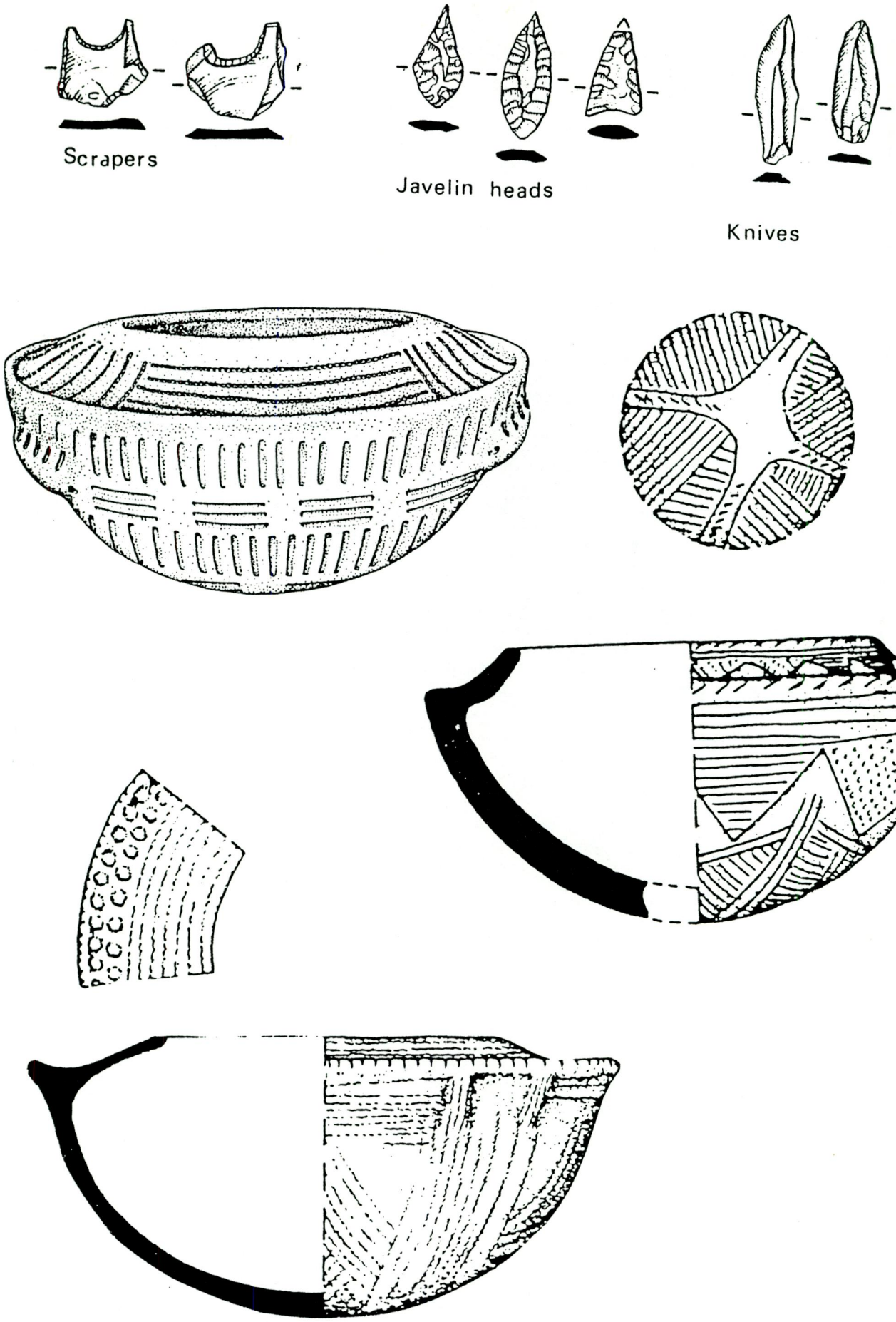


6 Portal Dolmen at Poulnabrone, Co Clare

the rear, out over the portal entrance. Low walls around these tombs indicate the existence, at one time of some form of cairn structure. This structure was possibly not very high to begin with, Prof Michael O'Kelly believes that *"A high mound would have taken from the appearance of their magnificent roofing slab" (28, p,94).* These dolmens are found mainly in court cairn territory, only a few examples being known from the West of Ireland. They are usually found situated in lowland areas beside streams and rivers. Like court cairns, they generally, though not always, face east. Because of the denuded state of many of these dolmens, it is difficult to determine the burial rite. Many cremated remains have been found with sherds of pottery, flint knives, scrapers and javelin heads. *(See Fig 7)* If inhumed remains existed they would have been vulnerable to decay. Many of the features of these tombs point to a relationship with earlier court cairns. Only the megalithic structures and the presence of a new type of pottery point to separate traditions.

## CHANGING BURIAL PRACTICES

Single burials start to appear in the late neolithic era; these cremated and inhumed remains were placed in stone coffins known as cists. Communal burials occur in earthen enclosures, which possibly acted as clan or village cemetaries as well as ritual areas. Excavations of multiple habitation sites in Lough Gur, County Limerick reveal some unusual burials which were found under houses and the areas surrounding them. These crouched inhumbed burials are almost all children. Some have accompanying pottery, the rest were found alone. Perhaps the spirits of these children were protected by the household. Interral under houses was a common funerary practice in Spain, Portugal and Crete at this time and in some "primitive" cultures the practice of burying dead children under houses and thresholds is believed to bring back the child's spirit in the birth of the next child to the household. *(14, Vol1, pp 18 - 20)* These different traditions and the ones discussed in the following chapter give us only a glimpse of how peoples of this time viewed the dead. One aspect appears to be strikingly different to the modern conception of the dead and that is the ancients apparent belief in the power of the dead to affect the lives of the living. Though it is commonly felt today that ghosts exist and that the dead watch the living. These ghosts are not imbued with the same mythical power as were the ghosts of the ancients.




7 Flint and pottery found in Portal Dolmens

# CHAPTER TWO
## "The Seeds and the Dead"

## PASSAGE TOMBS

During the middle of the third millenium a new culture was to accomplish the erection of the most monumental tombs we have ever seen in Ireland. These tombs are called passage graves, those at the Boyne Valley being the most impressive examples known. The Irish passage grave culture shows many similarities with other Western European cultures. These people show the earliest signs of large, well organised chiefdoms. The tombs, no doubt, fulfilled a much wider social function than that just of tombs; they signify a highly complex and developed religion pertaining to the dead. It is quite likely that they acted as ritual centres for a cult of the dead which fulfilled individual concerns with death as well as much wider social concerns. The builders of these 'tombs', according to legend were a matriarchal people called the tuatha dé Danaan, the people of the Goddess Danu or the Greek Goddess Danaë. Both are Goddesses of the moon and of fertility, they are archetypeal mother Goddess figures similar in character to Demeter and Ishtar.

Passage graves were always placed on high, over-looking fertile valleys. They must have been focal points for the people who farmed these valleys, which in many instances had been settled by earlier court cairn building peoples. Pottery types which are primarily associated with passage graves have been found in court cairns suggesting an element of cultural mergence between these peoples.

Though both groups were farmers, the passage grave builders must have farmed on a much larger scale in order to support their tomb building projects. They must have possessed some kind of knowledge, leading to the surplus wealth necessary to build these monuments. Perhaps this knowledge was connected with the strong leadership which must have existed. The remains of these monuments point to the existence of a well organised society. Perhaps they understood how to replenish the earth's fertility. Engravings in some of the tombs, which are believed to be of calendrical and astronomical significance might indicate a highly developed system of agriculture. In order to build such monuments, these peoples must have occupied an area for may generations. Questions about why this was such a rich culture and what led, eventually, to its

decline, are among the riddles poised by its sepulchral remains. A key to some of these riddles lies in the rituals which may have been associated with these places.

We can only guess at the forms which the religious beliefs of these peoples might have taken. Ideas about fertility and death appear to have been central. Ritual pertaining to these primal aspects of life would have played an important role in the lives of these superstitious people. An organised system of religion and ritual would have led to social unity and stability which in turn would lead to cultural wealth. Ritual can also legitimise social control if knowledge of it limited to elite members of a society who become teacher, priests: *'The symbols used in ritual are inactive recursive relationship with the world which is their context. The ritual derives its meaning from society, but it also renews and gives significance to social structure." (19,p.171)*

There are about 300 known passage tombs in Ireland attesting this culture, they are generally found to the east and north of the central plain. The most elaborate known are centred around the Boyne Valley, which may have been the primary centre for this culture. As the tombs move away from this centre they tend to be less elaborately constructed. This might indicate a decline in the ideals underlined in the monuments of the Boyne Valley. On the other hand the Boyne complex could represent a classical period in the passage grave tradition. In the west of the country the tombs are generally not so refined but are present in numerous cemetery groups indicating the existence of large communities.

## TOMB STRUCTURE

The tombs have long narrow passages which were constructed from vertical orthostats and roofed with lintels. The passage leads into a chamber of either simple or complex form. *(See Fig 8)* A cruciform plan chamber is the classic Irish type, though many variants exist. Many of these chambers have corbelled roofs but some of the simpler structures have a flat slab roof. the tombs are enclosed by round mounds (measuring from 8 - 85m in diameter) which were constructed with great care from many layers of sod, clay and stone. The roof stones in some tombs were cut with channels to drain of any water which might seep through. The

interiors of these tombs are as dry today as they were over four thousand years ago. The mounds are surrounded by kerbstones which contain them. The passages are entered through two upright stones supporting a lintel . Sometimes two passages and rarely three are placed under a single mound. The grouping of these mounds into cemeteries is a uniquely Irish feature of a wider European passage grave culture. The form of these tombs is suggestive of a womb of the earth emphasising a link between fertility, death and rebirth, and perhaps likening life cycles to the yearly cycles of agriculture, seeds, plants and harvesting.

## ALIGNMENTS

The orientation of these tombs does not appear to be a prescribed rule. Knowth's two passages face east and west, those at Dowth face south west. Newgrange and others in the loughcrew complex face south east towards the rising sun, Fourknocks and Seefin face 17 degrees east of north. Some of the tombs have astronomical alignments. As well as the mid-winter spectacular at Newgrange, the tomb of Ollamh fodhla (Cairn T) a legendary King of Ireland, at loughcrew, is orientated towards the equinoctal sunrise. This cairn is on the highest summit in the cemetery, the surrounding cairns face towards this obviously significant one. A watcher in this tomb:

*'At dawn sees the entry of a thin, bright sunray which strikes the ornamental stones on the back wall and moves steadily across their faces, picking out one by one the various inscribed symbols. the effect is of a moving finger of light, spelling a story in an unknown language, relating perhaps to astronomical or astrological lore, to cocmogony, to the myths and histories of the race or to a combination of these and other themes. To aid the interpreter the sun itself is identifying its own symbols' (26,p142)*

Other tombs, Fourknocks, for instance seem to have stellar alignments which may have been used to observe stars which would identify key calendrical events: *'In ancient mesoamerican society similar strategies have been detected, the largest group being known as the 17 degree family of orientation.' (5,p184).* It is quite possible the ancients lived in fear (as do many 'primitive' peoples) of the sun or moon disappearing or the winter

never ending or the flood returning, just as early explorers were afraid of falling off the edge of the earth. There were no complex instruments for measuring time and predicting eclipses and storms. Knowledge of such things must have been bordering on the sacred, and where better to keep such knowledge than with the dead in their everlasting tombs.

