

# Middle and Late Bronze Age Ritual Activity at Glencurran Cave, Co. Clare

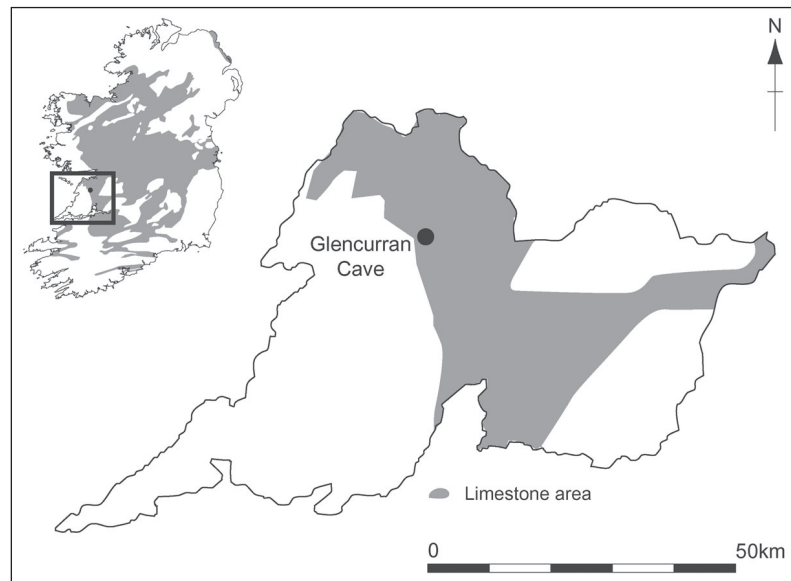
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*This paper provides an account of recent excavations in Glencurran Cave in the Burren, Co. Clare. A series of rich Bronze Age ritual deposits were encountered. In the Middle Bronze Age at least two individuals were found associated with a drystone built cairn inside the cave, accompanied by deposits of faunal remains, personal ornaments and a stone axe. The discovery of a young child of Late Bronze Age date deeper in the cave indicates either continuity of funerary practices or part of elaborate votive deposition which also involved human clavicles, neonatal domesticates, hares, pottery vessels, amber beads and perforated shells.*

*Figure 10.1: Map indicating location of Glencurran Cave*

## Introduction

Glencurran Cave (CL010-054) is located in Tullycommon townland, Co. Clare (NGR 12740 19631) (Fig. 10.1). It is situated in the western section of the Burren National Park, west of a minor roadway that runs north-south between the villages of Carran and Killinaboy. The cave penetrates a limestone knoll on the southeastern side of the now dry Glencurran Valley. Archaeologically, the cave is situated between two large archaeological complexes that extend over several townlands and contain dense concentrations of prehistoric and Early Medieval sites. Of relevance here are the significant numbers of *fulachtaí fiadhb*, cairns, tumuli, cist graves and wedge tombs in the immediate area. Parknabinnia wedge tomb is due south of the cave and the complex of



Neolithic and Bronze Age activity at Roughan Hill lies further south.

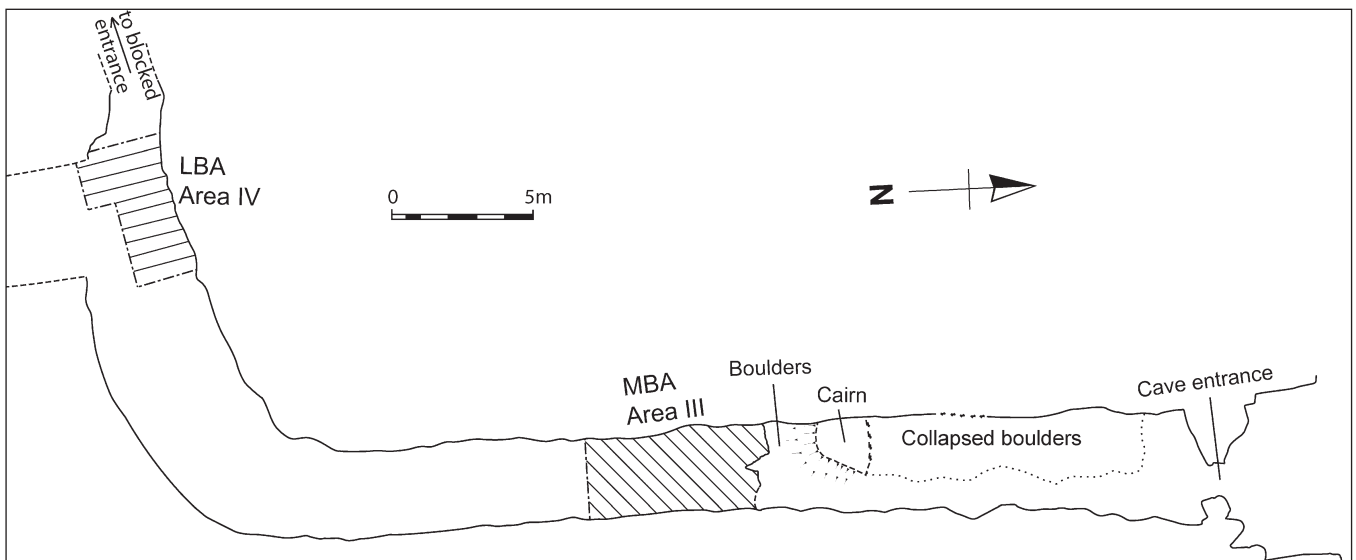
Rescue excavations were undertaken at Glencurran Cave over seven weeks in 2004 and 2005 (Licences 04E0432 and 05E0379) on behalf of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government following the discovery of a perforated dog/wolf canine in addition to significant quantities of bone scattered over the cave floor. These however were not the first excavations at the site. An unpublished record in the diaries of the Committee Appointed to Explore Irish Caves, dated 30th June 1902, records that animal bones and two human bones were recovered from the cave. T.J. Westropp (1911, 357) also noted that 'Richard Usher's ... slight examination of the caves in Glencurraun yielded evidence of very early human occupation'. In 1964, speleologist Jack Coleman conducted further excavations at Glencurran (Coleman 1965, 40). Though this work was carried out under archaeological licence (E000752), it appears that Coleman focussed on digging through sterile deposits in attempts to establish the full length of the cave. No published or unpublished records can be located at present and it is not known whether he encountered archaeological material.

