Summary of a Study of County Cork Souterrains[1]

By J.P. McCARTHY

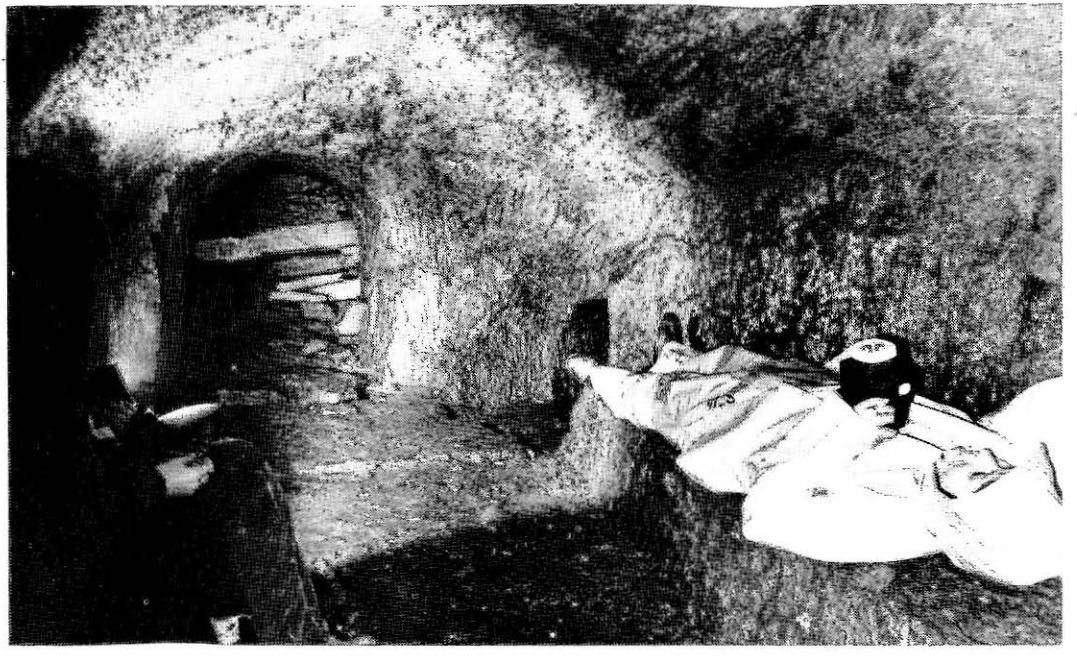
There are several thousand souterrains in Ireland, and in Co. Cork to date we have records of the existence of approximately 500. The scientific name *souterrain* is an antiquarian's term for these monuments. Other names used in the past were *Dane's Hole* and *Rath Cave*. Folknames for souterrains range from the nondescript *Cave* or *Poll Talaimh* to, in specific cases, *Tigh-faoi-thalamh* and *Carraig-an-tseomra*. Dr Anthony Lucas states in a recent paper[2] that probably, during the period in which they were used, one of the common names for a souterrain was *Uam* (*Uaimh* in modern Irish).

There are a number of common misconceptions about these sites. When investigating or enquiring about souterrains in Co. Cork I have often been told that they run beneath rivers, that they join neighbouring ringforts or that they honeycomb the interiors of ringforts. While such statements may have a basis in local folklore they are not founded in fact. To expand slightly on one of these statements gives some idea of how these assumptions arise. The idea that souterrains join ringforts is usually conceived when a site is discovered in a field between two ringforts which are known to have what are locally termed 'caves'. The souterrain is then assumed, without investigation, to be a passage between two ringforts.

In Co. Cork souterrains are found within or in the vicinity of a variety of surface structures. Ringforts are by far the most commonly associated, though churches, promontory forts, rectangular earthworks and stoneforts also occur near or in connection with them. In terms of numbers, unassociated souterrains form the second largest category of recorded sites. They pose two questions which we have not as yet attempted to answer scientifically. Were there, at one time, surface structures above them of which we now have no visible and no recorded evidence? Did the builders of these souterrains intend that the locations of their sites should be unmarked? At a future date excavation and possibly aerial photography may bring us some way towards answering these questions.