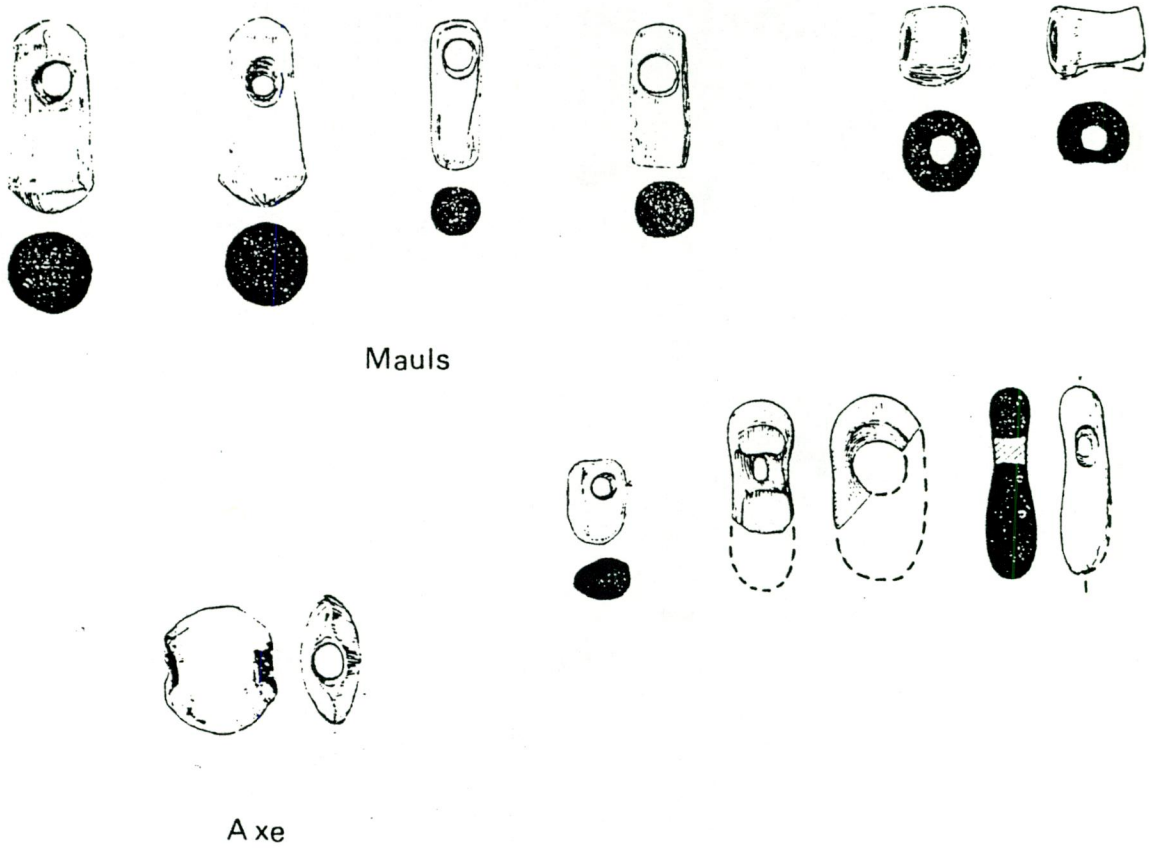
## FUNERARY RITES

Although inhumed burials have been found in passage graves, just as they have in court tombs, it appears that, contrary to the practices of their European relations Irish passage grave builders preferred the funerary rite of cremation. That there are the remains of hundreds of peoples in many of the graves suggests that they weren't the final resting place of only a few elite members of the community. The remains of large circular fireplaces which have been found opposite the entrance to Newgrange and Knowth West possibly provided symbolic or crematory fires. A trench near Fourknocks probably served as a cremation area, charcoal remains found here were of oak, ash hazel and willow *(18,p 150)* These trees are believed to be sacred in Irish drudic lore. The cremated remains were placed in the chambers of these tombs many of which contain stone basins which appear to have acted as temporary receptacles for the cremated remains. These basins were placed in the recess to the right of the back recess, their function and consistent placement in the right hand recess point to an important role which they must have played in the burial ritual.

## GRAVE GOODS

Some objects which have been found in the passage graves which have been excavated bear remarkable similarities and point to a tradition of interring particular objects with the dead. Remains of bone and antler pins, some with mushroom head and some with poppy head forms have been found. *(See Fig 9)*. The frequent occurrence stone and clay pendants imitating pestles, hammers, mauls, axes and hones, indicates some kind of link with early metal mining or the search for precious stones *(See Fig 10)*. Other unusual pendants found were of pierced crystal, an animal tooth, a triangular stone and a spindle whorl. Some of this jewellery was made from faience , jasper, carnelean, serpentine, blue limestone and soapstone. The burnt appearance of these

9 Boars tusk and antler pins from passage grave E, at Carrowkeel, Co Sligo




10 Pendants found in passage graves

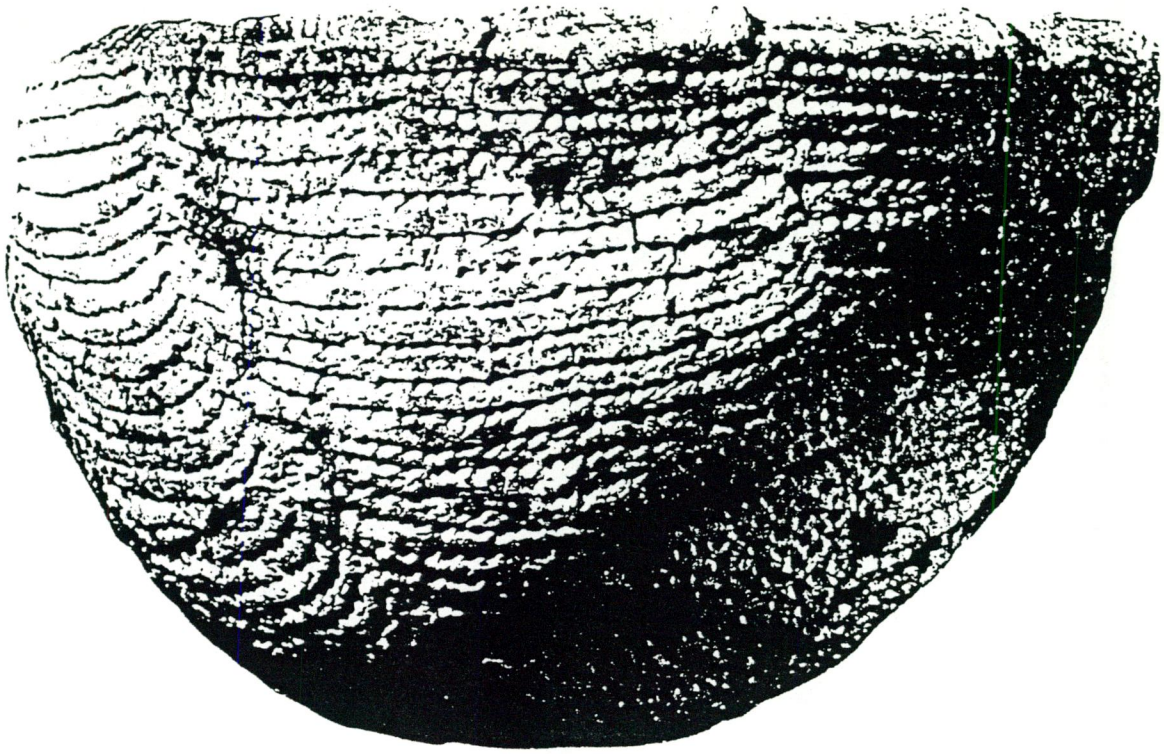
objects shows that clothes and jewellery accompanied these people to their cremation pyre. The most common pottery associated with these graves is known as Carrowkeel ware, named after the site at Carrowkeel in Co Sligo. *(See Fig 11)* They are hemispherical bowls, ranging between 8 and 25 cm in diameter at the rim, often they are decorated with geometric ornamental zones. The sooting which occurs on the inside of these vessels might indicate that the offerings in them were also burnt. It may have been believed that the food and clothing accompanying the dead needed to be burnt in order to be of benefit in an after life. Herodotus describes how such beliefs existed in ancient times:

*'The ghost of Melissa appeared and said that ... she was cold and naked, the clothes, which had been buried with her, having been of no use at all, since they had not been burnt. Herodotus History V 92 (17, p30).*

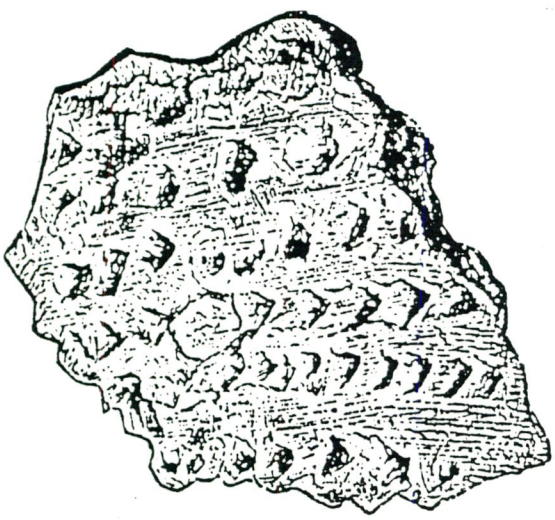
The frequent occurence of stone and chalk marbles in pairs in these graves suggests that they held some symbolic significance, that they may have had testicular associations has been suggested, if so perhaps they had a talismanic function *(See Fig 12)* of ensuring rebirth.

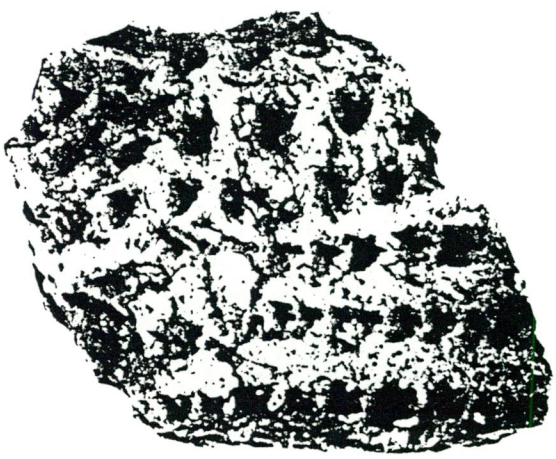
## NEWGRANGE

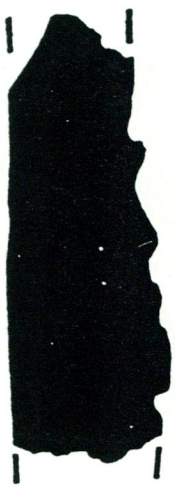
At this point it is worth examining Ireland's most well known passage grave, Newgrange. It is the largest in a small cemetery of tombs, which were probably built at an earlier date. This tomb has some outstanding features. It is strategically placed on a hill, overlooking the famous bend of the river Boyne which is believed to have been presided over by the Goddess Bonad, sister to the mythical mother of all Banshees, the 'Bean-Sídhe' woman of the mound, or otherworld, as she was known in Celtic times *(16,p102)*. To hear her cry was the harbinger of death. Surrounding this mound, there are twelve standing stones, whose placement was contemporary with or earlier than the construction of the mound *(27,p 82)*. They represent what once may have been a circle. Research which has been done on their placement and significance, suggests that astronomical and geometric patterns fix the position of all of the monuments in the general area, Newgrange being the focal point *(27, p84)*.



Tara

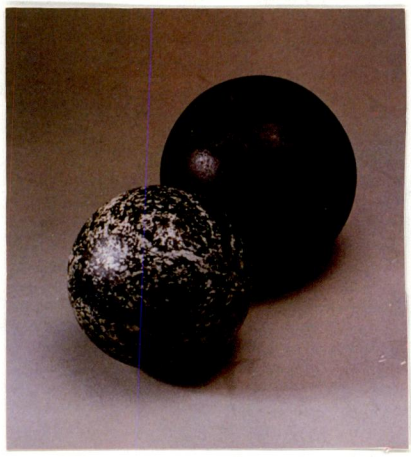




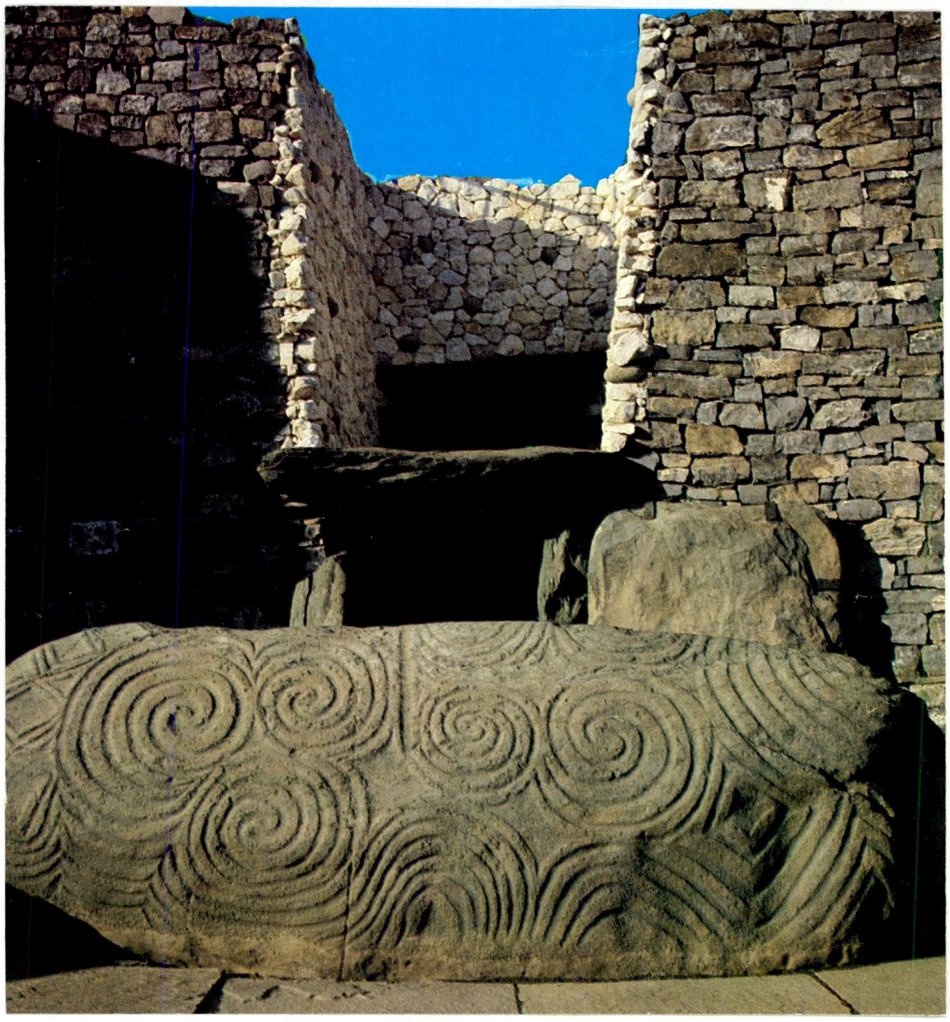


Fragments from Carrowmore

11 Carrowkeel ware



12 Polished stone balls from Loughcrew



13 The entrance to Newgrange

Fig 14

## EXTERIOR

On passing the scraggy standing stones, the entrance to the grave is barred by a profusely carved kerbstone. During recent restoration, an arc shaped path was placed around this stone to facilitate tourists. *(See Fig 13).* One would originally have had to hoist oneself over this stone in order to gain access to this 'other world'. Placed above this entrance, and set a few feet back from it is an opening which was once closed by a stone door. Scratches around this roof box reveal that the door was frequently used. This roof box feature is unique in Irish passage graves. The tomb of Maeshowe in Orkney is the only known parallel except that is aligned with the midwinter sunset instead of the sunrise. It is possible that this opening in Newgrange had other uses besides capturing the rays of the sitting sun. It could have been a place to leave offerings for the dead at Samhain, a feast of the dead which fell on the first of November. A remnant of this tradition survives with the feasting on apples and hazelnuts at Halloween, 'Col' and 'Aball' were sacred trees in ancient Ireland. Hazel was the 'bile-ratha' tree of the rath or circle, it gave its name to MacColl a God like hero, who according to myth was one of the earliest Kings of Ireland. At ancient Samhain festivities mortals were expected to pay the *fairies tribute in the form of hazelnuts. *(16,p 182).* At a feast of the dead in ancient Greece also on November the first, entrances to burial caves were left open in order to allow the spirits and heroes to come out for an airing. *(16,p 182).*