In the 1960s Glencurran Cave was just 76 m in length (Tratman 1969, 204; Bottomley 1961, 15). However, by the beginning of the 1980s, cave deposits had been dug out by cavers extending the length of the known cave passage to 400 m (Self 1980, 187–8).

This has continued on an intermittent basis over the past 25 years or so; at present the cave reaches a total length of 700 m though its full extent has still not been reached (Bunce & Judd 1987, 12; Mullan 2003, 193–4). Current evidence indicates that only the outermost 65 m of cave passage is of archaeological interest (Fig. 10.2) and it would appear that the deposits dug through by cavers (beyond the outer 65 m) are sterile and of no archaeological significance. The 'archaeological' section of the cave is orientated north-south before curving to the west and branching into two passages. The main entrance faces north with a second smaller choked entrance orientated approximately west. Inside the main entrance is a level area that was cleared of boulders sometime in the past, possibly during the Early Medieval period. A low narrow passage, 13 m long and 1 m wide, slopes down from this entrance area to the level floor of the main cave passage which is quite high, wide and spacious (Fig. 10.2).

During the recent excavations, the outer 65 m of the cave was sectioned off into grids each usually 0.50 m × 0.50 m and five excavation trenches were opened. All deposits were excavated stratigraphically by hand, according to grid, under artificial lighting powered by a generator running outside the cave. To ensure maximum retrieval of material, 100% of excavated deposits were wet sieved through 3 mm mesh sieves. All bones and artefacts were bagged according to the grid and context in which they were found which allowed useful

Figure 10.2: Plan of the outer 65 m of Glencurran Cave indicating excavated areas of Bronze Age activity



spatial analysis of the distribution of material. Excavations revealed intermittent use of the cave from the Early Bronze Age through to post-Medieval and modern times, with a particular focus of activity in the Bronze Age and the Early Medieval period. This paper focuses on the Middle and Late Bronze Age uses of the cave.

### **Middle Bronze Age activity**

The evidence for Middle Bronze Age activity at Glencurran Cave comes from a small trench on the cave floor at the base of a drystone 'cairn' (Figs 10.2 & 10.3). This cairn is situated between 11.50 m and 14 m from the cave entrance, at the terminus of the sloped passage that descends from the entrance chamber to the main cave passage. The cairn is curvilinear in plan and was constructed against the western cave wall. It measures 2.5 m × 1.54 m and reaches a total height of 1.62 m. It consists of a low wall, five courses high, constructed of large angular blocks of limestone. These limestone blocks are very regular and deliberate care must have been taken when selecting them; they may have originated from outside the cave. The structure was topped with a significant calcite deposit

which acted as a sealing 'cement'. These calcite-rich deposits were dug up from the cave floor. The cairn was not intact; the southern portion had partially collapsed and at least some of this disturbance seems to have been caused by human interference. A human mandible was retrieved from within the structure by a caver in the 1980s but unfortunately cannot be located at present. During the 2004 excavations, a whetstone was also found built into the fabric of the cairn.

