**Probus Wednesday 21 February 2024**

**The Drumnakilly Urns: Hugh Ward**

In the month of May 1872, a labourer in the employment of local farmer Robert Kyle from the townland of Drumnakilly found an urn of quite magnificent detail. This was apparently the first whole vessel to be found but reference has been made to pieces of ‘Crocs’ ( crockery) found on the site previously during farming operations. Mr Kyle, recognising this to be an unusual find, took the urn to the offices of the Tyrone Constitution. The then editor, Mr Carson exhibited the artefact in the office window. The urn was the subject of some interest, but no one locally had the background knowledge to recognise its importance. An Enniskillen reader of the Con sent information about the find to one of the then top archaeologists in the country. Some months passed before Mr Wakeman made his way to Omagh where he met Mr Carson and three other local gentlemen who apparently had been visiting and searching the site, whether before the find or after is not clear, the local schools inspector, Mr O'Sullivan, Seaton Milligan, father of Alice, the well-known poetess and author and a Mr. O Gorman. It was not unusual at the time for men of learning and means to collect items of historical interest. Upon his arrival in Omagh, Wakeman contacted Carson and made drawings and measurements of the urn. Obviously, these were the days before photography was readily available. Imagine Wakeman's surprise when he was told that two further urns had been discovered near the site of the original find. It is possible that these were in the possession of the gentleman previously mentioned above. After further measurements and drawings, the party made their way to the farm at Drumnakilly where excavations quickly began with the aid of some of Mr Kyle’s workmen.

 Five further urns were found that day despite the November weather, bringing to eight the total finds. With his archaeological training Wakeman’s was also able to note the layout of the urns and other artifacts so important for future historians. He noted that the soil in which the vessels were buried was of a particularly fine grain and a distinctive colour. This was to have a catastrophic bearing on the story of the site nearer to our own time.

Off the urns themselves. Wakeman had the following to say. Concerning the first found, he wrote that “ as regards beauty of forum, richness of decoration, and even size, it was one of the most remarkable of the vessels of this class hitherto discovered in Western Europe. It stood 1 foot 3 inches and 1/4 in height. It measured 3 feet, 6 inches in circumference at the mouth. The ornamentation which it presents was exactly of that class which we find upon the golden ornaments and other antiquities of prehistoric times preserved in our museums. The colour is light, I may say bright red, and all the lines are sharply incised. It contained bones well burnt, very white, distorted by the action of fire and extremely heavy.”

Wakeman continued his report with similar comments on all the eight urns found. It was remarkable that no two urns appeared to be the same. They differed in size, form and particularly in ornamentation.

Several of the urns contained within them smaller vessels. This was taken to indicate that, with the bones placed in the urn, food was placed in the smaller vessel for what was sometimes termed as food for the journey, indicating a belief in an afterlife. Wakeman makes several other observations about the siting and deposition of the finds. All the urns were buried in cists lined with slabs of flat stones. Most of the urns were inverted and covered by flat stones which had scooped out indentations. This feature appeared to be unique to the Drumnakilly Urns. The only other place where such arrangements were found was in Newgrange. Another link with the very ancient past was the discovery of some type of writing or alphabet scratched on the corner of one of the stones forming a of the cists.

Another link with the very ancient past might well be found in the remarks of PW Joyce, the noted historian and compiler of Irish place names." It seems very extraordinary that all memory of this custom, cremation, should be lost to both history and tradition. For a I am not aware that there is in any mention of the burning of bodies in any- even the oldest- of our native writings."

Among the archaeological tradition the Drumnakilly Urns are a very highly rated being compared to other burial vessels found over the rest of Europe. Drumnakilly has also been referred to by other archaeologists as a bronze age site. There has been no evidence of bronze age implements being found on or near the site so the reference to bronze age may very well be to the pottery of the bronze age across Europe some 6000 years ago.

Where are the urns and pieces found today? Wakeman's sent a number of urns, specifically the one first found and other damaged pieces to the Museum of the Antiquities of Ireland Association In Kilkenny. This museum closed sometime in the 1920s and much of its contents were forwarded to the National Museum in Kildare Street in Dublin. A catalogue of all items sent was in existence, but I cannot find a copy at the moment. As noted in the article a number of local people had procured some urns. What they did with them we can only guess. Seton Milligan, referred to earlier, left Omagh the year after the urns were found and it is unlikely that he would have abandoned these rare items. Are they languishing in some dark cupboard far from the gaze of those who would value their historical worth.

We can only wonder at the beauty and the uniqueness of the items produced from the blue clay of Drumnakilly by a hardy people who were our ancestors.

The very fine sand noted by Wakeman, the product of the Ice Age glaciers, was to ensure the obliteration of this fine site when somehow permission was given for the opening of a sand and gravel pit!

And a final word. How can a site of such importance be allowed disappear under the shovel of the JCB?