Archaeology of

View from Cave E, Keashcorran, Co. Sligo

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The subterranean world

Marion Dowd of the Archaeology Department at UCC argues that caves were of greater significance in the past than archaeologists presently appreciate

The importance of caves in Ireland as places of prehistoric burial and ritual has not been widely recognised, largely because most of the caves that have produced archaeological material were excavated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These excavations were non-archaeological in nature and often had a palaeontological research focus. Consequently, archaeological material was badly recorded, if at all. Bones and artefacts were gathered only as an aside to geological investigation. Much of the archaeological material from caves is therefore without a context. Even in cases where stratification was recorded, it is necessary to bear in mind the range of natural and cultural processes that can cause disturbance to cave deposits.

Archaeological evidence

Most of the archaeological artefacts recovered from caves date from the Early Christian period and testify to the use of caves for a range of purposes, including domestic occupation, shelter, craftworking, storage and for concealing wealth and prestige items. By contrast, and contrary to popular images of club-wielding troglodytes, the evidence indicates that in prehistoric times Irish caves served principally as places of ritual and burial. This implies that in pre-Christian times caves were considered unsuitable for secular activities and were the domain of death and its attendant ceremonies.

In Kilgreany cave, in the Dungarvan Valley, a bronze razor and bronze socketed knife/dagger were recovered which may have been associated with the pierced boars' tusks and amber beads also discovered in the cave. On the floor in Brothers/Oonaglour cave, not far from Kilgreany, a socketed bronze axehead, bronze chisel, bronze sickle and bone awl were deliberately deposited together, with no effort made to conceal them. Large quantities of amber beads were also recovered from several areas within this cave. Both these caves and other discoveries in rock clefts suggest the possibility that such places were used for the deposition of hoards in the Late Bronze Age.

The occurrence of human bone in a cave need not always imply burial there. For instance, skeletal elements may have been washed in from outside, or animals may have dragged in bones or parts of human corpses. Bodies may also have been dumped in caves for reasons that had nothing to do with ritual, for instance murder victims. Nevertheless there is sufficient evidence to suggest that caves were used in their own right for burial in prehistory. People were interred in caves during every period from the Early Mesolithic to the Bronze Age. Iron Age cave burial has so far proved elusive. Recent excavations in Cloghermore cave, Tralee, indicate that cave burial was not unknown in early medieval Ireland and that undated human remains from other caves may be of a similar date.

From definite artefactual associations and a limited number of radiocarbon dates, it appears that cave burial was particularly popular in the Neolithic, for instance at Kilgreany and Ballynamintra caves, Co. Waterford, and at Killuragh and Annagh caves, Co. Limerick. Burials are frequently unburnt and either crouched or extended.

The grave-goods found with Neolithic cave burials include animal bone, pottery, polished stone axes and worked animal teeth. There are also parallels with the megalithic tradition. The

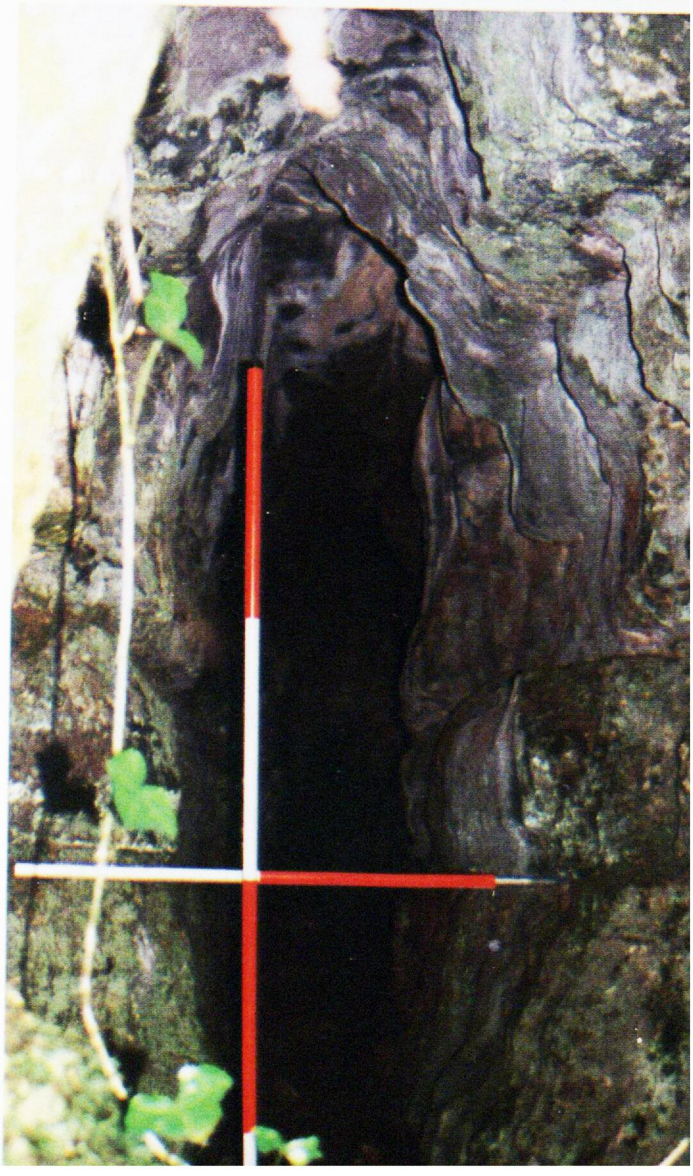
Above: Keashcorran Caves, Co. Sligo

similarities lie in the control of space and the consequent curtailment of the number of (live) participants in the rituals. As with megalithic tombs, people would often have had to squeeze, crouch or crawl on the journey to reach the interment area. The creation of passages and chambers in the construction of megalithic tombs may indicate attempts to recreate the atmosphere of the underground realm.

