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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DARKNESS

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edited by

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Front cover: Fourknocks passage tomb chamber, Ken Williams.
Back cover: Robert Mulraney.

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Background and acknowledgements

Marion Dowd and Robert Hensey

This book began with a conference entitled 'Into the Earth: the Archaeology of Darkness'. The event took place just before Halloween 2012, at the Institute of Technology Sligo, in north-west Ireland. The success of the present volume is in no small part due to the contributors to that conference; we thank them all for their insights and enthusiasm for the subject. We would like to sincerely thank those speakers who are not represented in this volume: Colmán Ó Clabaigh, Muiris O'Sullivan, Jack Santino, Ken Williams and Brian Keenan for their involvement.

Brian Keenan's powerful and moving account of his physical and mental deterioration, coping mechanisms and recovery from the four and a half years he was held hostage by Islamic Jihad in Beirut between 1986 and 1990, was for many a highlight of the conference. The impact his talk had on the other speakers is clear from several chapters in this book. Brian's meditation and reflections on darkness through his various publications (*An evil cradling*; *Turlough*; *Four quarters of light*) was an important influence on us from the conception of the conference through to the production of *The archaeology of darkness*.

Darkness is a fundamental feature of life, which we realize was not just an important and undertheorized feature of the monuments and sites we studied, megalithic tombs and caves, but a central aspect of human experience in the past and present (see Chapter 1). Certain religious practices evident in the archaeological record have, at their core, an interaction with darkness. Current research by Paul Pettitt, for instance, reveals that shadows played a significant role in the creation and appreciation of Palaeolithic art in European caves (Chapter 2). Similarly, Marion Dowd examines the use of the darkest areas of caves for ritual activities in Bronze Age Ireland (Chapter 6) while Ruth Whitehouse argues for the centrality of darkness in initiation ceremonies held deep inside caves in Neolithic and Bronze Age Italy (Chapter 3). The symbolism and interplay between light and dark are themes found in ritual landscapes, from the prehistoric monuments of Ireland and Britain as explored by Richard Bradley (Chapter 5), to the famous *hare paenga* of Easter Island re-examined in a fresh light by Sue Hamilton and Colin Richards (Chapter 8). Robin Skeates' contribution (Chapter 4) highlights a topic that is common for many of the authors: the sensory experience of physically and spiritually navigating dark underground spaces.

The living and working conditions of some people past and present also involved intense interaction with darkness, such as the Bronze Age and post-medieval miners who exploited the Great Orme copper sources in Wales as explored by Sian James

(Chapter 7). In spite of the pervasive associations between darkness and negativity, Charlotte Damm presents a refreshing account of the welcome communities north of the Arctic Circle have for the 'great darkness' (Chapter 10). In a similar vein, the received wisdom that Victorian and Edwardian asylums were grim dark places is challenged by Gillian Allmond's review of the contemporaneous literature and architecture which suggest, rather, that light and brightness were at the forefront of mental institution design (Chapter 12). Medieval Irish literature portrays darkness as a metaphor for wisdom, a theme brilliantly illuminated by John Carey (Chapter 9). Caver Tim O'Connell brings us on an enthralling journey into the darkest and deepest place in the known world (Chapter 12). As Gabriel Cooney notes (Chapter 13), the challenge in understanding how darkness was perceived in other societies is to be reflexive and aware that our interpretations are conditioned by and grounded in our own culture and experience.

The high quality of these chapters, the punctuality of the contributors in meeting deadlines, and their interest in the subject have made our work as editors pleasant and enjoyable. For help in the organization of the conference we would like to thank: Jeremy Bird, Rory Connolly, Ciarán Davis, Billy Fitzgerald, Phyl Foley, Alan Healy, Pádraig Meehan, Sam Moore, Sinead Neary, Paul Rooney and Gordon Ryan. Special thanks are due to I.T. Sligo for a grant towards the conference costs, and to the School of Geography and Archaeology NUI Galway and the Sligo Field Club who provided financial support for this publication. We are grateful to the team at Oxbow Books for their work. We would like to acknowledge all those who gave permission to include their images. For the illustration from the *Book of Ballymote* we thank Bernadette Cunningham and the Royal Irish Academy, and Anne Marie O'Brien and the Irish Script on Screen (www.isos.dias.ie). Thanks to Counterpoint Press for permission to reproduce the Wendell Berry poem 'To Know the Dark', and Craig Koslofsky and Cambridge University Press for permission to reproduce figure 1.2. We are indebted to Ken Williams and Robert Mulraney for their wonderful photographs which grace the front and back covers respectively.

