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Bronze Age Compartmented Cist with Urns, Glenacunna, Co. Tipperary

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SUMMARY

Bulldozing uncovered a compartmented cist and destroyed a second grave nearby; each of the two compartments of the cist had an inverted urn containing burnt human remains. A miniature pot was found in the more elaborate of the two urns. The find may be dated to the early bronze age c. 1700-1400 BC.

DISCOVERY

On 29 November 1975 a bulldozer revealed two graves 12m apart in Glenacunna Td., near Grangemoekler, Co. Tipperary.¹ The driver, Mr. Michael O'Brien, was clearing away a field fence just below the 700' contour as part of a land reclamation project and dug a hole just north of the fence to bury some stones. In the course of digging the hole, at a depth of about 60cm below the general level of the field, the bulldozer blade uncovered and displaced what turned out to be the capstone of a cist. Unfortunately the capstone or the blade then crushed an urn which had been in the eastern compartment of the cist (Urn A) and displaced the stones which formed the sides of the cist in this area. The urn in the western compartment (Urn B) remained complete and *in situ*.

The landowners, Messrs Walshe, immediately notified the local Land Reclamation Officer, Mr. Michael Kelly, and the Gardai.

On the afternoon of the discovery I examined the site and found the complete urn cracked and very fragile. In view of its condition and of the damage being done inadvertently to the site by interested visitors, I immediately bound up the complete pot and removed it. I also collected the bones inside it and as much as possible of the broken urn and bones associated with it. Most of the sherds had been gathered together by the finders and placed in the western compartment of the cist; together with a miniature pot 5.6cm high, which the bulldozer driver said had been mixed with the cremated bones inside the broken urn. Many specks of bone still adhered to the pot, substantiating the claim that it had been found in the urn.

12m west (290°) of the cist was another grave which was so severely damaged by the bulldozer as to make a survey impossible; the damage was made worse because of the wet sticky nature of the clay and by the trampling of sightseers.

The grave appeared to be a circular pit about 75cm in diameter, and was partially or wholly lined with small slabs and/or dry stone walling. Some cremated bone was collected from the area of the grave. These represent one adult (see Appendix I).

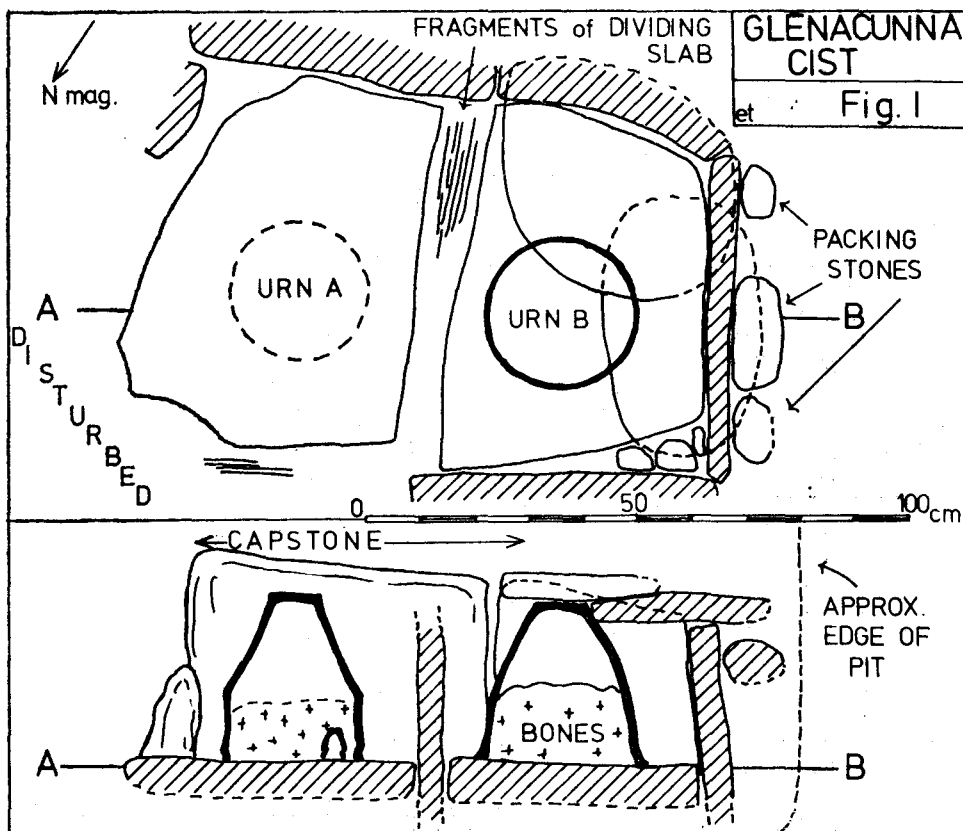
¹ Exact location; Glenacunna Td., Garrangibbon Ph., Slievardagh By., Co Tipperary. O.S. 6, Sheet 78. 77.5cm from W margin, 60.6cm from S margin.