The cairn was not excavated but present evidence suggests that it may conceal a Bronze Age burial, (or some form of ritual deposit) as a concentration of human bones, animal bones and artefacts were recovered from the small trench (6 m × 1 m) that was opened on the cave floor immediately beneath the structure. This material appears to have trickled out from the cairn over millennia. Only the uppermost stratum in the trench was removed. It consisted of a mid-brown silty clay between 40 mm and 10 mm thick. Sixteen human bones were recovered, the vast majority within 3 m of the cairn. The bones derived from at least two adults of undetermined sex and included portions of two left clavicles, two right ulnas, two right radii, a left fibula,



*Figure 10.3: Cairn associated with human remains of Middle Bronze Age date*

three hand phalanges, a foot phalanx, two metacarpals, a metatarsal, a talus and a patella (Fibiger 2006). Despite the absence of skull fragments, in general all anatomical regions were represented. The presence of both large and small skeletal elements suggests the remains indicate complete cadavers rather than representing practises such as excarnation or token deposition. One of the fibulae, found within 1.5 m of the cairn, produced a Middle Bronze Age AMS date of  $3035 \pm 36$  BP, 1410–1190 cal BC (UB-6660). However, until further radiocarbon dates confirm that all the human remains are contemporaneous, and until the cairn itself is excavated, caution needs to be exercised when interpreting the date and nature of the structure. This is particularly the case considering that the range and type of material closely resembles discoveries made in Area IV (see below) which reflect Late Bronze Age activities. Nonetheless, working with the current available evidence, for the moment the cairn will be considered a funerary or ritual structure of Middle Bronze Age date.

A total of 1509 animal bones were also recovered from the trench beneath the cairn. Due to fragmentation and erosion, only 615 bones (or 41%) could be identified to species (McCarthy 2006). While natural formation processes may explain the presence of some of the faunal remains, many of the animal bones reflected deliberate human deposits, though it cannot be assumed that all date to the Bronze Age. The assemblage included at least four sheep (260 bones) ranging in age from newborn to adult though the majority of the bones derived from individuals slaughtered under six months. Most parts of the body were identified indicating local slaughter of the animals and the deliberate deposition of portions of the carcass. Though only one crude butchery mark was noted, scorching on some of the bones indicated human activity. The 47 cattle bones represented the remains of two individuals but most belonged to a young calf. A crude chop mark was noted through an adult metatarsus associated with marrow extraction. The 39 pig bones derived from two individuals: an adult and a piglet under one year. One bone bore a crude chop mark associated with dismemberment. A large male pig tusk – probably from a domestic animal

– was also recovered. Other domesticates represented in the assemblage included three dog bones belonging to an adult, terrier-sized, individual and eight cat bones – mostly skull fragments and loose teeth (McCarthy 2006). The wild fauna included at least five mice (101 bones), frog (65 bones), hare (58 bones), rabbit (30 bones), Lesser Horseshoe bat (2 bones), fox (1 bone), stoat (1 bone) and bird (awaiting identification). These are all likely to represent natural occurrences with the frog and rabbit bones indicating relatively recent dates while the Lesser Horseshoe bat is resident in the cave (McCarthy 2006).

The prehistoric, or probable prehistoric, artefacts found adjacent to the cairn included seven amber beads (Fig. 10.4), approximately 50 fragments of amber beads, three perforated European cowrie or spotted cowrie shells (*Trivia monacha*), a perforated and an unperforated flat periwinkle shell (*Littorina obtusata*), three bone beads, a shale chisel axe, a sandstone rubbing stone and a net sinker. Broken scallop shells and charcoal were also retrieved. A significant number of the artefacts were broken due to traffic through the cave. Further evidence of disturbance comprised the discovery of Early Medieval to modern material mixed in with the prehistoric remains.

As at Glencurran Cave, unmodified scallop shells have been found with Bronze Age burials at Moylehid, Co. Fermanagh and Kealkil, Co. Cork (McCormick 1985/6, 44–5). However, perforated sea shells are more common in Neolithic rather than Bronze Age burial contexts including sites such as Kilgreany Cave, Co. Waterford (Dowd 2002, 83), Fourknocks I passage tomb, Co. Meath (Hartnett 1957, 241) and Knockmaree (or Chapelizod), Co. Dublin (Brindley and Lanting 1989/90, 2; *contra* O'Sullivan & Breen 2007, 94). Of relevance to Glencurran however are the cowrie shells found mixed in with the cremated remains of a 14–16 year old individual in a Bronze Age cist at Carrigeens, Co. Sligo ([www.excavations.ie](http://www.excavations.ie) 1992:162). Perforated cowrie shells were also found in a Bronze Age barrow at Langton, North Yorkshire associated with an adult female, one of three crouched inhumations (Kinnes & Longworth 1985, no. 2). The three cowrie shells from Glencurran were double perforated indicating that whether strung or sewn onto textiles, the aim was to have the slit facing outwards. Based on ethnographic

research, Claassen (1998, 204) has illustrated an almost universal association between cowrie shells and sex, fertility and the womb due to the perceived resemblance between the slit in the cowrie and the female vulva. While ethnographic parallels need to be used with caution, there is also a universal association between caves and the womb, birth and rebirth (Dowd 2004, 10). It is important therefore to consider that during the Bronze Age, the cowrie shells placed with the human remains in Glencurran Cave may have been linked to concepts of femininity, death and/or rebirth.

