



MEGALITHIC ART IN COUNTY TIPPERARY

Muiris O'Sullivan and Blaze O'Connor on an important piece of megalithic art unearthed during excavations prior to the new Cashel bypass

A decorated stone was unearthed in 2003 during archaeological investigations in advance of the construction of the N8 Cashel Bypass and the associated N74 Link Road, directed by Joanne Hughes of Judith Carroll Network Archaeology Ltd. It was located in the townland of Owen's and Bigg's Lot at the south-eastern edge of the 400ft contour around Windmill Hill, a prominent landmark 2km south of the Rock of Cashel in County Tipperary. An unidentified hilltop enclosure occupies the apex of the hill.

The Windmill Hill complex is a cluster of 24 charcoal-rich pits averaging 0.4m in diameter with depths of up to 0.4m. One of these pits contained a cremation enclosed within a small, cist-like structure, on the capstone of which some interesting pick-marks occur. The stone measures about 0.55m by 0.33m, with a maximum thickness of 0.18m, and its flat, more freshly exposed face was inverted over the cremation deposit. From the cemetery, the summit of Slievenamon is visible more than 20km away to the south-east, and Galteemore lies approximately the same distance to the south-west.

The underside of the capstone is decorated with pick-marks, an idiom more normally associated with passage tombs. For the most

part the pick-marks are loosely distributed across the surface, forming an oval cluster measuring c. 0.3m by 0.2m. They are more concentrated towards the edge of the cluster, with suggestions of a broad framing ribbon c. 5–6cm wide. Near the narrower end of the stone, the ribbon of picking runs along the rim of a natural hollow, and a few additional pick-marks highlight the continuation of the rim. Large flake scars indicate that the stone has been shaped for its role as a capstone. Like the picking, which is not for any obvious aesthetic effect, this was presumably an aspect of the burial ritual.

This stone forms part of a very small but growing corpus of carved stones from cist and burial contexts in Ireland, the majority of which probably post-date the height of the passage tomb art tradition. The Irish material includes examples from known or probable burial contexts at Hempstown Commons, Co. Kildare, Moylough, Co. Sligo, Ballinvally, Co. Meath, and the sites of

Above: Looking west towards Windmill Hill, showing the hilltop enclosure above the housing estate and the Galtee Mountains in the distance. The decorated stone lies between the large shed and the edge of the photograph on the extreme left.



Crumlin and Carn More in County Louth. As Elizabeth Shee Twohig has noted more than once, the motifs incorporated into the few decorated burial cists in Ireland are predominantly closer in form to those of megalithic art than to the *in situ* rock art tradition.

The Irish corpus in turn can be understood in terms of its relationship to the wider corpus from across Britain, but particularly between Perthshire and Derbyshire, a phenomenon that has been referred to as the 'northern' tradition. Pottery associations at these British sites represent a chronological spread across the last centuries of the late Neolithic through to the end of the early Bronze Age, and possibly into the middle Bronze Age. What is notable is that so few examples are known from late Neolithic-early Bronze Age burials in Ireland compared to Britain.

Although evidence from some burials suggests that the decorated stones represent the quarrying and reuse of what were formerly *in situ* rock art panels, it is clear that other panels were sourced and decorated specifically for use in burial monuments. A key characteristic of these stones is their idiosyncratic, highly individual nature. As a group they exhibit little sense of a unifying style or motif range of the type seen across both megalithic art and rock art traditions. Instead, almost every stone is different, and particular design elements seem to have been borrowed, often in abbreviated form, from the predominantly earlier carving traditions of megalithic and rock art. Despite this sense of uniqueness, however, some specific parallels for the Windmill Hill stone are worth noting.

From the funerary art corpus, surface picking representing an oval and other less regular forms is visible on the Hempstown Commons stone. In addition, the large side panel from the

Crumlin cist features light, dispersed pecking and shallow, poorly defined cups. Looking to megalithic art, a closely comparable motif can be seen on stone M15 from the Millin Bay monument in County Down, which features an oval area (0.15m by 0.3m) of light pecking or 'bruising' with a fringe of deeper pecking. In general, the lightness of the picking technique employed on the Windmill Hill stone has more in common with megalithic art than with the more deeply carved forms of *in situ* rock art. It is interesting, too, that the Windmill Hill artwork occurs on a sandstone slab in what is considered to be a limestone area (megalithic art usually occurs on sandstone).

The placing of the carved surface over the Windmill Hill burial is reminiscent of much of the British material, where the carvings are frequently placed face down over burial cists, thus addressing the dead. It also echoes the placement of small cup-marked stones, including small cobbles exhibiting just a single cup, face down inside or over cists and in the body of cairns. Although there may be a functional aspect to this practice (the flat face suiting this face-down position for structural purposes), the wider evidence suggests that it may also have had a symbolic dimension.

The use of artificial markings to embellish natural characteristics of the stone is a common feature of rock art and megalithic art alike, natural hollows frequently becoming the 'cup-mark' encircled by an artificial pecked circle. Dispersed pick-marks are seldom noted as part of the rock art repertoire, although this may be a result of weathering and the lichen-encrusted condition of the panels. In instances where panels have been covered by soil or sods, pick-marks are sometimes visible owing to the stone surface having been 'cleaned' of micro-vegetation via burial. Examples of rock art panels incorporating picking include those at

Far left: The stone beside its original position as a capstone over a burial cist.

