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The multi-period cairn at Cnoc Raithní, Inis Oírr, Aran Islands, Co. Galway

Dr. Keith Murphy

Fig 1



Introduction

We are fortunate in Ireland, to have embedded in our landscape, plenty of well-preserved examples of cairns and burial mounds. One such cairn was discovered after a storm on Inis Oírr, Aran, County Galway in the year 1885. Inis Oírr lies off the coasts of Galway and Clare and has been suggested to be an extension of the Burren. The islands terrain is composed of limestone pavements, isolated rocks, and crisscrossing cracks, much of which has been reclaimed as soil filled fields and plots. Some of the finest examples of ‘Glacio-Karst landscape exist on the island today’ (Jones 2004). The modern name for the island (Inis Oírr) was brought into use by Ordnance Survey Ireland as a compromise between the traditional local name (Inis Thiar) and the previous official name (Inis Oirthir). The words Thiar or Oirthir have been mentioned in the annals in relation to Aran and are translated to mean ‘Rear or Back Island’.

According to Irish mythology the first inhabitants of this tiny island where the Fir Blog (Monaghan 2014), who lived on Inis Oírr after being driven out of Ireland. The island has a rich

natural and cultural heritage including natural landscape and archaeology. Inis Oírr is rich in flora, history, folklore, island life and Christian heritage.

Today, the islands are accessible by sea or air and are serviced by modern piers and landing strips. In 1885 when the Rev. Murphy docked, the only landing place was near the beach on the north side of the island and could be 'only accessed in very fine weather' (Murphy 1886).

Otherwise, some of the local men met your vessel in their Currach's and you would have to maneuverer your way down into them, taking your chances on not ending up in the ocean or been trodden upon by cattle. Woman were instructed to remove their 'high heeled' shoes or boots for fear of piercing the Curragh and thus, causing a leak according to local folklore.

On the north shore of Inis Oírr during the month of June 1885, 'a great storm' blew sand away from a hill and an important archaeological site was revealed. Known locally as Cnoc Raithní (Hill of Ferns) it was used as a grazing patch for the local horses and after the storm had subsided, a mound or hillock was revealed. At the time of the storm, the Office of Public Works had a superintendent coincidentally called Murphy, on the island carrying out repairs to O'Brien's Castle. Rev. Denis Murphy, S.J. is the man who discovered the mound after the storm and carried out an investigation of the mound with the superintendent, rather than an excavation.

Figure 2



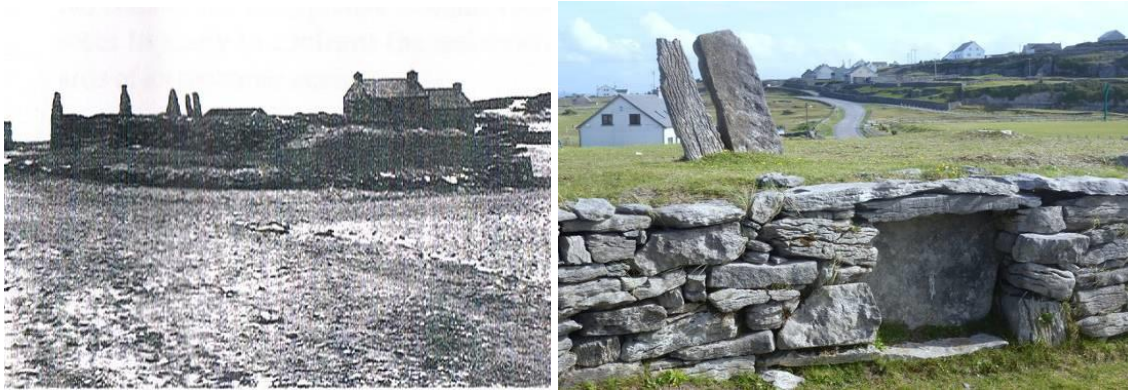
Rev Murphy (fig. 2) was a highly educated, well-travelled scholar and a man held in high esteem. Born in Co. Cork in 1833 he went on to receive his education in Clongowes College, Limerick before joining the Jesuit Order and becoming a novice in Toulouse, France in 1848. He continued his studies in Germany where he studied philosophy and then onto Wales and Spain to study theology. Rev Murphy became a teacher and lectured in Limerick and finally at University College, St. Stephens Green. A skilled historian, he maintained his love of the written word and contributed greatly to society on a literary level, with the publication of several books and articles in esteemed journals such as the Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy and the Kildare Archaeological Society, of which Rev Murphy was the vice-president and editor. In 1878 the now Dr. Murphy joined the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, was elected fellow in 1890, and vice-president in 1894, while also been a member in council of the Royal Irish Academy. On the 18th of May 1896 Rev Murphy S.J., LL. D, M.R.I.A. passed away leaving behind a legacy of ‘a man who could smooth away difficulties that would descant on history or the association of places visited and to encourage and help the beginner in historical or antiquarian study. Yet did his pleasantry never for a moment descend to levity unbecoming of his sacred calling’ (Obituary). Murphy published a short account of his endeavours on Inis Oírr, although this presents some difficulties in determining the detail of his discoveries and the sequence of activities he uncovered.