This book and the opportunity it has given us to delve into the subject of darkness has been extremely rewarding. Though we have not completely gone over to the dark side (!) we are quite sure our respective archaeological work and thinking will never again be quite the same.

January 2016

Marion Dowd
Robert Hensey

Contributors

Gillian Allmond is a buildings archaeologist based at Queen's University Belfast. Having worked for several years on the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's survey of listed buildings, she is currently completing a doctoral study of colony asylums in Scotland, Ireland and Germany.

Richard Bradley taught prehistoric archaeology at the University of Reading between 1971 and 2013, and is Emeritus Professor of Archaeology there. He has a special interest in ancient landscapes and monumental architecture in Europe. In 2007 he published *The prehistory of Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge University Press).

John Carey is Professor of Early and Medieval Irish at University College Cork. The collection *The end and beyond: medieval Irish eschatology*, edited by him together with Emma Nic Cárthaigh and Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh, was published in 2014.

Gabriel Cooney is Professor of Celtic Archaeology at University College Dublin. His research interests focus on Irish prehistory, particularly the Neolithic. He is co-director of the Irish Stone Axe Project, and is currently involved in researching prehistoric quarrying on Shetland.

Charlotte Damm is Professor of Archaeology in the Department of Archaeology and Social Anthropology at the Arctic University of Norway. Her main field of research is early (Stone Age) hunter-fisher societies in the northern circumpolar region, particularly northern Scandinavia.

Marion Dowd is an archaeologist with a specialist interest in caves. She has directed excavations in many Irish caves, and has written and lectured widely on the subject. Her book *The archaeology of caves in Ireland* (Oxbow Books) was published in 2015. She is Lecturer in Prehistoric Archaeology at the Institute of Technology, Sligo.

Sue Hamilton is Professor of Prehistory at UCL Institute of Archaeology. She is interested in landscape archaeology, sensory and gendered landscapes, and late prehistoric Europe. She is co-director of the Rapa Nui (Easter Island) Landscapes of Construction Project.

Robert Hensey specializes in Neolithic Ireland and Europe with particular reference to the Irish passage tomb tradition, megalithic art and religion. He is the author of *First light: the origins of Newgrange* (2015) published by Oxbow Books.

Sian James has worked as the archaeologist on the Bronze Age copper mining site at Great Orme for over ten years. Previously researcher and lecturer in the History, Welsh History and Archaeology department at the University of Bangor she is an avid caver as well as archaeologist and is interested in the experience of working in challenging environments.

Tim O'Connell is an educator and caver. He is a founding member of the Clare Caving Club, and has been involved in numerous explorations of cave systems both new and old.

Paul Pettitt is Professor of Palaeolithic Archaeology at Durham University. He holds degrees from the universities of Birmingham, London and Cambridge; was archaeologist in the Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit at Oxford University (1995-2001), research fellow and tutor, Keble College, Oxford (1998-2003), and taught at Sheffield University (2003-2013). He researches aspects of Palaeolithic mortuary activity and art.

Colin Richards is Professor of World Prehistory at the University of Manchester. He has published widely on the Neolithic, particularly of Orkney, most recently *Building the great stone circles of the north* (2013). He is co-director of the Rapa Nui (Easter Island) Landscapes of Construction Project which has been running since 2008.

Robin Skeates is a specialist in central Mediterranean prehistory and in museum and heritage studies. His latest book is *An archaeology of the senses: prehistoric Malta* (2010). He has a long-standing interest in cave rituals, and directs two field projects (in Sardinia and central Italy) on the cultural life of caves.

Ruth D. Whitehouse is an archaeologist who specializes in Italian and west Mediterranean prehistory. She has published widely on the role of caves in ritual and religion in prehistory. She is Emeritus Professor of Archaeology at UCL Institute of Archaeology.

Chapter 6

In search of darkness: cave use in Late Bronze Age Ireland

Marion Dowd

On a caving expedition to the Burren in 1989, members of the Cork Speleological Group decided to explore Robber's Den, Co. Clare. They climbed the vertical cliff face to the cave entrance – a rope is typically used to make this short ascent. The entrance leads into a small chamber which is naturally lit by daylight and commands panoramic views over a broad karst plateau. An opening in the floor of this chamber drops down into a dim and dark lower chamber. Rectangular in shape, this space has been used at various times in the past as indicated by intermittent finds of animal bones and artefacts. A narrow gap in the floor of this second chamber provides access into an extremely tight narrow passage shrouded in complete darkness. The journey through the passage is torturous; twisting and contorting the body, all the time feeling trapped between massive solid walls of limestone. It is not a trip for the faint-hearted or claustrophobic and is unquestionably off-putting to all but experienced cavers (Fig. 6.1). When the explorers squeezed through this constrictive passage in 1989 they emerged into a third chamber, again enveloped in complete darkness. An underground river runs through a deeper section of the cave interrupting the silence with the sound of flowing water. Probably thinking they were the first to venture so far into Robber's Den, the cavers must have been surprised to discover the skeletal remains of an adult female lying on the cave floor (Anderson and McCarthy 1991; Cremin

