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House of the living, house of the dead: an open and shut case from Ballyglass, Co. Mayo?

*Jessica Smyth*

The Early Neolithic court tomb at Ballyglass is the larger of two such monuments (Ma. 13 and Ma. 14 in the national inventory of megalithic monuments) in Ballyglass townland and one of a group of 30 court tombs forming a dense concentration on the carboniferous sandstones around Bunatrahir Bay in north Mayo. The tomb is situated on level ground at the western edge of a narrow area of lowlands between the sea and higher peat-covered ridges to the southwest, with the Ballinglen and Bellananaminnaun rivers lying 500 m to the east and west, respectively (Figure 1). Ballyglass Ma. 13 seems to have been first noted in the early 19th century by cartographer William Bald. In a letter postmarked 'Castlebar 1825' to a Miss Clendening in Dublin, Bald provided a simple sketch of the monument, describing it as "*a druidical place of worship having two cromlechs*" (Hayes 1965, 110). The dual gallery and central court features of Ballyglass Ma. 13 were subsequently confirmed in the modern megalithic surveys of the mid-20th century onwards (de Valera 1951; 1960, 94 and Plate VI: de Valera and Ó Nualláin 1964). These surveys recorded a northwest-southeast orientation and a large elliptical central court measuring 11.50 m (north-west to south-east) x 7.25 m (north-east to south-west) with a lateral entrance to the north-east and two segmented galleries running off the court in opposite directions (Figure 2). The sandstone and granite orthostatic structure had survived almost entirely intact, along with a number of corbels and a single sandstone lintel in position above the galleries. Two large sandstone slabs lying at either end of the court were interpreted as displaced gallery capstones.

As one of only eight known central court tombs in Ireland, Ballyglass Ma. 13 has received more attention than most (*e.g.* Ó Nualláin 1976) and remains the only central court tomb to have been excavated. Excavation took place over three 8-week seasons in July and August 1969-1971 and were directed by Seán Ó Nualláin, Archaeological Officer to the Ordnance Survey of Ireland. Prior to excavation, the original form of the surrounding cairn was unclear, although sections of surviving kerb suggested a long elliptical-shaped cairn, 35 m in maximum length and 15 m in maximum width. Due to the symmetrical nature of the tomb, the main baseline was set up to divide the court and the galleries along their long axes with a site grid laid out along this baseline and ten cuttings marked out. Additional cuttings were opened in subsequent years to expose the full extent of the Early Neolithic house, and a large area to the south of the tomb and house was opened to investigate the extent of cultivation evidence revealed outside the kerb. In the final season of fieldwork, the area north of the tomb was opened in a series of adjoining cuttings. Cuttings were also opened in fields to the east and west of the tomb (Figure 2). An interim report was published soon after excavations finished (Ó Nualláin 1972), although the site awaits full publication. In collaboration with the University College Dublin School of Archaeology, this work was at an advanced stage prior to Ó Nualláin’s death in 2006. The archive remains in University College Dublin and the publication project has seen renewed effort in recent years, with specialist reports and additional radiocarbon dates commissioned. I am grateful to my University College Dublin colleagues for permission to reproduce components of the Ballyglass monograph currently in preparation.

**Tomb-house stratigraphy**

Clear stratigraphic evidence for the tomb-house sequence emerged over Ó Nualláin’s three fieldwork seasons. The first season in 1969 focused on the north-western end of the tomb, and excavation just outside the western section of the kerb revealed two postholes and a short section of a narrow trench containing dark soil (Figure 2). Removal of the cairn material and overlying strata in this area in 1970 revealed the foundations of a rectangular timber building, which was excavated in 1971 (Figure 3). The postholes and trench uncovered in 1969 were then recognised as forming the southern corner of the building, overlain by the line of the kerb at this point. This earlier timber building, while described in the interim report as running north-west to south-east (Ó Nualláin 1972, 54), the same orientation assigned to the court tomb above (Ó Nualláin 1976, 103), is very definitely on a different, more north-northwest-south-southeast orientation, a point that will be returned to below.

