

ANCIENT STONE MONUMENTS OF SOUTH ARMAGH

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In 2009, during work to up-grade the A1 south of Loughbrickland, several sites of great archaeological importance were discovered. The remains of a Neolithic settlement were uncovered just south of Loughbrickland, dating back 6,500 years, and a Bronze Age burial ground was discovered at Beech Hill. Archaeologists described these finds as of the greatest significance, as they cast light on the lifestyle of these early people.

In March 2012, during work in clearing the route of a new water-main, a prehistoric site was discovered in the townland of Aghantaraghan just south of Poyntzpass. The site, described as 'a fire-mound', was in a field owned by Thomas McVeigh close to the main Newry Road and, while it is of much less significance than those associated with the A1, it was a further reminder that our island has been inhabited for many thousands of years and that our neighbourhood has been home to countless generations who have lived here before us.

The first evidence of early human activity found in Aghantaraghan was the discovery, when the topsoil had been removed, of an area of fire-blackened soil. Archaeologists were called and, having inspected the site, declared the site to be prehistoric and of some archaeological interest. In due course a pile of stones was uncovered which confirmed that this was what is known in Ireland as a '*fulachta fiah*' or primitive cooking place.

These discoveries are relatively common in Ireland and, while there is some debate about their function, it is generally accepted that they were used for cooking meat.



Excavation of the site in Aghantaraghan

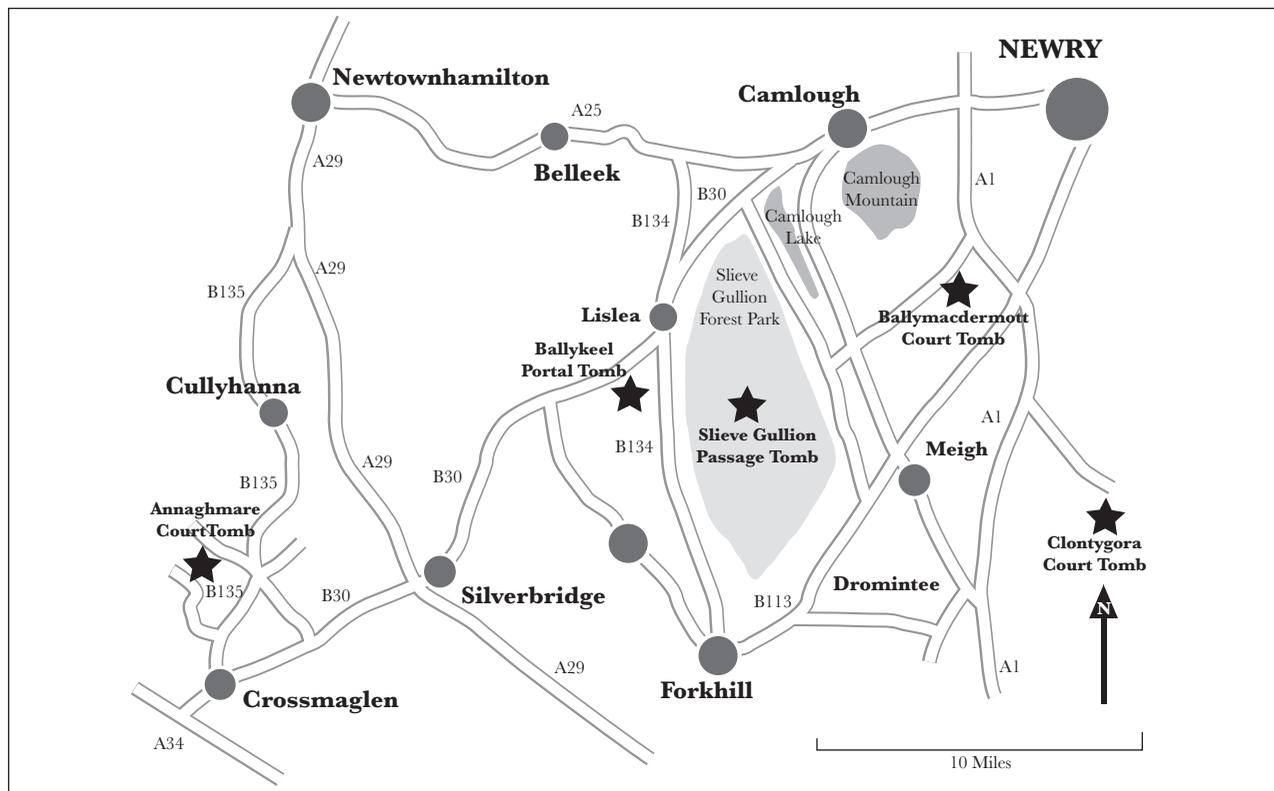
A *fulachta fiah* is generally found in a low-lying area, close to a stream or water source, or in a place where there was water-logged soil. First a hole was dug in the ground and filled with water. Next a fire was lit nearby and cobble-sized stones placed in the fire until they were red hot. The stones were then rolled into the water in the hole till eventually the water was brought to the boil. Meat was placed in the boiling water and cooked, the water being kept boiling by the addition of more hot stones from time to time.

