

SURFACE-COLLECTED FLINT FROM SITE A, NEWGRANGE, CO. MEATH.

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Introduction

The Boyne Valley area is well known for its Neolithic passage tomb cemetery but there was also extensive activity in the area in almost all subsequent periods. Excavations at Newgrange have uncovered evidence of activity not only from the Neolithic but also from the Beaker period, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. While both Dowth and Knowth, neighbouring passage tombs, served as settlement sites in post Neolithic times it is interesting to note that Newgrange appears to have retained its ritual importance with the erection of a pit circle/woodhenge, great circle of standing stones (O'Kelly 1982, Sweetman 1985) and the deposition of a hoard of precious gold objects, discovered in 1842 (the Coyningham find), including a number of Roman coins, deposited during the late Iron Age.

The flint under discussion was collected in a field opposite the main mound at Newgrange in which stands site A (Coffey 1912, 42), a tumulus nearly 6 metres high and 25 metres in diameter. Herity (1974, 247) listed it as a possible passage tomb. It is surrounded by, though not centrally located within, an oval earthen bank approximately 122 metres in diameter only traces of which are still visible (Herity 1974, 247, Coffey 1912, 42). A possible ditch feature, a 13m wide opening to the east and a 5 metre wide linear feature inside the line of the bank at the west of the enclosure were revealed by a resistivity survey (Stout 1991, 247, 268). From the entrance area of the main mound at Newgrange, the tumulus can be seen clearly approximately 500 metres to the south-east on a terrace above the river Boyne, which flows a further 400 metres to the south-east. South-west of site A close to the bank of the river is site P, the remains of