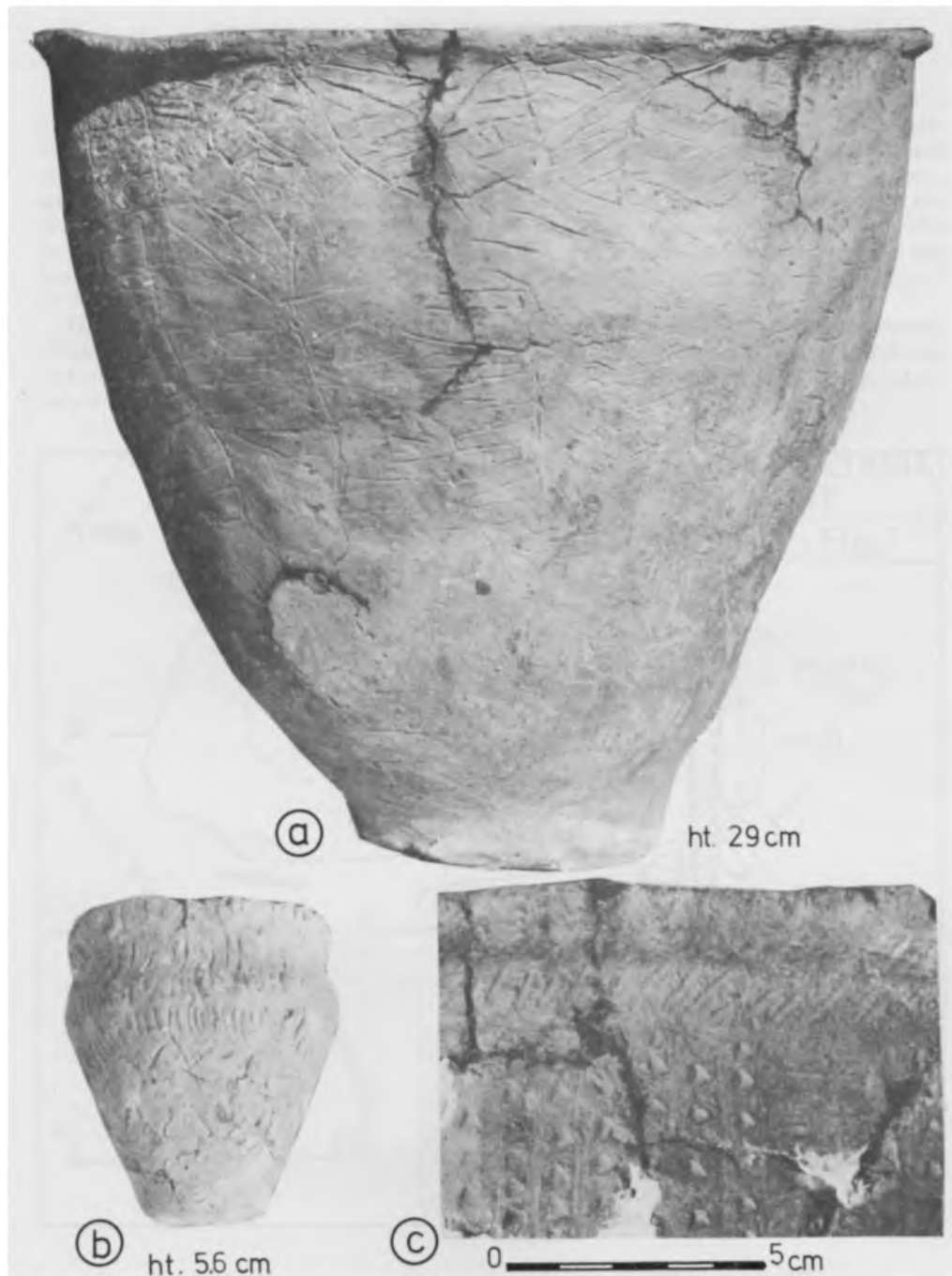
GIST STRUCTURE

(figs. 1 and 2)

The cist was constructed in a specially dug pit, the western end of which was discernible. The cist was approximately rectangular in plan, measuring internally about 110cm east-west and 70cm north-south. The sides of the cist were constructed of upright stones, of which five remained at the time of investigation. At least two, and possibly three, upright stones had been removed from the northeast corner of the cist by the bulldozer. Part of the base of one of these stones was found *in situ*. The base of an upright stone which had divided the cist into its two compartments was found and the remains of the actual stone were identified near the cist: what remained of the stone measured 43cm x 28cm and it was 8cm thick.

