

THE BALLYNOE STONE CIRCLE AND CAIRN

The decision to excavate at Millin Bay was to some extent conditioned by superficial similarities that could be observed between this monument and the cairn enclosed by the stone circle at Ballynoe, situated some eleven miles to the south-west in the Lecale peninsula. It is therefore necessary to give some account of the latter site, which was excavated on behalf of the Ministry of Finance in 1937-8 by Dr. A. E. van Giffen, but the task is complicated by the absence of a detailed report of the excavation, an omission which after a lapse of sixteen years is, to say the least, unfortunate*.

The site at Ballynoe comprises three essential elements (fig. 15) :—

(a) A circle of closely-set orthostats, just over 100 feet in diameter, with two orthostats, 7 feet apart, placed 10 feet outside the circle on the west. On the north-east and south-west are two outliers, 28 feet and 124 feet, and 26 feet and 147 feet, respectively from the circle.

(b) An arc, open to the east, comprising at least six orthostats, measuring 35 feet across the chord, placed about 8 feet within the circle on the west.

(c) An oval mound, eccentrically placed within the circle (a), defined by a stone kerb, the longitudinal axis of which, aligned east—west, when projected more or less bisects the arc (b) and the pair of orthostats outside the circle on the west.†

It is the mound (c) which concerns us here and it was this structure that was examined during the excavations of 1937-8 (fig. 16). The area, oval in shape, defined by the stone kerb was about 58 feet from east to west and 46 feet from north to south. Centrally placed within the kerb but not occupying the whole area enclosed by this feature was a stone built cairn, about 2 feet 6 ins. in maximum height, measuring about 43 by 30 feet, the edge of which more or less followed the line of the oval kerb. Covering the cairn to a height of about 3 feet 6 ins., and extending as far as the kerb, was a deposit of stoney soil, which concealed a number of small boulders, described by the excavator as “baetyls, or a kind of miniature ‘menhirs indicateur,’” set into the old surface level between cairn and kerb.

*Apart from brief notices in *Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, 3 (1937) 453 ; 4 (1938), 32, the only details of the excavation available to the writers are contained in a short report on the 1937 work submitted, as required by the conditions of the licence to excavate, by the excavator to the Ministry of Finance. This report is accompanied by a plan and sections of the cairn. Of the 1938 season, no adequate record is available and repeated requests to Dr. van Giffen for further information have unfortunately been ignored. In the circumstances the writers have no option but to present a summary account of the results of excavation based on the information available to them.

†The survey on which the plan, fig. 15, is based was carried out in September, 1954. The mound now extends considerably beyond the stone kerb on the west, as shown, but it seems certain that this prolongation is not an original feature and must be due to the dumping of spoil from the excavation. The writers understand that Dr. van Giffen carried out a certain amount of restoration on the completion of digging, but most of this work was done after his departure from the site. Professor E. E. Evans informs the writers that prior to the excavation the mound, as might be expected, did not extend beyond the limits of the stone kerb. A sketch survey of the site before 1937 by Professor Evans is fortunately in existence.

At the east, and perhaps the west, end of the cairn was a stone-built cist. The eastern cist measured about 5 by 2 feet internally, and was enclosed on three sides by large single orthostats and covered by a large capstone. The entrance to the cist appeared to face eastwards and was provided with a sill-stone and closed by flat slabs. The cist contained what is rather ambiguously described as a "primary interment consisting among other things of calcined bones," this burial deposit being covered by a large flat stone. The western cist appeared to have been disturbed and was filled with soil from which cremated bone was recovered; it is not clear whether this cist was set into the material of the cairn structure, and it is possible that it should be regarded as a secondary feature. In both cases, it appears that the contents of the cists were not fully investigated in 1937, but that detailed examination was postponed until the following year, with results that are not known. In 1937, a few cremated bones, not necessarily human, were found beneath the cairn, but no other finds were made. A single potsherd, illustrated in pl. XIV : 3 evidently the sole artifact recovered during the whole excavation, was presumably found during 1938, but no details of its find-spot are available.

Despite our sadly inadequate knowledge of the details of the excavation, we can, however, point to two features of the Ballynoe cairn that have parallels at Millin Bay, firstly the oval plan of the Ballynoe monument and secondly the presence there of the so-called "baetyls," which appear to be similar in character to the "small stone settings" at Millin Bay. In the case of the Ballynoe "baetyls," it should be noted that the excavator was of the opinion that they originally stood exposed between cairn and kerb, and that the stony soil found covering them was a secondary deposit "consisting of earth which had come down from the cairn." Inspection of the available sections of the mound, however, seems to suggest that the whole of the structure is contemporary, but to disagree with the excavators interpretation would clearly be unwise in the absence of full details.

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Ballynoe (Legamaddy) Stone circle or Cromlech Co. Down

This stone circle is close to Ballynoe Station and about three miles from Downpatrick. It is a complete circle of 45 large stones with a diameter of about 100 feet. Inside this is an ellipse of 22 smaller stones about 90 feet by 40 feet.

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Ulster Antiq. The stone Age, Dec. 1924, p.p. 18 and p. 26, Fig. 8.

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Ballynoe td, Stone Circle 1)

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About 3 m. S. of Downpatrick and $\frac{1}{4}$ m. N.W. of Ballynoe Station, from which a lane leads directly to it. Down, Sh. 37, Plan 16, Tr 2, Alt. 100. This monument is of the greatest importance, as it forms a kind of missing link between the so-called "henge" monuments and the grave mounds. Perhaps the finest megalithic structure surviving in Northern Ireland, it stands in cultivated lowland less than 100 ft. above sea. It consists of an outer ring of massive stones up to 7 ft. in height set in a true circle the external diam. of which is 108 ft. The uprights are irregular in shape and arrangement: they are often in contact but some are collapsed and some apparently removed. They are set in places around a low mound but this may in part not be an original feature. On the W. side are two external uprights 9 ft. from the circle and 7 ft. apart: opposite them, 19 ft. away and inside the circle is a crescent of 5 smaller extending for 28 ft. and acting as a kerb to a raised platform which, occupying the rest of the circle, serves to level its interior since the ground outside is sloping down to the W. On this platform, which is 3 ft. high at the W. end, is an oval cairn 48 ft. by 60 ft. surrounded by a kerb 2 ft. high, occupying the E. side of the circle and set on same ^{the} axis as the crescent and external uprights. It is 3 to 4 ft. in height. The stones of the outer circle are nearly all composed of local Silurian grit but a few are granite erratics. Two of the fallen stones have large cupmarks, most probably not artificial.

Several outlying stones occur near by: while some may be natural boulders, others are set upright. Two on the N. are aligned at distances of 8 and 40 yds. from the circle: and two others on the S. stand at the same distances. Another outlier on the S.W. is 40 yds. from the circle and there are others on the N.W. The cairn was excavated in 1937 and 1938 by Dr. van GIFFEN and two cist burials found in the ~~margin~~ edge of the cairn. Except a sherd of early type, nothing was found in the cairn itself. This sherd, so far the only indication of the date of this monuments, places it provisionally in the neolithic period. Vested in Ministry of Finance. Plate 29.

M.G.E.E.E. A.E. van G.

1) CHART, D.A., etc.: A prelim. surv. of the anc. monum of N. Ireland, 1940, p. 120-121.

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