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Glenbane: Excavation of Medieval Church and Graveyard

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Summary

Glenbane is the site of a medieval parish church and graveyard, where archaeological excavation was undertaken to recover skeletal remains exposed during quarrying and to determine if any section of the church had survived. Parts of four levels of burials were recorded and rescued. Several child burials were disturbed by a ditch-like feature. Excavation also revealed a stone wall(?), corresponding to the position of the church marked on the first edition of the 6" scale Ordnance Survey map.

Introduction

Glenbane is situated about six miles west of Tipperary town. The Ordnance Survey Books (1840) list Glenbane as being the site of a church called *Cilt Sinnithe*, an anglicised version of Cill tSinche, the church of Saint Sineach. Saint Sineach also had a church at Kilshine, County Meath dedicated to her. The site is known locally as the 'kyle' (church).

An unenclosed graveyard is still visible, as are some uninscribed gravestones. The graveyard was in use as late as the 1920s, when the last burial is said to have taken place (Buckley and Riordan, 1985). The site was brought to the attention of the Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork, when human skeletons became exposed in the west and south section on a quarry (Fig. 2).

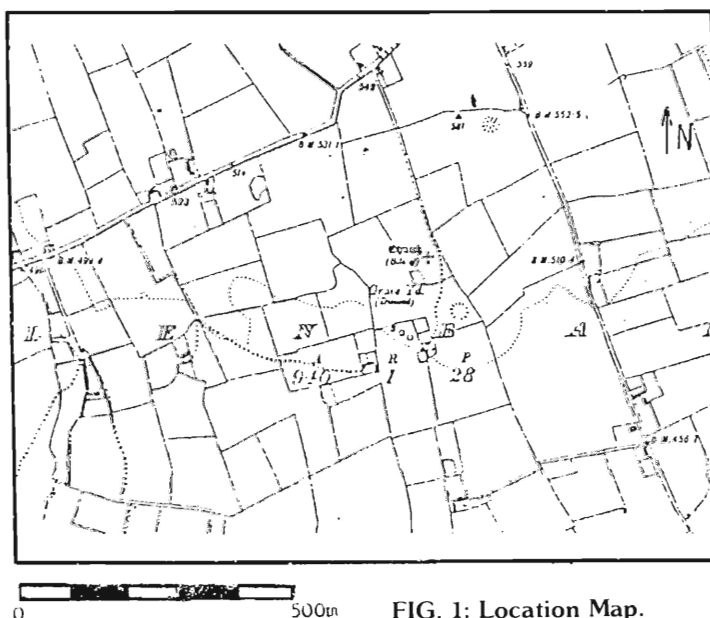


FIG. 1: Location Map.



This quarry, approximately 40m. in diameter, had been dug two to three years prior to the excavation by the landowner to provide road metal. Excavation was carried out to rescue the skeletal remains and to determine if evidence of the known church site survived.

The Excavation

The excavation was carried out during a five-week period in March and April 1985. This was confined to the west and south section of the quarry face, where skeletons were exposed, and to an area at the eastern edge of the quarry, where a black layer, approximately 9m. in length, and approximately 25cm. in thickness, was exposed.

Five cuttings which were 3m. square were opened, cuttings A and E at the east edge of the quarry and Cuttings B, C, and D at the south of the quarry (Fig 2). Various redeposited layers