The approximate edge of the pit dug to contain the cist was located at the west end. Three packing stones were found between the side of the pit and the upright end slab of the cist. These packing stones were not removed and there may have been others below them.





Pl. I Pottery from the Glenacunna cist burial :

- a. Urn B b. miniature pot c. Urn A detail of rim and neck.

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Each compartment of the cist had a single floor slab; in the west compartment the slab was 9cm thick and in the east 8cm thick. The floor slab did not completely reach the north west corner of the western compartment and the space was filled by three small cobble stones.

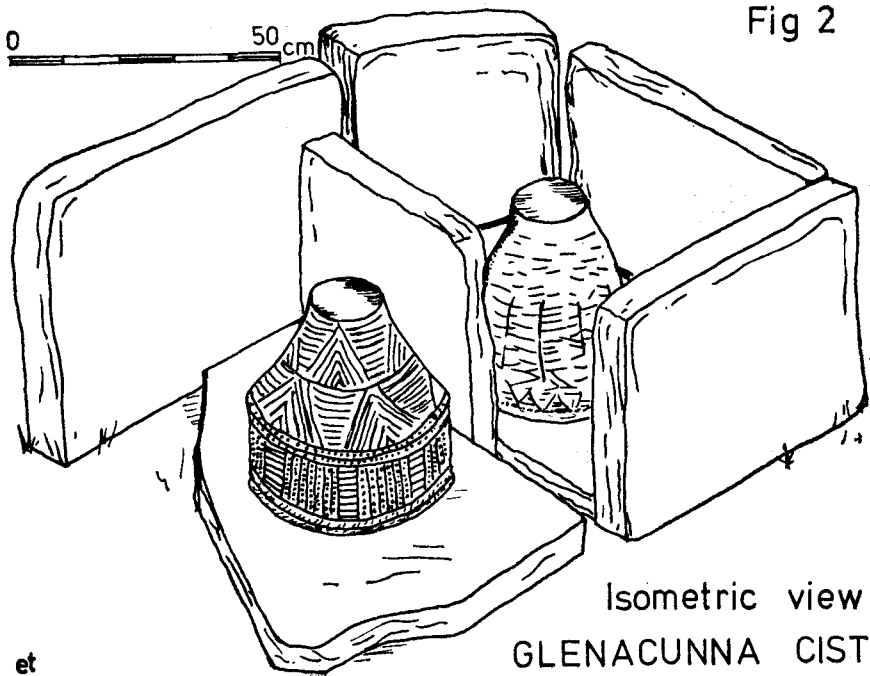
The cist had been roofed by a capstone 105cm x 60cm x 15cm thick. At the south-western corner of the cist two corbel slabs were in position, and it is likely that the main capstone partly overlaid these. The corbels covered about half of the area of the western compartment.