Discovery

The mound is close to the beach at the north end of Inis Oírr. It is recorded with the National Monuments Service as an ‘unclassified circular cairn revetted by a drystone wall’(Gosling 1993). A cairn is a heap or mound, ‘predominantly of stone, placed over and around ancient burial sites’ (Waddell 2014). Upon inspection it was found to be surrounded by the foundations of a wall, built with thick large stones and at a depth of ten feet from the surface. The foundations were laid bare and what appeared to be a two-tiered structure was exposed. The mound stands as a rough circular monument with a drystone wall, 20m in diameter. Another rough square tumulus 9m in diameter sat on top, also with a drystone wall edging. The wall in the upper tier had a large slab blocked ‘entrance’ and was surmounted by two small limestone pillars with a single lintel

(fig. 3). At the time of the discovery at Cnoc Raithní, both mounds had several upright slabs protruding from them unfortunately, only two survive on top of the square mound today.

Fig 3



When Rev. Murphy dug inside the mound beyond the wall, he reported coming across some tall stones, four feet in height set on end, and enclosing a circular space of about five feet in diameter. After carefully clearing away the sand between them, Rev. Murphy came upon the smaller of the two urns he discovered in what he described as a ‘sepulchral tomb’. The urn (figure 4, A) fell apart when he tried to remove it, however, thankfully ‘I was able to piece it all together and it is less than six inches (15.2cm) in diameter at its widest’ (Murphy 1886:478). Venturing further into the stone circle, the second and perhaps more impressive urn was found (figure 4, B). In 1885 this urn was the second largest in the National Museum in Dublin and at that time, these urns were considered to hail from Scotland. The smaller urn was open at both ends and due to its condition, did not appear to have much decoration on the exterior of the pottery. Decoration was, however, observed on the larger vessel in the form of circular mouldings and a diamond shaped design on the top moulding (fig.5). Both these ‘sepulchral urns’ contained what appeared to be cremated human bones and a small bronze pin or awl was described as coming from inside or close to the smaller vessel. Rev. Murphy also records that, in the north-west quadrant of the mound, upwards of 24 stone lined graves were discovered, each lying east west and covered by a stone slab. The complexity of the site suggests a multi-period construction and the details of the archaeological evidence identified in 1885, indicated a Bronze

Age burial mound that was re-used as a Christian burial site. Before, generously handing over the find to the Academy, Rev Murphy employed the services of a local blacksmith who (crudely and rather unusually) ringed both vessels with a thin piece of iron, enclosed with an iron rivet (fig. 6). This was presumably intended to keep the pots intact for the very long journey (at that time) to Dublin.

Figure 4 (A&B, as sketched by Wakeman, 1885)