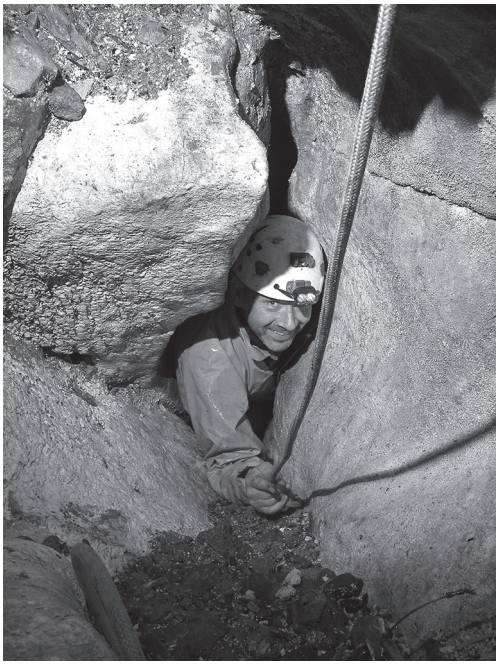

Figure 6.1: Caver Terry Casserly squeezing through the narrow passage into the third chamber of Robber's Den (Colin Bunce).

1991). The woman was over thirty-five years old at the time of death. Her dental health was poor with evidence for dental abscesses, calculus on the majority of the teeth, and indications of periodontal disease. She had suffered osteoarthritis and degenerative changes to the spine (Fibiger forthcoming). Beside the skull, on the cave floor, were two decorated lignite rings neatly resting one on top of the other. Radiocarbon dates revealed that this woman had died towards the end of the Late Bronze Age (Dowd 2015, 143).

Late Bronze Age material in caves

A core issue raised by the Late Bronze Age skeleton from Robber's Den is how it got there and what it represents. Even though caves in Ireland have been used for a wide variety of purposes from the Early Mesolithic through to post-medieval and modern times, the occurrence of archaeological material deep inside caves is not common (Dowd 2015). Broadly speaking, prehistoric activities revolve around burial, excarnation and votive deposition in the outer parts of caves, frequently within the daylight zone and usually less than 20m inside cave entrances (often less than 10m). However, over a period of approximately 400 years, during the Late Bronze Age (1000–600 BC), individuals or small groups of people began undertaking long and sometimes arduous journeys into the absolute deepest and darkest parts of caves. Human bodies and disarticulated bones, animal remains and artefacts, mark these excursions underground. Occasionally, people modified the underground landscape. This paper explores the evidence for these Late Bronze Age journeys into darkness, and examines possible reasons for this specific phenomenon, which is so strikingly different to how people in Ireland interacted with caves in all previous and subsequent archaeological periods.

Currently eleven caves have been identified that contain material of Late Bronze Age date (Fig. 6.2) (Dowd 2015, Chapter 6). The evidence ranges from intact cadavers (Robber's Den); to disarticulated human bones (Glencurran Cave, the Catacombs); metalwork hoards (Kilgreany Cave, Brothers' Cave); and deposits of animal remains and non-metal artefacts – particularly pottery (Glencurran Cave, Moneen Cave, Kilgreany Cave, Ballynamintra Cave, Carrigmurrish Cave, Brothers' Cave, Killuragh Cave). Only three of these sites have been excavated to modern archaeological standards (Robber's Den, Glencurran Cave and Moneen Cave). Almost all the others were investigated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, as a consequence, contextual information is quite limited. While these eleven caves vary in shape and size, there is a consistent use of the deepest and darkest chambers. Here, in areas furthest from cave entrances and from daylight, is where Late Bronze Age material is found.

