

Human Remains from Irish Caves Project

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The *Human Remains from Irish Caves Project* was initiated as a result of doctoral research by Marion Dowd who identified a significant number of Irish caves which had produced human bone in the 19th and early 20th centuries. These assemblages had never been subject to modern osteoarchaeological analysis and it was felt that such a study was essential to the further understanding of the archaeology of Irish caves.

The project involved the analysis of assemblages of human remains from 24 caves in 11 counties, stored in the National Museum of Ireland (Antiquities Division and Natural History Division), the Ulster Museum and the Department of Archaeology, University College Cork. Assemblages varied in size from Kilgreany Cave, Co. Waterford and Dunmore Cave, Co. Kilkenny with over 2,000 bones or bone fragments to Killavullen Cave 3, Co. Cork and Carrigmurish Cave, Co. Waterford with just a few bones each.

The project osteoarchaeologist, Linda Fibiger, designed a detailed recording system which took into account the fragmentary nature of the assemblages and the taphonomic factors that might have affected human remains in caves. She analysed assemblages from 23 caves while the Dunmore Cave material was examined by osteoarchaeologist L.G. Lynch. The quantitative assessment of the remains was based on a zonation system adapted from the investigation of faunal remains (Knüsel & Outram 2004). Each bone was divided into a number of zones, thus allowing detailed calculations of the distribution

of different skeletal elements within each assemblage and an accurate investigation of taphonomic factors affecting the remains. Each bone or bone fragment was identified, measured and weighed. Detailed recording of taphonomic changes included the observation and classification of fractures as well as evidence for erosion, cracking or flaking, animal activity, staining, burning and cutmarks. Depending on preservation, the analysis also involved identification of age and sex and the recording of pathologies and anomalies

Though the assemblages span the Late Mesolithic through to the Early Modern period, some general trends emerged. At least four caves produced evidence for the deposition of complete bodies, which were consequently disturbed by natural and cultural formation processes. However, the small number of bones and low MNI count from the majority of sites suggests deliberate token deposition. Alternatively, excarnation in caves is a possible explanation for the occurrence of small quantities of bones at some sites, though there is no definitive evidence for this. Cutmarks associated with defleshing of remains were absent and indicators of scavenging rare. Where sex was identifiable, both females and males are represented in the assemblages from caves. There is a general paucity of non-adult bones from the majority of assemblages. While non-adult bones are present at 10 caves, the numbers of bones are quite low. In contrast, the high incidence of juvenile remains from the Dunmore Cave indicates that the cave may have been used as a *ceallúnach* at some point in the past.

An interesting result of the project was the identification of two incidences of non-accidental trauma from Kilgreany

Cave, Co. Waterford. A juvenile or adolescent posterior skull fragment had suffered two peri-mortem injuries. Although the wounds as such were not fatal, they showed no evidence for healing and were sustained around the time of death. The second incidence was noted on the skull of Kilgreany A - an adult female of Neolithic date. The individual had suffered an injury to the mandible which had partially healed but continued to exhibit a chromic infection which would have affected the individual's ability to move the jaw for eating and speaking (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Kilgreany A: Penetrating injury of left mandibular ramus.

The project has demonstrated the value of the scientific analysis of older

collections with current analytical techniques and allowed for important interpretations and re-interpretations of activities at individual sites. Publication of the results is planned for the near future as part of a volume on Irish caves by Marion Dowd.

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References

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