Ritual in Late Bronze Age Ireland

Material Culture, Practices, Landscape Setting and Social Context

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Introduction

The following text is developed from the author's doctoral research. It is organised into five main sections under the following subjects: 1) Theory, 2) Ritual Practices, 3) Landscape, 4) Social Context, and 5) Summary. A brief introduction to the Chapters is provided below, followed by an outline of the aims, objectives and methodology of the research conducted.

The text begins with an overview of the current state of Irish archaeological research and how the current study relates to prior research. Chapter 1.1 more specifically addresses the archaeological investigation of ritual by considering the mechanisms used by a number of theoretical perspectives. Chapter 1.2 provides a theoretical overview of archaeological investigations of identity which is more directly applied to the Irish Late Bronze Age (LBA) in Chapters 4.1 and 4.2. Similarly, Chapter 1.3 provides a theoretical overview of the archaeological investigation of materiality which provides the theoretical foundation for the analysis of LBA Irish ritual practice developed throughout.

The data on which much of the investigative analysis presented in this publication is built is the material culture of the Irish LBA, and therefore an understanding of the study of materiality and material culture from the perspective of the interaction of people and 'things' is of benefit to fully appreciate the complexities presented by the Irish LBA archaeological record. This is especially evident in Chapter 4.1 where material culture is used as an indicator of the formation and transformation of identities in LBA Ireland. In Chapter 4.2 the focus of discussion is the presence of exotic items in the context of Irish LBA ritual practice, which not only indicates Ireland's involvement in the movement of objects throughout Europe in the Bronze Age, but also the transference of knowledge and ideas across regions.

Chapters 2.1-2.4 provide a contextualised analysis of the four categories of ritual practice focused on in this study: feasting, deposition, death and fertility. These categories of ritual practice are investigated from the perspective of their physical enactment. Chapters 3.0 and 3.1 develop upon the previous chapters by shifting the focus of discussion to the physical enactment of ritual in the landscape. In particular the close associations between certain ritual practices and certain types of locations in the landscape is investigated, as is the relationships between locations of ritual practice as situated within a wide landscape context. Chapter 5.0 acts a concluding discussion to the archaeological interpretations presented. Particular themes which are consistent throughout a number of categories of ritual practice are discussed and avenues of future research are put forward.

Aims

Current Bronze Age research in Ireland is mainly focused on the earlier part of the period with few studies investigating the Late Bronze Age (LBA) specifically. When it has been the focus of research the Irish LBA archaeological data is often communicated as a descriptive narrative with few traces of theoretical argument or comparative interpretation. Studies of LBA Ireland have as a result been heavily dominated by catalogues, classifications and typologies, and are often missing a human element. This project aims to develop upon the current state of scholarship by investigating performance of LBA ritual practices within their social and landscape contexts, as well as applying an anthropological analysis and a contextually focused theoretical framework to the existing body of data.

This research thus develops a more nuanced understanding of the social context of LBA ritual practice in Ireland, thereby putting a human face on a body of scholarship previously dominated by studies of monument and artefact types. The project's central research question is: 'Can an investigation of the practices of ritual feasting, mortuary ritual, ritual deposition, and fertility ritual as situated within their broader socio-cultural contexts yield fresh perspectives on the Irish LBA ritual system?' Ritual practices find expression in a range of contexts which can be studied separately; however, they belong in, and thus require, an over-arching, integrated ritual system to 'explain' their broader purpose. Therefore, in this study LBA ritual practices and their contexts will first be investigated as distinct research objectives in separate chapters and subsequently analysed together as a more holistic ritual system to address the central research question.

Objectives

The main objectives of this research project were to investigate the practices and contexts of ritual feasting, ritual deposition, death ritual and fertility ritual in Late Bronze Age (LBA) Ireland. The achievement of these objectives focuses on investigating patterns of ritual practice in LBA Ireland in order to develop a clearer understanding of how they were enacted. To facilitate the analysis of these sub-categories, ritual practice is conceptualised as an integrated system (as influenced by the main theoretical framework applied, practice theory). Another main objective involves the investigation of the social contexts within which ritual activities and concerns were addressed at various levels of LBA society in Ireland. This is conducted through critical analysis of past and current interpretations and models of LBA social organisation and by considering if these interpretations/models are suitable for and/or applicable to an Irish context.

