



Mobility and migration in late Iron Age and early Medieval Ireland



Jacqueline Cahill Wilson ^a, Christopher D. Standish ^{b,*}

^a The Discovery Programme, 63 Merrion Square, Dublin D2, Ireland

^b Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BF, UK

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ABSTRACT

Strontium and oxygen isotope analysis has been performed on a selection of human teeth dating from late Iron Age and early Medieval Ireland to test the hypothesis that the appearance of new burial rites was associated with phases of migration from, and contact with, the Roman and Late Antique world. In particular, the appearance of crouched inhumations from the beginning of the 1st century CE, and the appearance of extended supine inhumations alongside the reappearance of crouched burials after the c. 4th century CE are investigated. Isotopic data favours the presence of non-local individuals during both periods. As parallels for virtually all of these new burial practices can be found elsewhere, for example throughout Iron Age and Roman Britain, the data are seen to support previously proposed theories that such burial practices were intrusive and reflected new rites associated with migrant peoples. This adds to the increasing body of evidence demonstrating that rather than being isolated, Ireland was very much part of a connected Europe throughout the entire period of Roman administration in the western provinces, and in the centuries after its demise.

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1. Introduction

The somewhat isolationist characterisation of the Iron Age in Ireland that dominated its research during the early part of the 20th century CE stemmed from a culture-historical reconstruction. It relied heavily on stylistic or morphological parallels for monuments, enclosures and artefacts often cross-referenced (retrospectively) through the corpus of medieval Irish texts. The reasoning behind this approach has been outlined in detail elsewhere, and it is clear that this (re)construction of Irish pre- and early history was created as a response to the emerging new nation state which sought pride in a wholly Irish (Celtic) culture and an indigenous history and archaeology separate and different to that of Britain (Cahill Wilson, 2012; Cahill Wilson et al., 2014; Carew, 2012; Cooney, 1996; Mallory, 2013; O'Sullivan, 2003; Piccini, 1996; Waddell, 2005; Warner, 2013).

The irony is that embedded within this indigenous interpretation was the explicit recognition of external cultural influences, but with an emphasis on a likely continental European (rather than British) origin. A good example is the artistic and artisanal parallels offered for the La Tène-type metalwork such as the Bann Disc from County Derry, which appears to reach its floruit in Ireland at the beginning of the late Iron Age (1–500 CE). The majority of these highly accomplished decorated pieces, however, have no clear provenance or context and recent research has suggested that stylistically they are more closely paralleled amongst finds from northern Britain and Scotland in the 1st

or 2nd century CE (Harding, 2007: 171–172; Raftery, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2005; Warner, 2013).

The traditional historical narrative created a 'Celtic' Iron Age that was also seemingly unaffected by the inevitable displacement of people, firstly under the military aggression of Rome and later through the conscription/recruitment of the auxiliary, drawn as they were from both the formal provinces and well beyond the borders of the Roman Empire (Wells, 1996, 1999, 2008). Some may even have been conscripts from Ireland (Bland, 2012; Cahill Wilson, 2014; Warner, 2013). It also neglected to take account of the population movement and displacement during the Migration Period in continental Europe (300–600 CE) and ignored the impact that even a small migratory group might have had on local political structures (Heather, 2009: 17).

In later years the reliance on older artefact typologies and past interpretations has been questioned, and it has been argued that a new narrative, one that engages in more recent theoretical dialogues in archaeology and anthropology is essential to our understanding of the Iron Age in Ireland (Newman, 1997, 1998, 2005; Mallory, 2013; Raftery, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2005; Waddell, 2005; Warner, 2013). Furthermore, development-led archaeology and dedicated academic research, often with a greater focus on scientific techniques including absolute dating and geochemical studies of artefacts, human and faunal remains, has greatly altered perceptions of what was until recently a poorly understood period of Ireland's past (Becker, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Becker et al., 2008; Cahill Wilson, 2012; Cahill Wilson et al., 2012, 2014; Corlett and Potterton, 2011, 2012; Gavin, 2013).