In the course of analysing the data collected during my study[3] of Cork souterrains one interesting fact emerged relating to church-associated sites. This was that the largest recorded tunnelled souterrains in the county had been found in the vicinity of churches. These are Dunisky[4] near Macroom, Kilmocomogue[5] near Kealkil and Templebryan[6] near Clonakilty. Though we do not have sufficient evidence to justify a similar statement regarding those built with stone masonry, Kilclogh[7] near Blarney, Co. Cork does encourage an open mind on the matter. This is the largest[8] recorded stone-built souterrain in the county. It is unassociated and a field adjacent to it is known as the 'graveyard' field.

Within ringforts there is no particular location for souterrains. They can occur at the centre or at the sides of the enclosure. Many are entirely contained within the bounds of the interior though occasionally they may lead out into an adjoining field. Examples of souterrains connected with houses in ringforts have been discovered by excavation at Ballywee,[9] Co. Antrim, Cush,[10] Co. Limerick and Leacanabuaile,[11] Co. Kerry. In Co. Cork,



Rock-cut souterrain at Dunisky, Co. Cork. Chamber 3 with entrance to construction shaft at centre and creephole at end of bench on right.

Knockdrum[12] stonefort near Castletownsend is the only definite example. Twohig[13] records a possible association at Castlemagner in north Cork though this was not substantiated by an investigation of the ringfort interior.

Influenced partially by geological factors, souterrains are made in either of two ways. They can be built of stone masonry or they can be tunnelled in clay or rock. The procedure for a stone-built souterrain was to excavate a trench to the required depth. Within this the structure was built, each course of masonry being supported on the outside by a packing of soil between the stones and the trench wall.[18] Tunnelling for a clay or rock-cut souterrain was done by means of excavating one or more vertical shafts to a suitable depth. Allowing for ceiling height and sufficient clay and soil overhead to support a cavity the chambers were then made by excavating outwards horizontally.

Any examination of a souterrain leaves one classifying its features into two categories. These are structural features and functional features. Structural features to be noted may be the site's compartment plans and masonry characteristics or construction shafts. Functional features are those which reflect the usage of the souterrain. They are vents, drains, steps, ceiling shafts and entrances.

In plan souterrain compartments normally conform either crudely or sharply to one of three basic shapes. These are long narrow galleries, rectangular chambers and circular cells. Using this basic definition I have devised a classification system for Cork souterrain

designs which will be described later.

People in general, when enquiring about archaeological monuments ask two simple questions which are: how old are they and what were they used for? Archaeologists in the not too distant past have also taken this approach to the study of souterrains with regrettable consequences. Because souterrains did not provide clear-cut answers, studying them was regarded as an unproductive exercise. This has resulted in an impoverished scientific record with the majority of discoveries either poorly noted or closed without a detailed examination having been made. Excavation in most cases is either a rescue operation or an additional factor in a ringfort dig. Therefore in making a statement about the dating and function of souterrains I am emphasizing what we do not know.

Dating and function are assessed on the basis of association and finds. Dating by association means that we must accept a date range for the surface structure in question and assume that the souterrain is contemporary. In the case of ringforts, for which we do not know the limits of the date range, this means that their souterrains were built and in use between Early Christian and Medieval times (5th-13th cent.). This does not however contribute towards an overall date range for souterrains in general regardless of the type of surface association. Attempting to date souterrains by means of finds poses the same problem. Whereas artefacts, ogham stones and radiocarbon dates, such as 670 A.D. and 690 A.D. for an excavated ringfort souterrain at Raheennamadra[14] in Co. Limerick, fit in well with the Early Christian/Medieval time range, they do not help us to decide when souterrains were first built and when they went out of use.

The following are the suggested functions for souterrains:

1. Domestic storage places.
2. Places of concealment for valuables.
3. Temporary and permanent dwellings.
4. Sleeping quarters in ringforts.
5. Places of refuge.
6. Anchorites' cells.

Most of these theories were put forward in the past based on the idea that all souterrains were one and the same kind of monument. Some theories such as those of temporary and permanent dwellings, anchorites' cells and sleeping quarters cannot be reliably substantiated. That they were used as places of storage, concealment and refuge can be suggested on the basis of finds and features, or circumstantially, on the basis of association and early documentary references.[15] Ringfort souterrains could provide a cool storage place for dairy produce. Wine could be stored in church souterrains. Coins have been found as at Castlefreke,[16] Co. Cork, and Knowth[17] in Co. Meath. Rock-cut benches at Dunisky and the presence of vents and drains in many sites all hint at the above three functions. But, taking *souterrain* as a blanket term, I think that future researchers should examine individual sites in the context of associated surface structures. In other words, the intended function of a small, single-chambered, ringfort souterrain may bear no relationship to a seven or eight chambered rock-cut site built to serve the varied needs of a church.