**House of the living?**

From the time of its discovery, the Ballyglass timber building was recognised as belonging to an emerging corpus of Neolithic rectangular houses across Ireland and Britain (Ó Nualláin 1972, 55). In the early 1970s, there were very few direct comparisons from the island of Ireland: the discovery at Ballynagilly, Co. Tyrone a couple of years earlier (ApSimon 1969) and the rectangular houses uncovered at Lough Gur, Co. Limerick 20-30 years previously (Ó Ríordáin 1954). Nearly 50 years later and with over 100 Irish Neolithic timber buildings now documented (Smyth 2014), Ballyglass can be seen to belong to a very recognisable style of timber architecture in use in the early 4th millennium BC. Measuring approximately 13 m x 6 m and defined along three sides by a continuous slot trench with associated postholes, Ballyglass bears a particularly close resemblance to houses uncovered at Corbally, Co. Kildare and Tankardstown, Co. Limerick (Smyth 2014, fig. 3.8). Charcoal from the postholes and wall trenches of the Ballyglass house, identified as oak and hazel with some willow or poplar (McKeown n.d.), indicate a mix of sturdier post and planking and lighter structural elements and align well with wider island-wide patterns (Smyth 2014, 34-36).

Domestic spaces are of course defined as much by function as by form, and there is ample additional evidence for Ballyglass serving as a ‘house of the living’. Pottery sherds representing up to 18 Early Neolithic Carinated Bowls were recovered from contexts such as the foundation trenches, postholes and the area outside the house, and the assemblage has close affinities with pottery from other Irish Early Neolithic houses (Roche n.d.). These pots were certainly used for processing food: carbonised matter and sooting was visible on a number of exterior and interior surfaces and ruminant dairy fats have been identified in vessels recently selected for organic residue analysis, well documented in assemblages from other Early Neolithic houses (Figure 4; Smyth and Evershed 2016). The small lithic assemblage is also characteristic of house sites: a few fine re-touched pieces such as leaf-shaped arrowheads and a plano-convex knife with some tool maintenance and use but few cores and little production evidence (Smyth 2014, 54-5), although the area to the east of the house may have been used for chert working (Warren n.d.).

Fire-reddened areas of clay were revealed within the eastern and south-eastern end of the house, with the largest of these occurring in the south-eastern end of the central compartment, comprising a spread of oxidised clay underneath a dense charcoal deposit. It may indicate the presence of a hearth, although the charcoal deposit appeared to radiate outwards from the plank footing in the south-eastern partition wall and could also be the burnt remains of structural timbers and wattle screens. Episodes of intense burning are not uncommon in Irish Early Neolithic houses and arguments for accidental or deliberate burning can vary from site to site (Smyth 2014, 65-7). Either way, it provides further evidence that the house beneath the court tomb at Ballyglass was functioning similarly to other houses across the island.

Where Ballyglass may diverge from the wider corpus is in the so far unique recovery of a human cremation associated with the house. As is common on Irish sites, no unburnt bone was recovered from the excavation but analysis of the cremated material identified 97 fragments of poorly cremated bone (weighing a total of 14.5 g) found with a quartz chip within the charcoal spread in the south-eastern part of the house. Eight of these fragments were identified as human skull (Delaney n.d.). There was no further contextual information recorded, but Early Neolithic pottery recovered from a posthole (F32) in this area had a fragment of unidentified cremated bone adhering to it (Roche n.d.: Figure 2), making this deposit more likely to be associated with the house than the later tomb. Deliberate deposits of burnt bone have been recorded at two other houses: Tankardstown South, Co. Limerick and Cruicerath, Co. Meath, the former identified as animal bone and the latter unidentifiable (Smyth 2014, 58). It is tempting to suggest that this human cremation at Ballyglass had some role in the site’s trajectory and the subsequent construction of the court tomb. However, with so many poorly preserved and unidentifiable bone assemblages from Early Neolithic houses their association with human remains is far from being fully understood.