THE FINDS

(fig. 3 and pl. 1)

1. *Urn A*

The urn had been set in an inverted position and covered a quantity of cremated bones in the eastern compartment of the cist. A piece of cloth or leather must have covered the mouth of the pot when it was placed in the cist so as to prevent the bones from falling out when the urn was inverted. As already noted, the urn also contained a miniature pot. The urn was completely broken by the collapse of the capstone (or by the bulldozer blade). A number of sherds had already been collected by the finders but a search in the disturbed soil north east of the cist yielded several more sherds. The bones are those of a 15-16 year old individual (see Appendix I). The rim and neck of the pot survived best because the pot was inverted, while the base, being



uppermost, caught the brunt of the impact. Only one base sherd survives, and somewhat less than one third of the body.

The profile of the pot can be reconstructed with reasonable certainty. The height cannot be determined with certainty but was probably 30-33cm; rim diameter approx. 26cm; external base diameter 9cm; average thickness of body 15mm; thickness of base 19mm.

In profile the pot has a vertical neck with a narrow slightly out-turned rim and a slightly raised band just below the rim on the outside. It has an internally bevelled rim. The shoulder is very marked and the pot narrows sharply from there downwards. The foot protrudes slightly.

The decoration was executed before the pot was fired. On the internal bevel of the rim there are two horizontal rows of triangles impressed with an angular implement, probably a sharply pointed wooden stick. The apices of the triangles point to the left, suggesting that the potter impressed the triangles on the rim from left to right, with the implement held in the right hand.

Externally the decoration is arranged in four horizontal zones, rim and below, neck, shoulder and body. Just below the rim three horizontal rows of sloping lines are lightly scratched. The upper row runs from the very top of the pot to the centre of an incurved hollow. The second row runs from just below this to the top of a ridge while the third row is on the lower slope of the ridge. These lines were executed with a roughly pointed stick and were probably done with an upwards stroke from bottom left to top right, again with the implement held in the right hand.

