

A Burial of the Bronze Age at Moyne, Co. Laois.

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Evidence of a prehistoric burial was accidentally discovered some years ago within the grounds of Moyne House, near Durrow, the home of Captain H.C.P. Hamilton.⁽¹⁾ Here, in 1952, when a septic tank was being sunk, workmen digging to a depth of about 5 feet found fragments of crude earthenware and some burnt bones. By the time they were brought to the notice of Captain Hamilton the construction of the tank had been completed thus making further investigation impossible. When the significance of the finds was recognised, Captain Hamilton kindly made them available for recording to the National Museum. They proved to be cremated human bones and shreds of a cinerary urn of the Bronze Age.

The small quantity of bones includes fragments of skull, portion of jaw bone, with tooth sockets, parts of rib and long bones. In all one individual is represented. The pottery is of thick, coarse, gritty ware, poorly fired. Very few shreds were recovered but they are sufficient to identify the type of urn to which they belonged. They indicate a large, wide-mouthed vessel with rim splayed outwards, it would probably have had a small, flat base. It is ornamented with impressions suggesting an 'ear-of-wheat' motif. In addition, there are traces of a pattern of moulded strips and flattened bosses applied to the surface. This method of decoration is characteristic of a group of cinerary urns known as Encrusted Urns.

The burial practice associated with Encrusted Urns follows a pattern. Usually the cremated remains were placed in the urn which was then inverted and deposited, mouth downwards, in a simple pit dug in the ground, occasionally resting on a slab. Sometimes a slab-lined grave was prepared for the deposit. The graves is generally in isolation without any indication overground of its presence. The Moyne cremation was probably placed in the urn which was then deposited, mouth downwards, in an unlined pit.

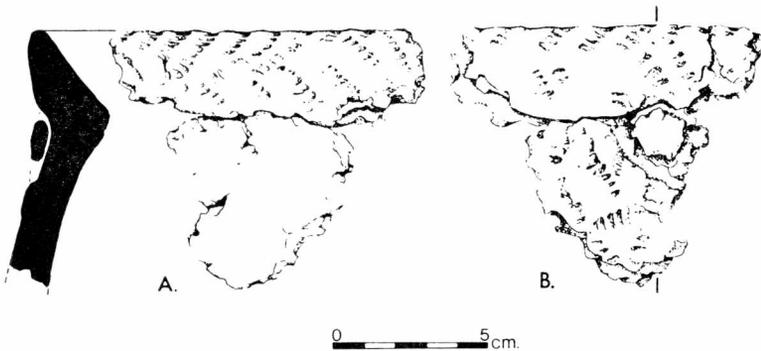
Similar burials in this region are scarce. The only other Encrusted Urn grave recorded for Laois occurred at Shanahoe. ⁽²⁾ There the urn had been inverted over a cremation laid on a slab in a pit. The nearest graves of the kind in Co. Kildare were at Mullaghreelein ⁽³⁾ near Kilkea and at Maganey ⁽⁴⁾. Each produced an Encrusted Urn which had been inverted over a cremation on a slab. At Maganey the deposit was protected by a polygonal cist. More recently, at Strawhall ⁽⁵⁾ near Carlow two Encrusted Urns came from separate stone graves, one a polygonal cist, in a small cemetery. Further away, at Knocklishen Beg ⁽⁶⁾ near Rathvilly, the urn inverted over the cremation was protected by two slabs propped against each other. These examples illustrate some of the variations in the grave structure.

There are only two instances of Encrusted Urn burials recorded for Co. Kilkenny. The first came from Ballygub ⁽⁷⁾ near Clonamery in the 1840s. Here, underneath a flag was "found a neatly formed vault enclosing an urn of ancient pottery, turned on its mouth and having under it cremated bone".

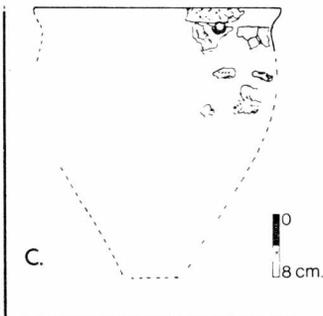
The second was at Tobernabrone (8) in Fiddown parish, where the urn with a "mass of incinerated bones was placed in a small cavity, regularly walled around" according to the account of its discovery.

Burials in Encrusted Urns occur elsewhere in Ireland, their distribution being concentrated to the East and North-East areas, and spreading into the southern midlands. The Moyne grave emphasises this distribution pattern. Further afield, their distribution extends into Wales, the Isle of Man, the North of England and as far as Scotland.

The people who used Encrusted Age communities in Ireland and beyond, between 1,000 and 2,000 B.C. Not much is known, as yet, of their way of life though their graves are distinctive. The cremated bones have been identified as representing a child of 8 years by Professor C. A. Erskine, Department of Anatomy, Trinity College, Dublin, to whom we are grateful for his report. When a comprehensive study of burial practices of the period is available, the significance of the Moyne finds may be interpreted more precisely. (9)



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Moyne urn. Rim fragment (A) inside with cross-section and (B) outside. Inset (C) tentative reconstruction of outline.

1. the site of the grave is in Moyne Demesne, townland Moyne, parish Durrow, barony Clarmallagh, Co. Laois. The coordinates on the Ordnance Survey 6" sheet no. 29 for Laois are 24.50 cm. from South, 43.80 cm. from West.

2. Jour. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Irel. 76, 1946, 210-212.

3. Jour. Kildare Archaeol. Soc., 2, 1896-9, 325-7.

4. Jour. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Irel., 92, 1962, 169-173.

5. Carloviana, 1, no. 4, 1955, 22.

6. Jour. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Irel., 75, 1945, 259-263.

7. Ibid., 1, 1849-51, 28.

8. Ibid., 15, 1879, 55-6.

9. For the present record of a new Encrusted Urn burial, a tribute is due to Captain H.C. P. Hamilton and his workmen, and to Mr. T. Hoyne of Webbsborough; also to Miss Rhoda Kavanagh, M.A., University College, Dublin, for her generous assistance and to Miss Rosaline Murphy who prepared the drawing.

The National Museum is greatly indebted to Captain Hamilton for generously presenting the material from Moyne (Reg. Nos. 1973 : 55, 56).

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