

4. Burial and ritual in late prehistory in north Wexford: excavation of a ring-ditch cemetery in Ask townland

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Illus. 1—Location of ring-ditch cemetery at Ask, Co. Wexford (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map)

In the summer of 2005, Valerie J Keeley Ltd (VJK Ltd) excavated a multiperiod site that included a ring-ditch cemetery, multiple burial enclosures and structures, and a standing stone. This work was undertaken on behalf of Wexford County Council and the National Roads Authority in advance of construction of the N11 Arklow–Gorey Link Road (Illus. 1), a 20-km-long dual carriageway linking the existing Arklow bypass and bypassing the town of Gorey. Excavation followed a detailed archaeological assessment process that included a desktop study, field survey and extensive test trenching. The assessment identified a number of potential archaeological sites along the proposed route, including three in Ask townland. These three were later amalgamated into one large site, as described in this paper (NGR 317727, 163350; height 63 m OD; ministerial direction no. A003/020).

The site is located 3.6 km north-east of Gorey town, in the barony of Gorey, Kilmacanogue parish, north County Wexford. It was in a large tillage field, on the north-west slopes of Ask Hill, overlooking a small valley and with views to the Wicklow and Blackstairs Mountains. Ask Hill is situated on a volcanic outcrop, which, together with the larger Tara Hill, or *Torrchoill*, to the east, forms part of a spur of volcanic bedrock jutting out of the Wicklow and Blackstairs Mountains to the west and extending to the sea. The site lay

within the very fertile sandy soils of the Wexford/Wicklow coastal plain, bordered to the west by the mountains, to the east by the sea, and to the north by the heavy so-called 'Macamore Clay' soils, which were too stiff to farm in the prehistoric period and so would have been heavily forested.

The known archaeology of the area, as recorded in the Record of Monuments and Places (RMP), consists of a large number of prehistoric and early medieval monuments in the environs of Ask Hill and neighbouring Tara Hill. These include burnt mounds, or *fulachta fiadh*, burial-grounds, megalithic structures, holy wells and standing stones. The latter show a concentration that appears to follow a contour around Tara Hill, to the south and north-west, and a similar pattern may be observed on Ask Hill. This cluster of features indicates the density of settlement and ritual activity in the locality in the past, in several successive periods.