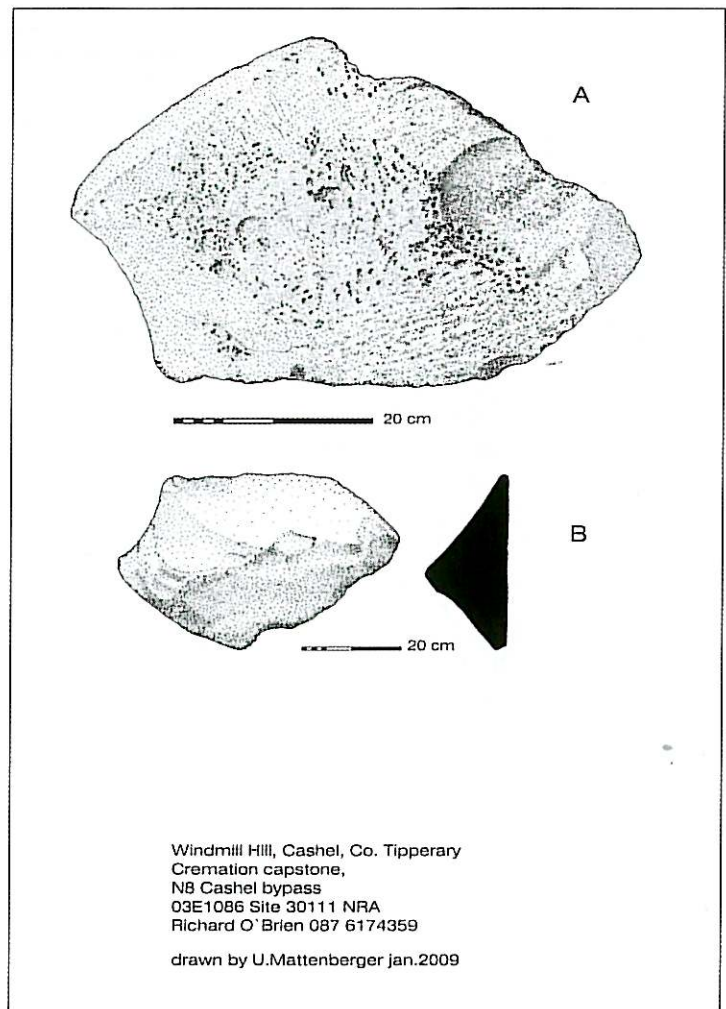
Left: The cist after removal of its contents.

Right: Drawing of the decorated stone from Windmill Hill, Cashel, Co. Tipperary (Ursula Mattenberger).

Drumirril, Co. Monaghan, and Drumgonnelly, Co. Louth. A very small number of rock art panels are known from the neighbouring counties immediately east of Tipperary (Kilkenny and Waterford), with larger numbers in Cork. Of note in respect to the Windmill Hill stone is the site of Knockbrack in nearby Carlow, which features a prepared (dressed) surface and a bevel around the edge of the stone, as well as more traditional rock art motifs (Lucey 2004, 66).

Standard megalithic art (and rock art) in Ireland focuses on the depiction of recognisable geometric shapes. In the Boyne Valley, this standard artwork is overlain by a variety of new approaches that collectively focus more on decorating the stone than on representing shapes. At Knowth, notably along the kerb of the large tumulus, the developed artwork often takes the form of pick-marks clustered along natural edges between individual facets, or forming the rim of a natural hollow. One of the rare examples of this approach outside the Boyne Valley has been recorded at Knockroe, Co. Kilkenny, where a cluster of picking on a roofstone of the eastern tomb focuses around a natural cup-mark in the stone. Knockroe, which has about 30 decorated stones, is the best known of a small group of passage tombs overlooking the Lingaun River in the countryside to the east of Slievenamon, including the cairn at the summit of the mountain itself. The Lingaun flows from the slopes of Slievenamon and joins the Suir a short distance downriver from Carrick-on-Suir. Upriver from the confluence and some 30km from Knockroe, a second group of passage tombs overlooks the Aherlow River, another tributary of the Suir. These two sets appear to be linked, a point emphasised by the orientation of Baunfree in the Lingaun group and Shrough in the Aherlow group, both of which are aligned towards the summit of Slievenamon. It is interesting, then, that Slievenamon is also visible from Windmill Hill, which, although isolated from the two clusters of megalithic tombs, is less than 4km from the Suir. With the Aherlow and Baunfree groups, it forms a loose necklace of sites around Slievenamon.

This is written without the benefit of radiocarbon dates from the cremated bone in the cist. Statistically, it is likely to be from the early Bronze Age or possibly the later Neolithic. If of Neolithic date, its obvious parallels would be the perimeter burials at the Mound of the Hostages, Tara, and the small, cist-like tombs located



near the Giant's Ring at Ballynahatty, Co. Down. In both cases cremated bone was deposited in small, chamber-like stone settings. Both complexes are aspects of the passage tomb tradition, and the artwork on the Windmill Hill capstone points to the same conclusion. While megalithic art has previously been encountered on cists attributed to the early Bronze Age, it is difficult not to consider the Windmill Hill stone in the context of the regional passage tomb tradition that flourished along the tributaries of the Suir around 3000 BC. ■

Acknowledgements

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Muiris O'Sullivan

Reference

Lucey, E. 2004 Lost in translation: exposing rock art in the southeast of Ireland. Unpublished MA thesis, University College Dublin.