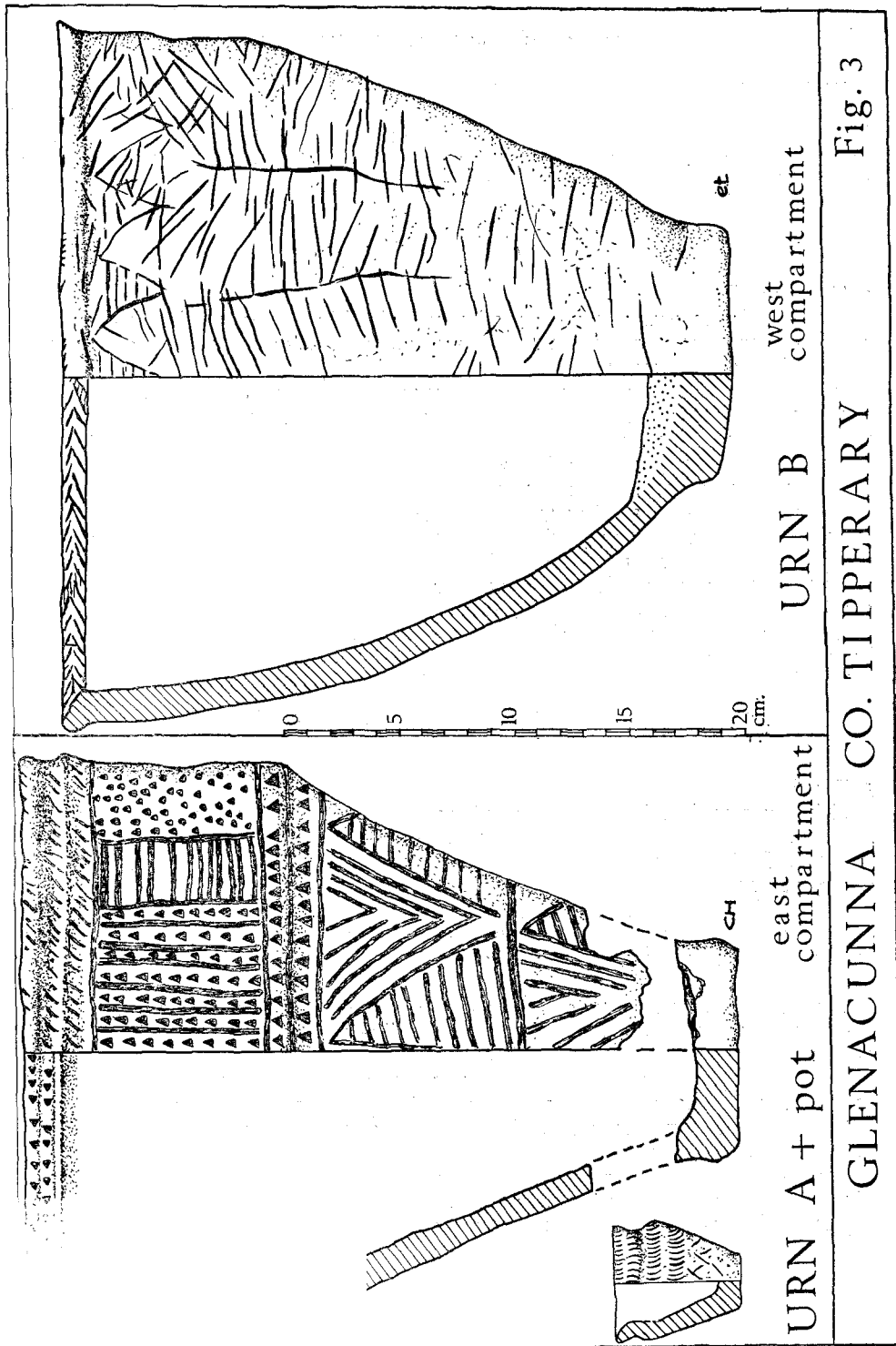
Below the sloping-line zone the neck decoration begins with a single scratched horizontal line. Below this the decoration is divided into panels, which take two forms; (1) Seven or eight horizontal lines, lightly scratched with a fibrous wooden implement which left fine striations along the line. These panels average 4cm in width, but one is only 3cm wide.

(2) Panels with vertical rows of impressed triangles. These are made in the same way as the triangles on the inner bevel of the rim. The apices nearly all point upwards. In most of the panels the rows of triangles are separated by vertical lines, made in the same technique as the horizontal lines in the panels described above. In at least two panels, however, the triangles are smaller and more haphazardly arranged with no vertical lines between them. This is shown on the right of the drawing in fig. 3.

A scored horizontal line defines the bottom of the decoration on the neck. A similar line runs round the point of the shoulder, and there is another just below on the body of the pot. A row of triangles, apices uppermost, is deeply impressed in each of the spaces between the scored lines, immediately above and below the shoulder.

The body of the pot is decorated with lightly scored infilled triangles, in at least two zones. The exact pattern is difficult to determine on the lower part of the body because of the loss of sherds. The upper zone appears to have pendant triangles infilled with chevrons. The erect triangles formed between these are infilled with horizontal lines. The lower zone seems to have been similarly arranged, its chevron-infilled triangles set below the horizontally infilled ones of the upper zone. The area immediately above the base is not decorated.