Excavation results

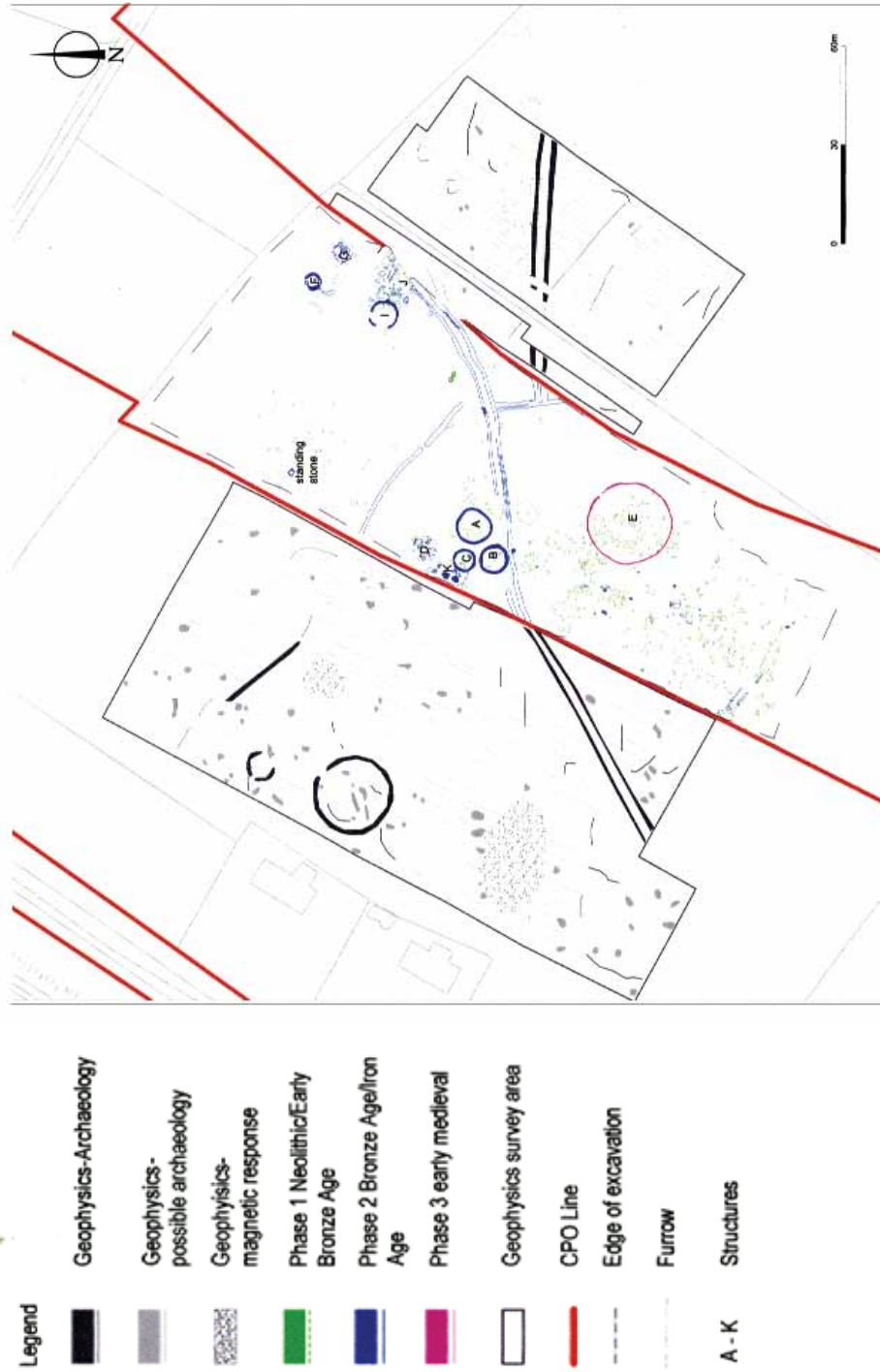
The excavation site measured 253 m north–south by 60–85 m, spanning the width of the proposed road development (Illus. 2 & 3). Excavation produced evidence of a very extensive multiperiod cemetery complex, with funerary activity spread across the site representing a number of periods or phases of use. This ranged from the Late Neolithic period through to the Bronze Age and into the early medieval period. This preliminary date range is based on the excavation director's interpretation and early post-excavation analysis; radiocarbon dating and full specialist analysis are awaited and may alter this interpretation.

The site was subdivided into five areas of archaeological concentrations or clusters of activity (Illus. 2); these are listed below:

- an initial and very extensive spread of burnt tree bowls (pre-dating the site) representing a large-scale forest and scrub clearance event in the Late Neolithic/Bronze Age period;
- north-eastern ring-ditch cluster, containing two penannular ring-ditches (Structures F & J) and an unusual possible ceremonial structure or complex of post-holes, pits and cremation pits in a roughly square alignment (Structure G);
- an isolated standing stone;
- western ring-ditch cluster, consisting of three annular ring-ditches (Structures A–C) and two complex 'ceremonial' structures (Structures K & D), one apparently presenting an interrupted ring of cremation pits and tree boles enclosing two very large post-holes pre-dating the ring-ditch;
- isolated cremation pit scatter and associated features, including at least 11 isolated cremation burial pits, several hearths and burnt pits or ground ovens, and a partially surviving coaxial field system, possibly of later Bronze Age or Iron Age date;
- a large penannular enclosure (Structure E), formed by a narrow slot-trench with a reinforced entrance to the north, which contained a number of cremation pits.

Geophysical survey

A geophysical survey of the surrounding fields by Target Archaeological Geophysics showed the site to extend over a far larger area, incorporating most of the lower slopes of the hillside



Illus. 2—Plan of excavated features at Ask, Co. Wexford, showing geophysical survey data (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)



