



Experts flock to Burren bones

by **TARA KING**

PARTIAL remains of two human skeletons were uncovered last weekend at the Caherconnell Stone Fort in the Burren.

The small circular burial chamber, in which the two skeletal remains were discovered, along with the remains of two young pigs, has left many experts perplexed, as such a structure appears to have been previously unknown in Ireland.

The archaeologist leading the dig, Graham Hull, worked in conjunction with Dr Michelle Comber of NUIG. He spoke about the skeletal find and the strange burial ritual that may be associated with it.

“We found parts of two skeletons, with one more complete than the other,” he explained.

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■ Joe McCooey, field archaeologist looking at the skeletal remains of a female, aged 15-25 years approx and probably from from the pre-historic era, which he found during the dig at Caherconnell in the Burren. Looking on are other members of the dig, including director Graham Hull. Photograph by John Kelly

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recently with all the experts trying to put a name on it, so it looks like it's a first."

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"The first skeleton we found on Saturday was a partial skeleton with a skull and upper part of the body but missing its left arm and legs. We suspect it may be a late-Neolithic early Bronze Age burial, around 2500 BC.

"Around that time, there was a burial ritual where people would bury parts of the deceased in different places. They would put the body outside and wait for it to deflesh and then they would gather the bones and bury them in different places. From what we can tell, the skeleton is most likely that of a girl of about 15."

On Sunday the team made a second discovery – the partial remains of a skull. "There's not enough of it there for us to identify just yet whether it is male or female," explained Mr Hull.

"We suspect it's from around the same period as the first skeleton. We are going back to the site this Friday and people are more than welcome to come along and watch. We believe the excavation will be coming to an end this weekend. However, it's unlikely that we'll find any more skeletal remains in the burial chamber because it is quite a small space."

Once Graham and Michelle's team have completed their own initial work on the finds, the partial skeletal remains will be brought to the National Museum of Ireland where radio carbon dating will be carried out in order to determine an approximate age of the remains. Further analysis will also be carried out on the bones.

The dig commenced as part of heritage week, with the team initially setting out to investigate a partially exposed dry-stone chamber situated next to the large

stone ringfort at Caherconnell. Before the work began, it was thought that the visible remains may represent a souterrain – a feature normally associated with ringforts/cashels.

A souterrain is an artificial underground chamber used for storage and refuge in the Early Medieval period, however the semi-subterranean structure was exposed when its roof and part of its wall collapsed.

The collapse resulted in the revelation of a souterrain-like chamber located midway between two cashels.

The team consulted with Dr Coleton Jones of NUIG, an expert on burial chambers in the Burren, however, upon examination of the structure, he confirmed that the monument was a type previously unknown in the Burren.

According to the owner of Caherconnell ringfort, John Davoren, experts have flocked to the site of this week's discovery to establish the name of this prehistoric structure.

"We don't really know what we have yet," he said. "It's definitely unique in Ireland. Various experts have come out to the site to see it and to try and figure out what it is, but it has left everyone baffled."

"Coleton Jones, who is an expert on these chambers, said he had never seen anything like it in the Burren before. "The stone monument is really well built into the ground and is a perfect circle with a little passageway into it. It's under this passageway that the skeletons were found. There were also the skeletons of two pigs. What it all means, we don't know.

"It's just one of those new things that comes up. There was a big debate around it