Negotiating darkness

The location of Late Bronze Age material within many caves displays a deliberate intention to take a physically arduous route *through* and *into* darkness. Such difficult and potentially hazardous trips must have been symbolically redolent. These were,

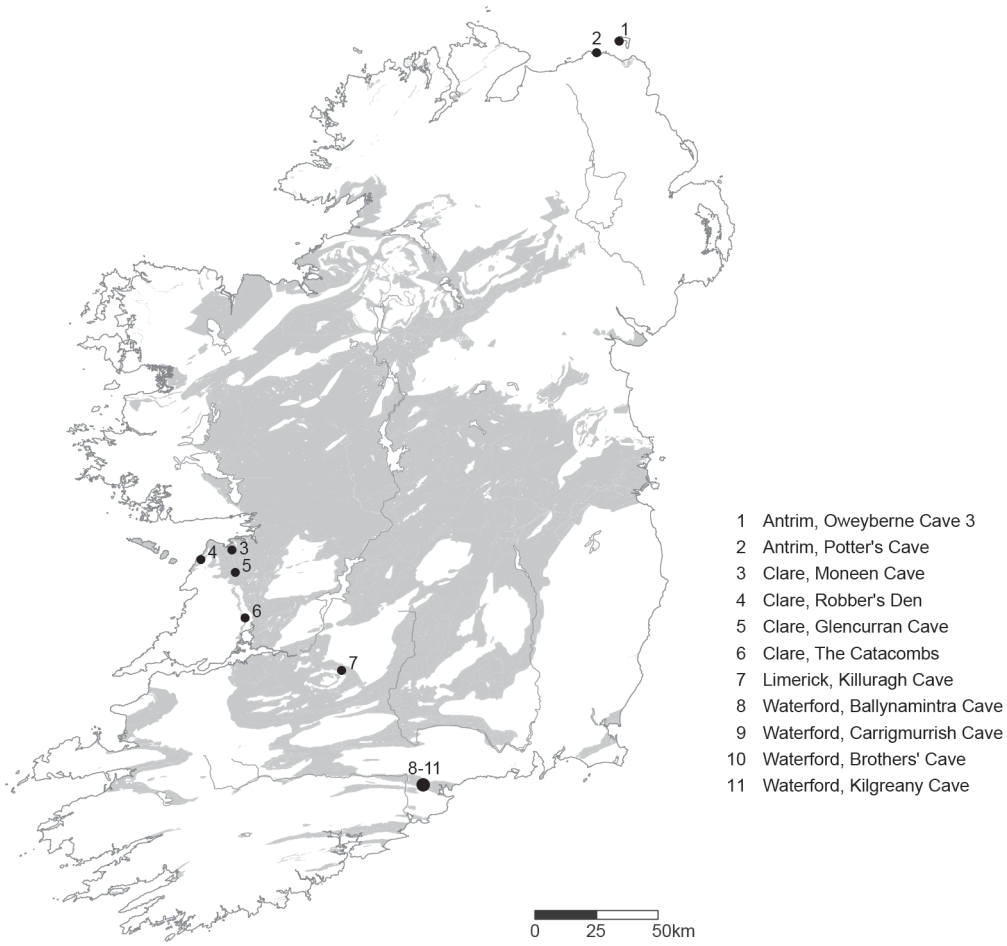

Figure 6.2: Irish caves with material of Late Bronze Age date. Limestone regions indicated in grey (Thorsten Kahlert).

plausibly, journeys into a liminal realm where the spirit world could be accessed, and where emotional, mental or psychic revelation awaited. In the south-east of Ireland, in the Dungarvan valley, there was an increased use of caves during the Late Bronze Age. Each of the caves in question had been foci for ritual or funerary activities in the Neolithic and/or Early Bronze Age, strongly suggesting that by the Late Bronze Age they were regarded as established sacred places in the landscape that had inherited ritual status (Dowd 2015). One of these sites, Brothers' Cave, was entered via a large circular opening on the ground surface measuring 7m in diameter. Ropes or ladders may have been employed to descend the 8m vertical drop onto the cave floor beneath. Though not particularly large, this cave system is quite complex. Close to the entrance,

but within the darkness of the cave, is an area that becomes waterlogged after periods of prolonged rain. It was aptly named the 'Bog' by Colonel Richard W. Forsayeth who excavated the site between 1906 and 1913 (Forsayeth 1931; Dowd and Corlett 2002). The colonel recovered more than thirty-seven amber beads from this location, almost certainly representing a necklace. In Ireland, prehistoric amber beads and necklaces are typically found in bogs and overwhelmingly represent votive deposits of Late Bronze Age date (Eogan 1999). Brothers' Cave could have been similarly viewed: a liminal and transitory place in the landscape, an underground location that alternated between being wet and dry.

