



The power of the pyre – A holistic study of cremation focusing on charcoal remains



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ABSTRACT

The pyre was an integral part of the ritual of cremation, yet the actual wood that fuelled pyres has rarely been investigated from Bronze Age sites. This research examines environmental results focusing on charcoal data from the largest Bronze Age cremation cemetery discovered in Ireland, Templenoe. A holistic approach combines charcoal, plant macrofossil, osteological and artefactual results to provide new insights into the cremation process in prehistory. It demonstrates that particular trees (oak, pomaceous fruitwood and ash) were selected over 600 years to fuel the cremation pyres at Templenoe, trends which are reflected regionally in both Ireland and Britain. Comparison of charcoal with osteological data suggests that the selection of wood did not reflect age or sex. Pyre material was consistently buried with the cremated bones in graves indicating the importance of the pyre itself in the overall cremation process. Empty funerary pits or possible “cenotaphs” contain the exact same wood taxa as the graves with bone, suggesting that it may be correct to interpret these as graves. It is possible that pyre material could have been buried as a proxy for the body.

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1. Introduction

County Tipperary has the densest distribution of Bronze Age cremations in Ireland. Three of the largest Irish flat cemeteries were discovered in this county, two as a result of recent intensive “Celtic Tiger” infrastructural developments. In the last thirty years, thousands of archaeological sites were commercially excavated, most incorporating policies of bulk soil sampling (Monk et al. 2007). Effectively this huge volume of new data has re-written much of our knowledge of Irish prehistory (Armit et al. 2014; Grogan et al. 2007; Smyth 2014; Whitehouse et al. 2014). With some exceptions, for example; Gowen et al 2005; Lyons 2015a; Mc Clatchie et al 2014, 15; OCarroll and Mitchell forthcoming; O'Donnell 2007, integration and synthesis of environmental material has been slow to follow. Thousands of samples, including hundreds from cremation graves, remain unpublished in “grey literature” (Stuijts et al. 2008, 11).

Williams (2008, 264) calls for the integration of theories, methods and data in the future study of cremation. Detailed studies need to be made of cremation deposits to provide insight into the cremation process (Nilsson Stutz and Kuijt, 2014, 146). One of the

key elements of cremation is the actual pyre, the direct study of which, particularly charcoal is currently lacking in Bronze Age funerary research. Pyre wood was probably sourced in the local area. Therefore, charcoal analysis from pyres can provide information on local woodland composition and fuel selection strategies (potentially influenced by cultural or ritualistic behaviours) (Gale, 1997; Thompson, 1999). The process of collecting, transporting and disposing of ashes varies in character and significance between societies, but Williams has suggested that the aim in many contexts is the creation of a ‘second body’ for the deceased (2004, 277).

Two main wood collection strategies are assumed for archaeological charcoal, based on availability and on selection. The first implies that people collected wood from trees that were nearby, in direct proportion to the occurrence of those tree species in the local woodland vegetation. Taking certain biases into account, frequencies of individual taxa can be considered to be an accurate reflection of their proportions in woodland vegetation (Asouti and Austin, 2005, 2; Chabal et al. 1999; Shackleton and Prins, 1992). Selection implies people based their choices on tree properties, such as strength, burning qualities and traditions (Dufraisse, 2008; Kreuz, 1992; Out, 2010). Interpretation of past fuel gathering strategies is often based on archaeological context. For environmental reconstruction it is advised that charcoal from long-term deposits be used (e.g.

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middens), not short-term or episodic events (e.g. primary refuse) (Asouti and Austin, 2005, 3; Chabal et al. 1999). The suggestion is that long-term deposits are more reflective of selection based on availability, i.e. particular trees are not required to fuel domestic fires, in contrast to other specialised activities like smelting, where wood was probably gathered based on selection. Cremation pyres—a short-term and arguably specialised event — are not ideal to use for woodland reconstruction, unless it can be shown a wide variety of trees were burnt, arguing against selection of particular trees (Deforce and Haneca, 2012; Moskal de Hoyo, 2012).

To examine pyre material in detail, this research focuses on charcoal data combined with osteological and environmental results from the largest Bronze Age cremation cemetery in Ireland, Templenoe, Co. Tipperary (Fig. 1). Environmental archaeology may help to interpret certain enigmatic aspects of Irish Bronze Age funerary rituals. The number of known pyres is extremely low, in contrast to the hundreds of excavated cremations (Collins, 2002; Grogan, 2004; Lynch and O'Donnell, 2007; Wilkins, 2011). Recent

work recommends re-interpretation of potential pyre features from cremation sites (Arcini, 2005). Based on this, four potential pyres have been identified at Templenoe (Geber, 2009, 223) (Section 4.3). Cremation type pits with pyre material yet with no bone present were found at Templenoe, with strong regional comparisons. This research examines if comparison of charcoal from graves, potential pyres and pits empty of bone can aid in the interpretation of these features. Ethnographic evidence demonstrates that wood selection for funeral pyres can be influenced by age or status of the individual. For example, among the Siberian Nivkh, a child's soul is thought to be afraid of crackling larch (*Larix* spp.) used for adult pyres, so children are cremated on juniper (*Juniper* spp.) pyres (Williams, 2004, 276). Charcoal from the Templenoe pyres is compared to osteological results, to determine if age or sex is reflected in wood type.

Overall, this research aims to investigate whether wood was gathered at Templenoe based on availability or selection and if the integrated analysis of pyre material can aid in the interpretation of funerary sites.



Fig. 1. Location map of Templenoe and nearby Bronze Age flat cemeteries.

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