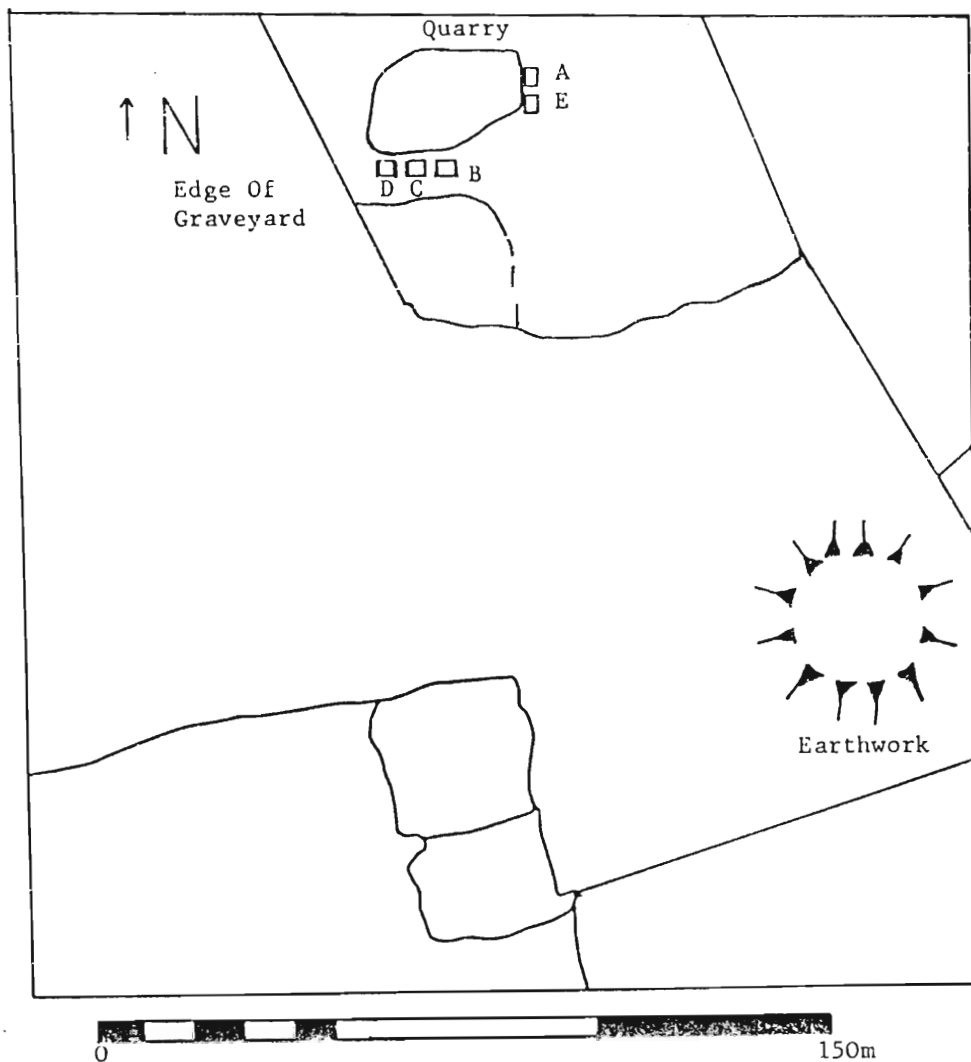


FIG. 2: Site Plan

occur throughout the site; some are from the recent quarrying and the rest are probably the result of gravedigging. All the burials were recovered from redeposited material.

In Cuttings B, C, and D, the first layer was redeposited material, probably from the quarry, and contained large stones (including a cut stone in Cutting A), and human and animal bones, and a roof slate. A more recently redeposited fill, probably from the quarry, was present in the north-east corner of Cutting B: a hardpacked stony redeposited layer occurred under this layer, and a similar redeposited layer in the south-west corner under the redeposited material from the quarry.

Burnt clay, flecks of charcoal, mortar, roofing slate and human bone are scattered throughout the redeposited material in Cuttings C and D. Human bone is scattered throughout all the excavated layers. The black layer seen in the eastern section of the quarry in Cutting A had been deposited by the landowner two to three years prior to the excavation, to fill a hollow in the field. This deposit consisted of alternate layers of modern rubbish containing charred branches, twigs, stones and charcoal; some layers were mixed with sand, gravel and mud; finds included human and animal bone, modern debris, and a piece of cut stone.

On the last day of excavation a trench, approximately 2.5m. x 50 cm., was cut diagonally (from the south-west corner to the north-east) across Cutting E to determine if there was evidence of a continuation of the stone structure found in Cutting A. Cuttings B, C, D, and E were not fully excavated. The principal features uncovered were a stone setting which was rectangular in plan, parts of twelve burials and drains (Figs. 3-4; Plates I & II).

The features described above will be described as follows: (1) burials; (2) rectangular formations of stones (wall)?; (3) drains (F. 13, F. 3) and, associated features.

(1) *The Burials*

In Cutting B (Fig. 3; Plates I & II) the legs of Burial 10 were recorded in a pit over Feature No. 13, a drain (Fig. 3). Burial 12, which was in a pit dug into redeposited material, lay east-south-east to west-north-west (Plate I). This burial abutted Feature No. 20, an unexcavated pit which ran under redeposited material.