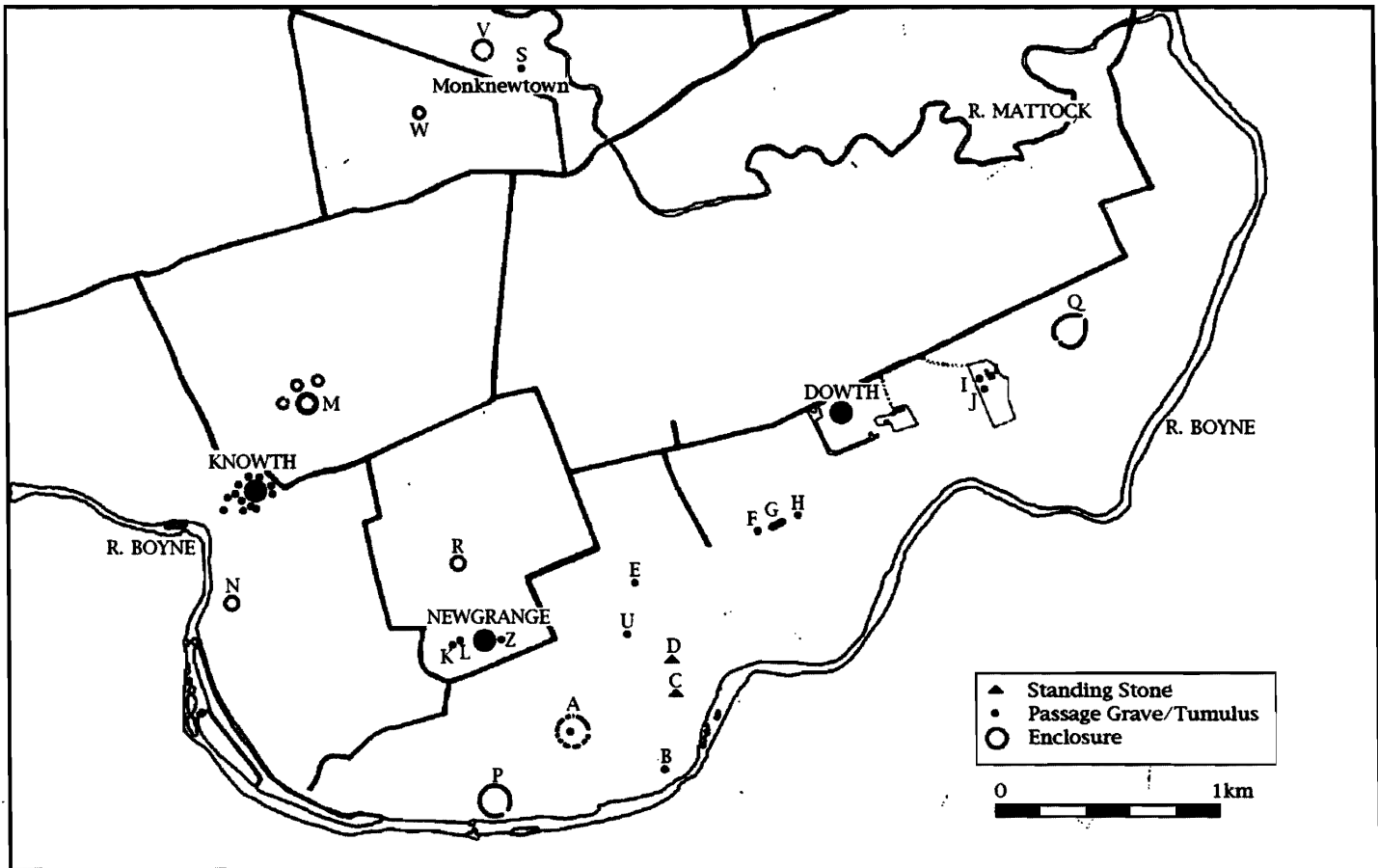


Fig. 1 The Boyne Valley area (after O'Kelly, 1990)

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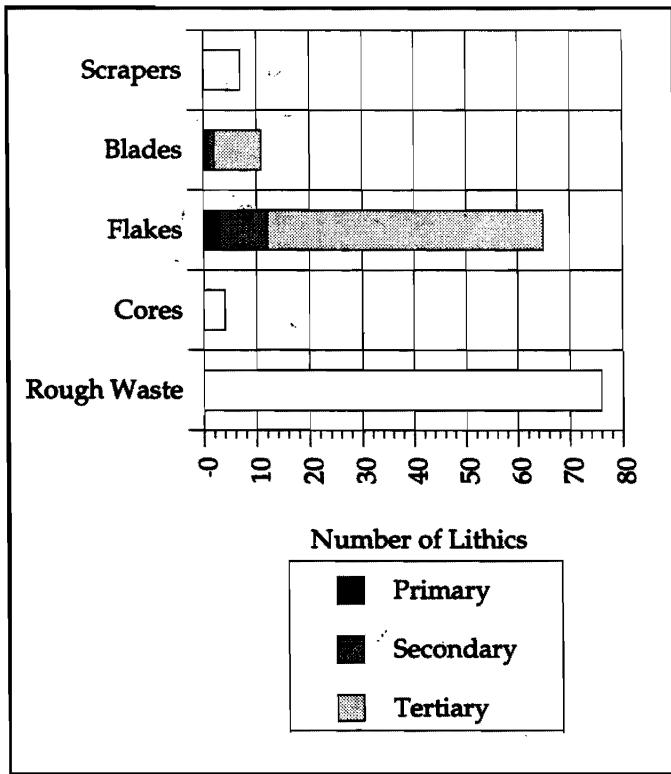


Fig. 2 Classification of flint

another enclosure, discovered in 1953 by aerial photography (O’Kelly 1968, 117). To the east of site A there are two standing stones, C and D (Coffey 1912, 42). Standing stone C was excavated in 1965 in advance of possible development of the gravel ridge on which the stone stands as a quarry. Eighty pieces of flint were found, five of which showed signs of having been worked and a further twelve displayed evidence of having been utilised. While the flint was taken to be an indicator of human activity in the general area of the stone, the excavators could not conclude that habitation took place nearby or that the flints could be associated directly with those who erected the stone (Shee and Evans 1965).

Coffey (1912) indicated that the bank around Site A was incomplete, but that a portion of it was still present. (See map; Fig. 1) According to O’Kelly one third of this monument remained in 1965, but this portion was bulldozed by the then landowner as it constituted a major obstacle to tillage. O’Kelly walked the area a number of times in 1967 and collected some 165 pieces of flint, most of which came from the recently destroyed portion of bank which lay to the east of the tumulus. Ten pieces were found to the west of the tumulus in the area where the bank would have originally stood. He speculated that the flint was associated with the bank but the exact relationship remained unclear (O’Kelly 1968).