## INTERIOR

The passage at Newgrange is almost nineteen metres long and meanders upwards so that the chamber is actually situated six feet above ground level. *(Fig 14)* This allows the beam of light from the roof box to penetrate the chamber when the sun is aligend. The forty three orthostats lining the passage are between one and a half to two metres high, many of them are inscribed. Over the years these orthostats began to lean forward causing the beam of light which enters the chamber to be much thinner today

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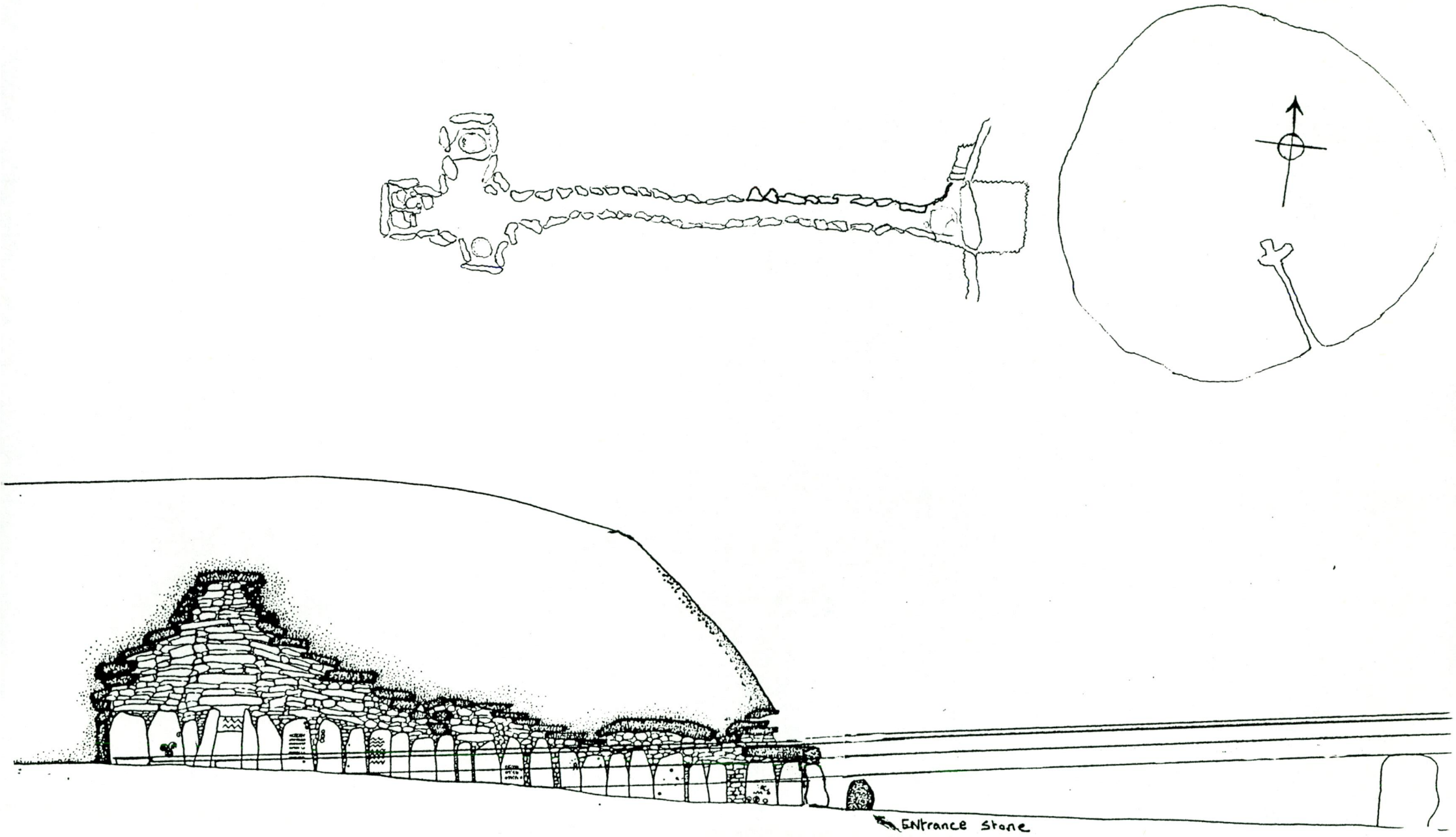
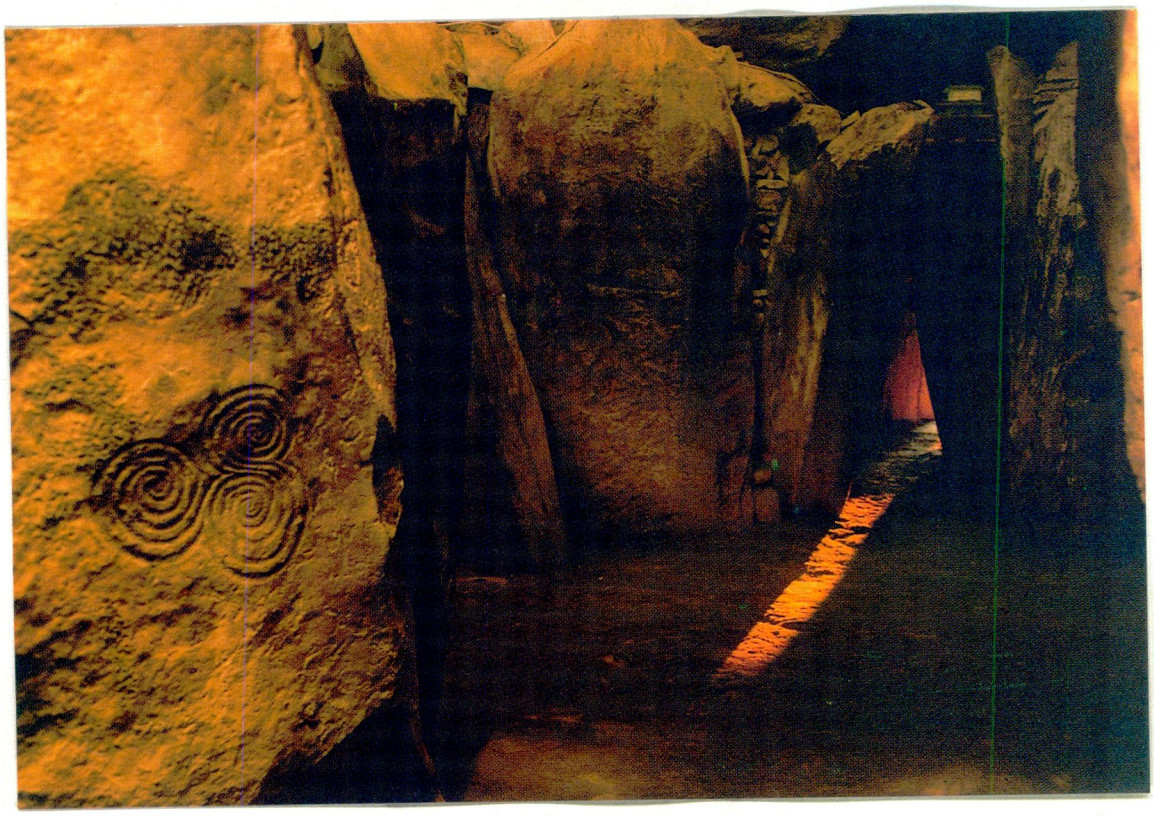
* In a mythical battle with the milesians the tuatha dé Dannan were finally banished to the realms of their mounds, and were to become known as the faery people.

Queen Maeve, who lends her name to Maeve Cairn-Moisgán Méadhbha, Knocknarea, Co Sligo, Mab the Queen of the Faery. *(16,p.105)*




14 Newgrange, plan and elevation

15 Corbelled roof at Newgrange



16 Winter solstice at Newgrange

Fig. 14

Fig. 16

than it was when the tomb was built. *(27,p124)*. The chamber measures over five metres from the entrance to the back recess and over six metres between the side recesses. The exquisitely corbelled roof gives the centre of the chamber a height of six metres *(27,p 21)*. *(See Fig 15)*. The light beam shines on the floor today but would originally have illuminated the back recess. Each of these recesses appears to have had a definite function, in the rituals associated with the tombs to the right of the back recess. In Newgrange the ceiling of the 'right hand' recess which contains a stone basin is profusely decorated. *(See Fig 17)*.

Much of the stone used in the construction of the interior is a local stone called greywacke, but the kerbstones and stone basin are of granite. This stone as well as the white quartz which covers the facade must have been brought from Wicklow by boat along the Boyne, the seafront and the Liffey. Such extravagant expenditure of manpower gives us a clue to the importance of these building projects, and the aesthetic and symbolic considerations which might have occurred. The numerous earthworks around Newgrange may be the remains of earlier centres of activity possibly of a ceremonial nature, one such place is believed to be the remains of an oval mortuary house.

## MYTHOLOGY

Robert Graves describes how the ¶ 'caer sidí' were known in ancient times to house the cauldron of inspiration. Numerous mythological sources indicate that Newgrange is the home of the Dagda, father figure of the tuatha dé. Another name for this God is 'Ruadh Rofhessa', meaning the 'mighty one of great knowledge'. He possesses two magical instruments, a cauldron, from which no one goes unsatisfied and a club with the power to kill instantly when struck with one end and to revive the dead when struck with the other end. Dagda is a God of wisdom and nourishment, he was also reputed to control the weather and the crops. The Dagdas character, which is portrayed in his mythological deeds, is very similar to the character to the Greek God Dionisus who was also honoured by husbandmen as a God of Vegetation. He is most commonly known as a God of Wine and sexual pleasure *(14, p.321)*. The domain of Newgrange,

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¶ Caer Sídí menas revolving castle in Welsh, Sídí being linguistically linked to the Irish Sídhe'. *(16,p.101)*

17 Recess containing granite basin at Newgrange

NEWGRANGE, CO. MEATH
SIDE CHAMBER

BRÚ NA BÓINNE, CO. NA MÍ
Tsoibhaincomra

according to Myth, was later won from Dagda by his son Oengus who corresponds to Apollo, both having been worshiped as Sun Gods *(16,p.101)*

## THE MIDWINTER SUNRISE

The fact that the rising sun, on the shortest day of the year, after the longest night, was chosen to enter the burial chamber at Newgrange may be a clue to the philosophy of its builders concerning the dead. The darkest hour is before dawn and when the first rays of light appear, it is as though a twighlight bridge is formed between the Kingdom of the living and the dead. Spirits, naturally luminous beings might have been drawn back, by this path, to the land of mortal beings. Mythological stories describing spirits and heroes who occasionally leave their underground abode are common. Perhaps rooted in ideas about rebirth, which were held by the builders of these tombs.