The fabric of the pot shows a considerable quantity of small sharp angular grits. The external and internal surfaces are quite smooth, so the pot may have been slipped before decoration. The inner surface shows very clear fine striae caused by smoothing the inside of the pot with a wad of grass or cloth, or possibly with the fingers.



Most of the striae run horizontally round the inside of the pot.

The pot was fired mouth downwards, and the outer surface is oxidized to a pinkish beige colour. The inner surface is black/brown in colour. In general the oxidization penetrated about half way through the pot, but the area below the shoulder is oxidized almost all through, while the base is less oxidized; in fact only 2mm of the 19mm thickness of the base is oxidized. Some traces of soot still adhere to the inner surface of the pot.

2 Miniature Pot

This was found with the cremated bones inside Urn A. It is 5.6cm high; rim diameter 5.05cm; external shoulder diameter 5.28cm; external base diameter 2.1 cm; average body thickness 8mm.

In profile the pot shows a plain slightly out-turned rim, and concave neck. It is widest at the shoulder and has a narrow base. It is comparatively thick, and internally the bottom of the pot comes to a rounded point.

The outer surface is decorated with four rows of finger nail impressions. The uppermost row is just below the rim and is quite short. The second row is in the hollow of the neck and there are two more rows on the body of the pot immediately below the shoulder. If the pot was held upright while being decorated then the impressions in the neck must have been done with the left hand, probably with the thumb nail, while the lower rows would have been done with the thumb of the right hand. However, if the pot was inverted during decoration the row on the neck would have been done with the right hand and the other two with the left hand. The lower part of the body has two zigzag lines roughly impressed with the nail.

The fabric of the pot is gritty and the surface is rough as a consequence. The whole pot is oxidized to a bright red colour, though this is less apparent on the external surface because the mud has not been washed off.

3 Urn B

This urn was found in an inverted position covering a substantial quantity of human bones in the western compartment of the cist. When inspected an attempt had already been made to lift out the pot but when its fragile condition became apparent, it was replaced. Accordingly all the bones contained in the urn were recovered. They have been identified as the remains of one adult male. (See Appendix I)

The pot is 29cm high; external rim diameter 31cm; external base diameter 11cm; thickness of body 13mm. Two cracks in the pot were filled with nitro-cellulose lacquer.

The pot has a somewhat rounded slack profile with slightly out-turned rim. The base is flat and the foot has a straight profile. The pot is somewhat lop-sided and the base is noticeably eccentric to the body.

The internal bevel of the rim is crudely decorated with a series of chevrons set one inside the other pointing to the right. They are roughly incised, and in places extend over the curve of the rim. In other places on the very edge of the rim a series of short lines are incised.

Externally below the rim there is a roughly incised zigzag line which forms a row of pendant triangles. Some of these are infilled with horizontal lines or parallel sloping lines. Below the triangles, round the middle of the pot, is a zone with vertical

scratched lines at intervals of 5-7cm. From each of these verticals a series of horizontal or slightly sloping lines is scratched to produce a sort of fish-bone pattern. The lower part of the pot has irregularly scratched horizontal and sloping lines. The lowest 4cm or so of the pot is undecorated.

The fabric of the pot is gritty, like Urn A and, again, it is oxidized externally but not internally. A sooty substance adheres to the inner wall of the pot and the inside of the base is extremely gritty and does not appear to have been effectively fired.

DISCUSSION

The Cist

Bronze age cist burials have been surveyed recently by Waddell (1970) who shows their distribution to be "biased towards the eastern half of the country". In fact he shows only six sites in Tipperary, but there are twenty in Kilkenny and there is a general spread eastwards through Carlow, west Wicklow to south Dublin. The Glenacunna example would thus fit best into the south west corner of this group of sites in south Leinster.

There is an old account of another cist in this area of Tipperary; though the exact location cannot be determined it must have been within a mile or two of Glenacunna. It seems to have been a short rectangular cist, covered by a capstone, and it contained "a large heap of ashes . . . but no remains of bones or anything else" (Keatinge, 1858-9, 11).