Overall, the assemblage of material found with the Middle Bronze Age bones reflects a recurring reference to the sea: the scallop shells, periwinkle shells, cowrie shells and net sinker. This is interesting considering the relative unimportance of marine resources in the Bronze Age diet; the absence of fish bones from the cave – despite 100% sieving – is worthy of note. However, the significance of the sea with regard to communication and trade was especially pronounced in the latter half of the Bronze Age. In this regard the amber beads found with the Middle Bronze Age remains are especially important as they are indirectly symbolic of sea trade or sea travel having probably originated from Jutland or the West Baltic region as with most prehistoric amber found in Ireland (Pearce 1979, 128; Eogan 1999, 77).

At a time when cremation was dominant

(Grogan 2004, 67) and gravegoods were rare, the human bones of Middle Bronze Age date from Glencurran Cave were deposited in an unburnt state and accompanied by a rich array of artefacts and animal deposits. The abundance of beads – bone, shell and amber – is noteworthy considering that ‘necklaces are quite rare’ in Bronze Age burials (Waddell 1990, 26). Amber is scarce, though not unknown, from Irish Early and Middle Bronze Age contexts (Eogan 1999, 77–8) and is also rarely found in Bronze Age graves (Waddell 1990, 27). Eogan (1999, 75, 85) illustrates the significance of amber in Bronze Age Ireland and, by extension, the remains from Glencurran Cave: ‘Like gold, amber has been prized and valued throughout the ages and consequently objects fashioned from it ... could also have had a special significance ... it would have been a rare material and that would add to its value both materially and intrinsically ... Visually, amber, like gold, must have been a striking material that was pleasing to the eye but also gave status to the wearers ... [amber was] worn by people of note ... Amber objects may then have been the property of ... an upper class of society’. Grogan (2004, 69) remarks that ‘the disappearance of burials that distinguish their occupants through associated artefacts’ and ‘differentiation in status was no longer mediated through the provision of elaborate gravegoods’. The animal remains, perforated shells, amber

*Figure 10.4: Amber beads associated with human remains of Middle Bronze Age date*



and stone axe associated with the human remains in Glencurran Cave clearly create a contrast to this general pattern.

Possible parallels for the Middle Bronze Age remains at Glencurran comprise what appears to have been an Early Bronze Age inhumation burial discovered in Knockane Cave (Castlemartyr), Co. Cork in 1806 associated with amber beads and decorated gold sheets (Crofton Croker 1824, 253; Cahill 2006, 329–332). The crouched inhumation of a young male at the Mound of the Hostages, Co. Meath accompanied by amber beads has also been radiocarbon dated to the earlier Bronze Age (O’Sullivan 2005, 177–182). Tara and Knockane Cave have been categorised by Grogan (2004, 63) as ‘rich burials’. These sites, and possibly Glencurran Cave, all comprise inhumations; all three were associated with amber; and personal ornamentation was an important aspect in all instances. In fact Keenoge, Co. Meath, Glencurran Cave, Tara, Knockane Cave and possibly Glencurran Cave are the only inhumations from over 40 ‘rich burials’ dating to the end of the Early Bronze Age and beginning of the Middle Bronze Age – all others comprise cremations (*ibid.*, 63). Glencurran Cave can therefore be added to a small number of rich Early-Middle Bronze Age burials known from Ireland where the quantity and quality of gravegoods indicate high status individuals who, at death and presumably also in life, were treated differently to the rest of the community. During the Middle Bronze Age, Glencurran Cave may have been perceived as a special place in the landscape, appropriate for the disposal of important members of the community.

### **Late Bronze Age ritual activity**

Late Bronze Age activity at Glencurran Cave was discovered during excavation of a trench 12 m<sup>2</sup> – named Area IV – located approximately 45 m from the main cave entrance and 17 m from the second blocked entrance (Figs 10.2 & 10.3). This was where the perforated dog/wolf canine was originally discovered. Because the cave stratigraphy sloped gently downwards from the main cave passage towards the cave wall, archaeological deposits only occurred along the northern section of the trench with the sterile clay floor exposed along the southern portion.

Overall, 17 contexts were recorded in Area IV but there were three principal strata all of which were disturbed. Because of the degree of stratigraphic disturbance, it is more useful to consider the overall findings from this part of the cave before examining the spatial analysis of material.