The archaeologists working in Aghantaraghan suggest a date of around 1500-2000 BC as the period when the site was in use. The extent of the area of fire-blackened earth suggested that the site was used over a considerable period of time, which, in turn, implied that there was a settlement of some kind here for a while. However, as any shelters erected by these people would probably have been very simple constructions of branches, thatch or animal skins and, bearing in mind too that the area uncovered in the excavation here was quite small, no trace of any dwelling was found.

Sometimes flint tools or implements are found at these sites but none was discovered here. Animal bones are often found on similar sites but in this case again nothing was discovered. This has led the archaeologist to speculate that this was a ritual site of some kind, used on special occasions - as opposed to a domestic one used by a family or small group - and that whatever was cooked here was consumed elsewhere.

The dig uncovered a 'cooking-hole' close to the 'fire-mound'. It was roughly oval or circular in shape about four or five feet in diameter and up to three feet deep. It was capable of holding quite a large joint of meat or even a whole animal, such as a small wild boar. This again would suggest that the cooking done here was for a sizeable community rather than a small family-group. Also uncovered near the fire mound was an area roughly 'paved' with stones, the purpose of which is not known, and two larger stones which could conceivably have been used as primitive seats.

By the time suggested by the archaeologists the people who constructed and used this site were more settled than the hunters and gatherers of an earlier time and while they may still have hunted and gathered, they were probably also involved in primitive farming. They may



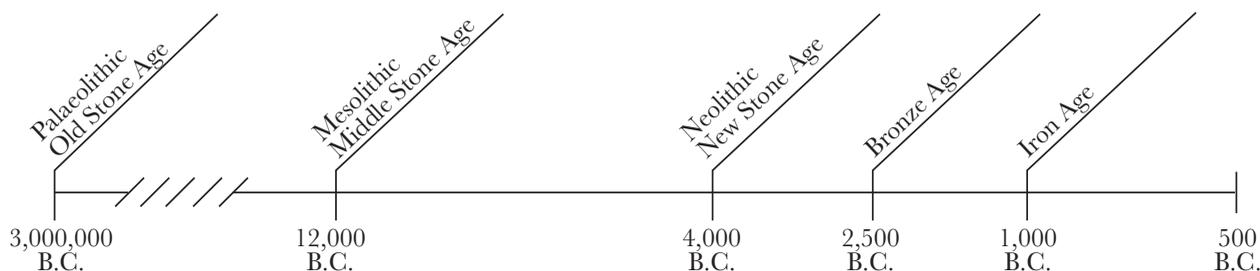
have had some knowledge of basic pottery for, although no fragments of pots have been found at the site in Aghantaraghan, pieces of primitive pottery have been found at similar sites elsewhere. These pots would have been small and would have been used for storage and to carry water from a nearby source to fill the cooking hole. Animal-skin ‘buckets’ might also have been used for this purpose.

Drainage in the vicinity of the site has certainly been greatly altered over the years, particularly by the construction of the main road close by. However a small stream still flows through a culvert under the road within 15 yards of the site and in times past may have been considerably bigger and much closer to the fire mound. This was a potential water supply.

While the prehistoric remains at Loughbrickland and Aghantaraghan lay hidden for thousands of years, not all traces of these early ancestors are so hard to find. All over Ireland are examples of great stone

monuments dating from early times and examples of them are to be found on our own doorstep in South Armagh.

About 10,000 years ago the last Ice Age had ended and the island of Ireland had more or less separated from its larger eastern neighbour. By about 6,000 BC *Mesolithic* people had arrived on the island. Many of these came from the north by island hopping from what is now Scotland but there is evidence that some came by the longer sea route from mainland Europe to the southern coast of Ireland. These people found a land covered with forest but rich in wild foods such as nuts and berries, with many small mammals such as stoat, hare and badger. The rivers were teeming with fish. These nomadic hunter-gatherers used stone tools. Excavations have shown that they lived in small temporary round huts and examination of some of their middens gives us good clues as to their diets and lives. However, they built no permanent structures and we know little of their religious and burial practices.



