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# Burials and Society in Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Ireland

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## Why study the social structure of the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age by an analysis of the single burial tradition?

The single burial tradition of the Irish Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age was rich and diverse and was the dominant Irish burial tradition for a period of approximately 600 years. The large number of burials which have survived, combined with the variety of burial rituals within the tradition, invites archaeologists to attempt to reconstruct the society of Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Ireland.

Some work has been carried out in this area before. A broad body of theoretical work (Saxe 1970; Binford 1971; Tainter 1975; Peebles and Kus 1977; Wason 1994) has outlined an approach to the reconstruction of social structure. This approach has been critiqued (Parker Pearson 1982; Hodder 1982), but the criticisms have fallen short of negating the utility of burial analysis as a method of examining society (Brown 1995; Kamp 1998).

The burial rituals of Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Ireland have been examined by John Waddell in his excellent summary of the single burial tradition and much was achieved by Charles Mount (1997) with his examination of the society of southeast Ireland through the lens of the single burial tradition. More evidence has become available in the intervening years. In particular the large number of radiocarbon dates now available, many published by Brindley (2007), and the presence of tools like OxCal 4.2, which allow non-statisticians to carry out complex analysis of radiocarbon chronologies, means that it is possible to consider looking at the burial traditions of this era within a more refined chronological framework than has previously been possible. The division of the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age into three chronological periods in this study has facilitated both synchronic examinations of each of these burial phases, allowing a reconstruction of the social structure of each phase, and a diachronic examination of the entire period, observing growing complexity and ranking through each of the phases, culminating in a significant increase in evidence for ranking in the latest phase, Phase C. It is proposed that the decline in Irish copper production after 2000BC, and the economic crisis which must have resulted, may have been a significant factor in the increase in social complexity and ranking seen in Ireland, and possibly Britain, at this time.

## Aims and Objectives

This work aims to examine aspects of the social structure of Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Ireland using burials from the single burial tradition as an analytical data set. There are a number of specific objectives.

1. As a necessary first step the study attempts to build a radiocarbon based chronology for the Irish single burial tradition, looking at the beginnings and spread of the tradition through Ireland, re-examining the radiocarbon dating of the era's funerary pottery, and looking at the development of aspects of burial ritual, such as the beginning of cremation, the beginnings of the use of pit burials and the appearance of potless burials.
2. Devise a system for making grave goods comparable in terms of how they may reflect the status of the interred, and making them statistically analysable with other burial attributes.
3. Establish the degree of complexity of burial ritual at different chronological phases of the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age, from that assess degrees of social complexity in each stage, and to then relate this complexity to the degree of ranking within society during each of these phases.
4. Through a subtle and multifaceted cross-tabulation and cluster analysis of burial ritual, the study aims to identify the basic social structure of each of the main chronological divisions of Early Bronze Age Ireland.

The study is not blind to the fact that this form of analysis is only a model of reality and accepts the possibility of both deliberate and incidental ideological masking of social reality through burial as suggested by several writers including Hodder (1982) and Parker Pearson (1982). By examining the results of the crosstabulation statistics, both synchronically and diachronically in light of the chronological model developed for the Irish single burial tradition, it is hoped that variations in the ways in which status was displayed though the era can be identified.

The book aims to be able to discuss the Irish single burial tradition in its wider context and in particular look at contrasts and comparisons with burial ritual and society in Britain.

**Definitions**

This book examines the single burial tradition of Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Ireland and some implications for social structure. As a prerequisite it is necessary to define some terms.

**The Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age**

The Irish Chalcolithic / Early Bronze Age is quite difficult to define compared to, for example, the commencement of the Neolithic, when there is a clear cultural and technological change. The Irish Early Bronze Age has had several definitions even over the past few decades. Megaw and Simpson (1984) defined, the Irish and British Early Bronze Age chronologically as the period between 2300 and 1300 BC. Cooney and Grogan (1999) have preferred 2300 to 1700 BC, succeeded by a Middle Bronze Age. In recent years it has become increasingly common to make a nuanced distinction between the Chalcolithic and the Early Bronze Age proper, with the Chalcolithic extending from about 2400 to 2050 BC. Some writers, like Billy O’Brien (2012), would consider the Irish Late Chalcolithic as continuing beyond this, until about 2000 BC, which would date the entire first phase of the Irish single burial tradition within the Late Chalcolithic. The detailed chronology of the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age will be discussed at greater length below but, for the purposes of this study, and realising that this is a simplification of a complex topic, the era of the single burial tradition as a whole is going to be referred to as the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age, which will be considered as beginning at approximately 2200-2150BC.