### ***Human bones from Area IV (from Fibiger 2006)***

A total of 28 human bones were recovered from Area IV. While this is a small assemblage, it represents at least six individuals: four adults, a 2 to 4 year old juvenile and a neonate. The neonate was represented by a single right femur. The ten juvenile bones included a left ilium, left clavicle, left scapula, left rib, right (?) fibula, two vertebral arches, an incisor, a canine and a skull fragment (occipital). The ilium produced a Late Bronze Age date of 2536±31 BP, 800–730 cal BC (UB-6661). The adults were represented by four right clavicles, two left clavicles, two vertebral arches, a metacarpal, two hand phalanges, four premolars and two molars. The number of clavicles is highly disproportionate: over a third of the adult bone assemblage comprised clavicles. This indicates the deliberate selection of particular disarticulated bones for deposition. The clavicle, or shoulder, was clearly of symbolic significance to this late prehistoric population.

### ***Animal bones from Area IV (from McCarthy 2006)***

A total of 8484 animal bones were retrieved from various contexts in Area IV. Just 1676 bones (20%) were identifiable to species level and over 5% of the assemblage was burnt or charred. There was clear evidence that most of the identifiable bones derived from human activities. Sheep (617 bones) were the most numerous animal present representing at least 21 individuals. Peripheral foot bones and skull fragments predominated although there were sufficient meat-bearing elements present to indicate almost complete carcasses. There was no suggestion of the deposition of selected joints of meat. The vast majority of the sheep were under two years of age at death, indicating slaughter when the animals had reached the optimum age for meat production. Seven adult limb bones bore chop marks associated with dismemberment and a few fragments displayed fine knife marks indicative of skinning and the removal of meat from the shoulder bone. At

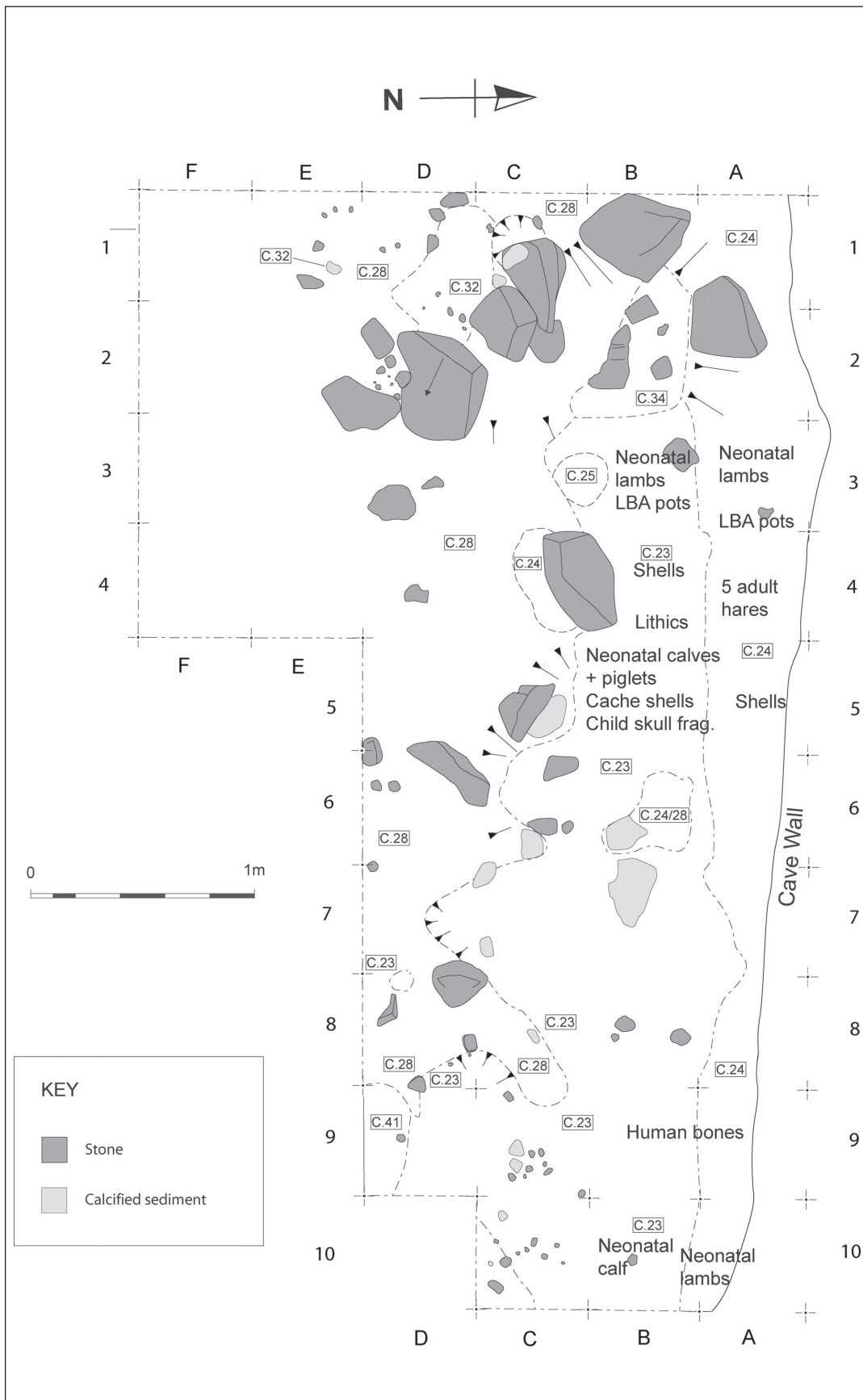
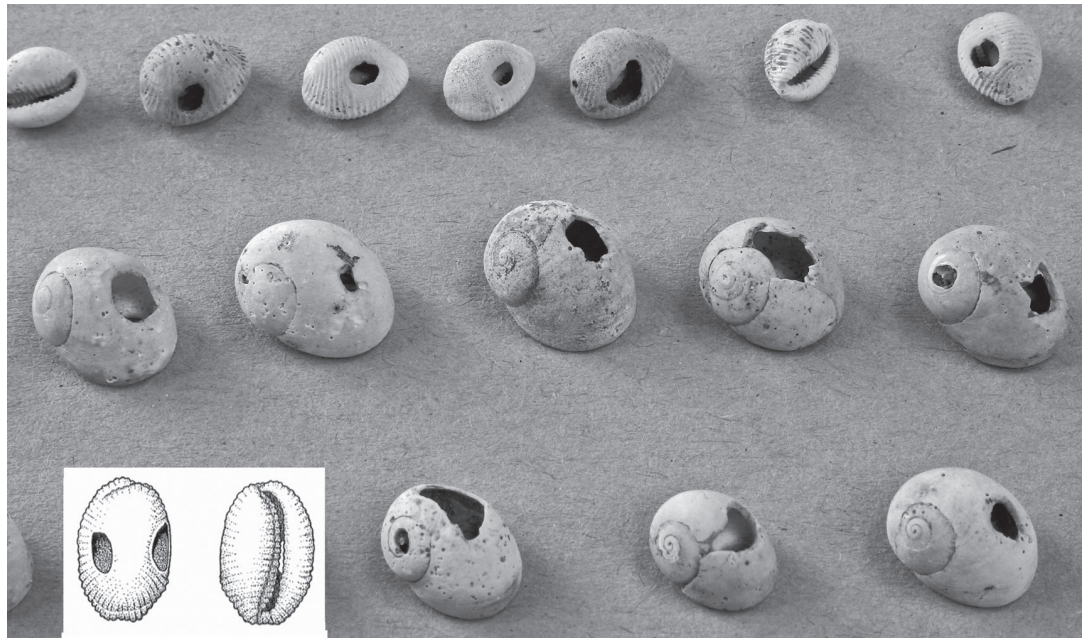