Approximate Timeline of the Historic Ages

About 3,500 BC the first farmers started to arrive from Europe. These *Neolithic* people formed larger, more permanent settlements. They were no longer nomads but now grew crops and kept domesticated animals. They hunted and gathered as well to supplement their food supply. The detritus found at excavated Neolithic sites tells us much about these early farmers. No complete dwellings have been found but the uncovered stone foundations of houses show that Neolithic people lived in much larger buildings than Mesolithic people. Most of the surviving stone structures relate to burials. Throughout Ireland the remains of about 1500 Neolithic (c. 3500 – 1500 BC) stone tombs have been found. The more complete examples have been classified into four main types: Court Tombs, Portal Tombs, Passage Tombs and Wedge Tombs. Examples of the first three types can be found in South Armagh.

If you travel south from Camlough village along the Keggall Road you will come to Murray’s Corner. Here is a sign pointing eastward to Ballymacdermot Court Tomb.

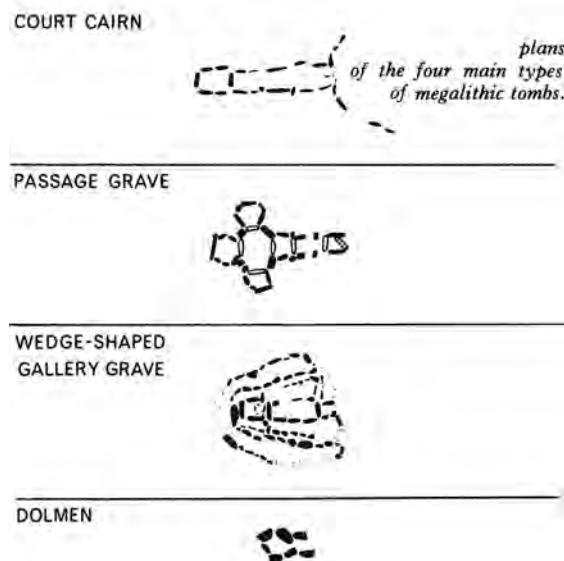
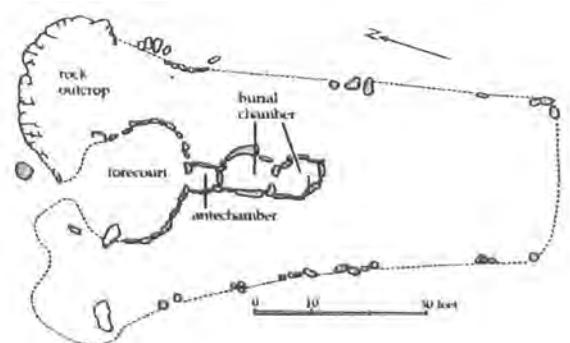


Diagram of four kinds of grave: Court, Passage, Wedge and Portal graves

Follow the signs and you will reach the monument not far from the Bernish viewpoint. This monument stands at the side of the road overlooking the Gap of the North. It is aligned N-S and at first glance shows why the descriptive name for the monument is appropriate. At the north end of the structure is an open D-shaped court. Running south from this is a gallery of three chambers built from large stones – the megaliths. The roof stones of these chambers are now missing. These structures are enclosed in the remains of a cairn with straight east and west edges held in place by the remains of a kerb.

The cairn is wider at the north end than at the south; its shape is usually referred to as trapezoidal. In the early days of modern archaeology archaeologists usually called these structures Ulster Horned Cairns because that was the site of most of the explored tombs. The majority of them had an open court with two curved arms or ‘horns’ and many had a partial covering of a cairn of small stones. In further discoveries and surveys it became clear that many existed outside the province of Ulster, some with full circular courts or centre courts. A few examples had lost their cairns with only the large structural stones remaining. There are a few cases where the court is missing and only the gallery remains. In some cases only the court remains. All these monuments are now known as Court Tombs and they are found in the northern half of the island with the most southerly example being at Shanballyedmund in Tipperary North.



Ballymacdermot Court tomb

The court at Ballymacdermot is built of large stones placed close together, with the maximum height being about 1m. However, the original ground level of the court may have been much lower and the true height of the stones is masked. In some court tombs the court stones may be about 2m. high. It is thought that the court may have been used for ritual practices associated with burial. Excavation has shown that the main method of disposal of the dead was cremation. Bones have been found but no complete skeletons. It would seem that Neolithic people buried only part of their ancestors, mainly long bones and skulls, and cremated the rest. In the double court tomb at Audleystown, Co Down remains of thirty four individuals were found.