The matter of designs has influenced a lot of my thinking about the interpretation of various aspects of these sites. What follows is an outline of my classification of Cork souterrains based on 110 drawings and 155 reports. There are essentially three types:

Type A. Stone-built chambers and galleries.
Type B. Beehive cells which though commonly stone-built also occur in clay.
Type C. Earth-cut[19] and rock-cut chambers.

Each type has a threefold subdivision:

A1. A single chamber or gallery (27 examples)
A2. A site of two chambers or galleries at right angles to each other and having an L or T shaped plan (12 examples).

A3. Three or more galleries or chambers at right angles to each other (8 examples).

B1. A passage leading to a beehive cell (9 examples).

B2. Two or three cells joined by creepways, with or without a passage leading to them (9 examples).

B3. Four or more cells in a cluster formation or in a straight line (5 examples).

C1. Two chambers with their long axes parallel and joined by a creepway (8 examples).

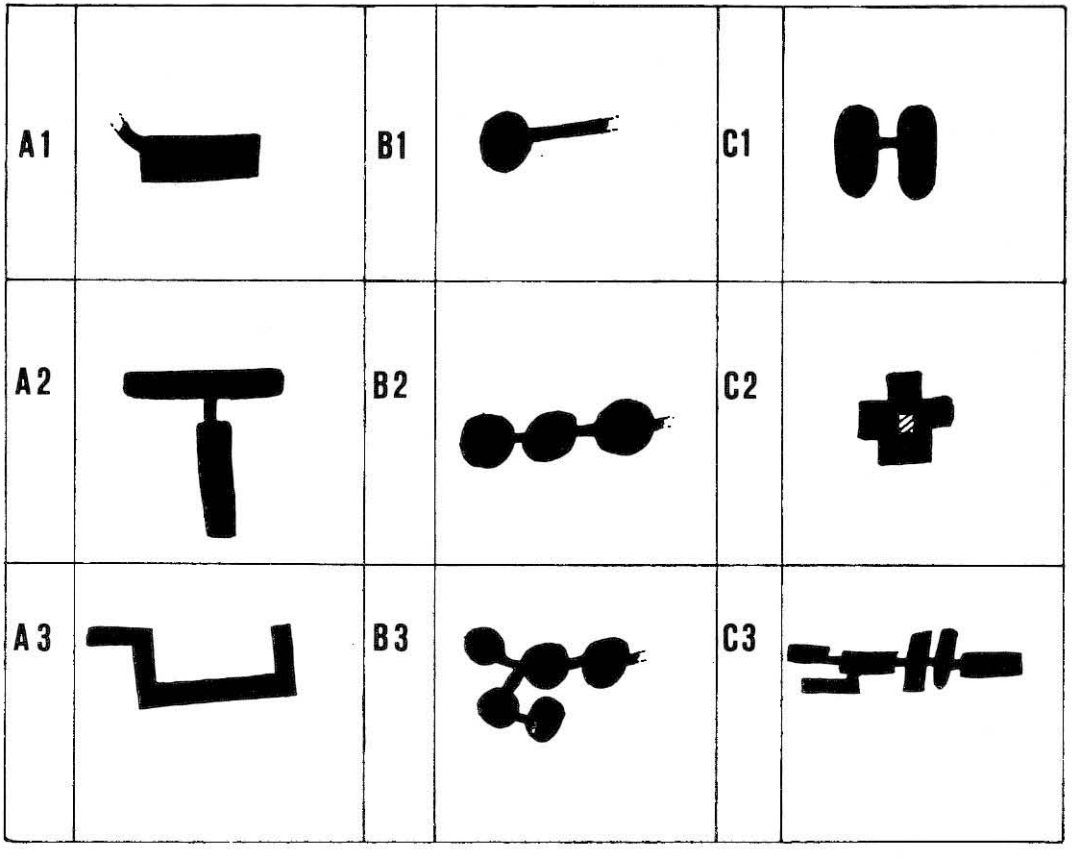
C2. Group of chambers arranged around one or two central columns (3 examples).