Figure 10.5: Area IV indicating concentrations of bones and artefacts

Figure 10.6: A selection of perforated cowrie and periwinkle shells from Area IV. Inset of double-perforated cowrie found with Middle Bronze Age remains



least 15 pigs (327 bones) were also present and the selection of prime joints seemed to have been significant. The 189 cattle bones comprised the remains of at least eight individuals, just one of which was over four years of age. Many of the skeletal elements represented prime meat-bearing bones from the upper regions of the body although there were sufficient quantities of peripheral elements to indicate complete carcasses, not just prepared meat joints. A few of the prime meat-bearing limb bones displayed heavy chop marks as well as fine knife marks associated with skinning and meat removal. Two cattle metapodia were split lengthways for marrow extraction. The seven dog bones recovered were sunburnt and fresh and appeared to represent recent intrusions.

What is perhaps most remarkable about the domesticated assemblage from Area IV is the preponderance of neonatal animals: three piglets, one foetal piglet, four lambs and two calves – all of which had died at, or a few weeks after, birth. No marks were identified to suggest deliberate slaughter. The lamb bones were burnt as were some piglet bones; the calf and the majority of the piglet remains were in an unburnt state. The neonatal bones occurred in concentrations hinting at the original locations where the animals were deposited: a concentration of neonatal piglet and calf bones occurred in and around Grid B5; burnt neonatal lamb bones centred on Grids B3 and

A3; a further cluster of calf bones occurred in Grid B10 (Fig. 10.5).