**The single burial tradition**

The single burial tradition is the burial of individuals, or groups of a few individuals, in small, discrete graves, which may be part of larger cemeteries or cairns, dating from approximately 2200-2150 BC to about 1600 BC.

Within this definition the single burial tradition can be divided into two broad sub-groups:

- a. Burials, cremated or unburnt, contained within a stone built cists or pits (Figure 1.1). These cist or pit burials may contain accompanying pottery vessels of several distinct styles and occasional grave goods.
- b. Cremation burials, which are contained within a funerary vessel and then placed into a pit or a cist (Figure 1.2). The in-urned burials are also more occasionally accompanied by accessory vessels, and somewhat more commonly accompanied by grave goods.



Figure 1.1 Photo of a cist containing an inhumation and accompanied by a tripartite bowl from Church Bay, Rathlin, Co. Antrim (after Sloan 2008)



Figure 1.2 Photo of an inverted vase urn within a cist from Knockroe, Co. Tyrone (Williams and Wilkinson 1988)

Both types of burials are found individually, in flat cemeteries, in specially constructed mounds, or re-using earlier megalithic burial monuments.

**Social structure**

Social structure is a term which can be used in different ways. Levi-Strauss noted how ‘the term social-structure

has nothing to do with empirical reality but with the models that are built up after it' (1963: 279). In this book it is used to mean a model of the political system, social ranking or stratification, gender relations and kinship structures of Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Ireland, in so far as they are detectable by an analysis of the archaeological record.

### The structure of the book

This book is divided into eight chapters.

**Chapter 1** is the introduction, setting out the aims, definitions, the books structure and acknowledgments.

**Chapter 2** is a review of the theoretical approaches to understanding death rituals and how death and burial may inform us about society. It looks at anthropological and archaeological approaches to death and burial before setting out the theoretical approach used for this study.

**Chapter 3** examines the background of Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Ireland as a whole, a necessary perspective from which to judge the burial record and its significance. It examines first the environment of Early Bronze Age Ireland and evidence for the types and extents of agriculture. Early Bronze Age metalworking is also examined, as are funerary and non-funerary rituals and Early Bronze Age settlement. There is then a review of the existing literature discussing the single burial tradition in Ireland.

**Chapter 4** is a detailed description of the methodology of gathering, recording and analysing the data statistically. It describes site selection, coding the data for input into the database, preparation of the data for analysis and then the methodology of statistical analysis in SPSS, focusing on cross-tabulation and associated significance tests and cluster analysis. An examination is undertaken of techniques for evaluating the status of grave goods accompanying burials in a way which makes them comparable and analysable. Finally this chapter discusses methods for assessing ranking from an analysis of burial ritual, setting out a set of criteria for different types of un-ranked and ranked societies..

**Chapter 5** is an analysis using OxCal 4.2 of the radiocarbon information from the sites recorded in the database. It fulfills Objective 1. One of the great strengths of the Microsoft Access database is the ability to bring disparate data together easily through the use of queries. This allows C14 data from human remains, or other sources, in the database, to be used to look at the dating of associated attributes of the burial ritual. An examination is made of the date range of the single burial tradition across Ireland along with an analysis of the differential appearance of the tradition in different

provinces. The dating of pottery is examined, as is the dating of some decorative elements of the pottery. Cists and pits are dated as a whole and by province, as a study is made of dating of inhumation and cremation burial. Pits and cists which contained human remains, but no pottery vessels, 'pot-less burials', are examined and unexpectedly found only to begin some time after the commencement of the single burial tradition and continue until the end of the Early Bronze Age.

**Chapter 6** is a detailed statistical analysis of the attributes of the single burial tradition. Initially descriptive statistics, focusing on characterising the data set, are presented. The results of the cross-tabulation analysis of different attributes are then given along with associated significance testing. The results of the cluster analysis are also presented. The status of grave goods assemblages is compared statistically to various burial attributes, fulfilling Objective 2.

**Chapter 7** presents a chronological model of the development of the single burial tradition informed by the results of the radiocarbon analysis presented in Chapter 5. This chronological model is used, along with the statistical results from Chapter 6, to build up a model of aspects of the social structure of the Chalcolithic / Early Bronze Age Ireland. The changing funerary complexity of burial ritual is examined and possible indicators of status for each chronological phase are identified. This fulfills Objective 3. Possible social groups within each chronological phase are identified by cluster analysis and crosstabulated with status indicators.