While the pieces collected by O’Kelly had no context, he

did note the similarity of a number of pieces from site A (scrapers, Nos. E.80: 1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 11, 16, 20, 21 and 23) to those excavated from the Beaker horizon at Newgrange. However, one of the pieces was identified as a plano-convex knife and assigned a possible Neolithic date because it retained cortex on its upper surface unlike the more numerous Bronze Age examples found in association with Food Vessels (O’Kelly 1968, 117).

The collection of flint described in this article was gathered over a number of visits in early September 1992 shortly after the field had been ploughed. No systematic sampling strategy was used, though all visible flint was collected. In contrast to O’Kelly’s observations, it was noted that there were no apparent concentrations of flint, the material being well scattered within the field. This is probably due to the frequency with which the field has been ploughed since the destruction of the bank. The material displayed much damage possibly due to ploughing.

The collection was reported to the National Museum and assigned the collection number C96.2. It was catalogued, measured and analysed following the methodology set out by Guinan, McDermott and Wood (1994). The variables used in this analysis were arranged on a Microsoft Works database. The analysis was limited by a number of constraints and the need for simplicity was paramount. The small size of the sample and the lack of context precluded a more detailed and thorough assessment of the material.

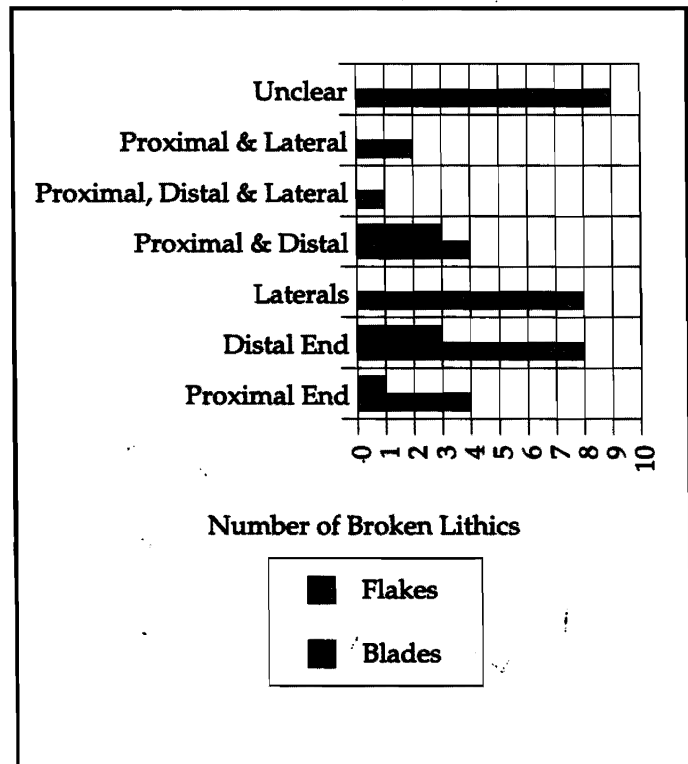


Fig. 3 Parts missing from incomplete blades and flakes

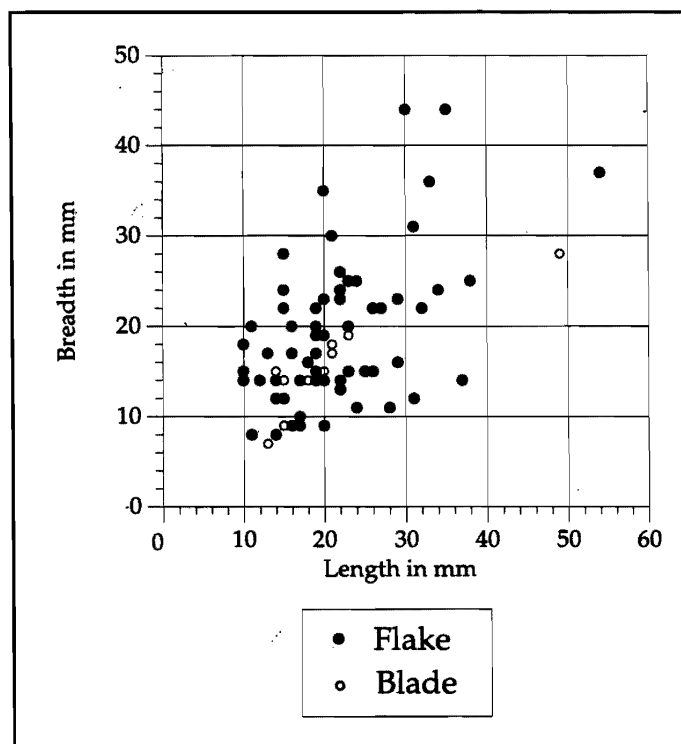


Fig. 4 Breadth/length plot of complete blades and flakes

Three of the pieces came from different locations - two having been found in gravel banks in the river and one having been found in the middle of a minor road near Newgrange, presumably transported and deposited there by farm machinery. The find locations of these pieces have been recorded in the database.

Assessment of the Material

The collection consists of 163 pieces of flint. The raw material used appears mainly to be glacial erratic flint

which was deposited in considerable quantities all along the east coast of Ireland during the last Ice Age. However, there is some indication of the use of fresh flint which must have been gathered from Co. Antrim - the only place in Ireland where flint occurs in situ. Some of the pieces are relatively large and display the characteristic grey colour of Antrim flint rather than the brown of small pebble flint and there is also a number of cores indicating that pieces of flint larger than pebbles were being worked.

The material has been classified into five categories:

The first, and largest, is rough waste and was defined as any irregularly worked material, which did not display the characteristic features of a systematic reduction strategy. 48% of the collection was rough waste (76 pieces).

The second category is flakes and the definition used here was any piece displaying a clear bulbar/ventral surface (Guinan et al., 1994). There were 65 flakes, comprising a further 40% of the collection.

The third category is blades and these were defined as any piece with roughly parallel sides and with a clear ridge on the dorsal surface (*ibid.*, 1994). While many writers take a length to breadth ratio of 2:1 as the main prerequisite of classification of a piece as a blade, due to the amount of damage visible, pieces displaying a clear break, but adhering to the other elements of the definition, were included in the classification. There were 11 blades, making up 6% of the collection.

57% of the blades and flakes were damaged in some way. The graph in Fig. 3 gives a breakdown of the parts missing from these pieces. While it was unclear what parts were missing from many of the flakes, the most common parts to be identified as absent were the distal end and laterals. The most common parts to be identified as missing from blades were the proximal