A variety of wild animals were also identified including hare (287 bones), rabbit (73 bones), frog (54 bones), mouse (53 bones), stoat (5 bones), bank vole (4 bones), lesser horseshoe bat (4 bones) and red deer (1 bone). Apart from the red deer antler and a notable concentration of hare bones representing five individuals in Grid A4, it is likely that most of the wild animals were intrusive. Fifty-five bird bones were also recovered of which 13 were unidentifiable. Identified species included rock dove (*Columba livia*) (16 bones), starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) (6 bones), woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*) (4 bones), jay (*Garrulus glandarius*) (4 bones), sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) (3 bones), corncrake (*Crex crex*) (2 bones), blackbird (*Turdus merula*) (2 bones), mistle thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*) (2 bones), water rail (*Rallus aquaticus*) (1 bone), blue tit (*Parus caeruleus*) (1 bone) and common gull (*Larus canus*) (1 bone). While many if not all of the birds may represent natural occurrences in the cave, they potentially reflect the late prehistoric environment. It is also worth noting that one unidentifiable bird bone was burnt suggesting the possibility of human exploitation.

#### **Artefacts from Area IV**

The majority of the artefacts from Area IV appear to be of Late Bronze Age date and include two bone beads, nine amber beads, 52 perforated cowrie shells (single perforations),

36 perforated flat periwinkle shells, pottery and lithics. The 60 pottery sherds represented three Late Bronze Age flat-based, probably tub-shaped, coarse vessels dating to about 1150–800 BC. They possibly contained perishable goods such as food or drink. Vessel 1 was different in fabric, wall thickness and size compared to the other two vessels which may indicate a contrast in function or time of deposition (Roche 2006). Lithics were found scattered through various strata across Area IV and included ten chert flakes, a flint flake, a flake of unidentified rock, a possible rock crystal core and a possible chert scraper (Sternke 2006). The cowrie and periwinkle shells (Fig. 10.6) are likely to have been collected from an area of rocky coastline along the western part of the Burren. The cowries were carefully perforated by grinding down part of the surface, probably against a stone. The periwinkles were more crudely perforated with a pointed tool. The shells may have been sewn onto textiles or strung to form a piece of jewellery. The amber beads and perforated shells mirror the material found with the human remains of Middle Bronze Age date and a repeated connection to the sea. Apart from the amber beads, cowrie and periwinkle shells, Area IV produced two unperforated topshells (*Osilinus lineatus*) and a dog whelk shell (*Nucella lapillus*) that was partially ground down to create a perforation. The single seagull bone is also worth remembering. Could this ‘repeat’ assemblage of material represent the use of Glencurran Cave by a high status familial group over several generations? Did people identify with the same artefact types over several hundred years and did these artefacts retain the same symbolic significance? Or, is it possible that the cairn and associated activities also took place in the Late Bronze Age but involved one or more human bones that were several hundred years older?

#### **Charcoal from Area IV (from Dillon 2006)**

A sample of 150 fragments of charcoal were analysed from the three main strata in Area IV. The assemblage was dominated by hazel (*Corylus avellana*; 60%), followed by yew (*Taxus baccata*; 11%), diffuse porous wood (10%), willow/aspens (*Salix* / *Populus tremula*; 7%) pmoideae (5%), holly (*Ilex aquifolium*; 4%) and ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*; 3%). The sample comprised a mixture of mature

wood and twig wood. The charcoal does not seem to represent *in situ* burning as it was mixed with unburnt material. The presence of yew and holly charcoal is interesting as both are evergreen trees and have long been symbolically associated with protective powers, immortality and the dead (Frazer 1922; Rival 1998; Mac Coitir 2003, 138–140; Tudge 2005, 81). From preliminary studies (Dillon *et al.* in press, 67–69), there is no evidence that these woods were used for domestic purposes in Bronze Age Ireland.

### **Concentrations of activity in Area IV**

Archaeological strata in Area IV were clearly disturbed as a result of both natural and cultural formation processes. That said, apart from 69 Viking glass beads very few artefacts from Area IV post-dated the Bronze Age. In addition, it is worth noting that the numbers of intrusive wild fauna in this part of the cave were lower than in all other areas of the site (McCarthy 2006). Spatial analysis of where bones and artefacts were encountered also supports the idea that while there was a degree of mixing between strata, deposits of artefacts and bones were also relatively *in situ*, with two notable concentrations of activity – the eastern concentration and the western concentration (Fig. 10.5).

#### **Eastern concentration: grids A9, B9, A10 and B10**

Most of the disarticulated human bones that occurred in Area IV came from the eastern concentration (overall area 1 m<sup>2</sup>) whereas almost all the artefacts occurred in the western concentration. Three bones of a 2–4 year old child, a single bone of a newborn baby and five adult human bones were recovered from grids B9 and A9. Neonatal calf and lamb bones occurred in the abutting B10 and A10. While the human bones have not yet been radiocarbon dated, the occurrence of Late Bronze Age pottery sherds and the repeated incidence of neonatal animals indicate that they are probably contemporaneous with the rich deposits described below.