*'The driving out of the old year and the coming of the new year, the driving out of ills and the regeneration of "Powers" are always interwoven with the rites of agriculture ... a somewhat optimistic view of existence gradually results from dealing with the soil and its seasons. Death is established as no more than a provisional change in the mode of being winter is never final' (10,p.331)*

Is this tomb a metaphor for the gates to another heavenly place? the ascending passage, the spiralling corbelled roof and the standing stone which once reputedly stood at the top of the mound, perhaps are significant. Passage tombs, like many other prehistoric graves are covered by, and disguised as hills. Hill tops border heaven and earth. Could these places have been built as earthly heaven spirit traps, where the dead could be called upon as oracles to impart their wisdom from beyond the grave. That the two dieties Dagda and Oengus are associated with Dionisus and Apollo who in turn are strongly associated with the ancient oracle at Delphi in Greece is perhaps not coincidental. In African beehive tombs the ghosts of dead kings are consulted as oracles of the highest authority *(14,p.126 vol 1)*.

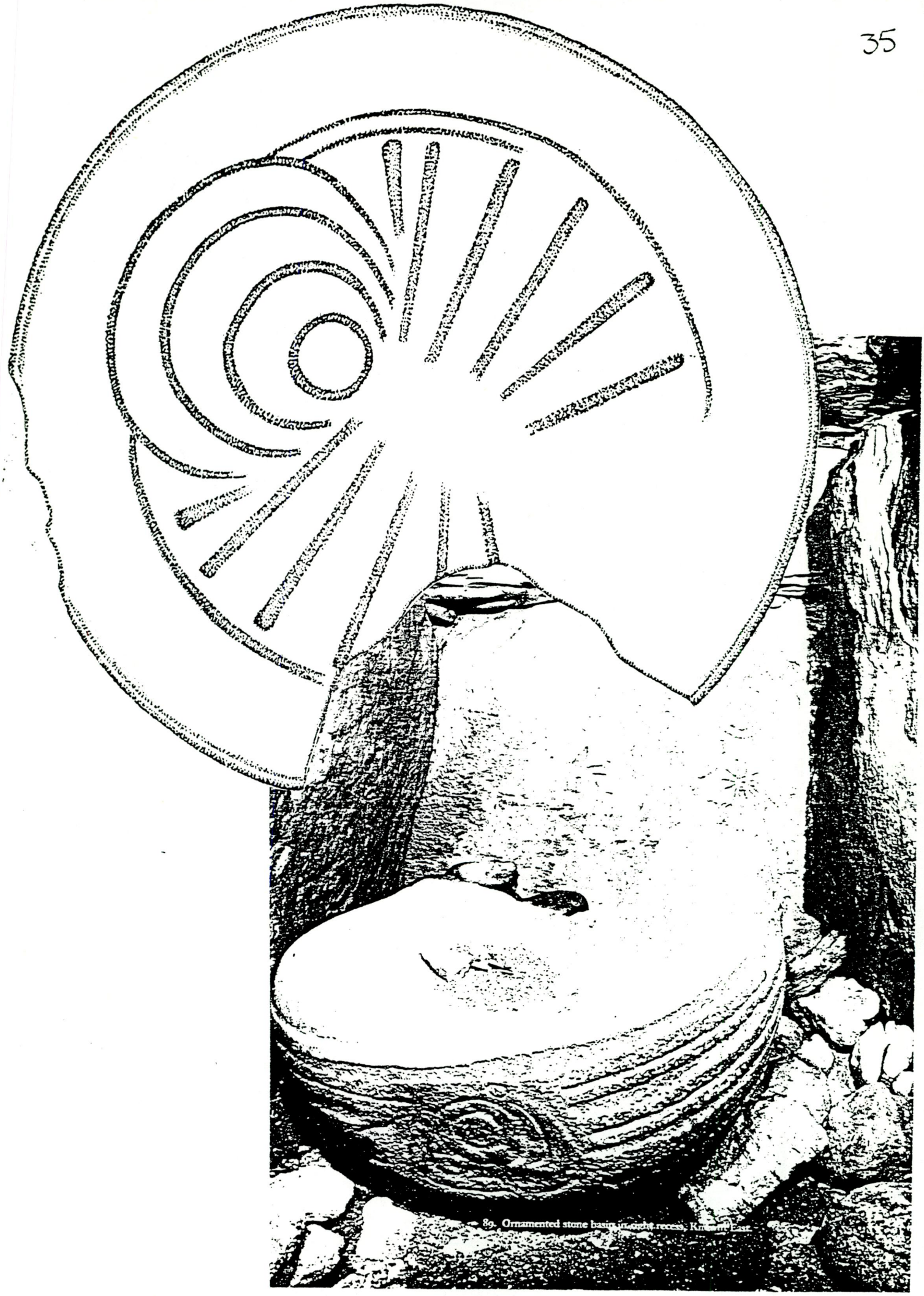
The symbolic elements of stone and light, whisper some of the secrets of these tombs. In many 'primitive' religions stone covered burials are constructed with the purpose of 'fastening' down the spirits of the dead *(10,p.217)*. The inanimate nature of stone is seen to act as an insulator between spirits and mortals. Stones were also believed to imprison spirits. In the rites associated with fertility, phallic and holed stones were slid down and climbed through so that the spirits imprisoned in them would act benificiently, ensuring pregnancy. The formless qualities of light on the other hand are opposed to those of stone. Light is the essence of life and energy. The experience of post mortem light is one attested to by the beliefs of numerous esoteric religions, it constitutes the last and perhaps most difficult initiative trial of Death *(11, Vol 3, p.281)*

STONE CARVINGS

The most beautiful examples of sculpted stone come from Knowth, a macehead of carved and polished flint appears to be engraved in an anthropormorphic representation of a head, the eyes are a double spiral, the ears are spirals and the mouth is the maces' socket. *(Fig 18)* Similar mace heads have been found in Orkney, Scotland the Island of Arran. Also from Knowth is a granite basin. Michael Herity has commented that the resemblance of this and other basins to saddle Querns, used from grinding grain *'might not be entirely fortuitous' (18.p119)*. The resemblence reminds one of the relationship between ash and soil fertility. The elegant abstract design carved into the basin at Knowth seem to represent a seed about to explode into life under a thin layer of soil, the carvings on the wall behind it are like a coded prayer or formula. *(Fig 19)*

A small proportion of Irish passage graves were decorated with carvings, some bearing similarities with Breton tombs. The decoration associated with each tomb has its own unique characteristics and the effect which these designs have upon the architecture which harbours them furthers this individuality. The semi abstract nature of these designs has attracted much attention and debate. There are theories about astrological, alphabetical, pictorial and mathematical aspects to these carvings. The elements which make up these designs have been placed into ten categories, five of which are curvlinear; circles, spirals, arcs, serpentiforms

18 Polished and carved flint macehead from Knowth

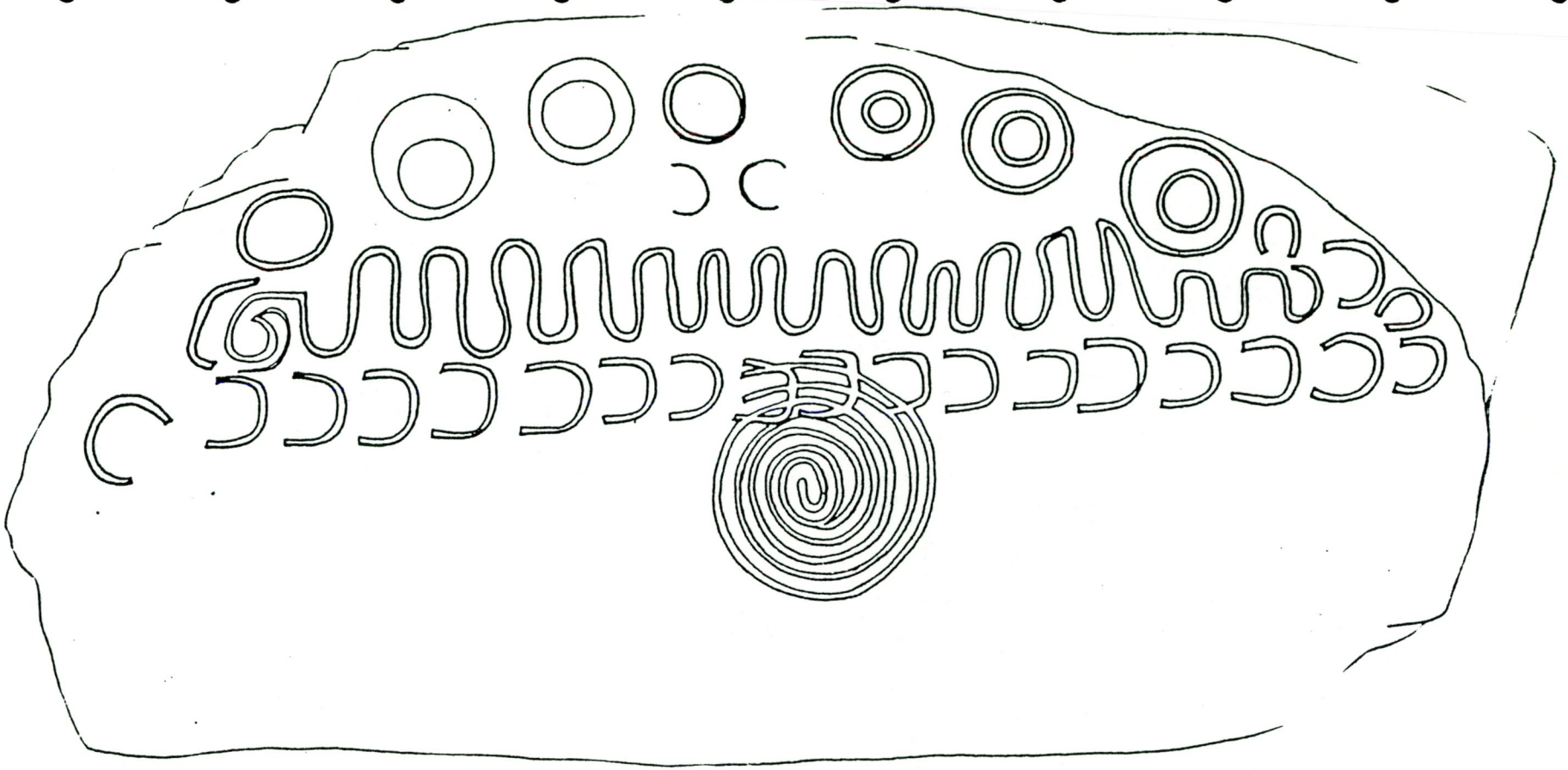


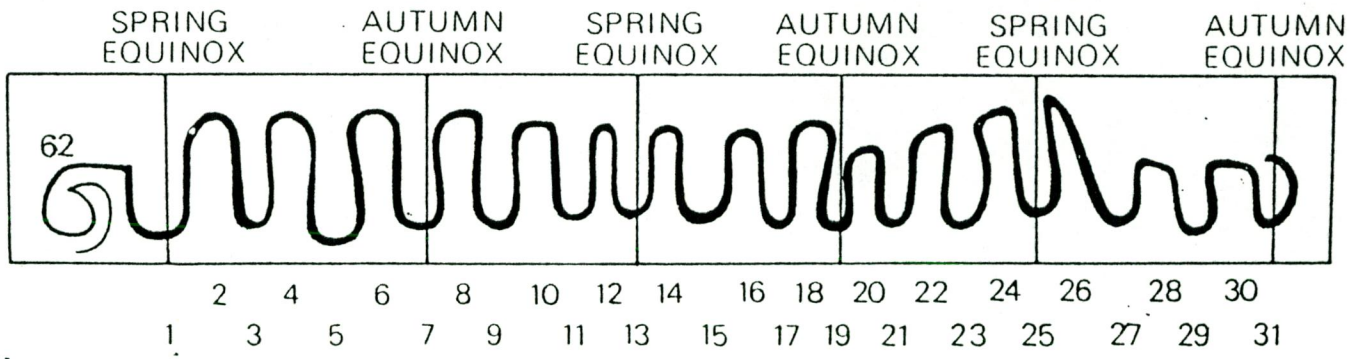

19 Design from the granite basin at Knowth

and dot in circles. The others are rectlinear; chevrons, lozenges, radials and star shapes, parallel lines and comb-like designs. *(27,.146)*. Passage graves display infinite variations of these designs and the skill with which the motifs were carried out varies from tomb to tomb. The function and meanings of them are either decorative, illustrative or for the purpose of sympathetic magic. A design may possess all of these functions. The lunar calendrical engravings at Knowth is an example, which illustrates the twenty nine day cycle of the moon. *(Fig 20)* The elements represent the wanning and waxing moon as it moves around a central diagramatic device, merging with a spiral (the sun) explaining the new moon. The central device is a calculating method for devising the solar year from the lunar year. *(5,p.144)* Such calculations would have been necessary in order to develop an advanced system of agriculture, but why were they placed in a tomb? Did a cult centred around the related concepts of death and fertility justify this placement? If these carvings were diagrams, and therefore probably an important source of knowledge, could they have been related to an oracular function which that tombs may have had? Perhaps these tombs were the domain of high priests of druids who used the knowledge they contained to manipulate the ordinary people.