In addition to the amber deposit in the Bog, a Late Bronze Age metalwork hoard (a bronze axe, sickle and chisel, and a bone point – Fig. 6.3) was deposited on the floor of a cramped low narrow passage that Forsayeth named the 'Gut', some 30m from the Bog. Two bone points, five amber beads and a fragment of leather (a pouch or bag?) were recovered nearby (Forsayeth 1931). The Gut is the furthest part of Brothers' Cave

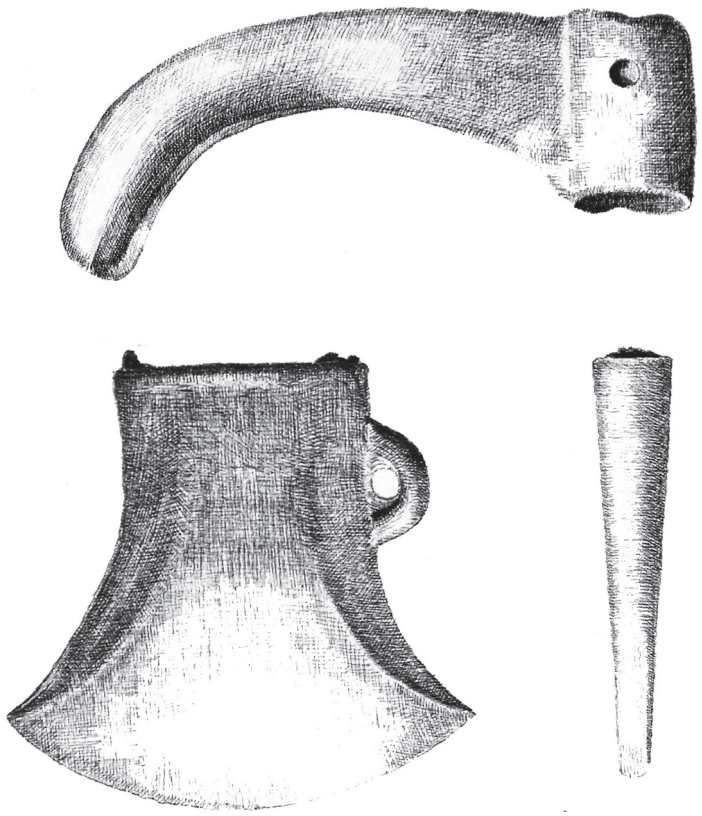

Figure 6.3: Metalwork hoard from the Gut in Brother's Cave, illustrated by Colonel Richard W. Forsayeth in 1906 (Dowd and Corlett 2002).

from the prehistoric entrance (the present main opening is the result of nineteenth-century quarrying). This was effectively the 'end' of the cave, the deepest area that could be reached by humans. To identify this location and its significance, Bronze Age people must have spent considerable periods of time exploring underground, becoming familiar with the various and complex chambers and passages, getting lost and finding their way, and creating a mental or physical map of the cave. Following this, the Gut was selected as the appropriate area at which to leave a votive deposit. Was this a place that was as far from the world of the living and as deep into the spirit world as was possible to travel? The Late Bronze Age material from Brothers' Cave indicates repeat journeys underground. The cave may have been visited on a recurring monthly, seasonal or annual basis, or perhaps more sporadically, dictated by irregular events such as social, economic or environmental upheavals.

Darkness for a select few

When Colonel Richard Forsayeth discovered the axe, chisel and sickle in Brothers' Cave in 1906 they were, 'lying with merely a slight wash of earth above them, on a space that could almost be covered with the hand … They appeared to have been laid down, not accidentally dropped ... they were not secreted, but open to the view of any passer-by' (Forsayeth 1931, 180). That there was no effort to conceal or bury the hoard reveals two things. Firstly, there was no expectation on the part of the individual who brought the hoard into the cave that it would be subsequently removed or disturbed: the hoard was 'safe' there. Secondly, and related to this, is that caves were arguably the domain of a select few, such as ritual practitioners or shamans, during the Late Bronze Age. There may have been a direct correlation between a certain cave and a particular ritual practitioner (for instance, the woman from Robber's Den). A cave may have served as the reserved or designated spiritual 'working' space of a particular ritual specialist for the duration of her or his lifetime. The implication is that rituals conducted inside caves were to some extent personal and private, even if they were undertaken on behalf of the wider community above ground. In Tzinacapan, Mexico, for instance, every *curandero* (curer) has his own special cave in which he analyses problems and restores social, spiritual and environmental harmony. The *curandero* will receive particular signs or dreams telling him when to visit his cave (Heyden 2005, 26–7).