According to Waddell (1970, 97-98), 52% of the 637 cists recorded contained one or more pottery vessels, of which the majority (217 sites) contained food vessels, while only 47 contained cinerary urns. In regard to burial rite, cremations are about twice as frequent as inhumations.

The most interesting aspect of the Glenacunna cist is certainly the fact that it is compartmented. There is no question but that the whole structure was built as a unit, for the stones are of similar size throughout; the dividing slab was comparatively flimsy and could not have been an end slab with a second compartment added later, and, finally, the whole structure was covered with a single capstone. The nearest possible parallel is the cist at Royal Oak, Co. Carlow, but here the three cists may have been built at varying times, since they differ in size and plan. One of the compartments contained a bowl food vessel and another "an urn" (Vigors, 1887-8). Genuine compartmented cists are known only in Mayo, Cavan, Fermanagh and Tyrone (Waddell, 1970, 93-4 and Flanagan, 1973, 26). All except the Tyrone example occurred in flat cemeteries or cemetery mounds and all were smaller than the Glenacunna cist. Where the pottery was identifiable, it was of food vessel type.

The Pottery

Urns

Both the urns would be classified as belonging to the "enlarged food vessel" class of cinerary urn. In the absence of a *corpus* of such pottery it is difficult to discuss parallels for the urns, but a rapid search through the principal published sources has not revealed any close comparanda.

The name "enlarged food vessel" has been rejected by some writers, and Waddell has recently proposed the name "vase urn" for the group (forthcoming, 1976). He now recognises at least 89 examples in Ireland and divides them into three types.

Urn A from Glenacunna would approximate to his Type 1, and Urn B would be of Type 3, though the decoration is not typical. Like ApSimon (1969, 38), Waddell stresses the relationship of the vase urns to vase food vessels, but he also notes that they differ from the food vessels in that they are usually twice the size and the burial rites are different.

The miniature vessel

While the biconical form of miniature vessel is relatively well known in Britain and Ireland (Rynne 1963 and Savory, 1958), the vase form of the Glenacunna example is unusual. Some parallels may, however, be noted: Annaghkeen, Co. Galway, undecorated, 4.3cm high (Costello, 1907-8 and Waddell 1974-5); Greenhills, Co. Dublin, decorated, 10cm high (Plunkett, 1898-1900); Craighdhu, Fife, 5.4cm high, decorated (Scott, 1951, fig. 2).

These pots usually accompany cinerary urns, and as appears to have been the case at Glenacunna, they are often placed with the bones in the urn.

Dating

The dating of inurned burials in Britain and Ireland is now seen as spanning the central period of the second millennium B.C. In the absence of a good series of radio-carbon determinations it is difficult to specify exact dates, but the period 1700-1400 B.C. is accepted by most recent writers (Burgess, 1974 and Harbison, 1973).

APPENDIX I

CREMATED BONES FROM CIST-GRAVE GLENACUNNA, CO. TIPPERARY

Report by Prof. C. A. Erskine, Trinity College, Dublin

1. Grave West of Cist:

Comprises 60-70 fragments 2-3 cm of cremated bones of skeleton of one adult. A number of fragments recognised as head of metacarpal, head of mandible, section of ulna and scapula. Few skull fragments present.

2. East Urn Bones:

Fairly large number of cremated fragments of human skeleton of individual of 15-16 years. Fragments 2-3 cm and some larger pieces of 3-4 cm of limb bones and skull. One separated epiphysis of metacarpal found. Fairly large fragments of long bones present with head of thumb metacarpal and piece of talus. Skull fragments include parts of petrous temporal bone. A few pieces show blue staining.

3. West Urn Bones:

Large collection of cremated bone fragments 2-3 cm and 4-5 cm with a number of larger pieces: nine complete lumbar and thoracic vertebral bodies. All limb bones represented: femur, tibia, fibula, humerus, radius, ulna and hand and foot bones. In spite of large quantity only one individual identified: adult, male.

C. A. Erskine 30:3:76

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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