**Dating Ballyglass house and court tomb**

Dating evidence is another consideration in assessing the ‘specialness’ of the Ballyglass house and the relationship between house and tomb. There have been three phases of radiocarbon dating since the site was excavated, involving the Smithsonian Institute (1974), Centrum voor Isotopen Onderzoek, Groningen (1999), and Queen’s University Belfast (2008). Four bulk samples of unidentified charcoal from the house wall trenches and one oak sample from a posthole in the south-eastern wall of the central house compartment were dated by the Smithsonian Institute (Ó Nualláin 1976, 114). A sample of oak charcoal from an ashy deposit east of the house and underlying the cairn was dated by Groningen. More recently, hazelnut shell from an external corner posthole and cereal rachis fragments from the eastern wall trench of the house have been dated at Queen’s University Belfast (Table 1).

The Smithsonian measurements, while all statistically consistent, cluster in the latter half of the 4th millennium BC (the Middle Neolithic) and are considered anomalously recent for their contexts. A similar error or offset has been noted for other Smithsonian dates on samples from nearby Ballyglass Ma. 14 and the Céide Fields (see Cooney *et al.* 2011). In contrast, the most recent dates on short-lived samples from the Ballyglass house, within the range 3950-3650 BC at 95% probability, fit well with current Bayesian models for the Irish Early Neolithic house horizon (*starting 3730–3660 cal BC* at 95% probability, Cooney *et al.* 2011 or *starting 3720–3680 cal BC* at 95% probability, Whitehouse *et al.* 2014: Table 1).

The amount of time that elapsed between the house being demolished and the court tomb being constructed is more difficult to determine. The court orthostats were never lifted and the underlying deposits not excavated, thus no primary dating material was retrieved. The 1999 date from the ash spread beneath the cairn, together with two house dates above, provide *termini post quos* for the tomb’s construction, while the initial use of Irish court tombs has recently been modelled as *starting 3700-3570 cal BC* (95% probability: Schulting *et al.* 2012, 27). This estimate was based on 47 determinations from 12 court tombs, two of which lie nearby: Ballyglass Ma. 14, 230 m to the south, and Behy, 6.4 km to the west, so is likely to be representative of activity in the area (although as mentioned above, dates from Ma. 14 may be problematic). With Irish Early Neolithic houses currently modelled as *ending 3640–3605 cal BC* (95% probability: Cooney *et al.* 2011) or *3640–3620 cal BC* (95% probability: Whitehouse *et al.* 2014), we are presented with a scenario of Ballyglass Ma. 13 appearing towards the end of the estimated range of court tomb use. In this regard it is interesting to note that the pottery retrieved from Ballyglass Ma. 13 was almost exclusively Middle Neolithic in style, thought to represent a phase of re-use when the original tomb contents were cleared out (Roche n.d. Figure 5). However, it may in fact reflect the shifting pottery styles of the 36th century BC communities that erected the monument.

**The connection between house and tomb**

The activity taking place at Ballyglass while the house was standing, before the court tomb was erected, certainly fits wider patterns of form, function and practice seen at similar Early Neolithic sites (Smyth 2014). While the relatively small area investigated prevents us defining the full extent of the settlement, there are examples of both single houses and small clusters of buildings being built during this period and Ballyglass could have developed in either way (Smyth 2014, 25). It is also important to note that activity associated with the house going out of use is not necessarily connected to the positioning of the later tomb. In addition to the episode of burning in the eastern wall mentioned above, postholes in the house seemed to have been deliberately filled with stones and soil, presumably after the posts had been removed, with some postholes covered by a layer of daub (Ó Nualláin 1972, 54–5). Ó Nualláin concluded that the house was intentionally demolished to make way for the tomb, but the large number of houses excavated since the early 1970s show that deliberate acts of destruction or decommissioning are common. Intense burning, dismantling and infilling, the digging of pits and purposeful deposition occurs on many sites that never saw the superimposition of a funerary monument and is more likely to be related to practices tied up in the lifecycle of the house (Smyth 2014, 59-69).