Methodology

Ritual practices create patterns which can be observed and analysed. Although the underlying 'meaning' may never be fully realised, by noting these patterns archaeologists can gather data pertaining to scale, temporality, and socio-cultural characteristics and therefore develop a better understanding of ritual practices in their broader socio-cultural context and natural environment. Ritual is a social construct; to be fully understood it must be considered within its wider context. It is therefore important to conceptualize and define ritual practice both in general and as a component of an Irish Late Bronze Age (LBA) socio-cultural structure.

In the context of this study Irish LBA ritual practices are initially investigated separately, then analysed together as a ritual system integrated within a larger cultural system. To achieve this the theoretical framework of '*Practice theory'* is employed to explore how LBA rituals may have been physically performed and what possible socio-cultural motivations may lie behind the performance of these actions. The research methodology builds upon the author's anthropological background and applies it to a detailed analysis of Irish material to examine aspects of ritual practice overlooked by other researchers and to push the theoretical debate further.

The archaeology of LBA Ireland includes evidence for a variety of ritual practices. However, the available data needs to be synthesised and communicated to the archaeological community within and outside of Ireland to make a contribution to current scholarship. Therefore, this study not only considers LBA ritual practice across the whole island of Ireland, but considers how these practices and identified trends relate to a broader European context. Accordingly, the research conducted for this project can help to situate Irish archaeology more firmly within current European academic debates.

The Irish Late Bronze Age

The application of scientific dating to the Irish archaeological record has revolutionised our understanding of the Bronze Age (BA) which previously was largely characterised by the distribution of metal artefacts (Brindley 1995, 11). Of course, as some indications of societal change are only observable through the introduction and development of new technologies and artefact types, the artefactual record continues to influence our comprehension of Irish prehistory. The bookends of this study are thus the introduction of the bronze slashing sword to Ireland at around 1200 BC and the introduction and proliferation of iron technology beginning around 600 BC. Therefore, although chronological parameters have been applied to provide structure it is societal change related

to the introduction of new technology (and its associated social practices) which defines the period discussed as the Irish Late Bronze Age (LBA) in this text.

Some authors would place a distinct Irish Chalcolithic period between 2500 and 2000 BC based on the introduction of copper artefacts (O'Brien 2012a), while others have stressed that although copper working was a significant development, similarities in pottery and monuments indicate a continuity from the Late Neolithic into the Early Bronze Age (EBA) (Carlin and Brück 2012). Similarly, some begin the BA at roughly 2500 BC, when metalworking first arises in the form of copper axeheads and blades, as well as sheet gold objects (Waddell 2010; O'Brien 2004), while others would not consider the BA proper to begin until the production of bronze artefacts at around 2000 BC (Brindley 2007).

The LBA in Ireland is traditionally subdivided into three phases: the Bishopsland Phase, Roscommon Phase and Dowris Phase, all named for hoards which typify a range of artefacts associated with each period. Like the EBA the chronology of the Middle Bronze Age (MBA) is largely delimited by artefact types. Grogan suggest that this period begins at c. 1600 BC with the introduction of two-piece stone moulds and the first socketed artefacts and ends at c. 1200 BC, although he stresses continuity with both the preceding and succeeding periods and does not provide artefactual evidence for a change from the MBA to LBA (Grogan 2004, 61). In Ireland the shift from the MBA to LBA is most clearly seen in changes in artefact types, for instance from Cordoned Urns to Coarse Pots between 1350 and 1200 BC (Grogan et al. 2007a, 23, Fig. 2.4) and from rapier to slashing sword at around 1200 BC (Waddell 2010, 213). Although, the MBA is defined by Waddell (2010) as the period from 1600-1000 BC and the LBA from 1000-600 BC, the dates which will be adhered to in this study are based on the introduction of new technologies (and their associated practices, in particular ritual practice) and so the LBA is thus considered here to encompass the period from c. 1200 – 600 BC.

The end of the LBA is difficult to pin-point as the gradual introduction of iron working is a complicating factor, as is the long radiocarbon plateau at 2400 BP (roughly 450 BC) representing 400 calendar years, which interrupts the more precise results usually available through C^{14} dating (Brindley 1995, 11). Bradley suggests that the social organisation of the BA began to 'collapse' in the ninth century BC and, based on a gradual reduction in hoarding practices and the slow integration of iron artefacts, places the beginning of the Iron Age at 600 BC (2007, 230). Waddell (2010) also suggests 600 BC for the end of the BA in Ireland and this date will be observed here. Although these temporal classifications are debatable and vague, they are necessary in order to clearly discuss the monumental socio-cultural and political changes taking place during the BA.