The gallery contains the burial chambers. Ballymacdermot has three chambers, consisting of a small antechamber and two burial chambers. The presence of an antechamber is not common but is by no means unique. The chambers are separated within the gallery by jamb stones and sill stones. The sides of the chambers are made from large slabs and the innermost chamber has a back stone.



Ballymacdermot Court tomb

Lintel stones would have been laid on the top of the jamb stones but the roof of each chamber would have been corbelled. Successive layers of corbels would have been placed along the top of the side stones with each layer projecting inwards until both sides eventually met in the middle. As each corbel was placed it was held in position by cairn material above it in counter-balance. So the cairn was not simply a cover for the tomb but an essential part of the whole structure. Many years after they were built, probably in the Iron Age or the early Christian era, these tombs became a valuable source of small stones for building such structures as dry stone walls. As the cairn material was removed the corbels lost their counter-balances and the roof of the tombs collapsed inwards. Some corbels still remain at Ballymacdermot and at other sites. Some court tombs have retained their lintel stones but no examples of a court tomb with an intact roof still exist.

The proximity of Ballymacdermot to the roadside makes it one of the easiest court tombs to explore. It is a very good example but it doesn't tell the whole story. About 5.5 km SE of Ballymacdermot is Clontygora. Leave Ballymacdermot and drive past the Bernish viewpoint to join the Newry Bypass. Travel southward to the first junction beyond Cloghogue. This will bring you onto the old A1. Follow it until you reach Killeen Bridge and turn left toward Clontygora. The tomb is in a small enclosure about 1 km SW of the Flagstaff. Quarrying has greatly damaged this tomb. During the 19th century

its entire cairn and some of the larger stones were removed for building purposes in Newry. However, some of the remaining court stones are more than 2 m high with very large stones in the gallery. None of the corbel stones remain and the roof of the first chamber of the gallery is now a large flat stone which would have originally been a side stone. This is kept level by some small chocking stones. These 'improvements' may be the result of some Victorian landscaping as were the extensions to the arms of the court and the circular stone wall which surrounds most of the monument; these may have led to the local name, "The King's Ring".



Clontygora Court grave

Two more examples of court tombs within the South Armagh area exist. The first is 1km SE of Killeevy Old Church in Clonlum. Unfortunately it is on private ground, is greatly overgrown and much of it is missing. It would be much better to drive to the western edge of the county. About 2.5 km N of Crossmaglen close to Annaghmare Lough is Annaghmare Court Tomb, known also as the 'Black Castle'. It is beside a small car park in the middle of the forest. The first thing to notice about Annaghmare Court Tomb is that it is built from small sharp edged stones. The edges of the stones at Ballymacdermot and Clontygora are rounded by the action of ice and water whereas the stones at Annaghmare appear to be newly quarried (5,000 years ago). The court is on the south end of the cairn and is a deeper D shape than that at Ballymacdermot. It is built of large flat slabs and small stones fill the spaces between.

This arrangement is known as “post and parcel” and is found in many court tombs. It is possible that the same arrangement existed at the other two sites but the smaller stones are now missing.

The court leads to a three chambered burial gallery which has jamb stones, sill stones and some corbels in the innermost chamber. The most noticeable difference between Annaghmare and the other court tombs lies near the north end of the cairn. Here there are two subsidiary burial chambers with separate entrances from the east and west edges of the cairn. They were probably built at the same time as the rest of the tomb. Such chambers are found in many court tombs and are not confined to the cairn. For example, the ruined tomb in Clonlum has a small subsidiary chamber in the remaining area of the court. The arrangement of court, galleries and subsidiary chambers has many variations. For example, the great court tomb of Cloghanmore at Malin More, Co Donegal has a full court with a subsidiary chamber at each side. This leads to two galleries, each of two chambers, running parallel to each other. Archaeological evidence shows that some court tombs were built at the start of the Neolithic Age while others were built toward the end.

An observant driver or navigator travelling along the B30 from Newry to Crossmaglen may notice a signpost between the junction with Longfield Road and Tierney’s Junction (12 km from Newry). This points southward toward Ballykeel Dolmen. Go along Mill Road and turn left immediately after the old scutch mill at Ballykeel Bridge.

