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Author(s): Marion Dowd

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Marion Dowd

# Labbacallee wedge tomb, Co. Cork

This contribution to **Folklore Focus** ponders the relationship between the tomb's stories and the remains discovered in excavation.

Below: Labbacallee wedge tomb (courtesy of Ken Williams).



LABBACALLEE TOWNLAND in north County Cork is named for a spectacular and exceptionally large Early Bronze Age wedge tomb (CO027-086---). The monument is marked on the First Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1841 as *Labbacallee*, an Anglicisation of *Leaba Chaillí*, the 'bed of the old woman or hag'. In the late 1930s, an entry in the National Folklore Collection Schools explained the naming of the wedge tomb:

'In the town-land of Labbycally where I live there is a Cromlech or ancient grave called the "Hag's Bed". It is said that an old hag and her husband lived there with their five children. It is supposed that they were all buried there. There is one big grave and five small ones.'

In one of the stones there is a dent. The story that is told is that the hag made an attempt to strike her husband with a hatchet and that she hit the rock. The dent is to be seen up to this day. The river Funcheon flows near the Hag's Bed and a big rock is to be seen in the middle of the river. The old saying is that the hag and

her husband had a fight. He ran to the river and she flung the rock after him and killed him' (NFCS 0377:159; <https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4921840/4895750/5184706>).

This folktale was transcribed just a few years after the 1934 excavation of Labbacallee wedge tomb by Harold Leask and Liam Price. A crouched burial of a headless adult female was discovered in the sealed end chamber. There was a suggestion that the woman's corpse had been in a state of decomposition when it was originally brought to the tomb, and her head was probably removed at this time. An adult female skull from the main chamber, sitting on fragments of an adult male skull, is assumed to originally have belonged to the crouched burial. The main chamber produced unburnt disarticulated bones of an adult male, a child (about five years old) and a newborn baby. It is intriguing to consider whether the folklore and townland name bear echoes of the Early Bronze Age woman who was probably the earliest interment in Labbacallee wedge tomb. **AI**