So why did Ballyglass take this trajectory, changing from a domestic space to one associated with mortuary ritual? It may be useful to first unpick the idea of a ‘house of the living’ being transformed into - or directly referenced by - a ‘house of the dead’, which is perhaps too simplistic to explain the process at Ballyglass. Significantly, house and tomb do not share the same orientation and, while there is certainly a stratigraphic relationship, the court tomb is not centrally placed on the house. Indeed, the main orthostatic structure avoids the earlier house completely, sited just to the east (Figure 2). This spatial relationship is very similar to that observed on Early Neolithic settlements with multiple houses, *e.g.* at Monanny, Co. Monaghan, where buildings rarely share an identical orientation and are virtually never superimposed (Smyth 2014, 22-27). Interestingly, House B at Monanny was intensely burnt at one section of its southern wall and appears to have been deliberately dismantled, while House C, located less than 3 m away and interpreted as the final building on the site, was burnt down *in situ* (Walsh 2009). Like other settlements, there may have been a stage at Ballyglass where both structures lay side by side, the footprint of the house, discernible through burnt and disturbed patches in the soil, nearly abutting the newly erected megalithic settings. However, the Ballyglass house was eventually subsumed by the monument, although not fully covered or erased. The south-eastern half of the building was buried under the cairn, with hints that this was done carefully with a memory of what lay beneath. The stones of the south-western kerb were placed along the line of the southern/south-western house wall and during excavation it was noted that within the cairn itself, composed of angular sandstone slabs, nine large rounded granite boulders up to 1.5 m in height had been set into the cairn material overlying the south-eastern section of the rectangular house. This is the portion of the house that saw intense burning and also the area from which the deposit of cremated human bone was recovered. Caveats about bone preservation notwithstanding, if there was a point of divergence in Ballyglass’ history from that of an ‘ordinary’ Early Neolithic settlement to megalithic monument, it may have been rooted in the marking or memorialisation of this cremation deposit rather than the house itself.

Another consideration in assessing the ‘house of the dead/house of the living’ model is the fact that Ballyglass Ma. 13 effectively comprises two ‘houses of the dead’ – the galleries that run in opposite directions from the central court. The design of central court tombs like Ballyglass Ma. 13 has been discussed by Powell (2005, 15), who speculates on the presence of a ‘local community built around an alliance between two unrelated lineages’, the alliance reflected in the single shared court and their lack of shared ancestry reflected in two galleries with their backs at opposite ends of the monument. If this were the case at Ballyglass - and Ó Nualláin (1976, 108) was confident that the monument was conceived as a single design - then a straightforward translation of timber house into megalithic house is problematic. How do we reconcile the apparent difference in social units across house and tomb? Might the occupants of the house have comprised one of Powell’s lineages, and from where might the second group have come?

The landscape around Ballyglass also brings an important dimension to the site and interpreting its trajectory. Ballyglass forms part of an extraordinarily dense cluster of 30 court tombs spread across an area approximately 20 km east-west by 10 km north-south (Figure 1). The fact that these tombs are located on moderately elevated land, largely on the sides of river valleys, and on relatively thin and well-drained soils, suggests they map onto the settlement pattern of the communities that built them (de Valéra and Ó Nualláin 1964, 114-116). Likewise, density of tomb distribution is presumed to mirror density of settlement, reflecting the quality and carrying capacity of land in that particular area (Darvill 1979, 316) as well as the accessibility of the terrain relative to other places along the north-west coast (de Valéra and Ó Nualláin 1964, 116). Successive writers have imagined a dynamic landscape around Ballyglass in the Neolithic: an initial ‘massive incursion’ of sea-borne farming groups (de Valéra and Ó Nualláin 1964, 116) creating a contested space negotiated through court tomb design, construction and ritual practice (Ó Nualláin 1976: Darvill 1979: Powell 2005). Competition within and between local groups is also suggested to be a driver of the land enclosure – the Céide Fields complex - recorded across this court tomb distribution (Powell 2005: Figure 1), which in places is clearly associated with tomb construction and use (Caulfield et al. 2011; Caulfield et al. 2013; Warren 2018). In this sense, Ballyglass Ma. 13 is as much a ‘tomb for the living’ as a ‘house for the dead’ (Case 1969, 13: Fleming 1973). If farming groups poured into this area in the early 4th millennium BC, it is an episode not recorded in the monument distribution or in the settlement remains in any other part of the island. The unusual sequence of house and tomb at Ballyglass may thus be due to a particular set of social dynamics at play across this small coastal region, where the landscape was marked out in different ways to the rest of the island. Without better chronological resolution of individual court tombs within this north-west Mayo cluster, we cannot tell if the wider Ballyglass landscape was really as busy as previous writers have assumed. In the well-dated and modelled Severn-Cotswold region, some 7000 km2 in area compared to the 200 km2 here, tomb-building is estimated to span around 400 years, with most dated monuments falling in between 3750-3550 BC (Whittle *et al.* 2007, 137). Of the approximately 120 monuments built over that time period, only half would have been in use at any one time, if a 100-year use life is assumed, or a just a quarter of tombs if a 50-year use life is assumed. This tempo of building activity would have left ‘territories’ of 120 km2 and 240 km2 respectively around active monuments, areas perhaps too large for any great degree of social control to be exerted (*ibid*.). While the areas involved at Ballyglass are of course much smaller, with as little as 400 m between some court tombs, we should be careful of uncritically assuming scenarios of heightened competition or tensions between farming groups based solely on monument distribution.