While potent places in the landscape such as caves were physically accessible, taboos or cultural restrictions may have meant they were off-limits for the majority of the population. Nevertheless, the wider community potentially played an important role in cave rituals while all the time remaining outside in the daylight and world of everyday life. For instance, some cave rituals possibly commenced with a community procession to, and gathering at, a cave entrance. This would have been particularly effective in cases where the entrance consisted of a large hole on the ground surface that led via a vertical descent into a deeper cave system (e.g. Brothers' Cave and Carrigmurrish Cave), or caves where the entrance was higher than the surrounding ground level thus requiring people to strain and look upwards (e.g. Robber's Den). By leaving the group,

entering the cave world, and disappearing from view, the ritual practitioner/s made a powerful social, symbolic and ritual departure from the community.

The Bronze Age people who visited Moneen Cave on a sporadic basis from approximately 2100–800 BC had to climb the gentle slopes of Moneen Mountain – a journey that can take up to an hour depending on the departure point (Dowd 2013). At present, the bare karstic landscape in which the site is set means that anyone walking up the mountain is quite exposed and can be seen from great distances (Pl. 7). Palaeobotanical research, however, suggests that the karst uplands of the Burren supported pine woodland up until about 600 BC (Feeser and O'Connell 2010). Those who visited Moneen Cave possibly travelled through trees with the wider community gathered towards the base of the mountain watching, waiting, wondering. Moneen Cave, unlike the other sites discussed here, is an extremely small chamber (max. 3.4m × 3m and 2m high) with no dark zone. It is entered via a narrow opening in the cave roof. For Bronze Age communities, the potency of Moneen may have revolved around the journey *to* the site rather than *within* the cave itself. A community could have observed the progress of significant individuals uphill carrying offerings such as an antler hammerhead (Early Bronze Age), or shellfish, meat and pottery sherds (Late Bronze Age), then disappearing underground through a hidden opening in the rock. On rare occasions, during very cold weather, a plume of steam issues from the cave entrance and is visible from the surrounding lowlands (Denise Casserly pers. comm.). This may have been perceived as a message or a sign from the spirit world, a call for another visitation to Moneen Cave. A similar phenomenon has been noted at the Cave of the Winds, in the Great Plains of North America: this cave appears to 'breathe' with changes in the weather – 'inhaling' when a high-pressure system approaches and 'exhaling' with the advent of a low-pressure system in the form of vaporous clouds (Blakeslee 2012, 354). This striking phenomenon may have led communities in the past to perceive both caves as living entities.

What exactly happened within the darkness of caves was veiled in secrecy. Specialized knowledge of cave rituals, spiritual knowledge gained therein, and encounters underground were probably concealed from the wider community. In the Fiji Islands, for example, when a chief died he was first interred in his house. A period of time later, his bones were brought by night to a distant inaccessible cave in the mountains, the location of which was known only to a few trusted people (Fison 1881 in Weiss-Krejci 2012, 124). In Bronze Age Ireland the person/s who entered the dark cave world might have been seen as going into an otherworld, while those outside remained vigilant of the duration of the absence – whether hours, days or weeks. Changes that occurred in the external world during this time – changes in the weather, the health of people or livestock, crop growth, political or social affairs etc. – were possibly directly linked to what was taking place deep underground in the dark. Emotional responses of those outside may have included anxiety, fear, terror, awe, suspense, relief or joy. Ritual specialists could deliberately capitalize on anticipated emotional responses by extending the duration of time spent inside a cave to exact stronger reactions from those outside. The experience of the emerging ritual participant would also have been visibly intense: disorientation and confusion as s/he was blinded by light and colour,

and overwhelmed by smells, movement and life in readjusting to the everyday world. Physical manifestations of the sojourn underground likely included muddied bodies and clothing, dishevelled hair, and even bruises, bloodied wounds or more serious injuries sustained – evidence of the physical and spiritual perils of navigating the underground.

Being in the dark

The surviving archaeological assemblages make it difficult to establish the precise nature of Late Bronze Age rituals in caves and the frequency with which they were visited. For instance, Glencurran Cave was visited on numerous occasions throughout the Middle and Late Bronze Age, but there is no way of knowing how regular or irregular such trips were. The site was used for at least one interment – that of a two to four year old child, seemingly laid on a bed of rushes (*Juncus spp.*), and accompanied by clothing or jewellery fixed with over forty perforated cowrie and flat periwinkle shells (Dowd 2009, 94). The burial was just one event in a history of funerary and ritual activities that spanned up to seven hundred years. Over that time an array of objects and materials were placed on the floor at the 'end' of the cave as it would have appeared in prehistory (Pl. 8). Deposits included disarticulated human bones (with a preference for clavicles); newborn calves, lambs and piglets; joints of meat; sherds of Late Bronze Age pottery; lithics; and items of personal ornamentation composed of amber beads, perforated animal teeth, perforated shells and bone beads (Dowd 2007, 2009). As with any instance of votive deposition at sacred places, the reasons propelling such acts are numerous and include expressions of gratitude, supplication, repentance, devotion, veneration, as well as bolstering political and social status (Bradley 1998). The objective may have been achieved regardless of whether the offering was a prestigious metalwork hoard (e.g. Kilgreany Cave) or a single sherd of pottery (e.g. Ballynamintra Cave). In fact, the most salient factor may have been the act of entering the cave and spending time in the dark.

