

Irish archaeology

Irish archaeology, the study of the human past in Ireland, through analysis of the material remains of different cultures has established that when New Stone Age (Neolithic) farmers arrived about 3000 BC they encountered very few inhabitants, though evidence (mainly flintwork) exists for earlier settlements near beaches in Antrim, Down, and Louth, and along the river Bann extending back as far as 6000 BC. The presence of Neolithic settlers from about 3000 BC is deduced from artefacts such as pottery, flint arrow- and axe-heads, as well as by the form of megalithic long-barrow and passage tombs, that is tombs constructed of large stones covered over by elongated earth barrows or circular mounds. The barrows are of two types: the court tomb, and the portal tomb (the latter also frequently known as the portal dolmen). The court tomb is so called because the passage leading into the burial chamber at the recessed end of the barrow opens out to an open space or court immediately in front of the burial chamber itself. There are more than three hundred court tombs sited mostly in the northern half of the country with concentrations in Mayo, Sligo, north Donegal, and around Carlingford Lough. The Irish court tombs are similar to those in the Cotswolds in England. The sites at Creevykeel, Co. Sligo and Ballyglass, Co. Mayo have been excavated. Portal tombs are so called from the two large upright stones forming the entrance to the burial chamber; a capstone is set over these and slopes backwards to rest on backstones. Originally covered by a barrow, in their denuded state they are striking features of the Irish landscape often known as *Leaba Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* [see *Fionn cycle] or *Leaba na Caillighe* [see *Cailleach Bhéarra] in *folklore. Ireland has some one hundred and fifty examples of portal tombs mostly in the court tomb area although they do extend into Leinster, Clare, and Waterford, and are also found in Wales and Cornwall.

The passage tombs are a separate category to the long-barrow types and include some of the most remarkable megalithic constructions in Europe, among them *New Grange, Knowth, and Dowth, in Co. Meath, and Carrowkeel, Co. Sligo. The passage tombs are most often set on a hilltop inside a large circular mound surrounded by kerbstones. The burial chamber is entered by a passage, often of considerable length. Many of the stones are engraved with ornamentations such as spirals, interconnecting loops, lozenges, and circles with lines emanating from them. The tombs are mainly concentrated along an axis from the mouth of the Boyne to Sligo, with other examples on the Antrim coast-line and in Leinster. They date from roughly the same period as the long-barrow tombs but would appear to represent a more advanced culture.

The wedge tomb is a further category of megalithic construction. So-called because the burial chamber tapers in towards the rear, these tombs are of simpler construction than the long-barrow types or passage tombs, and are to be found mostly in west Munster, with examples in Derry, Tyrone, and at Moytirra, Co. Sligo. These constructions date from the early Bronze Age, about 2000 BC, and are often found near significant copper deposits, such as those on the coasts of Cork and Kerry and in the Silvermines area of Tipperary. In the Bronze Age remains were interred with food vessels or beakers, hence the term Beaker folk. During the Bronze Age Ireland had a significant metal industry, and exported artefacts in bronze, copper, and gold to Britain and the continent. Bronze rapiers and gold torcs survive from c.1000 BC, while from c.700 BC there are trumpets and cauldrons in bronze, as well as many types of gold ornament. From this period the type of lake-dwelling known as the '*crannóg*', wooden platforms built near the lake's edge, make their appearance. With the *Celts, who probably began to arrive c.300 BC, came the Iron Age culture known as La Tène, after a site in Switzerland, which had a characteristic style of ornamentation seen on such monuments as the Turoe Stone, and in metalwork. The Celts also introduced the ring fort, which remained the basis of the social structure of pre-Christian Ireland.

Tens of thousands of ring forts survive. They were most often built by digging a fosse to create a circular bank around a central space in which people lived. It is unlikely that many had a military purpose and mostly they were the farmsteads of the better off, protected by the security of the fosse and bank. They remained in use from the Iron Age, and possibly earlier, to late medieval times. The *Ó Duibhdábhoreann legal family inhabited the ring fort at Cahermacnaghten, Co. Clare, down to the end of the seventeenth century. A distinction is made between the ring forts and the hill forts, which originated at around the same time; the hill forts being much larger and strategically placed, with both defensive and ceremonial associations. Amongst the hill forts are *Emain Macha, Ráth na Ríogh at *Tara, Grianán Ailech in Donegal, and Dún Aonghusa on Aranmore. The promontory forts, like those at Caherconel near Tralee, Co. Kerry, also date probably from the Iron Age. These ring and hill forts are different from the *Norman motte and bailey, which were defensive structures not dissimilar to ring forts built to consolidate conquest while a stone castle was being constructed. Various terms in Irish are used to refer to these forts, and they are often reflected in English *place names *lios* (Lis-), *ráth* (Rath-), *cathair* (Caher-), *dún* (Dun-), *caiseal* (Castle-). Gaelic folklore tended to regard all types of mound, whether court, portal, wedge, or passage tombs, or hill and ring forts, as residences of the **sídh* and as such liable to being bad luck if desecrated. There are other field monuments. The standing stone (*gallán*) was used to mark burial sites and boundaries, and examples, of which there are a great many, date from the early Iron Age down to the early

Christian period. Some carry *ogam inscriptions. There are also stone circles, similar to those at *Stonehenge and Avebury in England although not as impressive, which belong to the same phase of early Bronze Age culture. These are mostly concentrated in south west Munster and mid-Ulster.

The study of archaeology in Ireland developed from the antiquarianism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, fostered by the Anglo-Irish *ascendancy in collaboration with the survivors of the native Irish tradition. This tradition of antiquarian learning was formalized in 1782 with the establishment of the RIA which not only initiated its *Transactions* (later to become the *Proceedings*) as a major forum for archaeological discussion but also, from the beginning, built up a collection of Irish antiquities which in time became the basis for the National Museum. The setting up of the *Ordnance Survey in 1823 and the rapid and comprehensive survey of the entire country at a scale of 1:10,560, allied to the ancillary work on placenames, history, and archaeology by John *O'Donovan, Eugene *O'Curry, and George *Petrie among others, significantly advanced the developing subject of archaeology. A further scientific advance on antiquarian tradition was marked by Sir William *Wilde's publication of a catalogue of the RIA's collections 1857-62. In the last decades of the nineteenth century serious field-work excavation began, initiated by scholars such as W. G. Wood-Martin and T. J. Westropp. Wood-Martin's *Pagan Ireland* (1895) was the first significant attempt at a written synthesis of Irish prehistory. The appointment of R. A. S. *MacAlister as Professor of Archaeology at UCD in 1909 heralded a new era of scholarship in Irish archaeology. In 1928 Adolf Mahr was appointed Keeper of Antiquities in the National Museum, and this outstanding scholar was responsible for significantly developing and expanding the National collections. The arrival of the Harvard Archaeological Expedition to Ireland in 1932 saw the initiation of a campaign of large-scale excavation on a number of key sites and introduced modern scientific techniques of excavation to the new generation of Irish archaeologists. See Seán P. Ó Ríordáin, *Antiquities of the Irish Countryside* (1942, rev. Ruaidhrí de Valera 1979); E. E. *Evans, *Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland* (1966); and Michael Herity and George Eogan, *Ireland in Prehistory* (1977).