The Knowth stone basin, discussed earlier may be illustrative but it may also have been linked with the practices of sympathetic magic ensuring the growth of the crops. Newgrange has many examples of hidden carved stones which must have been positioned for magical purposes, for instance some of the quartz pebbles which adorn the entrance to the tomb were inscribed, and placed, design inwards, in the facade. It has many other hidden decorated stones, most of them carry dot in circle or radial designs, which are openly displayed at Dowth but hidden in Newgrange. The hidden carvings appear to be placed strategically on either side of passage, on either side of the corbel stones and at the point where the passage joins the chamber. *(28,p.185)*. It is as though they were spells which created a magical web to protect the tomb. The nuba of Sudan place designs around their granaries, (which are important places of initiation) in order to protect them from spiritual and physical pollution. *(19,p.185)*.

An insular feature of Irish lithic decoration from this time is the use of the spiral, the tripple spiral at Newgrange is particularly notable. *(Fig 21)* Its placement at the entrance to the recess containing the granite basin

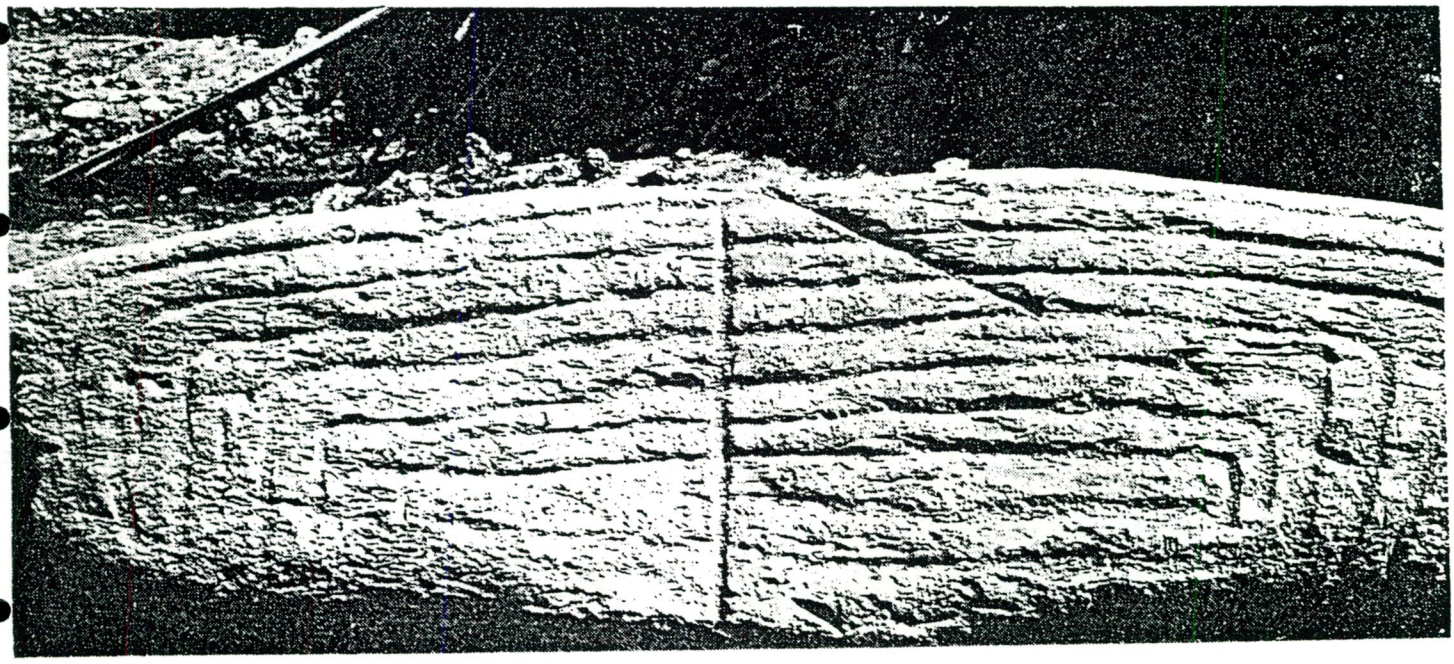





20 Calendrical engravings from Knowth west

denotes its particular importance. Whereas the recess is lavishly decorated, this motif stands alone. It echos, Bridgit, the tripple Goddess, who some say is Dagda's Mother. She is seen as the Goddess of poetry, healing and Smithcraft. *(16,p.101)*. Perhaps she is a descendant of the Goddess Danu. There are actually very few spirals at Newgrange but the existing ones are very prominently displayed. The front kerbstone for instance and the stone at the back of the mound, almost directly opposite it both display spirals. *(Fig 22)* Both stones also have a vertical dividing line which seems to represent the boundary between the two worlds. The losenge and the chevron are the most frequently used motif at Newgrange, and much of its ornamentation is profuse and undisciplined. Knowth on the other hand is ornamented with large, bold, symetrical patterns. The kerbstone here also has a dividing line which cuts through a mandala pattern of connectric arcs, signalling perhaps, the gates to another world. *(Fig 23)*

23 Entrance stone at Knowth west



21 Triple spiral engraving from Newgrange

22 Decorated stone at the back of the mound at Newgrange

NEWGRANGE
DECORATED STONE AT BACK OF MOUND

THE OFFICE OF PUBLIC WORKS

# CHAPTER THREE
## 'Bronze Age Burial; and changing beliefs'

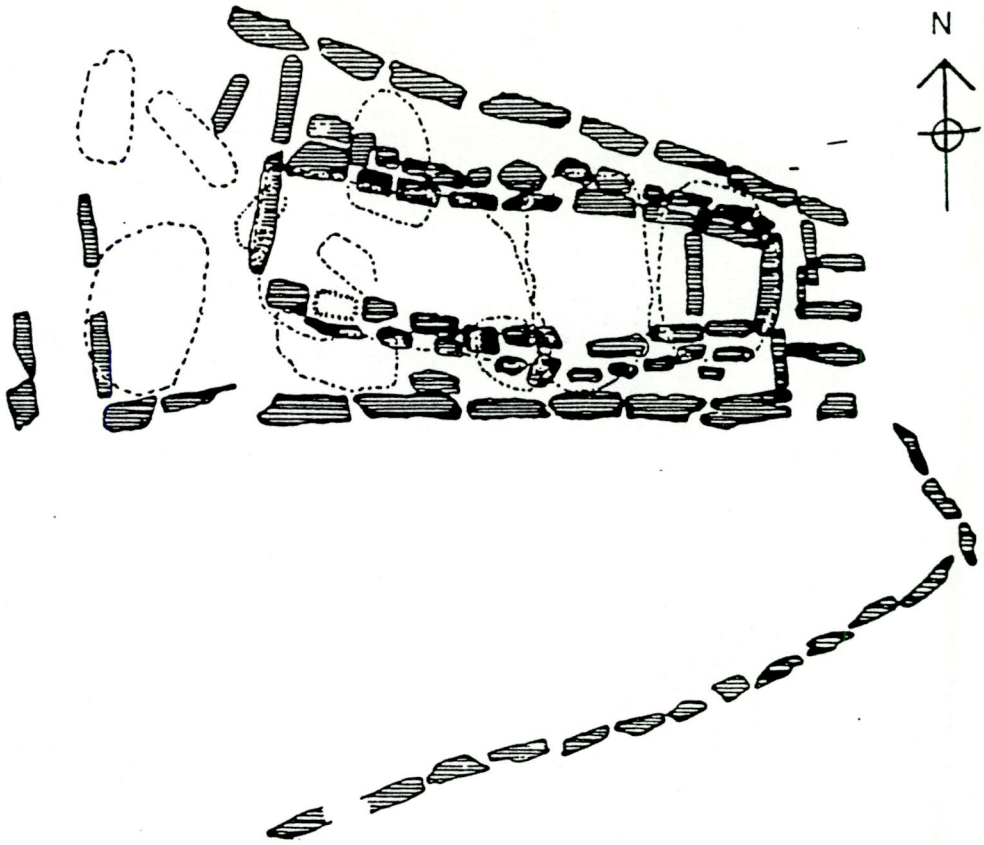
As the bronze age unfolded, Ireland engaged in greater communication with the rest of Europe. Trade on a larger scale and over long distances was necessitated by the separate location of the raw materials required for making bronze. This trade network provided the mechanisms for more rapid diffusion of new ideas.

During this this period in Irish history we see a decline in the megalithic sepulchral tradition and a growth in the tradition of single burials. There are different customs within the single burial mode which can be documented by different assemblages of artifacts. There is, however, one type of megalithic tomb which continued to be built throughout the bronze age. These tombs are known today as wedge tombs, and represent a large proportion of Irish megaliths. They appear most frequently in the west and north of Ireland.

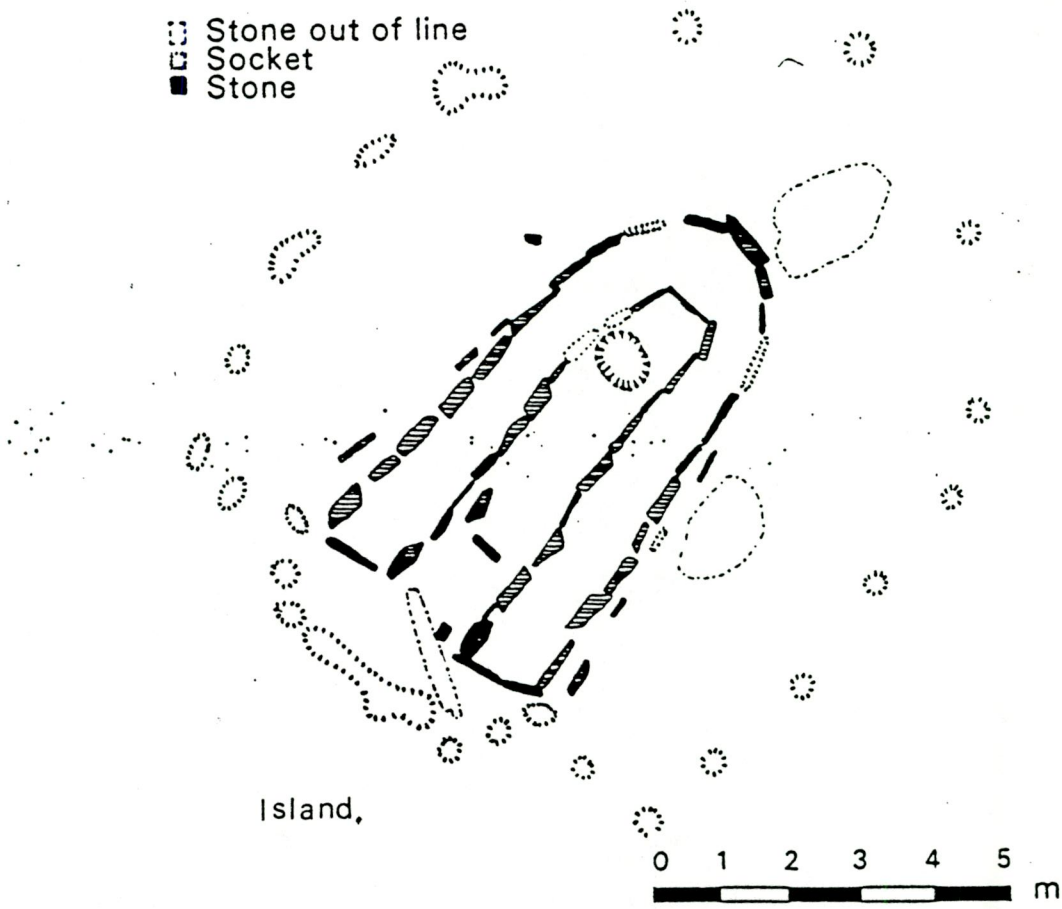
## WEDGE TOMBS

Wedge tombs are, as their name suggests, wedge shaped structures in which a portico leads to a main double walled chamber which is roofed with slabs. *(Fig 26)* The tombs range from two to fourteen metres in length, many examples have a semi-circular stone court at the entrance. The covering cairn varies in shape. The tombs in some areas have a preference for d-shaped plans, other groups of tombs have oval planned cairns. these covering mounds are bounded by kerbstones. The tombs display some of the features of court cairns and portal tombs, but a telling difference, perhaps, is their westward orientation; towards the setting rather than the rising sun. Because of their highland setting in areas more suitable for grazing herds than for tilling, the tombs are believed to have been built by pastoral communities. The main burial rite appears to have been cremation though inhumations are also known *(28,p.17)*. Very few tombs have been excavated, eight of them have produced diverse types of pottery, which is associated with neolithic and bronze age times. This diversity may indicate a mergence of old and new traditions.

The bronze age pottery found in association with these tombs is known as 'Beaker' ware, this finely made continental style pottery is usually associated with wealth in British and European contexts. In wedge tombs




Labbacallee.




Island.

pottery tends to be the sole remaining accompaniment. In Brittany, where prototypes for these tombs are found, rich Beaker burials occur and the burial rite differs in that it is predominantly inhumation; the French tombs, also, are orientated towards the east.