C3. Series of 3 to 7 chambers with long axes of some parallel, at right angles or following in a line (32 examples).

All other designs, for which there are less than 3 examples, have been classified as group D which is a miscellany designed to take such sites until future discoveries can allow for new types or prove some to be oddities.

Once the classification was completed I decided that it would be interesting to see what the geographical relationship of individual sites within each type might be. A distribution map gave the following results:

CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM FOR CO. CORK SOUTERRAINS.



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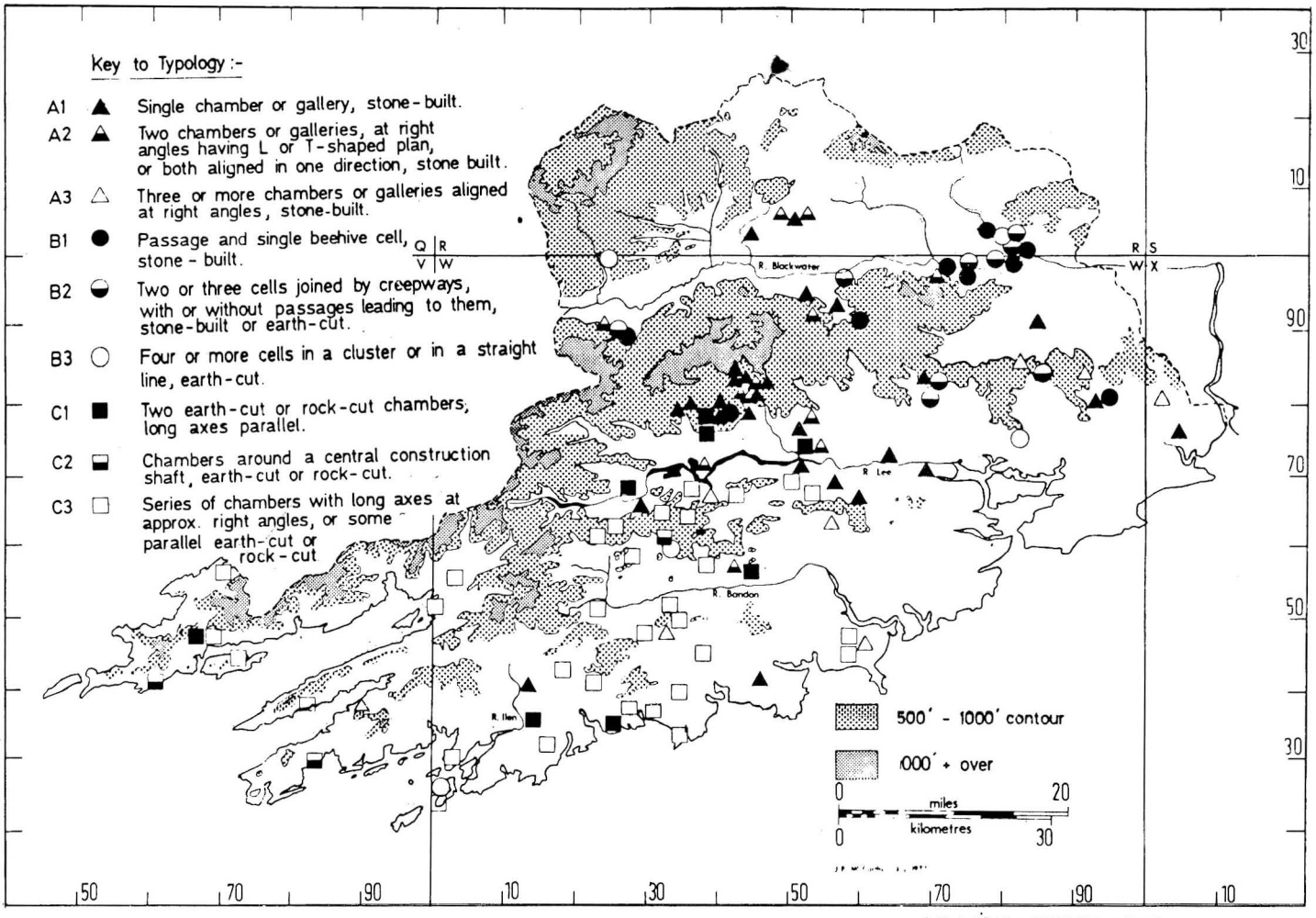
DISTRIBUTION OF SOUTERRAIN TYPES, CO. CORK



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CORRIGENDUM: For C2 above read 'chambers around one or two central columns'.