An intriguing additional use of caves suggested by finds from Glencurran is that certain individuals sought out the subterranean for ritual retreat in the Late Bronze Age, spending lengthy periods of time alone in the dark. In the world above ground many of the identifiable places of religious activity – stone circles and alignments, certain bogs, rivers and lakes – suggest public affairs in relatively exposed settings where rituals could have been witnessed by many. There may have emerged at this time a need amongst ritual specialists to retreat from public view and public spaces. Caves offered one of few locations in the landscape where solitude was guaranteed, particularly if they were out of bounds for the majority of the population. At Glencurran Cave there was evidence from the dark zone of chert knapping and the manufacture of shell beads and bone objects. The items in question were found scattered amongst disarticulated human bones, animal remains and artefacts (Dowd 2009). Carrying out craft or manufacturing activities at this location makes no practicable sense unless the objects were created as a result of spiritual experiences within the cave, or to absorb the special nature of the place itself. That this 'work' took place on ritual floors was no doubt significant. The

unusual predominance of clavicles in the human bone assemblage from Glencurran may point towards rituals such as osteomancy (divination using bones).

Many scholars have associated prehistoric ritual retreat in caves with rites of passage and initiation where, for instance, a group of initiates entered a cave as adolescents and, a period of time later, emerged from this liminal space and time as adults (e.g. Eliade 1964; Whitehouse 1992; Stone 1995; Heyden 2005; Bjerck 2012; Skeates 2012, this volume; Whitehouse this volume). Much more frequently documented in historic and ethnographic sources, however, is the use of caves for spiritual retreat by a solitary ritual specialist, monk or hermit. Solitary seclusion in caves is sometimes the preferred form of monasticism for Buddhist monks and nuns (Mackenzie 1999; Aldenderfer 2012; Hobbs 2012), as was similarly the case for many early Christian ascetics (Ryan 1931; Hughes 1948; Taylor 1993; Manning 2005; Dowd 2015). In these particular cases the theme is no doubt linked to respective traditions that Buddhist saints meditated in caves in search of enlightenment, and that Jesus Christ sought out caves for closer communion with God (Taylor 1993). In modern Zimbabwe there are also many examples of mediums, priests and witches who live in isolation in caves from where they dispense messages or advice from the spirit world (Ranger 2012).

The Irish Late Bronze Age evidence similarly points towards ritual specialists retiring to caves for periods of time to engage in contemplation, spiritual growth or to enter altered states of consciousness – which are highly likely to arise naturally in the darkness and silence of the cave environment (for discussion, see Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998; Lewis-Williams 2002; Clottes 2003; Ustinova 2009; Mlekuž 2012; Dowd 2015). The butchered bones of cattle, sheep and pig from Glencurran Cave and Moneen Cave might reflect food consumed by a retreatant pursuing spiritual enlightenment rather than representing food offerings to a sacred place or spiritual being. Two sea caves in Antrim – Potter's Cave on the coast at Ballintoy and Oweyberne Cave 3 on the coast of Rathlin Island – have also produced evidence of temporary occupation during the Bronze Age in the form of charcoal fragments, stakeholes, animal bones and pottery sherds (Forsythe and McConkey 2012; Dowd 2015). In both caves activities were focused in the outer areas within the daylight zone. Here we may have the localized use of caves for short-term shelter while on trips to the coast to source flint nodules and marine resources. However, we should not assume that occupancy was necessarily secular in nature. These caves, located as they are at distinctly isolated and liminal parts of the landscape, may have been adapted for ritual retreat where complete darkness was not an essential requirement.

Manipulating darkness

While some individuals in Late Bronze Age society were making incursions deep underground they were also, on occasion, deliberately altering and manipulating the physical environment: interactions with these wild places involved humanising them. This is most apparent at Glencurran Cave. The area that was the focus of votive deposition occurred some 40–50m inside the entrance (Pl. 8). Two low passages extend

from this area and, until the twentieth century, both were almost completely choked with geological sediments. These low passages were noticed by Bronze Age people because the openings were blocked by drystone walling, thus defining and 'containing' the sacred area (Dowd 2009). One of the passages would have been large enough for human entry and may have been used as a space for extreme isolation – with a ritual specialist walling themselves in or being walled in. If this sounds unlikely, we need only consider the medieval *reclusorium* or anchorhold located within the Christian monastery, normally abutting the church, which permitted the anchorite to remain in spiritually significant isolation while remaining within the religious community (*Ó* Clabaigh 2010). These were often small, cramped cells with no doors or windows, only a little opening in the wall through which the recluse could communicate or obtain food.