The monument is in a small field on the right. The word ‘dolmen’ comes from two Breton words meaning ‘table’ and ‘stone’. We can describe many megalithic structures as stone tables. The more correct name for the monument at Ballykeel is Portal Tomb. At the south end of a long low cairn is an arrangement of five large stones. Three of them are upright stones (known too as ‘orthostats’) supporting a large flat stone called the ‘capstone’. The two most southerly stones are the same height and are taller than the most northerly stone. This matching pair are the portal stones and a small gap or portal separates them. The smaller stone is the backstone. A fifth stone partially blocks the portal and is called the doorstone. Ballykeel is an excellent example of Tripod Dolmen as are Proleek in Co Louth and Legananny in Co Down. When Ballykeel tomb was complete, dry stone walling from the ground to the underside of the capstone would have blocked the gaps between the edges of the portal stones and the backstone. A cairn would have been constructed to the height of the wall and extended northwards in a long tail. The portal stones and the capstone were left exposed. This would have created a small triangular chamber with access through the portal. Other portal

tombs have sidestones and some of them have polygonal chambers with more than one capstone. At the north end of the cairn at Ballykeel is a small cist burial from the Bronze Age.



Annaghmare Court Tomb

Most existing portal tombs have lost their cairns. Kilfeaghan Portal Tomb, Co Down which retains most of its cairn is a notable exception. It stands close to Kilfeaghan Lane, north from the road from Rostrevor to Kilkeel, close to the junction for the road to Cranfield and Greencastle. In the ruins of some tripod dolmens only the three orthostats remain giving rise to place names such as Trillick and Rathrillick. Ballykeel is the only good example of a portal tomb in South Armagh but a fragment of another stands at Longstones, Aghmakane. This consists of a portal stone more than 2m high and a similar doorstone. Only half the other portal stone remains. Portal tombs are all over Ireland with the exception of the extreme south-west. They are more widespread than court tombs but not as numerous.

Slieve Gullion is the highest mountain in South Armagh and at its south summit at 576m is a very fine example of a Passage tomb, the third type of megalithic tomb in this area. A long walk of about 3km from Ballard TD to the north of the mountain will reach the tomb; a

shorter route is from the upper car park on the Forest Drive, less than 1km long but very steep. At the summit, sit down for five to ten minutes, catch your breath and enjoy the magnificent view. On a clear day it is possible to see the Antrim hills, the Mourne and the Cooleys, the Plains of Meath and the Wicklow Hills, the Sperrins, Lough Neagh and the rest of Co Armagh.



Ballykeel Dolmen

The tomb consists of a circular cairn about 30m diameter and over 4m high. Within the tomb is an octagonal stone chamber which is reached by a short passage about 4.5 m long. The entrance is on the east end. The cairn was surrounded by a kerb of stones, some of which remain. A kerb allows the cairn to be built high and prevents it from spreading. It is a common feature of passage tombs and in some cases only the circular kerb remains after the cairn has been quarried. Slieve Gullion Passage tomb is known as “Calliagh Beara’s House”. She was a local witch who also gave her name to the small Lough at the North Summit. This may be the highest passage tomb in Ireland though most tombs of this type seem to occupy the higher ground. Although more passage tombs than portal tombs exist they are found only in about twenty locations. Most of them group together in ‘cemeteries’ such as the Boyne Valley and Loughcrew, Co Meath; other ‘cemeteries’ are at Carrowkeel and Carrowmore in Co Sligo.

The Meath tombs are well known for their carved stones; only a small number of tombs with carved stones lie outside Meath.

References to Slieve Gullion Passage Tomb occur several times in the 18th century, at which time it seems to have been relatively intact. ‘Treasure seekers’ in the 19th

century severely damaged the top with explosives; after excavation in 1962 archaeologists partly reconstructed the roof and much of the corbelled roof is still in place.

Two other smaller, much lower portal tombs are at Clonlum (about 1.5 km south of Killeevy Old Church) and Aughadanove (about 1 km SW of Ballykeel Dolmen). Two fragments stand at Latbirget (about 500m N of Ballykeel) and Eshwary (on Barron’s Hill about 2km NW of Camlough). These may be parts of court tombs but not enough remains and excavation may be necessary for proof. Several single standing stones are throughout the area. Very few excavations have taken place but such stones are generally thought to belong to the Bronze Age and later. The exception is a stone at Annaloughmullin, thought to be the only remnant of a four-chambered court tomb destroyed in the 19th c.

Scientific archaeological investigation has revealed the history of these megalithic tombs only in the last 150 years. In the early part of the 19th c. ‘treasure seekers’ looking for gold and other precious artefacts opened and damaged them. They did not know that the tombs were built during the Stone Age before the discovery of metal. Giants were thought to have built the larger monuments and the label “Giant’s Grave” appears on many of the early maps. Other tombs were thought to date from the mythological era of Cuchulain and his friends – Ossian’s Tomb is a court tomb in Co. Antrim. Many of the megalithic tombs in Ireland are known as “Diarmuid and Grania’s Bed”, named for the ill starred lovers who were forced to flee and permitted to spend only one night at any location.



Slieve Gullion Passage Tomb