

**CORMAC McSPARRON, Burials and Society in Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Ireland.**

Queen's University Belfast Irish Archaeological Monograph volume 1. Archaeopress, Oxford 2021. £ 35.00. ISBN 978-1-78969-631-8 (Paperback). £ 16.00. ISBN 978-1-78969-632-5 (E-PDF). doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1rdtxfd>. 176 pages with 75 figures and 26 tables.

Over the past decade, many new studies have appeared into the Chalcolithic of Ireland, focusing on social and cultural developments dating specifically to the second half of the third, and early second, millennia BCE (e.g. CARLIN 2018; SNOECK et al. 2016). Thanks to this effort we have a lot more information concerning settlements, burials, monumental architecture, copper mining, pottery typochronology, and human mobility than before. It is with these studies in mind that I read the recently published PhD by Cormac McSparron, defended in 2018 at Queen's University Belfast, and published in 2020 by Archaeopress, as the first volume of a new monograph series of this university. Most of the abovementioned works have however not been incorporated in this study. Especially our better understanding of mobility and hereditary patterns through isotopic and aDNA analyses, provided by the papers of SNOECK et al. 2016 and CASSIDY et al. 2020, could have been a valuable addition to the discussion on social structure (chapter 8) provided by C. McSparron's burial analysis.

In his book, McSparron focuses on reconstructing society in Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Ireland, based on burial data. This is of course an old problem in archaeology, as also the author acknowledges in his first chapter (pp. 1–3). In the second chapter he considers the various ways in which past archaeologists have dealt with this problem, ranging from early anthropological works to Binfordian “New Archaeology”, and to the multitude of critiques that appeared from the 1980s onwards, mentioning the seminal work of Michael PARKER PEARSON (1999) (pp. 8–9). Interestingly, the author states that “... The postprocessual criticisms were generally valid, but they overstated their case...” (p. 9). After this, he cites many other, older, studies which have related burial data to social status, exploring ranking, economy, and social evolution, and he concludes that these ambitions are achievable.

Most importantly, he doesn't address any of the critiques raised by M. Parker Pearson or the many others (even working on the prehistory of the British Isles: e.g. BRÜCK 2006; FOWLER 2001). Many of those critiques, however, not only make valid theoretical points, but actually have something substantial to bring to the table, in terms of interpretation: Studying the many values and ideas that are expressed and signified through objects and actions of the participants of a funerary ritual, and are apparent when analysing patterns, can inform us of other, perhaps even more interesting, past practices than understanding social organisation.

Returning to the book, McSparron follows his work by giving an overview account of the late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age of Ireland (chapter 3, pp. 16–32). His account is primarily a summative listing of other works focusing on the Irish Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age. This leads to a very haphazard text, that jumps from a short comment on Food Vessels, to continental interconnections, to specific decoration on some bowls and to a very basic overview of genetic evidence, without much of a thread running through the chapter.

The subsequent fourth chapter (pp. 33–43) focuses on methodology but is more of a methods chapter in which he lays out the ways he selects sites for his analysis, the structure of his database, and the variables in this analysis of burials and their relationship to understanding social organisation. Not a single sentence is provided at problematising this relationship (how have other scholars used variables for understanding this particular relationship, and why are you selecting these vari-

ables specifically?). He ends this chapter with a short overview of what kind of burials to expect in ranked societies.

The fifth chapter gives an overview of how radiocarbon dating is used in the project (pp. 44–59). One of the strengths of this work are the many radiocarbon dates that are gathered here for an international audience. One can criticise the author for his methods, as “outlier” is poorly defined, every charcoal date is excluded, and even human bone is excluded when dates “contradict”; suffice to say that there are better ways of dealing with this. There is no mention of measurement quality,  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ,  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  values, C:N ratios, or the possibility that some deviant dates are related to later use of the same burial chamber, or other potential issues of context related to the samples. The resulting “new chronology” for the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age should therefore be regarded with suspicion.

The following chapter (chapter 6) focuses completely on the statistical analysis of Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age burials (pp. 60–112). Here he uses the relative frequencies of grave types, grave sizes, and grave goods. Moreover, he is studying their position in the landscape, in relation to water and to soil types. And thirdly, he is mapping the burials and the grave goods specifically (“aspects of ritual”) throughout Ireland. As an overview of the various burials, and the grave goods present in these burials – a starting point for further understanding – this is a useful aspect of the study. The resulting conclusions, based on this statistical analysis, are ambiguous. It is unclear what of these are new results, how others previously have thought about them, and how solid the statistical evidence is.

In the discussion (chapter 7) these results are then positioned within the social-evolutionary framework of understanding the development of hierarchies (or, as the author calls it, “complexity”) in Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Ireland (pp. 113–136). As we have seen, much can be debated as to the arguments behind this complexity. In this chapter, confusingly, the argument for a high status of certain burials (focusing primarily on energy expenditure) is presented after the overview of phasing and associated social complexity.

What is noteworthy, are the three phases that the author distinguishes, and summarises in chapter 8 (pp. 137–153), and the various changes in burial practice associated with it. Phase A (2200–2050 BCE) consists primarily of inhumations in cists and pit burials, with pottery vessels. Phase B (2050–1950 BCE) sees an increase in cremation burials and an increase in the variability of grave goods. In Phase C (from 1950 BCE onwards) this continues, as cremation becomes the dominant and, in some instances, only burial ritual. Also, grave goods increase in size, amount, and status (a ranking based on energy expenditure, see pp. 40–41). This fits well with similar developments in Britain and on the near Continent, with the Wessex/Armorican style elite burials appearing in Atlantic Europe (NEEDHAM et al. 2010). The author sees this as a developing of social inequality in phase B, towards proper ranking in the form of chiefdoms in Phase C.

All in all, the book has some important flaws (theoretical and methodological), which however also present an opportunity to once more revisit some of them through further detailed study. Notwithstanding, the book also makes some very interesting points about the underlying patterns in funerary rituals, and changes therein, that the author observes. This division into three phases, in which there is a shift from inhumation burials and relatively standardised grave goods (phase A) to more varied burial practices such as cremation and more elaborate grave goods (phase B) to a further regional development of predominantly cremation (phase C), seems to be solid and needs to be clearly understood.

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YVAN PAILLER / CLÉMENT NICOLAS (eds), *Une maison sous les dunes. Beg Ar Loued, Île Molène, Finistère. Identité et adaptation des groupes humains en mer d'Iroise entre les III<sup>e</sup> et le II<sup>e</sup> millénaires avant notre ère.* Sidestone Press, Leiden 2019. € 95.00. ISBN 978-9-08890-380-9 (Paperback). € 255.00. ISBN 978-9-08890-613-8 (Hardback). ISBN 978-90-8890-381-6 (E-Book), Open Access. 733 pages with 474 illustrations.

The Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age site of Beg ar Loued (Molène Island, Finistère, FR) was excavated from 2003 to 2011 over the course of nine excavation campaigns under the direction of Yvan Pailler as part of an archaeological programme initiated in 2000 concerning the Molène archipelago. It is not only an important milestone for this chronological period for north-western France, but also for northwest Europe, an area which is already well-known to the scientific community through a sustained programme of intermediate and more specialised publications (for example: PAILLER et al. 2004; PAILLER et al. 2010).

The site Beg ar Loued has the particularity of presenting a domestic occupation during the transition from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC which is marked by stone architectures and a good