**More houses beneath court tombs?**

Another slant on the Ballyglass sequence is that it provides a lucky glimpse of what was a relatively common occurrence in Early Neolithic Ireland, but something which survey and excavation to date have not been particularly well-tuned to finding. It is something that Ó Nualláin pondered early on, noting the occupation debris recorded underneath previously excavated court tombs, including circular ‘huts’ beneath nearby Ballyglass Ma. 14 and wondering if ‘… more extensive investigation in the precincts of court-tombs during the course of excavation might well repay the extra labour involved’ (Ó Nualláin 1972, 56). Of the nearly 400 court tombs recorded in Ireland (Jones 2007), approximately 10% have been excavated, most in the mid-20th century. Just over thirty years ago, Herity (1987) could list 42 court tombs that had been excavated post-1930. Since then, just two sites have been added to that total: Parknabinnia, Co. Clare, started in the late 1990s as a research excavation (Jones 2019), and Aghnaskeagh 4, Co. Louth, excavated in 2005 along the route of the M1 Dundalk Western Bypass. The excavation of megalithic tombs is these days rarely undertaken in a research context, while within developer-funded archaeology most linear infrastructural developments such as roads and pipelines avoid recorded megalithic remains at the route planning stage. The pre-excavation record for Aghnaskeagh 4, for example, indicated a very ruined monument and when uncovered just 60% of the court tomb – that within the road take – was excavated. The above factors make it very difficult to reconcile settlement remains with upstanding monuments and to speak more confidently about the overlap of house and tomb, and of different realms or spheres of activity, in the Early Neolithic. Might there be additional timber houses lying beneath the approximately 90% of unexcavated Irish court tombs? It is not such a ridiculous question, but one that can only be answered with targeted geophysical survey and open-plan excavation.

**History making in the Early Neolithic**

A final point to make is that we should be cautious in assuming a universal logic to prehistoric built spaces, particularly the idea that a ‘house of the dead’ should have to mimic or symbolise a pre-existing ‘house of the living’. With an increasing corpus of Neolithic settlement sites to interrogate, early and slightly under-baked theories on the long mounds of Atlantic Europe memorialising the LBK longhouses of central Europe (*e.g.* Hodder 1984) have been gradually replaced with more nuanced understandings of historical sequence and time depth in early farming communities, and how they were given expression across a variety of media (*e.g.* Hodder 2013). Indeed, several recent discoveries demonstrate how such processes of ‘history-making’ could vary across the islands of Britain and Ireland in the Early Neolithic. On Orkney, radiocarbon dating has shown that stone houses such as the Knap of Howar appeared approximately 300 years after the first stalled cairns, upturning long-held assumptions about the tombs mimicking domestic architecture (Richards and Jones 2016). On Anglesey, excavations at Parc Cybi have uncovered a Neolithic timber house on the same orientation to Trefignath chambered tomb, located just 100 m away to the north-north-east and visible from the house through a narrow cleft in the surrounding rock outcrop (Kenney, this volume). Recent re-evaluation of the site archive at Doon Hill, East Lothian has also provided compelling evidence for an Early Neolithic timber house (Hall B) erected on top of an earlier and larger timber hall (Hall A) after it had burnt down (Ralston 2019). The Ballyglass sequence incorporates elements from all of these examples and is yet quite different, reminding us look beyond simple timber-stone and living-dead binaries to a wider and richer repertoire of Neolithic ritual practice.