In 2011 the Discovery Programme, Ireland's centre for advanced research in archaeology, sought to further address the persistent problems with the characterisation of the late Iron Age and commissioned

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jw1270@bristol.ac.uk (J.C. Wilson), C.D.Standish@soton.ac.uk (C.D. Standish).

the Late Iron Age and Roman Ireland (LIARI) project (Cahill Wilson et al., 2014). One of the project's key research themes was to investigate the level and extent of mobility and migration within Ireland and between Ireland and the rest of Europe. In order to fully understand late Roman cultural influences, and given that many contacts persisted long after the collapse of Roman administration in the western provinces (c. 400 CE), the study was expanded to include the transition into the early Medieval period (400–800 CE).

The research focused on an investigation into the changing burial practices evident throughout the late Iron Age in Ireland, and in particular on those that had previously been interpreted as culturally 'intrusive' (e.g. McGarry, 2008; O'Brien, 1990, 1999, 2009, 2012). Parallels for virtually all of these seemingly new burial practices can be found throughout the pre-Roman Iron Age and Roman period in Britain. Thus it is reasonable to hypothesise that some of these people may have originated elsewhere and were buried in Ireland following their own burial traditions. Strontium and oxygen isotope analysis offers a method by which the geographic origins of individuals can be investigated. Here we present the results of such an analysis on a series of Irish late Iron Age and early Medieval burials. We test the hypothesis that the appearance of new burial rites in Ireland reflects the presence of incoming individuals or groups of people, which if proven would reflect phases of increased migration from, and contact with, the Roman and late Antique world. This research has also been used to explore further the concept of boundary *ferta* as a place or monument of esteemed and long-lived ancestral burial. Such ideas are now recognised as central to our understanding of why extant monuments were reused as places of burial in Ireland throughout the 1st millennium CE (O'Brien, 2009, 2012; O'Brien and Bhreathnach, 2011).

2. Burial practices in late Iron Age and early Medieval Ireland

The changes in burial practices from the late Bronze Age (c. 1200–700 BCE) to the end of the early Medieval period (c. 400–800 CE) in Ireland are well covered elsewhere (McGarry, 2008, 2009; Seaver, 2011; O'Brien, 1990, 1999, 2009, 2012; O'Sullivan et al., 2014) so only a précis of the major transitions for the late Iron Age (1–500 CE) is presented here.

The rite of cremation, known from the Bronze Age in Ireland, appears to have continued well into the 1st millennium CE, with new radiocarbon dates from around the country indicating that it was practiced at least up to the c. 5th century CE. For example, a cremation burial at Carrickmines Great, County Dublin, was radiocarbon dated to cal 345–539 CE (95% probability; GrA 29,944, 1625 ± 35 BP, Ó Drisceoil and Devine, 2012). Crouched inhumation burials become visible in the archaeological record from approximately the beginning of the 1st century CE. These cluster chronologically in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE and geographically in an area between the River Boyne and the River Liffey in the eastern counties of Meath and Dublin. Crouched inhumations are also known from areas in Britain, especially in the south-west and north where they are considered to be one form of local burial practice which continued into the Roman period (McGarry, 2008; O'Brien, 2009; Philpott, 1991; Toynbee, 1971; Whimster, 1981).