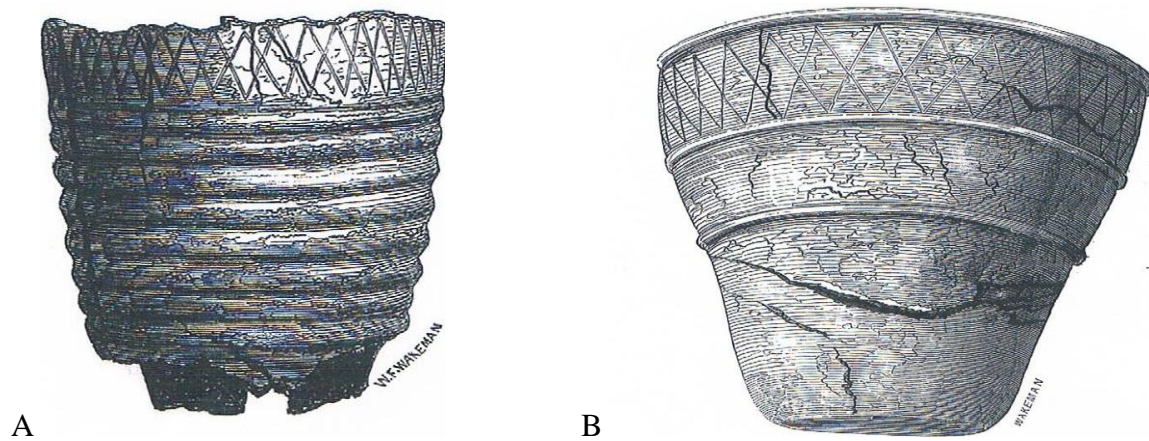


Figure 5



Figure 6



Discussion and Interpretation

As Ireland entered the Early Bronze Age; archaeological evidence shows that new burial customs were being practiced. Societies had stopped building megalithic tombs (although they were still sometimes used) and mounds or stone cists were now the favoured burial structures. Both inhumed remains as well as cremated burials have been discovered. The remains were often accompanied by pottery and less often by other grave goods, and in the later period the cremated remains were placed inside urns that were inverted in pits or cists. Early Bronze Age burials are frequently found in clusters forming cemeteries and these can be flat and unmarked or covered by cairns or mounds. Towards the south-east of Cnoc Raithní, two pottery vessels were found over cremated human bones. Alongside these was a small Bronze Age pin or awl. On this evidence it is reasonable to suggest that Cnoc Raithní was a prehistoric burial site reused by Early Christians on the island.

Wider Discoveries

In 1975 near Baile an Luirgáin, Inis Oírr, an unfinished stone ‘battle-axe’ was found. This resembles other finds in nearby Co. Clare, and it is suggested that these were not used as weapons or tools rather, as some form of ceremonial role and possibly symbols of prestige. It seems plausible to suggest that this find of an unfinished stone battle-axe is contemporary with Cordoned Urn burials.

This makes Cnoc Raithní one of the most significant sites on Aran, confirming human activity during the Early Bronze Age and is an example of multi-use of a burial tumulus by different cultural traditions over time. A bronzed socket axehead was discovered in a field in Formna village, Inis Oírr, indicating activity on Inis Oírr in the later Bronze Age period also. These are a ‘bronze socketed axehead, mounted in a bent wooden shaft’ (Waddell 1985:84). A loop may be

inserted in order to take a leather strap to bind the two together. This is contemporary with finds at the great fort Dun Aonghasa, on Inis Mór, indicating similar occupation from the later Bronze Age period.

Museum artefacts from the Cairn

I visited the National Archaeological Museum in Dublin with a Bronze Age pottery expert, Helen Roche. Our intention was to view, photograph and perhaps sketch the vessels found and removed from Cnoc Raithní. While in the crypt of the National Archaeology and History Museum, we also intended to write up a report on the two vessels from the site. The bronze pin/awl where at this stage recorded as missing. Upon examination of the first vessel (recorded as 1885:350:1) which is a cordoned urn, the following description was drawn up. The urn is a large coil-built tub shaped vessel mainly of calcite inclusions. The urn is manufactured with a thick wall of coarse fabric that includes a high content of inclusions which are up to 11.6mm in length. The base is shaped first, and the rest is moulded together using a method known as coiling.

This is done by mixing in the inclusions into your fabric mix and using sausage shaped type coils of the mixture and moulding them into shape to form the next piece. This process is repeated until the required height is reached. It has a rounded upright rim with an internal bevel. Pinched up cordons are present on the exterior surface, immediately below the rim. The second cordon is present 77.1mm below the rim whilst the third cordon is situated about 152mm below the rim and a fourth cordon sits 55.1mm above the base. The external surface has been smoothed with a clay and water wash. However, much of the external surface is badly weathered and the inclusions are visible on the surface.

The area below the rim between the first and second cordon, is decorated with a band of incised lattice motif, (fig. 7) and not the diamond shaped decoration described in the original report.