Burial 12 was a cramped flexed burial. An animal tooth and a lump of vitrified material were found in the top of the burial pit. A disturbed human skeleton (Burial No. 17) was found in the fill of

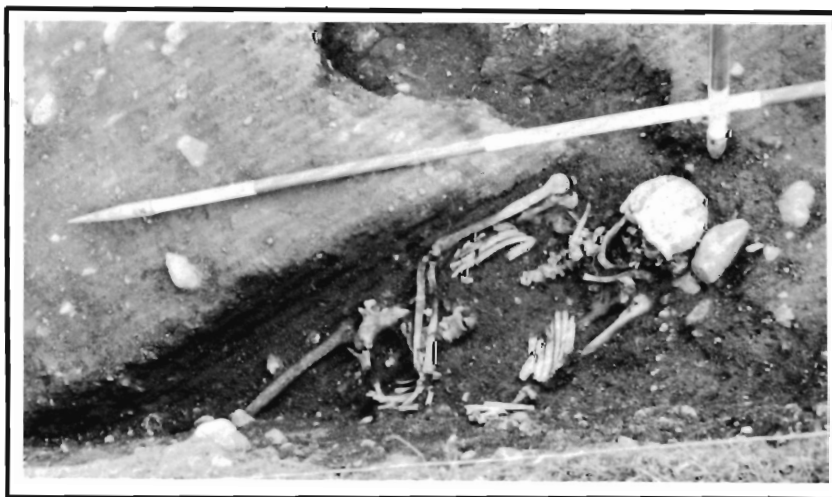


PLATE I: Burial No. 12, Cutting B.

Feature No. 13, the drain. Three skulls (Burials No. 18, 19 & 20) were evident under P. 13 and Burial 16 in redeposited material; these remain unexcavated.

In Cutting C (Fig. 4) Burials 4, 5 & 6 were recorded in redeposited material. The foot bones of Burial 5 were missing post-mortem. Burial 6 was a very fragmented skeleton of a child. Two burial pits containing Burials 8 and 9 were recorded under feature No. 3; F. 3 disturbed the skulls of these burials. A semi-circular setting of stones surrounded the pit of Burial B; a shroud-pin was found with the skeleton of this child.

Burials 11 and 13 and the skulls of Burials 14 and 15 were recorded in redeposited material. The only visible part of Burial 11 was the legs; another burial (no. 15) appeared to lie immediately under this burial. The remains of a child (Burial No. 14) are directly to the east of Burial 11 and remain unexcavated. The skull of Burial 13 and lower leg bones are missing post-mortem. The left arm of this skeleton was bent over the chest towards the right arm, and the right arm was by the side.

In Cutting D, Burial 1 was recorded in a redeposited layer; only fragments of the skull were recovered, as well as the postcranial skeleton (Plate 11). This burial lay head to the west and feet to the east, and was very near the surface. Roofing material, some charcoal and mortar are present around and among those bones. The burial of the infant with its legs drawn upwards had disturbed the right tibia of Burial 1 (Plate II). A skull was obvious near the south baulk of Cutting D; this remains unexcavated.

(2) Wall (?)

In Cutting A (Fig. 5; Plate III), under the layers of modern refuse, there was a rectangular formation of stones, approximately 1.6m. (N-S) 1.3m. (E-W) in length (Fig. 5; Plate III). It consisted of 3-4 courses of stones in some places, especially on the western side. The stones were mainly rounded and uncut. Small stones, pebbles and a light brown sandy soil were recorded among the interstices of the larger stones.

East of the wall and abutting it was a patch of charcoal approximately 60cm. in diameter. Immediately to the west of the stone wall there was what appeared to be a collapse of stones; rubble and mortar were recorded on top of this collapse of stone. Part of the western baulk of Cutting A was removed to determine the extent of the collapsed wall. This collapse continues for approximately 1m. and did not appear to have been disturbed by the quarrying.



PLATE II, Burials No. 1 and 2, Cutting D.

In Cutting E 1m. to the south of Cutting A the excavation revealed the top of what appeared to be collapsed stones similar to that in Cutting A. Some of these stones are larger than those in Cutting A, but are probably part of the same wall. An excavated fosse or ditch, which was at maximum 1.2m. wide, was recorded under the stone wall.



PLATE III: The rectangular stone formation, Cutting A.