Further intriguing evidence of human interactions with the dark landscape of Glencurran Cave is a semi-circular drystone structure built against the cave wall (Fig. 6.4). It was constructed at the point where the sloping entrance passage ends and the level cave floor begins; this area also marks the transition between the outer daylight zone and the inner dark zone of the cave. The stone structure was filled with multiple layers of creamy white calcite that had been dug up from the floor deeper inside the cave in the dark zone (extraction pits are still visible). Some of the layers contained chunks of hard calcite that had been cleaved off the cave ceiling (chisel marks and scars

Figure 6.4: Drystone structure in Glencurran Cave, marking the beginning of the dark zone (Peter Rees).

have been recorded). Great effort was made not to contaminate the pristine colour of this strikingly creamy bright clay. The only intrusive or deliberate placements within the layers were occasional animal bones and a small bronze ring (similar to Late Bronze Age examples from Dún Aonghasa – Cotter 2012, 48–9). A human mandible and a whetstone had been wedged into gaps in the drystone wall of the structure. The construction of this edifice involved detailed knowledge of the resources available in the cave – stones, white clays and calcite – knowledge that can only have been acquired through spending lengthy periods of time underground investigating and exploring. Its location strongly suggests that the structure marked both a physical and spiritual boundary, and radiocarbon dates place its construction towards the end of the Late Bronze Age. It may even have been built as part of a closing ceremony associated with the final phase of religious activities at Glencurran.

Concluding remarks

The skeleton of the Late Bronze Age woman found in Robber's Den, described in the opening paragraph of this chapter, demonstrates a concerted effort on the part of those who deposited the remains to seek out a location in darkness that involved not a difficult journey, but a torturous one. It is likely that two people were involved in bringing the body into the deepest chamber: one person in front pulling, and one behind pushing. The corpse could have been moved with relative ease through the first and second chambers, albeit within cramped and confined conditions but with some available natural light. However, the final trip through the extremely narrow passage must have occurred in complete darkness. It is difficult to imagine carrying a torch or lamp when navigating this passage as both hands are needed to push, squeeze and crawl through (and that is without the added encumbrance of hauling a corpse). Trying to negotiate a cadaver through this constricted space must have been extremely difficult, particularly if rigor mortis had set in. We cannot exclude the possibility that people of small stature, such as older children or adolescents, transported the corpse as they could have entered the deepest chamber with greater ease.

Robber's Den was not simply a convenient final resting place for a deceased member of the community. This was an extreme journey, for the purpose of meeting an extreme objective. It may be that in life this woman was considered so potent, or such a threat, that her remains were confined to the deepest, darkest and most inaccessible part of Robber's Den as a form of punishment, or perhaps to ensure that the route back to the world of the living would be too difficult for this revenant to traverse. Alternatively, she may have been directly associated with caves in her lifetime. Perhaps she was one of the select few who entered these special places for spiritual and religious reasons and this location was therefore considered appropriate to house her remains for posterity. The journey also alludes to the difficulties of labour and childbirth and the precarious journey an infant makes with great effort through the birth canal. The woman placed at the end of the constrictive passage in Robber's Den may allude to cyclical concepts of birth, death and rebirth.

Robber's Den and other caves with Late Bronze Age material reveal an ideological or cultural shift at the onset of the Irish Late Bronze Age, one that led to a specific interaction with caves and the need to seek out places of absolute darkness, isolation and silence for religious purposes. Why this phenomenon lasted for no more than 400 years or so remains unknown (albeit sometimes there is a suggestion of Middle Bronze Age origins). There may have been a perceived juxtaposition between underground and over ground; inside and outside; private and public; darkness and light; secrecy and knowledge. Caves were plausibly equated with the womb and associated with femininity and fertility, nurture and growth. Whatever the motivation, journeys underground culminated in the deposition of human bodies and bones, animal remains and artefacts. Within these dark landscapes signs of the past were open to view – animal bones, human bones, and objects that had been deposited decades or centuries earlier. Late Bronze Age materials were placed on cave floors amongst these older remnants of previous lives and past beliefs. That items were left exposed on cave floors and were not subsequently removed tell us that journeys into darkness were the exception rather than the rule in late prehistoric Ireland.

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