Figure 7



A horizontal incised line is present at the base of these motifs and above the second cordon. The exterior of the urn is an orange/brown colour; the core is blackish/ grey in colour with lots of inclusions.

Inside the vessel there are traces of carbonated residue on the internal surface indicating a cremation, perhaps. An average thickness of 12.5mm to 12.7mm was observed, with the rim 30mm in diameter and the base 120mm in diameter.

The bevelled interior of the rim is decorated with oblique incised lines. Inside of the vessels were plastered to help keep them in one piece and an iron belt is inserted on the exterior for the same purpose. This is a horrendous attempt to keep the urn intact however, maybe the local blacksmith at the time in 1885 felt it was the best way of preserving it on the long journey to Dublin. We indeed owe some gratitude for this action as it has made some impact on the urn staying together (fig.8).

Figure 8



Vessel two, (fig. 9) upon investigation turned out to a food vessel. A smaller and much cruder constructed pot, with the middle portion of the pot, the rim and the base of the pot is all missing. On the one surviving piece which is visible (among all the plaster and the iron belt) is a decoration of the filled triangle type. It is a poorly executed attempt of filled triangles but the section which is visible clearly shows this and not lozenges as described before. A horizontal line at the base is followed by a series of pinched cordon design. The vessel is constructed of a coarse textured fabric, with a moderate to high content of inclusions up to 2.7mm in diameter.

Its external surface is badly weathered and much of the surviving portion is decorated but only faintly visible. The band presumably below the rim is decorated with filling triangles which are poorly executed.

These triangles are followed by a horizontal incised line, below which are rows of false and low cordons. These rows are created by using an instrument or by hand to form running grooves to create a riled effect. The external of the vessel is orange/brown in colour with the core of a grey/black colour. The interior is grey/black in colour, albeit that very little is visible due to the plaster, and it is secured on the external with an iron belt, also inserted by our friend Mr Blacksmith. The thickness average is 10.7mm-11.5mm and this vessel is labelled 1885:351.

Figure 9



Several boxes with pieces of pottery were also in the find and these were also examined by Helen Roche and the author Keith Murphy. These have been documented and stored as:
Documented findings for vessel 1 were recorded as such.

Cnoc Raithni, Inisheer 1885:350:1 and so on.

The pieces were identified as, 3 rim shreds numbers 1885:350:1-3, 1 rim fragment 4, 10 body with cordons 5-12 plus 30-31, 2 base angle shreds 13-14, 9 body shreds 15-21 plus 32-33, 43 fragments 22-29 plus 43-50 plus 51-69 and several crumbs. Among all these pieces we also identified five other vessels of which there are pieces from within the items taken from the original find in 1885. Vessel 3 is a Collared urn, vessel 4 is an Encrusted urn, vessel 5 is a Cordoned urn and vessel 6 is possibly what is known as a Plained vase. Two fragments also in the find however, in a separate box, are of a high quality for such an age. They are two fragments which are ribbed and are a food vessel with comb decorations. The bowl is also ribbed tri-partite (fig. 10 & 11) and is logged as vessel 7.

Figure 10

Figure 11



Ms. Roche and I returned to the crypt to finalise all the documenting for the different finds. While examining some other material from the site, the bronze artefact was found. This appears to be a pin rather than an awl by the appearance of the piece that is left. In turn, Dr Eoin Grogan accompanied me to the museum, and we surveyed the Topographical reports and the registers entry.

This inspection unfortunately did not enlighten us any more with new findings however, it confirmed a lot of what was written by the Rev Murphy in his original report. Dr Grogan confirmed the existence of cremated human adult bones in the find and these need to be examined by an osteo-archaeologist to determine the number of bodies in the find.

Future studies

With the emergence of so many new discoveries from the original find in 1885 by Rev Murphy in Cnoc Raithní, the need for funding is required to complete a thorough and professional excavation for the fragmented picture to be completed. The significance of the site and its secrets could reveal so much of island life and the cult of the dead. This would perhaps give us a window into the past and a chance to view the cultures of the many societies who have over time turned this cairn into a multi-period and multi-purpose cairn.

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Figures 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11. Photographed by Dr. Keith Murphy

Figure 2. 1886. *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*. 6, (2):181-182.

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Acknowledgements

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