**Chapter 8** discusses the type of society that is likely to have existed at each phase of the Chalcolithic / Early Bronze Age using categories borrowed from multilineal social evolutionary theory (Lewellen 2003; Wason 1994; Earle 1993; Earle 1997; Ames 2015), fulfilling objective 4. In addition this chapter discusses the origins of the single burial tradition, the reasons for the emergence of ranking in Early Bronze Age Ireland and aspects of relationships between the Ireland and Britain in this era.

**Chapter 9** Recaps the main conclusions of the study and states future directions for study.



# Chapter 2 Theoretical Approaches to the study of Death, Funerary Rituals and Social Structure in Archaeology and Anthropology

## Introduction

The twentieth century was the epoch when archaeology as a science emerged and matured. From the pre-scientific era of antiquarian archaeology and culture history through to the present, the archaeology of death, and the rituals and rites surrounding it, have played a dominant role in the discipline. Initially much archaeology was simply concerned with cataloging sites and burial rites, with naive, although not necessarily always incorrect, interpretations based on 'common sense' or classical analogues. As archaeology approached its 'loss of innocence' (Clarke 1973), the increasing weight of data, but the lack of a similarly increasing body of knowledge derived from that data, led to new approaches. Archaeology borrowed from anthropology, building theories which were testable, general, and perhaps a little too ambitious. A second wave of reflection followed the first, setting limits on what could be inferred. This process, which was prophesied by Clarke (1973), continued through the 1970s, 80s and 90s. A parallel process has been a rejection of some of the 'objective' certainties of an archaeology which focused on the adult western male and a conscious attempt to write archaeologies of women, children and the marginalised. As Clarke suggested would happen, there have been signs since the mid 1990s of a synthesis, where the aims and methods of the 'new archaeology' have been matured by cautionary tales.

In this study the criticism, aired by Heidegger (Glazebrook 2012), that mechanistic science alone cannot explain nature, is accepted. However this work parts company with those, such as Shanks and Tilley (1987), who see little value in attempts to examine social structure from burial evidence. Value is placed on scientific analysis of gathered data as the foundation upon which interpretation can be made. Again Heidegger perhaps drew the best distinction when he compared historical science, the collection of historical facts, of which he was critical, from the true discipline of history, collecting, interpreting *and giving meaning* to these collected facts (Glazebrook 2012: 18).

A number of parallel strands of thought are accepted, with qualifications, by this study. The approach to burial archaeology espoused by writers such as Saxe (1970), Binford (1971), Tainter (1975) and Peebles and Kus (1977), who all believe that there is a direct relationship between burial ritual and the individuals place in society is accepted, albeit with the understanding, as proposed by writers like Wason (1994) and Kamp (1998),

that a simplistic linear association between burial and society cannot be drawn. In addition it is accepted that it is necessary to look at the entirety of the society (Lull 2000), as well as the burial record, synchronically and diachronically, to properly understand the society (Chapman and Randsborg 1987). This study also takes the view, espoused by Brown (1995), that small single cemetery analyses are futile, and that larger, regional, multi-cemetery statistical studies are much more fruitful and reliable.

To understand the link between burial, the individual and society it is not only necessary to categorise burial, it is also necessary to be able to categorise society. Multilinear social evolutionary concepts like band, tribe, chiefdom and state, provide a useful classificatory system (Service 1962). Also useful is the examination of the degree of ranking, from egalitarian societies through to stratified societies (Fried 1967 and Wason 1996). Together these two strands of theoretical thought provide the archaeologist with a powerful set of analytical tools. The criticisms of Shanks and Tilley (1987) are rejected as being appropriate to an earlier 19th century version of unilinear social evolution, typified by the likes of Lubbock (1865) or Lewis Henry Morgan (1877) and misrepresenting the post-war multilinear social evolutionists. Before implementing them, to understand their use, it is necessary to discuss them in the context of the developments in anthropological and archaeological thought on the relationship between burial rituals and the societies which produce them.

## Anthropological approaches to the study of death and funerary ritual

Nineteenth and early twentieth century investigations of funerary ritual, such as those of Frazer (1911), described the varieties of funerary practice but they tended to view each specific funerary ritual as unique, conditioned by the ideas and beliefs of the specific society, and made little attempt to look for meaning or pattern in the form of funerary rituals. In the early years of the twentieth century the writers of the *Année Sociologique* school began to develop theories of the structure and meaning of funerary rituals, and the treatment of the dead, which could have more general application.

### *The sociologists*

In his 1907 essay 'The Collective Representation of Death' Robert Hertz proposed that there is a structure