#### **Western concentration: grids A3, B3, A4, B4, A5 and B5**

A series of intriguing deposits occurred

concentrated in six grids (overall area 1 m × 1.5 m). Six human bones (three adult bones and three juvenile) were found scattered through the area. Sherds from at least two Late Bronze Age pottery vessels were confined almost exclusively to A3 and B3 which also produced neonatal lamb bones. Abutting these grids to the east were A4 which produced the bones of five adult hares and B4 which contained lithics and a scatter of perforated shells. A5 produced further perforated shells but the focus of attention may have been on B5. Here, a concentration of neonatal calf and piglet bones were encountered in addition to the occipital skull fragment of a 2–4 year old child and a cache of over 40 perforated cowrie and periwinkle shells (Fig. 10.6). A soft dark brown loose organic deposit with lumps of orange material and charcoal flecks (340 mm × 240 mm × 30 mm deep) was discovered in B5 and B6 abutting the area where the skull fragment occurred. In turn, a second organic deposit of fibrous material (330 mm × 300 mm × 1 mm deep) and charcoal abutted this in C6. Both organic deposits rested on the sterile cave floor and were stratigraphically earlier than the strata which produced the human bones, animal deposits and artefacts. Preliminary archaeobotanical examination indicates that the organic deposit in C6 partly comprised rush seeds and stems (*Juncus spp.*) (Brewer 2006). On present evidence it appears that a layer of rushes may have been deliberately introduced and deposited here.

Considering the small size of the area involved, and the relative *in situ* nature of material such as the pottery, the cache of perforated shells, the neonatal lambs and piglets and the five hares, there is a strong likelihood that these structured deposits were placed in the cave at the same time or at least within a short timeframe. Though scattered throughout Area IV, the bones of the 2–4 year old child represent all anatomical regions suggesting that this individual was originally placed in the cave as an intact fleshed cadaver which was subsequently disturbed (Fibiger 2006). This raises the question as to whether the child was one other element in a series of structured votive deposits or whether the remains represent a burial accompanied by an exceptionally rich array of gravegoods. Though the concept of a rich child's burial is highly unusual based on the current available

record for late prehistoric Ireland, it cannot be entirely dismissed. As is evident from many of the large Late Bronze Age metalwork hoards found throughout Ireland, at Glencurran Cave there is the appearance of an ostentatious display of wealth in the deposition of prestige artefacts (eg, amber) in addition to significant quantities of animals. The neonatal fauna mirror in age the remains of the young child and newborn baby. There is some evidence that these rituals took place in the spring – the season associated with fertility, birth and new life. The neonatal pig bones point to deposition in the early spring when farrowing commences and the shed portion of a red deer antler tine indicates late spring (McCarthy 2006). The five hares provide an interesting contrast being adult individuals, unburnt and wild. Hunting and capturing these animals for this particular occasion may have been a ritualised activity. Considering that hares seem to be the only wild fauna deliberately deposited, this animal must have been of symbolic significance. This also raises the possibility that the hare remains found with the Middle Bronze Age material described above may not be natural occurrences.

### Token deposition at cave entrance

A left adult ulna was discovered in what appears to have been an Early Medieval stratum immediately outside the cave entrance. It produced a date of 2426 ± 32 BP, 750–400 cal BC (UB-6922). It was the only human bone found in this area of the cave and may have been associated with activities that took place in Area IV or may represent a later return to Glencurran with the token deposition of a single human bone at the cave mouth.

### Concluding remarks

Space does not allow for a detailed exploration here of the significance of the Bronze Age activities at Glencurran Cave. However, a number of key points are worth highlighting. The cave can be included in a small group of rich Early-Middle Bronze Age burials where rites involve unburnt human remains and rich gravegoods with an emphasis on personal ornaments. However, until the cairn is excavated, the interpretation of this part of the site remains uncertain. The site is unparalleled in Ireland and Britain as regards the type of Late

Bronze Age deposits – notably the neonatal lambs, piglets and calves, the adult hares, the quantities of perforated shells and the focus on human clavicles. The elements of springtime deposition and the newborn animals and infant suggest that the rites may have been associated with fertility and rebirth. This is emphasised by ethnographic evidence which associates both cowrie shells and caves with the womb, birth and the feminine. The cave presents an intriguing possibility that it was used for ritual activities by generations of the same high status lineage, possibly a familial group linked to overseas travel or trade.

## Acknowledgements

I remember distinctly my first archaeology lecture as an undergraduate student at University College Cork in 1992 which was given to a packed theatre by our head of department Professor Peter Woodman. It was during that first lecture that I became hooked on archaeology, to a large extent due to Peter's vast knowledge, engaging manner and the great respect in which he was held by students and academics alike. Three years later when I was looking for a topic for my MA thesis he suggested cave archaeology and for this introduction I am forever grateful. Peter supervised my MA and PhD giving excellent direction when needed and the occasional 'it's not there yet' – a statement I dreaded hearing! Peter has been the most important mentor and source of inspiration during my academic career. I offer this paper in thanks for many years of flint, fieldtrips and friendship.

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