Large quantities of undated human remains from the caves of Kilgreany, Ballynamintra, Brothers/Oonaglour and caves in Edenvale and Newhall townlands, Co. Clare, were discovered in a scattered and fragmentary condition. This may be the result of natural processes, though it may also reflect the practices of disarticulation and/or secondary deposition which are not unknown from British cave burials. Caves may have been used for one part of multiphase burial rites and perhaps for the selective disposal of certain body parts. Bodies may have been left to excarnate inside caves before later removal for burial elsewhere; if the removal was hasty or careless, then only larger bones would have been gathered. Alternatively, whole or incomplete skeletons may have been placed in caves following excarnation elsewhere. These practices may explain the disproportionate occurrence of certain skeletal elements in the Clare caves. Primarily hand, arm and foot bones were deposited in Elderbush cave, Newhall; skull

Right: Elderbush Cave, Newhall, Co. Clare

Opposite: Ballynamintra, Cave, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford



fragments were concentrated at the entrance of the nearby Barntick cave; mostly limb bones were recovered from the Catacombs, Edenvale, while at Bats cave, Newhall, foot bones dominated the assemblage.

Discussion of burial evidence

The nature of the early cave excavations, combined with a high degree of disturbance of deposits, has resulted in few *in situ* burials and a paucity of information regarding their context and type. Therefore, although many caves have produced varying quantities of human bone, the majority cannot be dated by context or associations. Almost always, in a single cave, skeletal remains of more than one individual have been discovered, in addition to undiagnostic artefacts and/or artefacts from more than one archaeological period. Hence the problem of ascertaining the date of the burial, the impossibility of definitely identifying grave-goods and associating them with an individual, and finally the difficulty of establishing (in the absence of radiocarbon dating) whether the cave acted as a cemetery only in one period or was reused over millennia.

Regarding the status of those laid to rest in caves, it is not rash to suggest that they were somehow liminal members of the community—whether of high status, 'special' status or no status. In support of this hypothesis is the fact that cave burial is not remarkably common (though this may be a product of limited discoveries) compared to other burial techniques, and also that caves appear to be liminal places on the landscape and in the psyche.

In a ritual context, caves are likely to have been deeply imbued with symbolism derived from the experience of being underground: the acoustics (echoes, silence), low temperatures, smell, darkness, shadows, the geological cave formations, dampness, and sense of space—at times claustrophobic, and at other times vast and uncontrollable. These elements understandably would have led to feelings of awe and fear, and to a consciousness that these places were otherworldly, 'unnatural', and therefore possibly sacred.

Folklore

The archaeological evidence connecting caves with the dead is supported by myth and folklore. After being conquered by the Milesians, the Tuatha Dé Danann were relegated to living in underground chambers and passages. Not surprisingly, therefore, there are many stories connecting the sídh, or fairy folk, with hills, mountains, megalithic tombs and caves. Generally, caves are seen as dark, malevolent, sinister places and as entrances to the Otherworld/Underworld. Dunmore cave, Co. Kilkenny, was described as one of the three darkest places in Ireland, and the cave at Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon, earned the title of 'Hellmouth Door of Ireland'. Wily, dangerous and powerful supernatural women and hags are also said to have had their homes in caves. Sometimes they attempt to lure men into the cave, where danger is bound to befall them. A well-known tale describes such an encounter between Fionn Mac Cumhail and three women of the Tuatha Dé Danann at the Keashcorran caves, Co. Sligo. In other

Above: Kilgreany, Co. Waterford

legends wicked hags are banished to live in caves by saints. It is possible that these myths are symbolic of the struggle between two opposing religious systems and the eventual domination of pagan religions by a patriarchal Christian system.

Religion

The appreciation and use of caves as sacred or special places has survived into the twentieth century. They are frequently associated with religious pilgrimages, patterns at holy wells and festive assemblies at natural places—practices which are widely believed to have pre-Christian origins. In legends regarding caves that are associated with holy wells and pilgrimages, the protagonist is, without exception, a male saint. Typically, the saint used the cave as a hermitage, prayed in the cave or served penance there, thus sanctifying the place. Again, this may reflect the suppression of archaic beliefs and religions by Christianity and the incorporation and conversion of what may have been a pagan sacred site into a Christian framework.