## BEAKER POTTERY

Fired clay, like stone, does not disintegrate over time and like stone it can bear witness to ancient sepulchral traditions. In bronze age Irish burials, pottery becomes a most important indicator of different customs. Beaker pottery is one of the most significant styles to be associated with the early bronze age. This type of pottery occurs throughout Europe, and the contexts in which it is found usually show evidence of extravagent burial practices. Beaker pottery is a sign of a new kind of entrepenurial spirit which was emerging at this time. Throughout Europe, concordant forms and decorative types have been found, indicating an international style. Beakers are believed by many archaeologists to have been part of a 'cult package' of objects and ideas which travelled through the trade networks of Europe and North Africa. *(7,pp.82-85)*. Beaker pottery is beautifully and carefully decorated and is made from highly refined clays. It represents a high point in prehistoric ceramic technology and design. Beakers are believed to have their origins in the Nagyrev and Hatvan cultures of Hungary and in the ûnetican culture of Prague. Throughout Europe, the accompanying grave goods found in beaker burials are usually copper daggers, flint arrowheads, archers stone wristguards and personal ornaments made from amber, jet, bone and gold. *(Fig 25)* The burials - usually crouched inhumations - are often found in wooden or stone coffins or in wicker lined pits, and are placed under mounds which are frequently grouped in cemeteries. Beaker shards have been found in a stone circle in Grange near Lough Gur, bronze artifacts have also been found but the exact function which these circles had is puzzling. They appear to have been neither burial nor habitation sites. Some cremated human remains have been found but there is no element of formal burial *(28,p.138 - 139)*. It is presumed to be a ritual site.

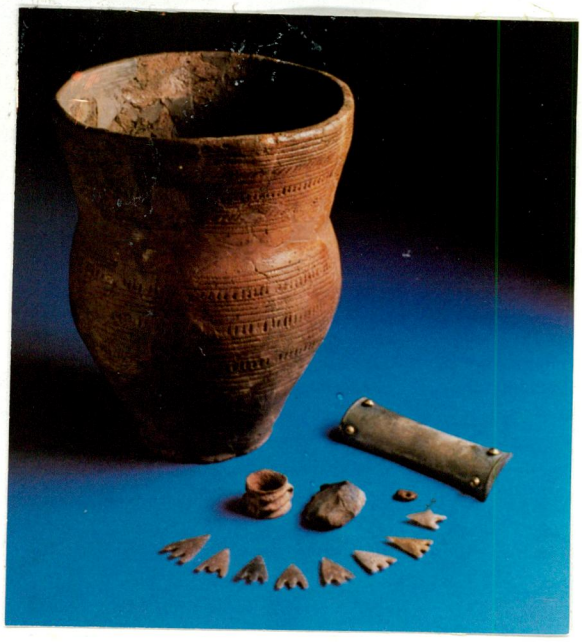
## FOOD VESSELS

As the bronze age developed in Ireland the custom of single burial appears more frequently, 'food vessels' often accompany these burials. These distinctive vessels have only been found in Ireland and Britain. The assemblages that they are found with are similar to those found with Beakers though they are not as wealthy. These vessels from Northern Britain and Ireland are much more carefully made than the examples from Southern Britain where Beakers are more commonly found. In Ireland, food vessels have occasionally been found on ritual sites and in domestic contexts. *(28,p195)*.

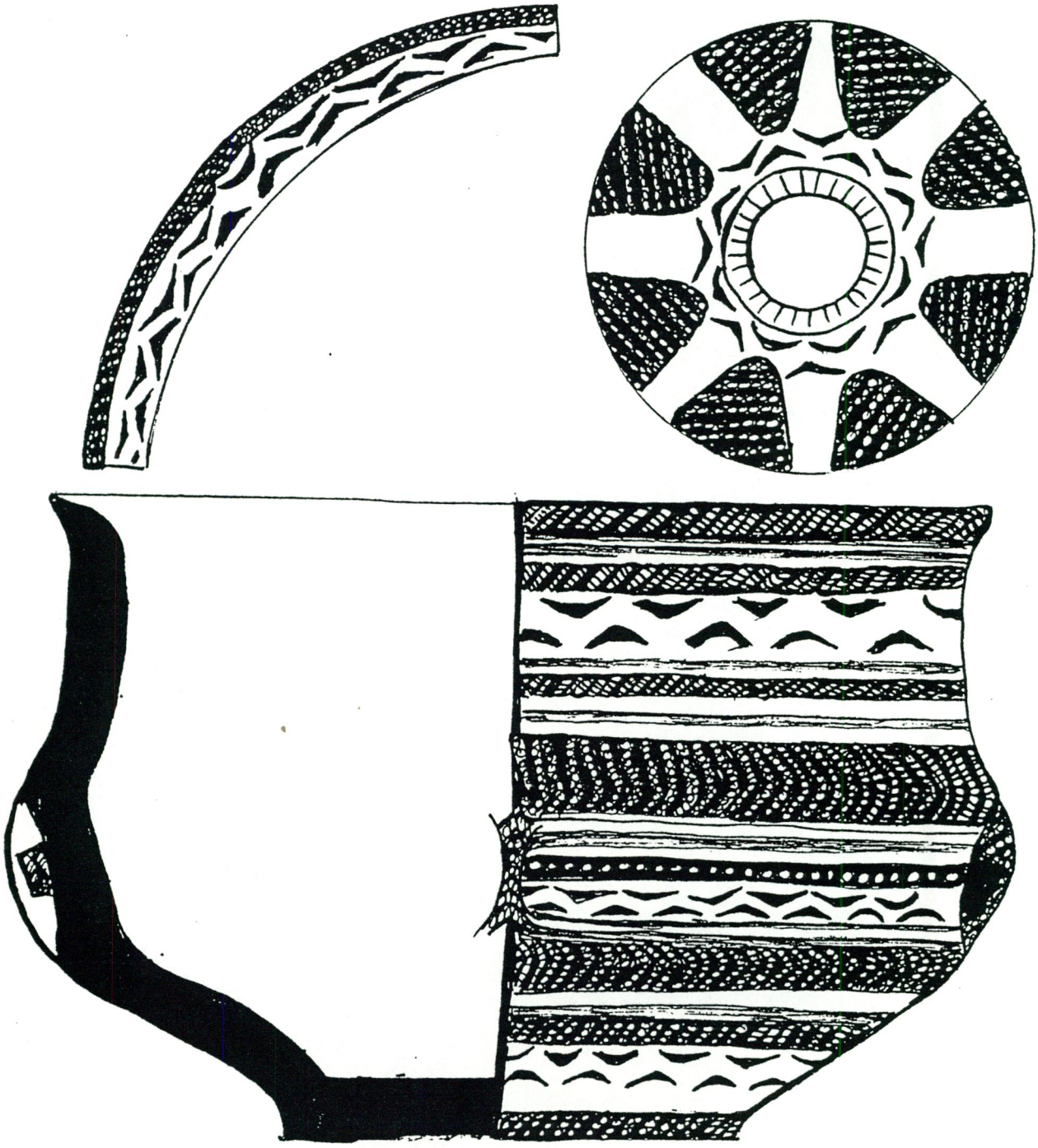
Food vessels are thick, strong and well fired pots which are usually between 10 - 16 cm in height, they are profusely decorated; the elements of their decoration echo the chevron, losenge and comb patterns which adorned the passage tombs of their predecessors. These patterns however are much more ordered and decorative. Food vessels are divided into two groups, pointing to separate burial customs.

Bowl food vessels are squat forms which are found both with cremations and with inhumations which were placed in stone cists or pits. Where the burials were inhumed, the bowl was generally placed at the head of the person, (crouched in a foetal position) whose face was directed at a point in the path of the sun, between north east and north west. *(1, vol 1,p.27)*. The face was possibly directed towards the sun at the time of burial. Presumably the vessels contained some kind of provisions for the dead as seems to have been the practice in Beaker and neolithic burials. Another sign that this tradition was influenced by earlier ones is the placement of 'food vessel' burials in specifically built circular cemetery mounds delineated by kerbstones. The bowl food vessel is an essentially Irish development its form and function no doubt influenced by earlier neolithic sepulchral vessels. *(28,pp193-194)*.

Vase food vessels are taller, thinner forms than the bowl food vessels. *(Fig 27)* Their form and decoration is similar to that of Northern British Beakers. Vase food vessels are believed to have developed later than the bowl food vessel tradition.