(3) Drains and Associated Features

In Cutting B (Fig. 3), within Feature 1, a drain, cut into redeposited material, there were large and small uncut stones which were oriented E/W. These stones may be a collapsed wall or bank. Fragments of animal bone were found among these stones. Features 13 and 14 were recorded under redeposited material, and there were two parallel trenches which were curved in plan (Fig. 3). Feature No. 14 was to the north.

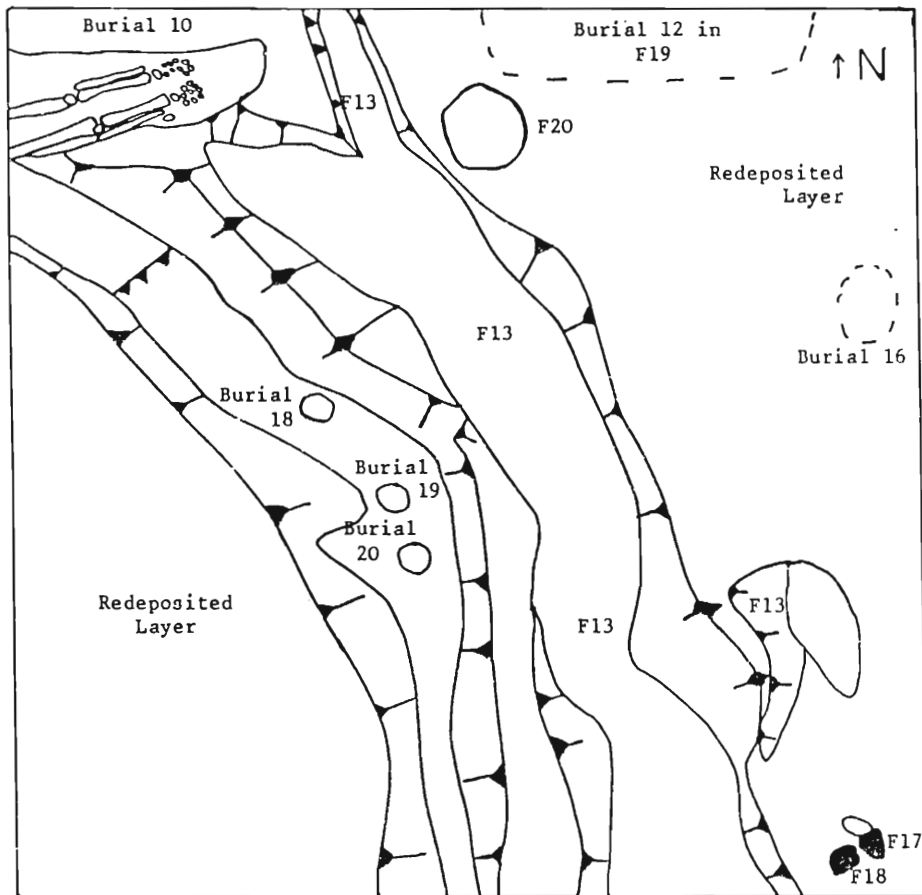
The fill on F. 13 was grey/black in colour and contained large stones, pebbles, an iron nail, animal bones and a disturbed human skeleton (Burial No. 17). Feature No. 14 was narrower than Feature 13, but roughly parallel, and was 65 cm. in width; the fill was a black peaty soil

containing human and animal bones. A piece of iron slag was found in the bottom of F. 13. Two stakeholes, Features No. 17 and 18, were recorded under (??) Feature 13, near the eastern baulk. Feature No. 17 is 10cm. in diameter and 12cm. in depth. In the north end, F. 13 branched to the west for approximately 75cm.

In Cutting C, feature No. 3, a drain, ran E-W across Cutting C, and forked to the south and was curved in plan; it varied from 2-19cm. in depth and 18-57cm. in width. It contained dark/brown clay with flecks of charcoal, mortar and human bones (predominantly skull and bones of children) and had a very stoney lower fill.

Discussion

In Cutting A, the visible black layer was obviously the result of recent activity by the landowner to fill in the hollow. Under this dumped material were the remains of what may be part of the foundations of a building (Fig. 5; Plate III). A survey undertaken during the excavation indicates that this formation of stones is in a similar position to that of a church indicated on a 17th century map (??). What would appear to be the top of a fosse lies immediately to the north-east of these stones (Fig. 5).