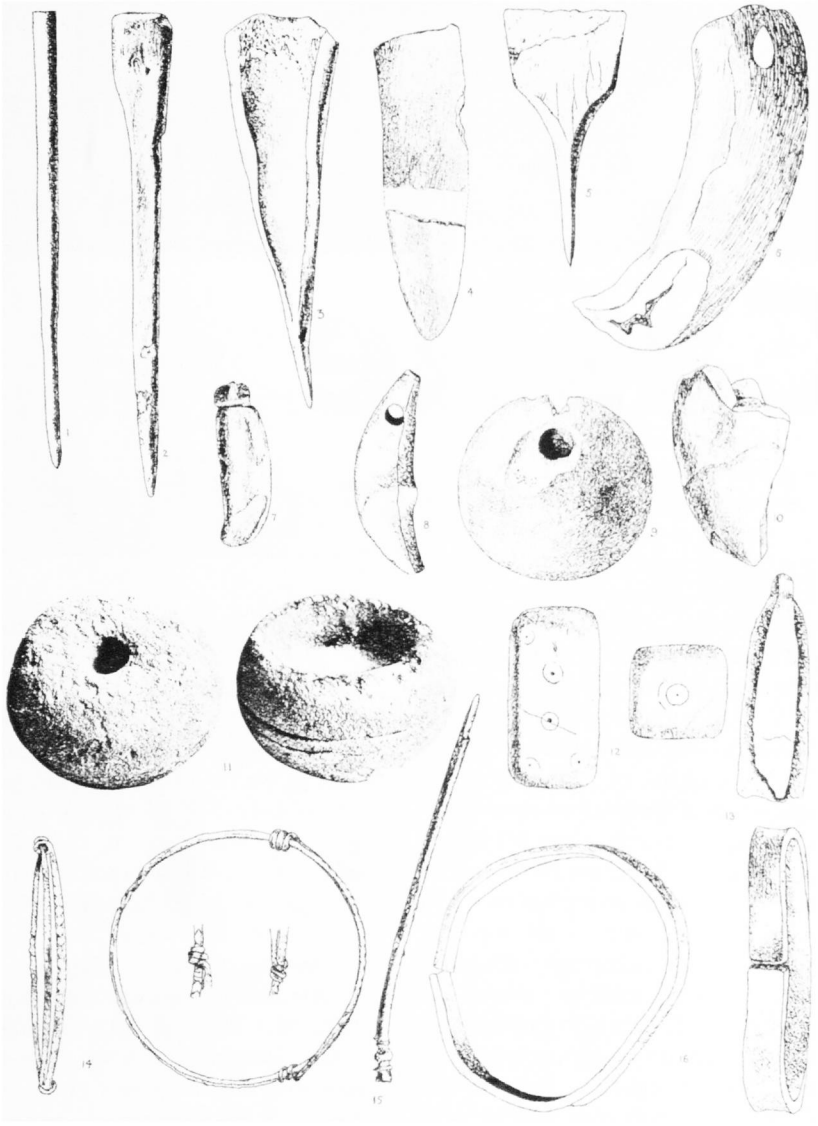
In *The Festival of Lughnasa* Máire MacNeill documents several non-religious festive assemblies, for example at Ardagh Hill, Co. Longford, Caher Roe's Den, Co. Wexford, and Tory Hole, Co. Cavan, and pattern pilgrimages such as at Pulty, Co. Leitrim, where a cave, swallow-hole or fissure is an important component of the route and the legends. The most famous pilgrimage cave is St Patrick's Purgatory on Lough Derg, Co. Donegal, which gained European fame in the early twelfth century. The pilgrimage originated from the tradition that St Patrick experienced visions of purgatory in the cave. Consequently, pilgrims were required to spend 24 hours alone in the penitential cave. It was subsequently blocked up and its exact location is now uncertain. There are several instances of holy wells located beside caves in which the pilgrim prayed, such as the holy well on Malin Head, Co. Donegal, and the well at Kilcradaun, Co. Clare. In the case of Chink Well, Portrane, Co. Dublin, the well is actually inside the cave.

Conclusion

Certain caves were used by past populations for a variety of purposes, though in prehistoric Ireland they served primarily as centres for burial and ritual. At present it is difficult to establish how widespread this usage of caves actually was. Mythology, legends, pilgrimage and Christian associations add a further dimension to their importance and hint that caves were possibly of greater significance in past times than archaeologists presently appreciate.

Until recently, caves have been peripheral to mainstream archaeological research. One reason may be that caves are natural places in the landscape rather than man-made depositories for the dead, and their interpretation as archaeologically important has depended on fortuitous discoveries of artefacts or human bone. In recent decades such discoveries have

Above: Possible former location of penitential cave, St Patrick's Purgatory, Lough Derg, Co. Donegal



Right: Selection of artefacts from the Edenvale and Newhall caves, Co. Clare

frequently been made by cavers and potholers but are rarely the result of a concerted investigative archaeological approach or of development-driven archaeology. The difficulty of the subterranean landscape in terms of safety and accessibility also hinders potential archaeological discoveries. The evidence to date highlights the potential for future discoveries and the necessity of further research into cave burials and their contribution to the variety and complexity of prehistoric burial practices in Ireland. ■