Extended supine inhumations appear in Ireland from the c. 4th century CE, with one of the earliest burials of this type coming from a male at the site of Carbury Hill in County Kildare (Carbury Hill IV has been radiocarbon dated to cal 171–401 CE at 95% probability; UBA-20008, 1747 ± 37 BP). It has been argued convincingly that this new form of burial practice was influenced by what was by this time a well-established burial rite of extended inhumation in Roman Britain, and as a result these burials reflect either the adoption of a new burial practice by communities already living in Ireland or the arrival of migrants using their own practices (Cahill Wilson, 2010, 2012; McGarry, 2008; O'Brien, 1990, 2009). Although in the past extended supine inhumation was regarded as representing Christian burial in Ireland due in part to the predominant west-east orientation, no assumptions should be

made about either the dating or indeed the adoption of new religious practice without the benefit of further scrutiny (O'Brien, 2010, contra McGarry, 2010). During the early Medieval period there was also a reintroduction of crouched burials, which are also regarded as intrusive and perhaps reflect a small but important migrant population. However it should be noted that these are rare and are often single burials within a larger group of extended inhumations (Cahill Wilson et al., 2014; O'Brien, 2010).

In this study we focus on changes to burial practices at two key periods of time: the appearance of crouched inhumations from the beginning of the 1st century CE, and the appearance of extended supine inhumations and the reappearance of crouched burials in the transition from the late Iron Age to the early Medieval period, after the c. 4th century CE.

3. Materials and methods

The strontium ($^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$) and oxygen ($\delta^{18}\text{O}$) isotope signature of an individual's dental enamel represents a time-averaged signal of the food and drink consumed during the period of enamel formation. Ultimately this is defined by the geology, climate and geography (e.g. altitude and latitude) of the region where the foodstuffs originated. Assuming that the majority of a person's diet was sourced locally to where the individual lived, tooth enamel records the isotopic signature of the region in which the individual's childhood was spent (Budd et al., 2004; Evans et al., 2010; Iacumin et al., 1996; Longinelli, 1984; Price et al., 2002). By comparing the isotopic signature of an individual's dental enamel with the local signature for the region in which he/she was buried, it is possible to assess the likelihood that this individual grew up in the area where they were interred, and provides a means to investigate migration and mobility in the past (e.g. Chenery et al., 2010; Evans et al., 2006; Müldner et al., 2011; Pollard et al., 2012).

This paper presents new strontium and oxygen isotope analyses alongside previously published/reported data on Irish burials dating from the late Iron Age to early Medieval period (Cahill Wilson, 2010, 2012; Cahill Wilson et al., 2012, 2014; Montgomery and Grimes, 2010; Montgomery and Milns, 2010; Montgomery et al., 2006). The data are used to identify the broader patterns of origin for individuals based on the principal burial rites, rather than for in-depth site-specific investigations. Past studies on intrusive burials in Ireland have demonstrated that similarity in burial practice can no longer be used to infer similarity in dating (Cahill Wilson, 2010; O'Brien, 2010). Consequently, analysis of our data focuses only on those burials that can be securely dated to the chronological periods of interest by either absolute dating (direct radiocarbon dating) or in two cases by associated diagnostic grave goods.

Burials dated to between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE are included to investigate the appearance of crouched inhumations from the beginning of the 1st century CE. Burials dated to between the 4th and 7th centuries CE are included to investigate the reappearance of crouched inhumations and the appearance of extended supine inhumations from around the 4th century CE. The remaining undated burials, or those where radiocarbon dating indicated ages outside the periods of interest here, are included to provide a comprehensive summary of the analyses performed by Cahill Wilson (2010, 2012) and Cahill Wilson et al. (2012, 2014), and because they can be used to help define the local $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ range of the study region. Fig. 1 illustrates the geographic locations of all sites mentioned in the text.

Strontium isotope analyses of enamel and dentine samples followed the methods published by Haak et al. (2008), and those for the analyses of plant and soil samples broadly followed Evans et al. (2010). Oxygen isotope analysis of the carbonate fraction ($\delta^{18}\text{O}_c$) of tooth enamel followed methodologies published by Pollard et al. (2012), and all $\delta^{18}\text{O}_c$ values discussed in the text are relative to SMOW (Standard Mean Ocean Water) to facilitate comparisons with other studies. All errors are presented at 2σ . Further details of the analytical techniques are available in the supplementary information.

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