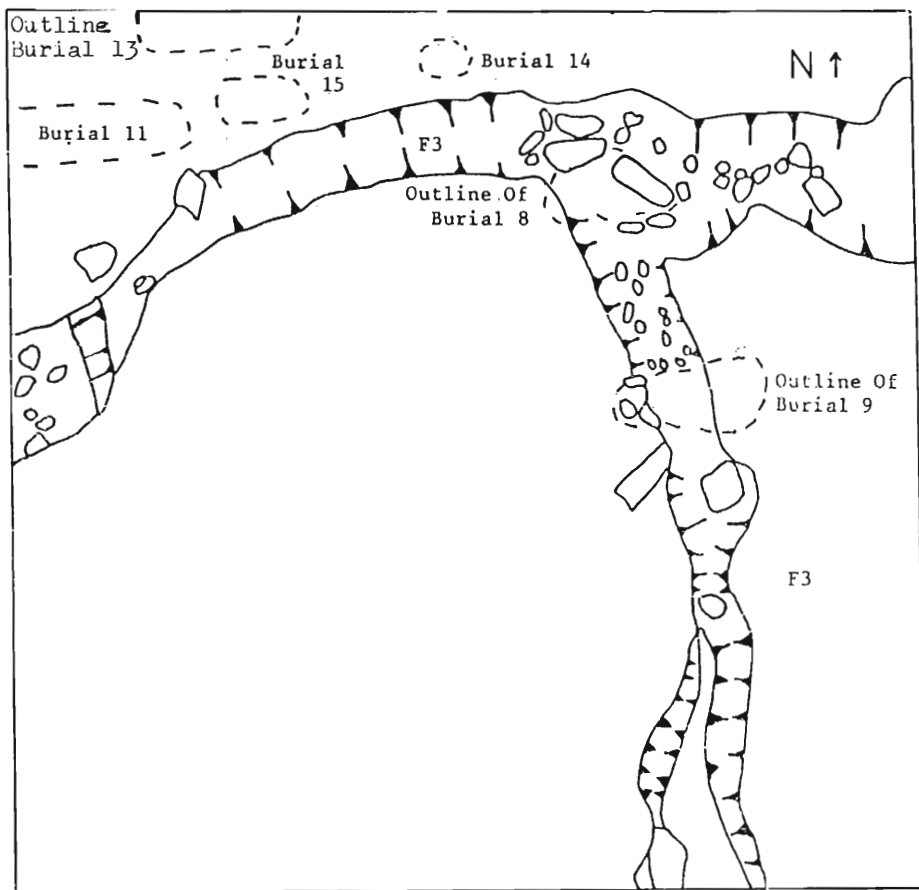
0 1m FIG. 3: Cutting B.

It was not possible to complete the excavation, but it seems probable that the stone settings recorded in the level reached in Cutting E are indeed collapsed stones similar to that in Cutting A. In Cutting B, C, and D various drain-like features have disturbed several burials, at various levels (Figs. 3 & 4).

The drain features, F. 13 & 14 in Cutting B, are probably stone lined drains, a type of drain in use in the 18/19th century A.D. (Conry, 1973 & 1976); these features run diagonally across the slope. The drains cut some of the burials, which are post-medieval in date. Feature No. 3 in Cutting C may be a continuation of either or both of these features (Fig. 4).

On the other hand, F. 3 may be part of a structure (two stakeholes are evident in it in Cutting B), or it may have delimited a particular area, i.e. for burial of children. This feature disturbed some burials, but not Burials 8 and 9. Feature No. 20 may be a burial pit or an extension of Feature No. 13.

Parts of twelve skeletons from four levels of burials were excavated. The orientation of the burials is east to west; slight variations on this occur. This orientation is suggestive of burials



0 1m FIG. 4: Cutting C.

dating from post 4/5th centuries A.D. to as late as post-medieval times. The burials in the uppermost layers are post-medieval in date. The graves which are marked by headstones to the southwest of the excavation are probably the later 19th and early 20th century burials.

Burial 12 gave a radiocarbon date of between c.1400 and c.1450 A.D. (Appendix). There are levels of burials lower than Burial 12 still obvious in the quarry section, obviously pre- or early 15th century. All of this would indicate that Glenbane was used for burial over a long period, perhaps from Early Christian times to early in the 20th century. Immediately around the quarry and the later burial ground there are undulations which suggest the presence of an enclosure, probably for the church and burial ground.

