

# Tumulus in Jerpoint West : Preliminary Note

By Michael Fitz G. Ryan, National Museum of Ireland

THE tumulus<sup>1</sup> was situated on the lands of Mr. Edward Follis<sup>2</sup> of Jerpoint West. The monument, a large mound, ca. 24m. in diameter, was partly destroyed in bulldozing operations on 26th March, 1971, the superficial layers of soil being removed over two thirds of the area of the site to a maximum depth of 1. 20m. In the process the stones of a large polygonal cist were discovered. This was examined by Mr. A. B. Ó Ríordáin of the National Museum and subsequently by Mr. P. Healy of Sandy-mount, Dublin, who prepared plans of the monument. It was decided to mount a rescue excavation and operations were begun on 19th April, 1971, and continued for six weeks. Five workmen were employed and the writer was assisted initially by the late Mr. Michael Mullaney of the National Museum and subsequently by Miss Claire Foley, B.A., a post-graduate student of the Department of Archaeology, University College, Dublin.

A total of 101 sq. metres was fully tested and the superficial layers over a wider area were partly excavated. The following facts have been established with regard to the site :

- (1) The floor of the cist was bedded on Old Ground Level; the side-stones were set in sockets, excavated through O.G.L. into the subsoil. Although the grave was slightly off-centre it may be taken as the primary feature on the site.
- (2) The mound was carefully constructed as follows :-
  - (i) In the immediate vicinity of the cist the tumulus was composed of a deposit of fairly regular limestone slabs all pitched upwards in the direction of the grave.
  - (ii) The whole was covered by a mantle of soil in which a high proportion of sod occurred. At intervals throughout this deposit thin layers of stones occurred.
  - (iii) At one point three concentric arcs of stones were uncovered; one of them marked the perimeter of the tumulus. The stones of these arcs rested on the Old Ground Level. Between these arcs radially-set stones occurred.
- (3) Detailed examination of the stratigraphy of the mound confirmed that the monument<sup>3</sup> was a one-period construction.

The cist contained two burials, one cremated, the age and sex not being determinable, the other, unburned, being that of a young adult male.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that the two burials were contemporary and not successive. Examples of double burials in cists (one a cremation and one an inhumation) are known in the Early Bronze Age.<sup>5</sup>

Finds comprised portions of several pottery vessels, an incomplete bone pin and half a leaf-shaped arrowhead of flint. One of the vessels appears to have been round-bottomed and biconical in shape. It is heavily decorated with channelled ornament disposed in vertical and horizontal zones. There were apparently six rudimentary lugs arranged in pairs about the body of the vessel just below the shoulder. The decoration of the vessel has features in common with Neolithic wares and also with Early Bronze Age (Food Vessel) pottery. Related pottery is known from megalithic tombs and from single graves of Late Neolithic Ireland.

A second vessel is undecorated. It appears to be a typical "Western Neolithic" pot. It had a round bottom, a shoulder and a slightly everted, rounded rim. Similar pottery occurs widely throughout Ireland in the Neolithic period. The leaf-shaped arrowhead is typical of Neolithic times in this island while bone pins are known from Passage Graves and also from the late Neolithic site at Caherguillamore, Co. Limerick.<sup>6</sup>

The grave goods from Jerpoint West are of interest in that they show us the traditions of the Early Neolithic undergoing change. The affinities of the decorated vessel have already been pointed out but the form of the burial itself is also a break with the earlier traditions of the Neolithic (i.e. communal burial in large megalithic tombs) and anticipates the single-burial rite so common in the Early Bronze Age.

On general grounds a tentative date of about 2000 B.C. may be proposed for the Jerpoint West burial.

1. Td. Jerpoint West, par. Jerpoint West, bar. Gowran, O.S.6", Kilkenny, 28.
2. The National Museum is grateful to Mr. Follis for reporting the discovery, for granting permission to excavate, and for his generous donation of the material recovered.
3. The National Museum is indebted to Dr. Michael Conry of An Foras Talúntais, Carlow, for the examination and comments on the soils of the site.
4. The Museum wishes to express its gratitude to Professor C. Erskine, Professor of Anatomy at Trinity College, Dublin, for his examination of the human remains from Jerpoint West.
5. Waddell, J., *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 100 (1970), 98.
6. Hunt, J., "Prehistoric Burials at Caherguillamore, Co. Limerick," *North Munster Studies* 27, Fig. 5 : 316 and 317.