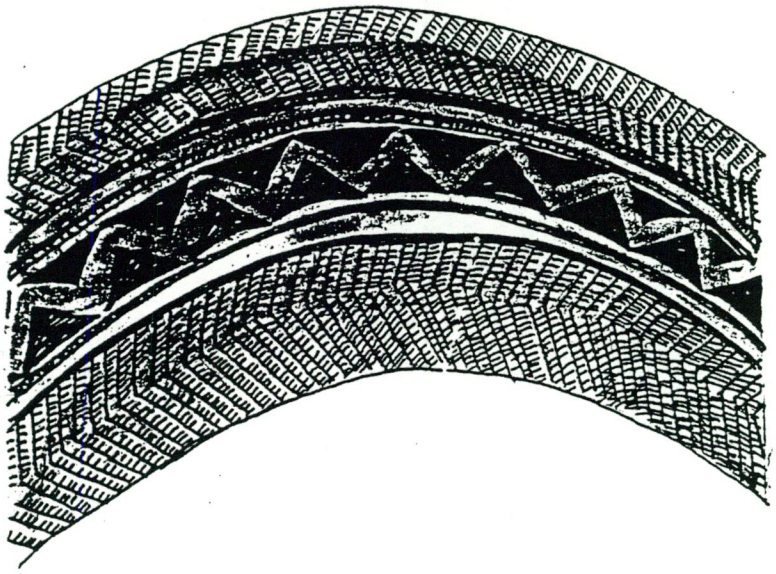


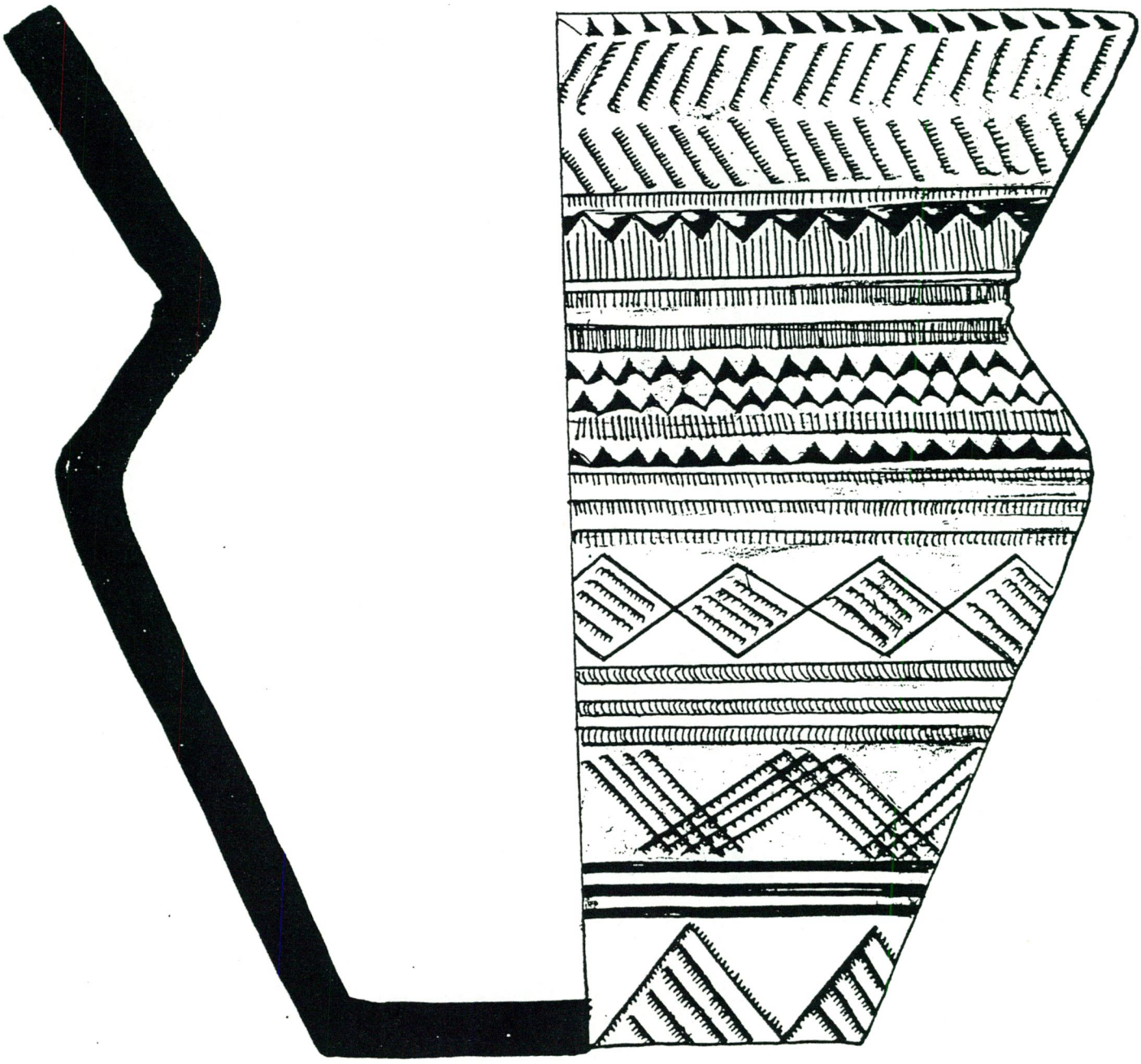
25 Beaker burial assemblage



26 Bowl food vessel from Cumber, Co Derry

27 Vase food vessel from Greenhills in Tallaght, Co Dublin



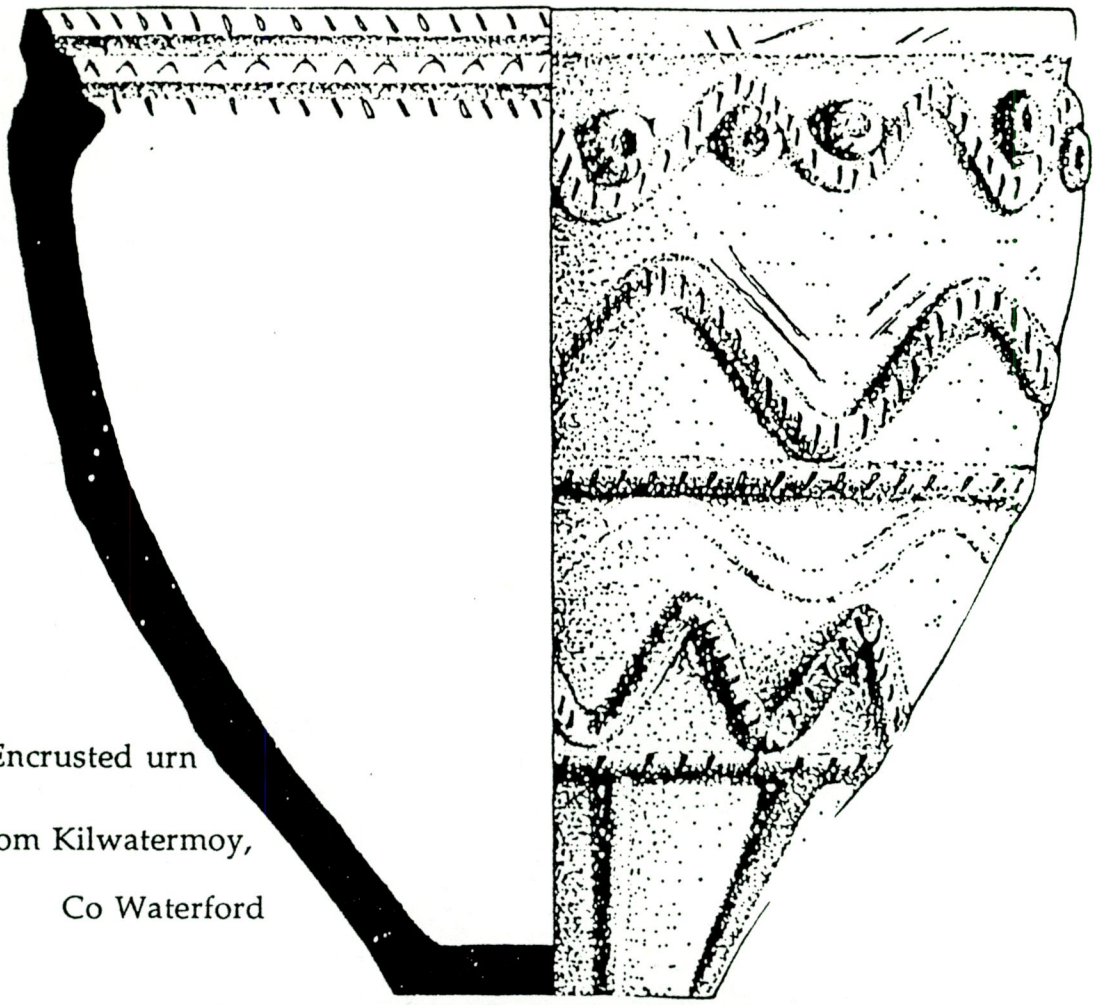


They are predominantly associated with cremated burials which were placed in unmarked pits and cists. The peoples who used them did not build cemetery mounds or any permanent structures above ground to mark their burials. They occasionally inserted their burials into mounds erected by the 'bowl food vessel users' and into neolithic passage graves *(9,p.135)*. The vase food vessel tradition appears to be a hybrid of the earlier bowl food vessel tradition and the Beaker tradition which was possibly contemporary.

## CINERARY URNS

Though the practice of putting the cremated remains into accompanying vessels began in the early bronze age with 'food vessels', (a few such examples have been recorded) a strong cinerary urn tradition appears in the middle bronze age. Despite its native influence this is a new and exotic practice. There is a change in the role of the vessel in the presence of death, with less attention being paid to cist construction, as inverted urns take their place as protectors of and houses for the dead. These vessels are the largest sepulchral vessels known in Irish prehistory, they are usually between 20 and 50 cms in height. There are two major traditions where urns are prominent, the first category encompasses 'enlarged food vessels' and 'encrusted urns'. This tradition is linked to that of the earlier food vessels. *(Fig 28)*. Secondly there are 'collared urns' and cordoned urns' which appear to have been derived from the Wessex culture of Southern England. These separate traditions have differences in the form and decoration of the urns and in their burial contexts.

Encrusted and enlarged food vessel urns are rather top heavy forms with large bellies, wide rims and narrow bases. *(Fig 29)* The fact that they are ill designed to stand on these bases would lead one to presume that they were made especially as funerary urns. They are the most commonly found cinerary urn in Ireland, and are on average about 30cms high. The encrusted urn is so named because of its applied decoration in the form of relief bands and knobs. A limited range of motifs are used, mainly chevrons, hollow disks, horizontal and vertical lines, herring bone and basketry designs. Often the applied ribs look like poles on miniature wigwams. Such skeumorphic references possibly played a part in the symbolic life of these vessels. Like the earlier food vessels the encrusted



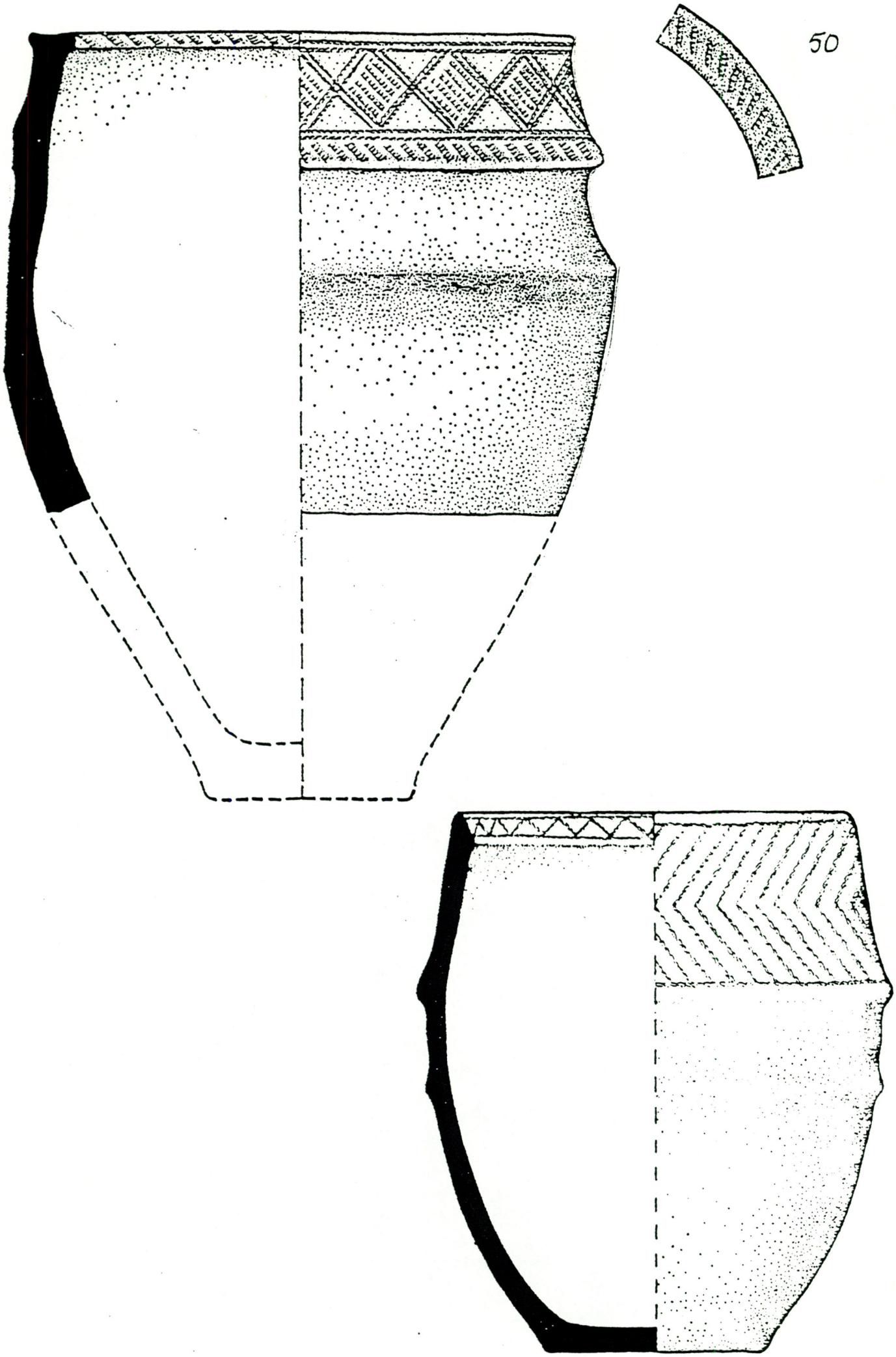
29 Encrusted urn from Kilwatermoy, Co Waterford

28 Enlarged food vessel urn and vase food vessel in a cist from Greenhills in Tallaght, Co Dublin

and enlarged food vessel urns were often found deposited in neolithic megalithic tombs. Usually these urns were the sole pottery accompaniment in a burial but occasionally they were interred with food vessels. Other grave accompaniments include quartz and crystal pebbles, these objects were also traditional grave accompaniments in neolithic times. Bone pins, imitating metal types, small metal rivited daggers and occasionally faience beads and battle axes were included in these assemblages. Encrusted and enlarged food vessel urns are mainly found in the north and east of the country. Scotland is seen to have influenced this tradition, which on becoming established in Ireland, influenced Welsh sepulchral traditions *(20,pp 523-24)*.

The second category of urns are 'collared' and 'cordoned' urns. *(Fig 30)* The 'collared urn' is a tripartate vessel of collar neck and body. Its decoration rarely extends below the collar and neck. Decoration is made up from the same basic geometric motifs as those previously described, occasionally the urns were undecorated. Though they are found hundreds of miles apart, these vessels show a marked similarity and could be the work of one potter or group. *(21,p.229)*. Many of these urns have been found in multiple cemetery sites in Ulster and Leinster. They were occasionally accompanied by food vessels. A burnt clay lining, found in many of the pits where these vessels were interred, indicates that cremations probably often took place in the final burial place. The main gifts associated with these burials are bronze daggers, razors, knives and bone pins. This type of urn is commonly found in Britain where it is associated with uncremated burials, however in Ireland and Scotland it appears only to be associated with cremations. *(21,pp.300 - 302)*.

Cordoned urns are directly related to collared urns and appear to mimic them in the way that the cordons are applied to the vessel as strips of clay. Here again the decoration is limited to the upper portion of the vessels, the designs also being similar. The type of grave goods closely follow those of a typical collared urn. Inhumed remains have been found as well as cremations with these burials. Many cinerary urns had holes placed near their rims which might have been used to tie skins over the urns. *(20,p.513)*. They may also have served as 'soul holes' like the holes made in mimbres burial pottery *(28,p.196)*.