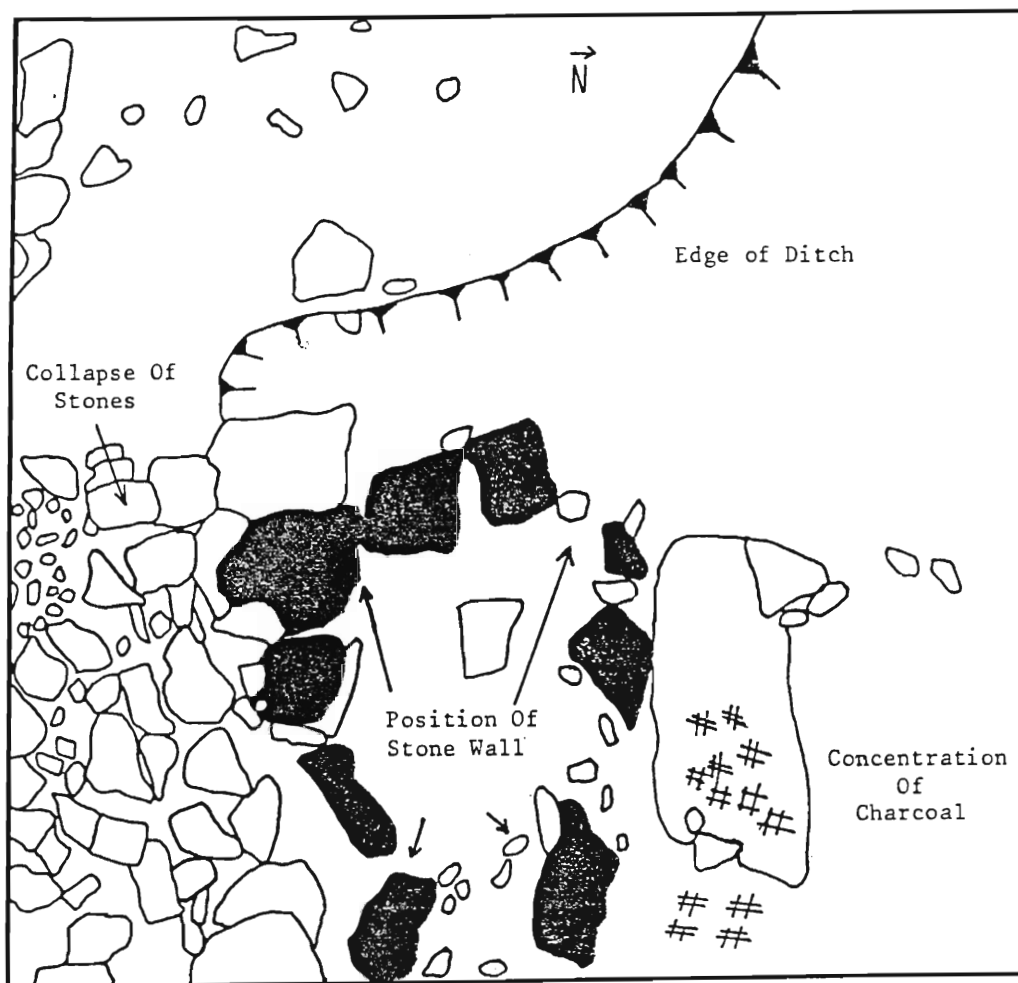


FIG. 5: Cutting A.

Notes

1. Exact location: O.S. 6" scale, Sheet No. 60, Tipperary, 4.3cm. from the north margin, 24.5cm. from the west margin. Td. Glenbane; Ph. Glenbane; By. Clanwilliam.
2. The excavation was financed by the National Parks and Monuments Branch at the Office of Public Works, and the grant was administered by the Finance Office, University College, Cork.

Appendix

Radiocarbon Dates

A sample of bone was taken from Burial 12 and submitted for radiocarbon dating. The conventional uncalibrated radiocarbon age is: 500[±]30BP (GrN 13,273). Calibrated, using the curve published by Pearson and Baillie in *Radiocarbon*, 25(2), 1983, pp. 187-196, the sample can be dated between c. 1400 and 1450 A.D. Dr. J. N. Lanting. (Rijksuniversiteit, Biologisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, Groningen, Netherlands).

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