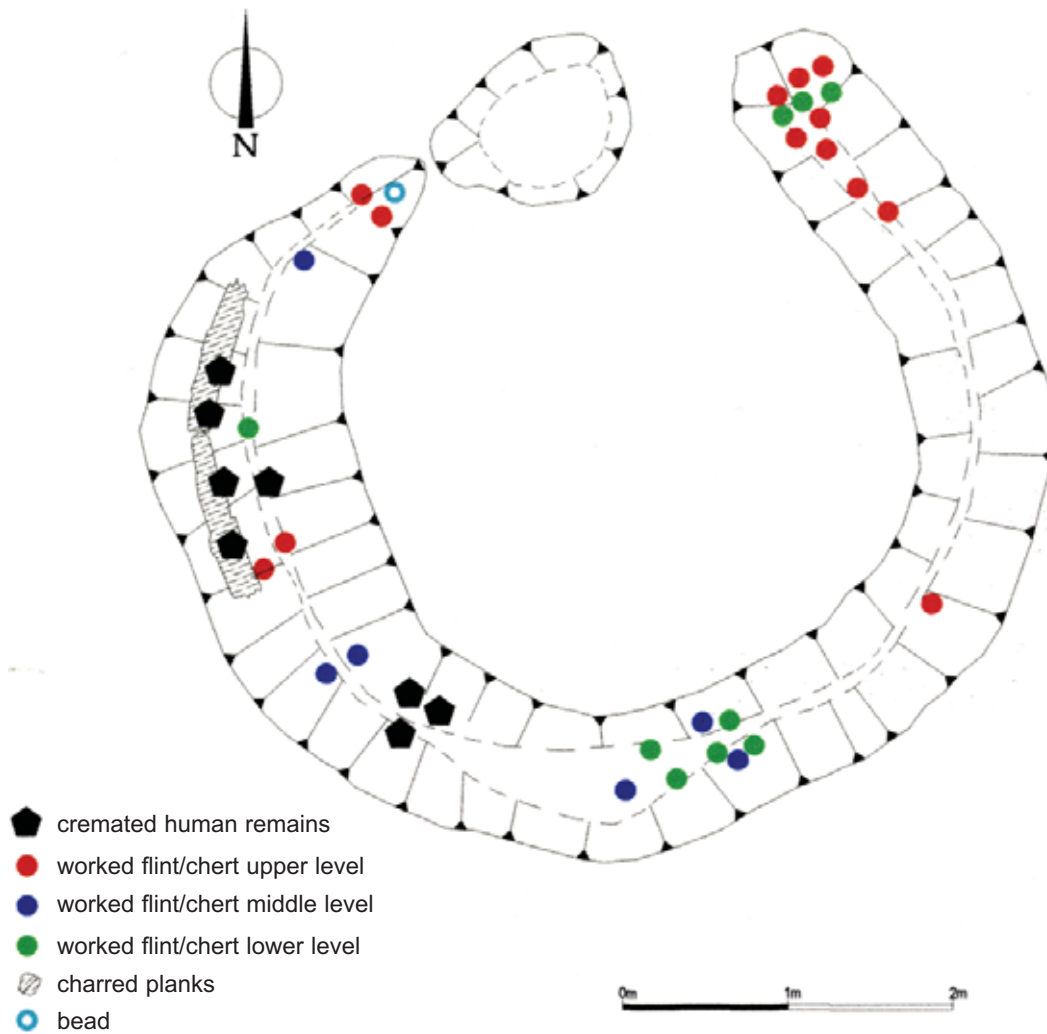
Illus. 3—Elevated view of Structures A–C (ring-ditches), Structure K (tree-ring), Structure D (excarnation platform) and Structure E (palisade), looking south-east towards Ask Hill (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

and including a second cluster of ring-ditches to the west and also possibly to the east, although this is less apparent, and a second penannular enclosure similar in size and form to Structure E (see Illus. 2). The western ring-ditch cluster was also shown to continue to the north-west, and the possible coaxial-type field system could clearly be seen to represent two phases of division. The site was therefore clearly in use for a considerable time and was very extensive in size, and as such of significance to the archaeological record for the region.

Ring-ditches

Structure A (Illus. 2 & 3) was the biggest of the three annular ring-ditches at 11 m in diameter. This monument (like the smallest ring-ditch, Structure C) revealed no evidence of cremated bone or pottery and only produced a few lithics. Its ditch was initially open long enough to allow a partial silting, but this was followed by intense burning that originated from the interior, suggesting that the raised internal bank or mound slumped in and was set alight. Afterwards the ditch was uniformly backfilled with a sterile soil, suggesting that the bank or mound was deliberately levelled.

