

Antiquity

VOL. XXIX No. 115

SEPTEMBER 1955

Editorial Notes

THIS is the holiday season, and many readers of ANTIQUITY will have gone sight-seeing or be taking part in excavations. Visits to ancient monuments prompt reflections on problems that confront their custodians and they are many and difficult. The remarks which follow are made with full knowledge of the fact that the conservators or custodians are doing their best, often with too small a staff and inadequate financial means. Such criticism as is implied is, therefore, not necessarily directed at those who are now responsible for the upkeep of the monuments.



Since these notes are being written in Ireland at the end of a fortnight's field-work there, it would be awkward to maintain the usual convention, so I shall drop it and write in the first person. My visit was necessary because I needed photographs of some of the carvings on the stones of the famous burial-cairns of the Boyne culture—Lough Crew, Dowth, New Grange, and some others. Lough Crew is curiously named; there is no lake anywhere near, and the cairns are on a mountain-ridge high above the surrounding plain. There are three groups, one on each of the three summits of the ridge. Access is not easy; the middle hill can be reached by a lane and footpath on its south side, indicated by an official guide-post. The cairns are of different sizes and all seem to have approximately the same cruciform plan. There is a passage flanked by upright slabs—hence the term 'passage-grave'—leading to a corbelled chamber with (usually) a pair of side-chambers and another at the end. The whole was originally covered by a huge cairn of smaller stones, round whose base was a curb-wall of slabs.



The carved designs are mostly on the inner face of the side-slabs and on some of those roofing the side-chambers. They consist of spirals, zigzag and wavy lines, concentric circles and arcs, triangles and rayed circles. These were all of some religious significance in connection with the cult of the dead; and the Abbé Breuil has convincingly explained some of them as derived ultimately from representations of the human face, particularly the eyes. The earlier stages of these designs are found in Iberia, where there can be no doubt at all that they represent faces; and I believe that the wavy lines originally represented side-tresses such as are found on figurines and pots in the East, whence the idea came. They may be interpreted as representing a deity.

ANTIQUITY

Unfortunately no complete survey has been made of the Lough Crew designs. Much has been written about them, and they were drawn more than a century ago when they were freshly exposed and in a much better state of preservation. Those carvings which are still under the cover of the cairns are still well preserved ; but the others have for long been exposed to the corrosive action of the weather ; they are covered with a thick growth of lichen which blurs their outlines (though it may also perhaps have afforded some protection from erosion). Worse still, the chambers and passages are obstructed by a dense growth of nettles and other plants, so that the designs cannot even be seen. The problem of conservation is admittedly an extremely difficult one, for it must involve some re-excavation in the first place, and constant labour to prevent the annual growth of vegetation. It will take several years' work to put the cairns in a proper condition ; but they are worth it, for they have justly been described as the most remarkable engravings of their kind anywhere in Europe, and they are at present in such a state that they cannot be studied. Even then they will not be safe from those pests who carve their infamous names upon them, for not even locked gates and iron railings avail, nor has any method yet been devised to prevent this form of vandalism, which is practised all over the world. Even the throne-room of the Palace of Knossos is not safe ; the vacant spaces on the frescoed walls are disfigured by innumerable names.



Equally famous are the Boyne passage-graves between Slane and Drogheda. The biggest is the burial-cairn of New Grange, a huge mound covering a cruciform tholos ; close by are those of Knowth and Dowth, and the remains of several small cairns of the same type. There is a small one, not marked on the map, a few yards to the west of New Grange, with its little passage exposed and plainly visible. The Abbé Breuil has observed four different and successive styles in the carvings. The engravings of his first style consist of simple designs in thin incised lines ; those of the others are made by picking. There can be no doubt whatever that the succession is correct ; he has given instances of incised designs obliterated or partially effaced by picked ones. At Dowth I observed a rayed circle whose incised circumference had been later demarcated by picking, while the rays were left untouched. I am not quite convinced that there must be any difference in date between the styles ; it is noticeable that the incised lines are all on softer slaty stones ; none that I saw were on the hard stones on which the incisors' tool, whatever it may have been, would not have been able to make a mark. The tool used for picking must have been some kind of a metal punch ; the pick-marks are round and about two or three millimetres in diameter.



A little to the southwest of the big cairn at Dowth the map marks a long mound between two round ones. When I first visited the site thirty years ago I regarded this as the remains of a Long Barrow. On revisiting it with longer experience of such remains I can see that diagnosis was wrong ; it is the remains of a very large cairn whose north and south parts have been sheared off by cultivation and deliberate removal. On the north side is a big excavation in which is exposed a single large stone slab, standing upright : that proves that the cairn is the work of man and not, as has been suggested, a natural mound. In the grounds of Dowth House is a large roughly circular bank with opposed entrances and internal ditch. On the lower ground, southeast of New Grange, are the remains of a round enclosure with a large central mound ; and a little to the west,

EDITORIAL NOTES

on the edge of the river, is another circular enclosure recently discovered and photographed from the air by Professor Ó Ríordáin. Between New Grange and Dowth, in the corner of a field, is a small and very perfect round cairn with the curb-wall well preserved and a wide berm five yards wide between it and the skirt of the cairn. It is therefore a sort of bell-barrow made of stone.



Clearly there is still much field-work to be done here. A survey of the existing remains, accompanied by a plan of them, photographs and descriptions, is the first thing needed. It should be done in the spring, when the vegetation is low and there are no clegs to bite the surveyor. It seems certain that excavation would reveal some more carvings, and it might also yield dateable remains. Priority, however, should be given to the duller but far more urgent task of conservation; it should be realized that the exposure of the carvings to the weather means that in a few years (archaeologically speaking) many of them will no longer be visible. The date of these cairns is still not certainly fixed; Dr Rafferty's discoveries at Lough Crew, of which so far only a preliminary account has been published, suggest that one of the cairns there (H) was constructed in the Iron Age. That is a disturbing thought; but it is very hard indeed to reconcile so late a date with the other evidence, all of which points to the Bronze Age.



New Grange is a show place, lit by electricity. Dowth is also a show-place, though it still has to be seen by the light of torches and candles. Knowth, excavated by Professor Macalister, cannot be seen at all and its great wealth of carvings is inaccessible. It is greatly to be desired that Knowth, like Lough Crew, should be put in order; for until then the study of megalithic art in Ireland is greatly impeded.



I cannot conclude these notes without referring to the most recently discovered of these cairns at Fourknocks, north of Dublin, near Balbriggan. Here is a small passage-grave that has been admirably excavated and put in order by the Ancient Monuments Branch. There are many carved stones, including one on which parallel rows of zigzags are as fresh as if they had been picked yesterday. I noticed one small but possibly important feature; one of the zigzags is unfinished, but the last leg has been scratched, not picked. It looks as if the procedure were to scratch the outline roughly at first and then go over it with a punch. That would, of course only be possible on slaty stone, but may it not explain the sequence of incised and picked lines already mentioned? A weak point, it seems to me, in the theory that the incised designs are 'far older' is that nowhere in this area have they been found dissociated from picked lines.