



Book Reviews

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF CAVES IN IRELAND BY MARION DOWD

Oxbow Books, Oxford. 2015. 320 pp, 130 illus, incl 59 col pls and 10 b/w pls, 8 tables, 1 appendix, ISBN 978-1-782978138, hb, £50.00

Caves are unique phenomena in the archaeological record. Occupying a physical and theoretical position between the natural and cultural worlds, and serving as ‘enduring places’ in the landscape (page 260), they are sites which are both blessed and cursed by the time-depth and variety of activity which they attract, both today and in the past. Indeed, caves were some of the earliest archaeological ‘sites’ to have been explored by archaeologists/antiquarians, though they have not always been served well by this early attention. More ‘obvious’ than traditional subterranean archaeological sites, relative ease of access means that cave deposits are often heavily disturbed and ephemeral in nature – and less amenable to the more rudimentary recording methods of the early years of excavation, particularly without the benefits of scientific dating. Also unique to caves is that we, as archaeologists, share these spaces with other interested parties (cavers, tourists) who interact with the material record to a greater or lesser extent. Perhaps it was these problems, or merely that caves continue to lie on the margins of our modern western consciousness, which led to a general decline in cave archaeology for much of the latter part of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, the archaeology of caves has seen resurgence in recent years, with edited volumes devoted to understanding the unique nature of these enigmatic sites in various times in the past and from different cultural perspectives (eg, Bergsvik and Skeates 2012; Moyes 2012; Dowd and Hensey 2016). The current volume, which represents the ‘first comprehensive study of the archaeology of caves in Ireland’, makes a welcome contribution to this new momentum in research, and puts Ireland’s karst landscape firmly on the map. The volume is well-illustrated and wide-ranging in scope, with chronological and thematic chapters which combine antiquarian assemblages with modern excavations and scientific analysis. Representing the culmination of the author’s masters, doctoral and post-doctoral research, the volume draws on the amalgamation of large disparate datasets (such as the distribution maps charting the use of caves in Ireland through time), the initiation of new analyses on old datasets (crucially, comprehensive radiocarbon dating programmes), detailed modern excavations conducted by the author, and new frameworks for understanding cave use in more recent times through folklore and oral tradition.

The ten chapters of *The Archaeology of Caves in Ireland* are organised broadly into two (unequal) parts. The first (Chapters 1–3) is more thematic, and the second (Chapters 4–10) more chronological in focus. Chapter 1 outlines themes current in modern cave archaeology, recognising the unique nature of caves in both past and present, and the theoretical challenges which they impose. As such, this chapter is as relevant to any cave in any country as it is to caves specifically in Ireland, but for specialist and non-specialist alike, outlining these theoretical frameworks at the outset serves to set the agenda for the remainder of the volume. Chapter 2 charts the history of study of caves in Ireland but, likewise, echoes the general trajectory of cave exploration in Europe and further afield. This chapter serves to outline the wealth but problematic nature of the numerous cave assemblages retrieved through various means over the years, and now housed in museum stores and personal collections. Chapter 3 however is more optimistic in its outlook and sets a new agenda for cave archaeology; whilst recognising the problems with existing datasets, Dowd outlines the ways in which the modern archaeologist can engage with these old assemblages, for

example, through detailed osteoarchaeological analysis and comprehensive, targeted radiocarbon dating programmes.

The remaining six chapters of the volume are devoted to charting the changing patterns in cave use in Ireland over a period of roughly 10,000 years, from the Mesolithic (Chapter 4) to the modern day (Chapter 10), and includes interim chapters devoted to the Neolithic (Chapter 5), Bronze Age (Chapter 6), Iron Age (Chapter 7), Early Medieval Period (Chapter 8) and Medieval Period (Chapter 9). Although any bounded chronological category is likely to create artificial divisions within the archaeological record, such division is necessary in order to present such a large body of data. Having said this, greater systematic integration of radiocarbon dates from the accompanying tables into the more discursive text passages would be helpful, particularly for those working outside of Irish archaeology, for example, on the Long Iron Age of Scotland or Scandinavia. What this long *durée* approach to the evidence does provide, however, is a sense of the changing nature of cave use over time, and arguably more importantly, those aspects of cave use which persist; perhaps, unsurprisingly, activities with a ritual or religious nature which indicate an enduring perception of caves as places ‘outside’ of the everyday and domestic realms of life.