Type A: These sites are mainly located in that area stretching east to west, border to border of the county and defined to the north by the Blackwater River and to the south by the Bandon River. Though this is the main concentration area, outliers of all three subtypes occur.

Type B: Excluding B3 the main concentration is on both sides of the river Blackwater with one outlier south of the River Lee.

Type C: These are mainly located in that area occupying the the west portion of the county defined to the north by the River Lee and to the east by a north-south line from the Old Head of Kinsale to the River Lee. This distribution is approximately coterminous with the newer glacial drift in this area and probably explains why clay-cut sites are so common here.

These distribution patterns indicate only the main areas of concentration. Secondly, the map depends for its accuracy on the standard and extent of recording, which is poor generally, undertaken over a two hundred and sixty year period, i.e., c. 1717-1977.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 This summary was prepared for a talk given to the Cobh (Co. Cork) Historical and Archaeological Society in March 1982.

2 Lucas, A.T. (1971-3) 'Souterrains: The Literary Evidence', *Bëaloideas*, Vol. 39-41, p. 170.

3 McCarthy, J.P. (1977) *The Souterrains of Co. Cork.* (An M.A. thesis at present with the publisher).

4 McCarthy, J.P. (1978) 'The Duniskey Souterrain Co. Cork', *Subterranea Britannica*, Bulletin No. 7, pp 5-8.

5 Fahy, E.M. (1960) 'A souterrain at Lisheen, Co. Cork', *JCHAS* lxv (1960) pp 142-3.

6 Twohig, D.C. (1976) 'Recent Souterrain Research in Co. Cork', *JCHAS* lxxxi (1976) pp 31-33.

7 Unpublished site. Surveyed J.P. McCarthy 1976. Included in forthcoming publication of M.A. thesis.

8 *Large* is defined for the purposes of my study as either the total length of a souterrain or the floor plan size of particular compartments. Templebryan is not large in terms of length and neither is Kilclogh.

9 Lynn, C.J. (1974) Ballywee, Co. Antrim. *Excavations 1974. Summary accounts of archaeological work in Ireland*, pp 4-6.

10 Ó Ríordáin, S.P. (1940) 'Excavations at Cush, Co. Limerick', *R.I.A. Proc.*, Vol. xlv, C, pp 83-181.

11 Ó Ríordáin, S.P. and Foy, J.B. (1941) 'The excavation of Leacanabuaile stone fort near Cahercíveen, Co. Kerry', *JCHAS* xlvi (1941) pp 85-99.

12 Somerville, B.T. (1931) 'The Fort on Knockdrum, West Carbery, Co. Cork', *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, lxi, pp 1-9.

13 Twohig, D.C. (1976) 'Recent souterrain research in Co. Cork', *JCHAS* lxxxi (1976) pp 19-23.

14 Stenberger, M. (1966) 'A ringfort at Raheennamadra, Knocklong, Co. Limerick', *R.I.A. Proc.*, lxv, C, pp 37-54.

15 Lucas, A.T. (1971-3) 'Souterrains: The literary evidence', *Bëaloideas*, Vol. 39-41, pp 165-191.

16 McCarthy, J.P. and Dolley, M. (1977) 'The Castle Freke (Rathbarry, Co. Cork) find of tenth century Anglo-Saxon coins', *The Numismatic Circular*, Nov. 1977, pp. 488-490.
also
J.P. McCarthy (1979) 'Co. Cork Souterrains', *Subterranea Britannica*, Bulletin No. 10, pp 3-8.

17 Dolley, M. (1969) 'The Anglo-Saxon pennies from the upper souterrain at Knowth', *British Numismatic Journal*, Vol. xxviii, pp 16-21.

18 Variations of this method, and contradictions of it as explained here, also occur. Further excavation is required to substantiate the norm — if one exists!

19 Term 'earth-cut' is synonymous with 'clay-cut'.