Structure B was 7.5 m in diameter and the only one to contain a small quantity of cremated bone in the ditch as well as in an internal cremation pit. The ditch also produced



Illus. 4—Schematic drawing of Structure F (ring-ditch), showing the distribution of finds recovered from the ditch (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

a large assemblage of flint artefacts and prehistoric coarseware pottery. There was no evidence of burning but the ditch contained a large stony deposit in the north and west, of unknown origin and purpose.

Structure C was the smallest ring-ditch, and although it produced no cremation deposits it did contain a large assemblage of pottery and flint artefacts.

Structure F was one of two penannular ring-ditches on this site, located in the north-eastern ring-ditch cluster (Illus. 4). This monument was 5.35 m in diameter and 0.25 m in depth, with an entrance to the north. It contained a large quantity of heavily crushed cremated human bone, found in various places around the circumference, as well as a blue glass bead (Illus. 5) and several flint artefacts. Two large, fragmented, charred birch planks were also recovered and may represent the remains of a funeral pyre. Examination of the wood identified numerous insect holes, indicating that the wood was semi-rotten when burnt.



Illus. 5—Glass bead recovered from ring-ditch Structure F (John Sunderland)

Bronze age ritual

The difference between a ring-barrow and a ring-ditch lies in the presence of an outer bank. The tradition of ring-barrows and ring-ditches has its origins in the Bronze Age, with sites such as Kilmahuddrick, Co. Dublin (Doyle 2001), emerging in the Early Bronze Age. Later Bronze Age ring-ditch sites are also known, at the Mound of the Hostages, Hill of Tara, Co. Meath (O’Sullivan 2005), Navan Fort, Co. Armagh (Mallory 1995), Ballybeen, Co. Down (Mallory 1984), Beaghmore 10, Co. Tyrone (Pilcher 1969), and Ballygroll, Co. Derry (Williams 1981–2). The tradition continued into the Iron Age, however, with annular and penannular ring-ditches like the Early Iron Age Ballydavis 2, Co. Laois (Keeley 1999), Ballybranoge South, Co. Limerick (Eogan & Finn 2000), and Duntryleague, Co. Limerick (Gowen 1988). Multiple phases of use of a ring-barrow are also known from the Early Bronze Age to the Iron Age at Kilmahuddrick, Co. Dublin (Doyle 2001). The inclusion of grave-goods is a feature of Irish ring-barrows/ditches, from both the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. Ritual funerary monuments without burial—a form of early cenotaph—are also common throughout the later prehistoric period, for example in barrows at Curragh, Co. Kildare (Waddell 2000, 367), Mitchelstowndown West, Co. Limerick (Daly & Grogan 1993), and Duntryleague and Lissard–Ballynamona, Co. Limerick (Gowen 1988; Ó Ríordáin 1936).



Illus. 6—Cremation pit with compartment containing deposit of cremated human bone (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

Ritual structures

Both ring-ditch complexes also contained other prehistoric structures. Structure D (to the west) and Structure G (in the north-east) appeared to be similar in form and nature. They consisted of a roughly circular or diamond-shaped alignment of large post-holes and small pits, some with cremation deposits, large lithic and pottery assemblages and several fire-spots (or ovens), forming a pattern of neither structural nor random nature. These have been interpreted as representing ritual burial activity and may relate to an excarnation structure—i.e. an outdoor platform for ritual display of the body and/or associated offerings.

Structure K, immediately to the west of the three ring-ditches, pre-dated Structure A (Illus. 2 & 3) and was represented by a double arc of post-holes, small cremation pits and tree boles, encircling two very deep post-pits. These were each 1 m in diameter and 1.8 m in depth, clearly large enough to support very substantial posts. Beyond the excavated area the geophysical survey recorded no evidence to suggest other adjacent pits forming part of a post circle or wooden henge-type arrangement, like Ballynahatty, Co. Down (Hartwell 1994), so it must be assumed that this was not the case, although additional excavation might prove this conclusively. The use of an enclosing tree-ring or hedgerow is very unusual and suggestive of a sacred grove. This feature is provisionally dated by lithics and pottery to the Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age.

A second alignment in the north-east, Structure J, represented quite different activity and appears to be a processional alignment of pits and post-holes, some with cremation deposits, terminating at, though not associated with, a second penannular ring-ditch, Structure I.