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Figure 1: Location of Ballyglass Ma. 13 and Ma. 14 court tombs, north-west Mayo, showing density of court tombs (white squares) and the extent of sub-bog field walls (part of the Céide Fields complex) in the surrounding area.

A close up of a map

Description automatically generated

Figure 2: Post-excavation plan of the court tomb and underlying house at Ballyglass, showing the extent of cuttings. The postholes and section of foundation trench uncovered beneath the kerb during the 1969 field season is also marked.

A black and white photo of a dirt field

Description automatically generated

Figure 3: Pre-excavation photograph (facing north-east) of Ballyglass house, showing the southwestern section of the court tomb kerb overlying part of the foundation trench.

A close up of a map

Description automatically generated

Figure 4: Partial gas chromatogram of lipid extract from BGS-4, a sherd of Early Neolithic Carinated Bowl from Ballyglass house (Vessel 5 in Figure 5), showing a lipid distribution characteristic of a degraded animal fat. Cx FA are free fatty acids of carbon length x; Int. Std is the internal standard (C34 n-alkane); b) Scatter plot showing δ13C values determined from C16:0 and C18:0 fatty acids preserved in Carinated Bowl pottery from the Ballyglass house. Ellipses show 1 standard deviation confidence ellipses from modern reference terrestrial species from the UK (Copley et al. 2003). Archaeological and modern data are corrected for the addition of a methyl carbon during derivatisation using a mass balance equation (Rieley 1994) and the reference fats are corrected for the contribution of post-industrial carbon (Friedli et al. 1986); c) the same data with Δ13C values (=δ13C18:0 - δ13C16:0) plotted against δ13C16:0 values. Ranges of the Δ13C values are based on a global database comprising modern reference animal fats from the UK, Africa, Kazakhstan, Switzerland and the Near East.

A picture containing sky

Description automatically generatedFigure 5: Examples of Early Neolithic Carinated Bowl pottery from the Ballyglass house and Middle Neolithic globular bowls from the court tomb above.

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| **Lab code** | **Material** | **Context** | **Age BP** | **Error** | **Calibrated date range (2σ)** | **σ13C** | **Sample id** |
| SI-1452 | Charcoal (unidentified) | House, east wall trench | 4480 | 90 | 3380–2910 BC (94.5%) | ---- | E83:446-8 |
| SI-1453 | Charcoal (unidentified) | House, eastern partition wall trench | 4530 | 95 | 3520–2920 BC | ---- | E83:442-5 |
| SI-1451 | Charcoal (unidentified) | House, south wall trench | 4575 | 90 | 3630–3580, 3540–3020 BC | ---- | E83:436-8 |
| SI-1454 | Oak charcoal | House, posthole F62 | 4575 | 105 | 3640–3560, 3540–3010, 2980 2960, 2950–2940 BC | ---- | E83:456 |
| SI-1450 | Charcoal (unidentified) | House, north wall trench | 4680 | 95 | 3660-3310, 3300-3260, 3240-3100 BC | ---- | E83:432/3 |
| GrN-24989 | Bulk charcoal (hazel, willow/poplar, oak) | Pit F72, back chamber of west gallery in tomb | 2350 | 80 | 760-340, 320-200 BC | ---- | E83:293 |
| GrN-24891 | Oak charcoal | Ash spread F63 beneath cairn east of house | 4990 | 110 | 4040-4010, 4000-3620, 3590-3530 BC | ---- | E83:468 |
| UBA-8570 | Hazelnut shell | House, posthole F43 | 5005 | 42 | 3950-3690 BC | -14.5 | E83:153 |
| UBA-8571 | Cereal rachis fragments | House, eastern end of east wall | 4948 | 32 | 3790-3650 BC | -29.5 | E83:475 |

Table 1: Radiocarbon dates from the house and tomb at Ballyglass. Measurements calibrated using OxCal v4.3.2 (Bronk Ramsey 2017) and IntCal13 atmospheric curve (Reimer et al. 2013).