Indeed, for much of prehistory, caves in Ireland (as elsewhere) are very much associated with the ‘non-domestic’, frequently forming a focus for funerary and votive deposits, even as early as the Mesolithic. In contrast to populist ideas of ‘cavemen’, there is little evidence to suggest that caves in Ireland were ever systematically used for habitation at this time, apart from occasional expedient use as shelters. Evidence for the ritual use of caves in Ireland gathers pace in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, where they appear to have served as sites for excarnation – the laying out of bodies for natural (or artificial) decomposition and disarticulation. Large quantities of small bones from the hands and feet suggest that articulated (and thus presumably fleshed) cadavers entered the caves, whilst a relative absence of larger bones such as skulls and long bones (such as that displayed by bodies ‘4’ and ‘5’ at Annagh Cave, Co. Limerick; page 99) were removed for secondary interment or use among the world of the living. Indeed, Dowd discusses caves not only in their own right, but as part of inhabited landscapes, drawing important observations from megalithic tombs in Britain, such as Ascott under Wychwood, Oxfordshire and Parc le Breos Cwm on the Gower Peninsula (page 110), where calcite-covered bones indicate connections between caves and burial monuments aboveground in what must have been complex and protracted funerary rites. Iron Age evidence, like that for the rest of Ireland at this time, is scarce, but appears to maintain the association between caves and the ‘otherworld’.

Significant then, after such a long period of confinement to this ‘otherworld’, is a shift in the Early Medieval period towards more domestic uses of caves in Ireland – far more so than in any other period. It is important to bear in mind, however, and is something that Dowd acknowledges (though not until the very end of the chapter), that what our modern western minds conceive of as ‘domestic’ and ‘ritual’ practices may be very different, and no doubt far more binary, than in the past. Indeed, human bones of Early Medieval date appear not to be entirely absent (Table 8.1), and coupled with the ephemeral and disturbed nature of cave deposits, more detailed unpicking of these assemblages would be of great benefit (as Dowd herself suggests). What does stand out from the analysis of Early Medieval caves in Ireland, however, is the sheer quantity of material represented; something which contrasts strongly, for example, with contemporaneous caves in Scotland, and could signal very different attitudes to caves in these two regions at this time.

The latter chapters of the book, from the Early Medieval period to the present day (Chapters 8–10) bring out one aspect of cave archaeology which is often overlooked but which is served well in an Irish context. This is the importance of folklore and oral tradition in bringing forth the central and deep-rooted role that caves played in the worldviews of past communities, and even up to the present day. These cultural attitudes to caves leave no material trace for the archaeologist to

analyse, and thus Dowd's call for the adoption of a more interdisciplinary approach to cave archaeology – one which includes the historical and anthropological disciplines – is an important one. Such an approach is, of course, particularly appropriate to the caves of Ireland, with the country's rich history of mythology and folklore (eg, Waddell 2014). These stories are not however exclusive to Ireland, occurring for example (with similar themes) also in Scandinavia, and serve as a useful framework within which to consider the role of caves in the cosmology of not only historic times, but in prehistory too; as Dowd notes, 'folklore reminds us that significant caves in the past were named places' (page 260). On a broader level, recognition that in many cases the cultural significance of caves does *not* leave material traces – in many folkloric tales caves occupy the realm of the supernatural or otherworld and are thus not suitable for frequent/causal visits by the world of the living – highlights another important omission in our datasets and the distribution maps which detail caves of 'archaeological significance'. As Dowd points out, if we are to truly understand the enduring role of caves in complex inhabited landscapes over long periods of time, we must take a more holistic approach to the evidence.

We have at this point come full circle, and learn that though the specific nature of practices may have varied over time (burials, deposits of disarticulated human and animal bone, votive deposition of artefacts, songs, stories and folktales) caves have always, and arguably remain, special and enduring places in the landscape, but a world unto themselves. *The Archaeology of Caves in Ireland* does indeed set a new agenda for Irish cave archaeology but serves as a sound foundation (and sets a formidable challenge) for similar studies elsewhere.

References

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Review received: September 2016

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