Isolated burials

The burial rite used on this site was cremation, although in various forms. Eleven isolated cremation burial pits were revealed scattered across this site, some with associated hearths, others with Cordoned Urn pottery sherds, and (as with the ring-ditches) others that produced complete pots with no burial deposit at all. Burial was exclusively by means of 'token' or comminuted cremation deposition—the bone appeared to be deliberately crushed, possibly by grinding, and hammerstones were found in the fills of some features. Small pits, up to 0.6 m in diameter, were used on this site, and some had compartments for the cremation deposit (Illus. 6). Compartments are a feature of the earlier Bronze Age (1950–1600 BC) and are usually found with pottery, whereas inverted Cordoned Urns occur mainly at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age (1600–1400 BC), with the increasing exclusion of grave-goods (Grogan 2004). The site therefore appears to contain both early and later Bronze Age cremations.

Standing stone

Excavation of the standing stone at Ask produced no conclusive evidence of date; it is important to the archaeological record, however, as standing stones are protected monuments and are rarely excavated as a result of modern development. They are one of the most numerous and widely distributed monument types in Ireland. Twenty-two are recorded in the area around Ask Hill and Tara Hill. Although individual standing stones are commonly dated to the second millennium BC, they are known from the Neolithic to the early medieval periods and are notoriously difficult to date. Of the few excavated examples, Kiltullagh Hill, Co. Sligo (McCormick 1994), produced an Iron Age date and was adjacent to a ring-barrow containing a cremation burial as well as a possibly Christian inhumation. Excavations for the N25 Waterford City Bypass by Joanna Wren of Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd revealed three undated standing stones, one surrounded by a ring of post-holes.

Excavation showed that the standing stone at Ask was quarried from a horizontal glacial outcrop of volcanic feldspathic tuff and erected upright directly on the bedrock. It had a white patina, or oxidised crust, and was dressed *in situ* on the top and three sides (but not the south-east face) to reveal a striking blue grain; the larger chips were used as packing and wedges for setting the stone (Illus. 7), while the remaining chips were deposited in the backfill of the stone socket. Stake-holes found close by indicated that the process used for lifting the stone included tethers held in place by stakes to temporarily hold the stone in place while wedges were set. The orientation of this square stone caused some debate among the excavators, and may be said to be either to the south-east (because of the patina and dressing) or the south-west (from the direction of the recumbent natural bedrock plinth). Although there is no evidence of marking or decoration, Corlett (1998, 13) notes a tendency of standing stones around Croagh Patrick, Co. Mayo, to be aligned NNE–SSW along the long axis.

The landowner, Mr Warren Stephens, pointed out a second, previously unrecorded, standing stone to the south-west of the site, outside the limit of the excavation area. This



Illus. 7—Standing stone under excavation, showing original location of one of the larger stones used in the foundation. This indicated that the standing stone was worked in situ (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

upright monolith was smaller in proportions but similar in form, and lay in a hollow midway down the lower slopes of the hill. The standing stones appeared to be a pair, possibly contemporary, and may have marked the limits of the ritual area. Although there is no clear association with the surrounding burial monuments on this site (nothing of archaeological significance was revealed within a 50 m radius of the stone), this has to be seen as more than coincidence as the remainder of the excavated area is full of burial activity.

Early medieval ritual

A later phase of burial was possibly represented by the large penannular enclosure, Structure E, with seven cremation burial pits in the interior. This large enclosure appeared as a narrow curving slot-trench or gully that resembled a palisade trench and measured 24 m in diameter (Illus. 2). An entrance to the north-east was delimited by two large, opposing post-pits and a short row of post-holes on either side, suggestive of reinforcement. The cremation pits were mostly devoid of finds, and only one contained charred seeds. One centrally placed burial pit, however, produced a gilded copper-alloy cross mount with chip-carved interlace decoration (Illus. 8). Ragnall Ó Floinn of the National Museum of Ireland



Illus. 8—Gilded copper-alloy cross mount (after conservation treatment) from the central burial pit at Structure E (John Sunderland)

has identified this find as being eighth-century in date and of Irish origin, possibly from a horse mount or perhaps an ecclesiastical object.

The inclusion of this find in a stratified context in an otherwise undated pit throws up questions regarding its function, origin and ownership. Its position suggests an early medieval date for the burial pit, and also suggests that the enclosure was of this late date. Radiocarbon dating of charcoal from both the pit and the enclosure should confirm this.