30 Collared and cordoned urns from Kyllycreen, Co Antrim and Gorteen, Co Louth

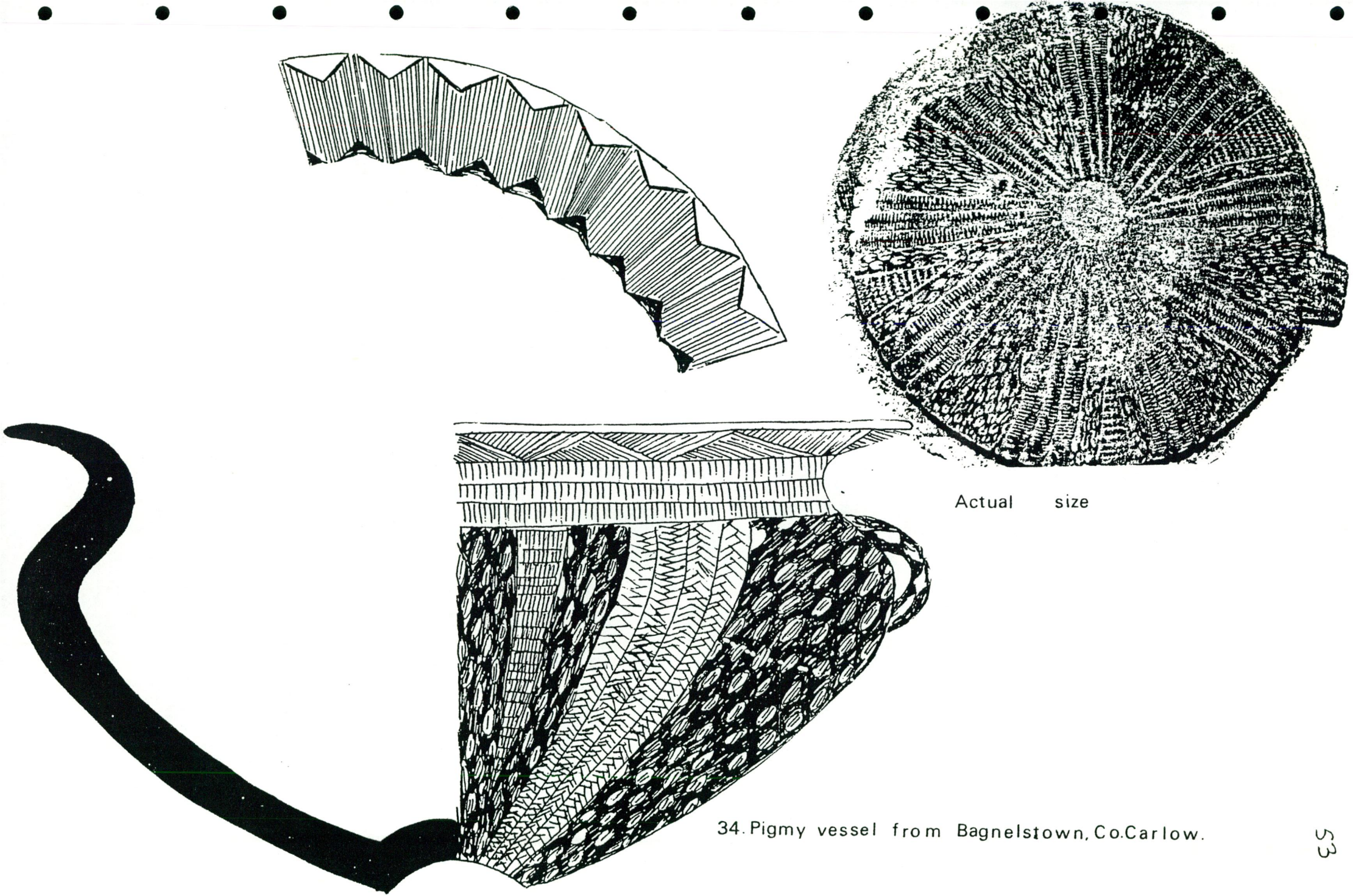
There is one more type of sepulchral pottery whose presence must be mentioned; and that is the 'pigmy cup' so called, because of its tiny size of less than 5cm in height. Their form and geometric decoration varies. They are generally present as grave accompaniments but in some cases, they were the sole accompaniments. Often they are found with cinerary urns and / or food vessels. Some of the cups have open areas and possibly held sweet smelling substances or incense. The use of these beautiful little cups was a trend which was probably introduced from Britain where they make their earliest appearance in the Wessex culture. *(21,p.76)*.

## ACCOMPANYING OBJECTS

Many similar types of objects have been found with cinerary urns, and it can be presumed that their interral was part of this cinerary urn tradition, in which they had a symbolic function. Axes and daggers appear frequently. In Spain, research has shown that axes and daggers are associated with male burials while small knives, awls and bronze and silver pendants were associated with female burials*(8,pp223-224)*. A similar situation may exist in Ireland. Many of the earliest metal weapons from western Europe appear to have been ceremonial or display objects, attested to by the fact that a large proportion of those found had never been sharpened. *(Fig 31)* Perhaps much of the mysterious power attributed to these objects is related to the nature of metal - that of stone, transformed by fire. Stone objects at this time still appear to have retained their symbolic importance. Robert Graves suggests that 'tanged arrowheads', frequently found in neolithic and bronze age graves, are so badly designed for utility that they must have been intended for magical or ceremonial use. *(Fig 32)* He links this type of arrowhead to the worship of an underworld goddess *(16,p.385 - 387)*. The common presence of stone wristgurads might also point to a ceremonial function. Semi-precious stones are another frequent inclusion in urn burials as they were in earlier neolithic burials. They may have been believed to have held magical properties, such beliefs have been popular right up to present times.

Although there is a diverse multitude of funerary practices throughout Europe at this time, there are some unifying features such as the dominant rite of inhumed burial as well as the practice of placing the dead under barrows or mounds. In the most isolated westerly parts of Europe,

31 Dagger from Ashgrove in Fife, Scotland with reconstructed replica.




34. Pigmy vessel from Bagnelstown, Co.Carlow.

North and West Britain and Ireland the ancient rite of cremation was most commonly practiced. More isolated again was the West of Ireland where we see the last stronghold of the megalithic burial tradition in the wedge tomb. There was much contact between Ireland, Britain, France, Scandanavia, and Iberia. Because of their proximity to the sea which allowed them to travel easily. In England and France the bronze age is seen to have allowed the development of a new system of secular power, linked to new economic and technological mechanisms. Because early rich individual burials in England avoid areas where megaliths are common, it is believed that this new secular power was at odds with the power systems associated with megalithic monuments *(7,pp81 - 127)*. In Ireland and Northern Britain a conflict such as this is not apparent. According to legend the high kings of Ireland at this time were buried in neolithic passage graves such as Tara. Burial traditions changed very slowly and were more complex, as each new wave of influence became mixed with the older indigenous culture.

In the later bronze age, in Ireland, the practice of burying the dead in a formal manner became less important. A climatic deterioration at this time brought increased rainfall and cooler temperatures. This must have disrupted newly established agricultural patterns. The formation of blanket bogs was caused by temporary lakes forming in lowland wooded areas which rotted and destroyed the trees. The factors which caused the formation of bogs would also have led to changes in settlement patterns. At this time all traces of burial practices seem to have disappeared. The cremated remains or bodies of the dead were now simply placed in unmarked pits with little or no accompaniments *(28p.210)*.

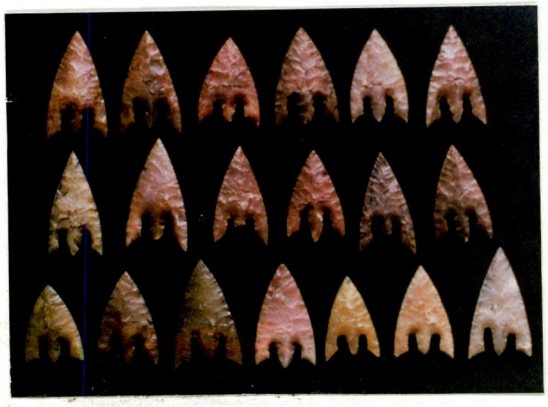
One outstanding burial, where the formal element has not entirely disappeared is to be found in Rathgall, Co Wicklow. Here a circular enclosure is surrounded by a shallow ditch of about 18 metres in diameter with an opening to the south. In the centre of the circle there are signs of a cremation pyre under which we find a slab surrounded by stones, on this was placed the cremated remains of a youth. A setting of stakeholes forms and irregular band around this central area. This may have been some kind of mortuary structure. At each end of the arms of this u-shaped structure was a cremation in a pit; one contained the remains of a child, the other, had in it an upturned cource bucket shaped pot which

contained the remains of an adult and child. Numerous other pits were found nearby, their function is not known *(28,pp.210 - 212)*. The plan of this circular cemetery is like a map of the hilfort nearby, also delineated by a ditch, it had a central circling wall enclosing a circular house. Beneath the floor of this house there was a pit in which the remains of a cremation were found. Barry Raftery believes that these remains show evidence that human sacrifice was practiced here. *(29,p.28)*. Whether this practice was wide-spread is not known. As yet this type of site is unique in Ireland. It appears also to have been a centre for bronze and gold working.

Ritual extravagance on a similar scale to that of neolithic funerary practices appears again in the late bronze age in the practice of depositing valuable artifacts in lakes and rivers. Hoards are not necessarily only associated with the bronze age. It is quite possible that ritual hoards of less durable materials were thrown to the water deities of earlier times. There is evidence throughout Europe for water worship from mesolithic times, undoubtedly because of its life giving, healing and cleansing quality. Although hoards are not directly related to burial practices during the bronze age, they indicate as do the remains of sepulchral artifacts, possible religious beliefs of the people of this time. Evidence of a similar custom of depositing votive hoards appears in Britain and throughout Europe at this time. The fertilizing waters of rivers were often deified, 'Bonad' of the Boyne, 'Sequana' of the Seine and Brigantia or Brigit of the River Braint in Anglesey. The fact that Irish portal dolmens were often placed by rivers may indicate that water worship was part of the ritual associated with these tombs. In England many stone circles have avenues leading off them ending at rivers, the stone lined avenue leading from Stonehenge to the River Avon is an example of this. *(4,p.3)*

Ritual shafts dating from this period have been found in Britain, some may have been wells, but some were also dug. These deep pits often contain pottery and beads and the kind of objects which are commonly found in graves. A ritual shaft in Wilsford, near to Stonehenge is an interesting example which was placed in the centre of a burial mound, and when excavated was found to contain pottery bowls, amber beads, a wooden hod, buckets and a rope *(4,p.4)*.

Ritual shafts and votive hoards might illuminate the nature some of the commonly held religious beliefs at this time. The climatic deterioration at this time must have laid a profound effect on the way that people lived. Perhaps ideas about wrathful nature dieties who needed to be appeased developed. Worship of such Gods and Goddesses of the underworld might have taken over the role which ancestors had previously played as sources of wisdom and power. Hoards may have been offerings to the Gods, in return for favours believed to have been done, or as requests for favour. Perhaps also the popular custom of throwing pennies into wishing wells is related to this ancient practice.



32 Tanged and barbed flint arrowheads

33 Metalwork hoard of axes, a dagger and awls, from Knocknague, Co Galway

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to trace the development and function of Irish sepulchral art in prehistory. An examination of the tombs and the objects associated with them has revealed much about their function.

Where court cairn and passage grave traditions are strongly linked by their similar grave good assemblages, their communal nature and their preference for cremation; their plans point to important differences. The open court feature of court tombs suggests the interaction of a large section of the local community. Portal tombs mark the disappearance of the court, leaving only a burial gallery. The ceremonies associated with portal dolmens would have been carried on outside of the tomb structure. Thus we see the tomb becoming specifically a place for the dead. Passage grave forms exaggerate this separation of the living from the dead. Entering these secretive places is like entering the labyrinth of the earth to commune with the dead. The apparent openness and simplicity of court cairns contrasts with the secrecy and complexity which is suggested by passage graves.

The passage grave period harbours the roots of much Irish mythology. The ancestral tombs of neolithic times became houses for the Gods of bronze age times. Passage graves were built by powerful groups who dominated large areas. There is no evidence to point to aggressive domination by these peoples. It is more conceivable that through religion and ideology such power relations were given legitimacy. By controlling access to the ancestors and Gods, and presenting themselves as appropriate mediators, leaders could have become powerful.

Many passage graves were further separated from the world of everyday life and the living by the profuse decoration which adorned them. Just as stone was used to mark boundaries between the living and the dead, decoration may have been used to sanctify ceremonial objects. Everyday pottery from the bronze age tended to be undercoated while funerary pottery was generally decorated. This ceramic decoration like much of the decoration on passage graves may have had a protective, or tallismanic function.

Sepulchral tradition in the bronze age saw a loosening of the emphasis which had been placed on community solidarity in neolithic times when the bones of the dead were mingled together in their monumental tombs. Though bronze age burials were placed in cemetery groups and mounds the integrity of the individual body was maintained. Cremations were kept intact in the urns which housed them and inhumations were crouched in foetal positions.

Towards the middle of the bronze age we can see a mythology surrounding metal succeeding the mythology of stone. Mining the raw materials needed for metal were often located deep in the earth's core, might have caused a new array of Gods and goddesses of the underworld to be revered. Alchemic processes of transforming stone into metal with fire might have inspired more complex mythologies, like the myth about Goibniu, the divine smith in Irish mythology. His most significant attribute is the role he plays as host of the 'otherworld feast', those who partook in it were rendered exempt from age and decay *(24.n.35)*. Mythologies surrounding life giving cauldrons also abound from this time. The depths of the water and the bowels of the earth succeed the neolithic ancestral tombs as sacred places of devine communication.

## GLOSSARY

**Faience**

Faience if a manmade material which is mainly composed of copper, cobalt, and powdered quartz, which are ground together and fused with intense heat. Its manufacture is believed to have originated in the Mediterranean.

**Inhumation**

In the context of this essay, inhumation means the uncremated dead

**Matrilineal**

Matrilineal means a female social lineage

**Matrilocal**

This means that women stay in their own houses when they marry

**Orthostats**

Orthostats are large stone slabs

**Patrilineal**

Means a male social lineage

**Patrilocal**

In patrilocal societies, marriage partners live in the husbands house or village

**Swidden**

Swidden agriculture is that type which produces crops

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