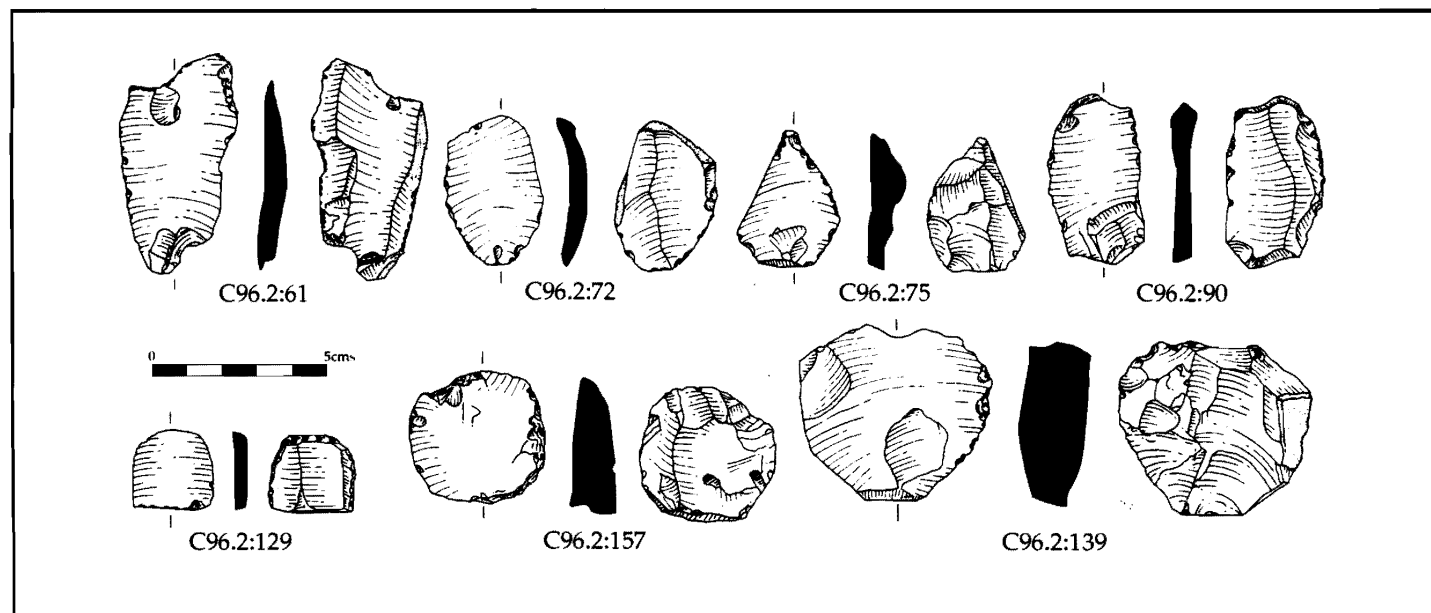


Fig. 5 Examples from the collection: C96.2:61, concave scraper; C96.2:72, blade; C96.2:75, scraper; C96.2:90, scraper; C96.2:129, thumbnail scraper; C96.2:157, scraper; C96.2:139, scraper.

and distal ends.

The fourth category is scrapers and these were defined as retouched flints which had a concave or convex working edge. There were 7 scrapers, (4%), all complete, one of which was a hollow scraper. This is an interesting piece in that it can be dated generally to the Neolithic and it corresponds to the plano-convex knife found in 1965 by O'Kelly. Because of the lack of context, this find cannot be used to date the rest of the collection. A number of the scrapers recovered are similar to those found by O'Kelly during his field-walking and during the excavation of the Beaker horizon at the edge of the Newgrange mound. These are scrapers Nos. 114 (not illustrated), 129 and 157 (see Fig. 5) and are comparable in that they have a steeply angled working edge, a feature noted by O'Kelly (1968, 117). It appears from the material under discussion in this article and that collected by O'Kelly, represents activity over a number of phases. Perhaps the plano-convex knife and the hollow scraper represent activity during the Neolithic, and date to the time when site A, a probable passage grave, was first built and used. The scrapers which O'Kelly noted as being similar to that excavated from Beaker levels at Newgrange, may date to the time when the bank was erected around site A. Circular enclosures in the Boyne valley like the woodhenge at Newgrange, the henge at Dowth and site P, a ploughed-out enclosure by the riverbank due south of Newgrange, appear to have been built during the Beaker period (Sweetman 1974, 71; Stout 1991, 225). Without proper excavation, however, it is not possible to date these monuments conclusively.

The fifth and smallest category is cores. There were also 4 cores, 2% of the collection.

Fifteen of the pieces, or 9% of the whole collection were burned - 10 pieces of rough waste, 2 cores, 2 flakes and 1 blade.

Although the collection is uncontexted and therefore undateable except in very general terms, it is of some value for comparison with other collections of flint from the Boyne Valley which may have a better context and date. The value of the collection is limited to some degree since it was recovered using a non-systematic sampling strategy. As Boismier points out research design is an essential element in any fieldwork project. Questions must be established in advance in order to better understand the distribution of artefacts, long before any interpretation can take place (Boismier 1991).

While most of the surviving monuments in the Bend of the Boyne area are now protected by law, many sites, like the bank around site A, have been destroyed. As Shee and Evans (1965, 129) pointed out "in a casual walk through any field in the Newgrange area during ploughing, similar flints can be picked up." A systematic programme of field-walking may be of value in any thorough assessment of human activity in the area. As the material did not display any marked spatial concentrations in contrast to that which O'Kelly noticed in 1965 and as much of it was damaged by ploughing, scientific recovery of further material would appear to be desirable sooner rather than later.

Acknowledgements

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