One possible explanation for this unusual find is that the cross was Viking plunder and may have been incorporated in a pagan Viking burial pit within the enclosure. Parallels for this cross exist from a Viking grave in Athlumney, Co. Meath (Ó Floinn 2001; Harrison 2001), and three unprovenanced examples are also known from near Navan Fort at Tullyargle, Charlemont and Ballynahone, Co. Armagh (Bourke 2003). Plundered Irish grave-goods are known from Soma and Gausel, Norway, and Birka, Sweden (ibid.), and cremation, in addition to inhumation, is a common early medieval Scandinavian burial rite. It is not unreasonable to suggest, therefore, that this cremation was of Viking origin.

Alternatively, the cross may have been incorporated as part of a native Irish burial pit in the Christian/pagan transition that existed at this time. Penannular burial enclosures are known from seventh-century Ireland, at Chancellorsland, Co. Tipperary, and Castle Upton, Co. Antrim, as well as from Anglo-Saxon England (Doody 1996; Gahan 2000; O'Brien 2003). Up to the early eighth century burial of Christians still continued in ancestral (pagan) cemeteries and in pagan monuments (O'Brien 2003).

Artefacts

This site produced a very large quantity of artefacts, the majority of which were of stone. In total, 3,300 worked stone artefacts were recovered, including pounding or hammerstones (used for grinding), scrapers, cores, flakes and debitage (i.e. waste) of flint, chert, rhyolite, quartzite, quartz, sandstone and granite, some of which was not locally sourced. The assemblage was mostly Neolithic or Early Bronze Age in date and domestic in character. The site may have initially comprised a series of domestic occupation/work areas, which later were given over to ritual areas. This can be paralleled at Croft Manor, Ballygalley, Co. Antrim (Moore et al., forthcoming).

In addition, over 500 sherds of prehistoric pottery were recovered. Ongoing analysis indicates that this assemblage includes a crushed Cordoned Urn, Beaker Ware and prehistoric coarseware. A significant quantity of cremated human bone, charcoal, metal objects, small quantities of slag, glass, nutshells and seeds were also recovered from the excavation. Analysis of this material is still at an early stage.

Conclusion

This site represents a large ritual complex from the prehistoric pagan past and makes a significant contribution to the archaeological record of the prehistoric and, possibly, the early medieval period in Ireland. Significantly, it produced a rare and very detailed excavation of a standing stone in its setting, plus a very large stratified collection of lithics and, lastly, possibly the first recognised Viking period cremation burial in Ireland.

The site contained multiple phases of burial and ritual activity, including evidence for the clearance of the fertile slopes of the very prominent Ask Hill from at least the Early Bronze Age through to the early medieval period. Phase 1 saw a large-scale and extensive 'clearance event', probably involving the digging up and burning of scrubland. Whether this was for the succeeding funerary activity or merely for agricultural purposes is unclear. The lithic assemblage suggests little or no time-lag between the two phases, however, suggesting

the former. An excavated example of this type of activity is extremely rare in the archaeological record.

Phase 2 dates from the Early Bronze Age and may have continued into the Iron Age, although this will only be confirmed when radiocarbon dating and specialist analyses are completed. This phase represented a ritualised funerary landscape or complex cemetery consisting of three annular and two penannular ring-ditches, one double post row or avenue, two possible excarnation structures and one tree-ring feature. Additional monuments were also revealed to the east and west by geophysical survey. In addition, 11 isolated cremation pit burials were scattered across the site, some associated with hearths, and these may span the Bronze Age in date. To this phase can also be provisionally assigned the pair of standing stones, which were undated but appear to be spatially related to the cemetery complex, as boundary markers. At some later point in the prehistoric period a coaxial field system was imposed on this landscape. This clearly respected the ring-ditches and appeared to follow the topographic contours of the site, making square or rectangular plots to the east of the complex. (A single ditch was cut at a diagonal to the field system but appeared to respect it and was probably contemporary.)

Phase 3 was early medieval in date and probably represented a pagan burial-ground containing a pair of large penannular enclosures with internal cremation pits, one containing a fine gilt cross mount. Whether Structure E was contemporary with this burial remains to be seen.

Lastly, Phase 4 represented the decline and abandonment of this site as a burial-ground and the eventual erasing of the site from view by agricultural use, with the exception of the standing stones, which remained as prominent reminders of the rich past of this part of the hillside.

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