



## Book Reviews

### **UNDERGROUND ARCHAEOLOGY: STUDIES ON HUMAN BONES AND ARTEFACTS FROM IRELAND'S CAVES EDITED BY MARION DOWD**

*Oxbow Books, Oxford. 2016. 191pp, 63 col & B&W figs incl 43 col pls, 48 tables, 2 CD appendices, ISBN 978-1-78570-351-5, hb, £48.00*

Hot on the heels of Dowd's (2015) award-winning *The Archaeology of Caves of Ireland*, comes its sister publication, *Underground Archaeology: Studies on Human Bones and Artefacts from Ireland's Caves*, also published by Oxbow Books. This volume serves as an accompanying volume to the more synthetic work, containing the osteological and artefactual reports from which much of the former's discussion is drawn. This is a refreshing approach; so often detailed primary data is given only the most cursory presentation (or omitted altogether) in large thematic works, leaving little room for critique, reanalysis or development of the arguments presented. It is clear, however, that from the outset, Dowd envisioned the *Irish Cave Archaeology Project (ICAP)* to serve as a model for future research on cave landscapes, not only at the site level, but also at the scale of individual artefactual (and osteological) assemblages; indeed, the CD appendix to Chapters 1 and 2 invites future research and manipulation of the raw data.

Caves are unique archaeological sites, not least in the active nature of these environments and the impact of post-depositional processes and other taphonomic factors (both natural and anthropogenic) on the assemblages recovered from them. Furthermore, they are distinct and easily identifiable places in the landscape. As such, many caves are multi-period sites, with episodic and intermittent activity (rarely continuous in the traditional sense) over long periods of time. Archaeological material laid down in one period is reused, reworked, or destroyed with each new visitation.

This visibility has also made caves early targets for investigation: by antiquarians, cavers and tourists. With this in mind, many early collections are lost, fragmented or, at best, survive without detailed context information. These factors make the analysis of cave assemblages difficult, and necessitate the development of specific analytical frameworks. Comparison of assemblages between sites is one way to observe patterns in the data, and formulate interpretations on the nature of cave activity, where detailed stratigraphic information for individual sites is lacking.

A volume dedicated to the detailed analysis of the archaeological assemblages from Irish caves is therefore much needed – both as a summary of the evidence to date, and as a platform for future researchers to ask new questions of a previously dispersed and under-utilised resource. Part I of the volume – Chapters 1 (Fibiger) and 2 (Lynch) – discusses the human remains from Irish caves; material which, like many human remains assemblages from caves, comprises predominantly disarticulated bones. With the development of bespoke analytical frameworks, and a step-by-step process of analysis, accompanied by detailed digital appendices featuring all of the primary data, these chapters alone reflect a huge undertaking and serve not only to make the data on human bone from Irish caves accessible to future researchers, but provide a model for the study of disarticulated bone more generally.

Rigorous and detailed analysis of human bone assemblages, particularly disarticulated material, has much to offer our understanding of prehistoric funerary rites, which were clearly more diverse, complex and protracted than was once thought. Publication of this difficult material not only brings mortuary activity in caves into wider debates within prehistoric funerary archaeology, but (with their often exceptional preservation conditions) provides evidence which

can enhance our understanding of existing assemblages from non-cave contexts. Excarnation (the transformation of fleshed bodies into dry, white bone, either naturally or manually) is increasingly recognised as one of the primary funerary rites of prehistoric Britain, whether in natural caves or pseudo-subterranean spaces such as megalithic tombs. As such, the analysis of cave assemblages has much to offer more traditional mainstream studies, and these chapters provide frameworks onto which analysis of this material can be directly mapped. Potential future avenues for study on the material presented could include greater taphonomic and histological analysis (e.g. Booth & Madgwick 2016), to gain a better understanding of the nature of the funerary rites which took place in these enigmatic places.

Moving away from human remains, Part II, which forms the bulk of the volume, discusses different classes of artefacts across the various cave sites. The papers precede in roughly (though not strictly) chronological order: from lithics (Woodman), prehistoric pottery (Roche), stone axeheads (Mandal *et al*), perforated marine shells (Connolly) and animal teeth (Beglane), Late Bronze Age metalwork (Becker), Early Medieval and Medieval pottery (Kyle), Early Medieval shrine fragments (Murray), and Viking-age artefacts (Sheehan). Meanwhile, Part III is formed of site-specific artefact reports on stone rings (Sheridan), Medieval pottery (McCutcheon), late seventeenth-century material (McCutcheon) and coarse stone objects (Mandal).

The perforated marine shell (Chapter 6) and perforated animal teeth (Chapter 7) reports are particularly well-executed, and read well as standalone papers. Not only do they perform the necessary task of detailing the analysis of assemblages from Irish caves, but discuss them within the broader context of deposition in these unusual environments, and what this might say about the cosmologies of the individuals and communities involved. Like the osteology papers then, these (and the sources which they reference) serve as useful go-to guides for anyone studying this little discussed material both within and outside of cave environments.

In contrast, Early Medieval shrine fragments (Chapter 10), and Viking-age coin and hacksilver hoards (Chapter 11), are interpreted in a more pragmatic manner; the former as discarded loot and the latter as the expedient concealment of material wealth. Both of these interpretations may of course be valid, but they could usefully have been balanced with some discussion of their possible votive deposition at such symbolically-charged sites, many of which have long histories of ritual and funerary use. The inclusion of some typologically/chronologically undiagnostic classes of material, such as amber and shale, in the discussion of Viking-age artefacts was also an interesting choice, since the author admits, in relation to amber at least, that it 'occurs quite frequently in later prehistoric contexts in Ireland and consequently some of the amber beads... especially those without association, may well be of prehistoric date (e.g. Carrigmurrish Cave, where Late Bronze Age pottery has also been recovered)' (p.164). Certainly, amber beads and shale artefacts are known from later prehistoric cave sites in Scotland, such as the Sculptor's Cave in Moray (Benton 1931; Armit & Büster forthcoming).

This volume is an essential reference for anyone studying the human and artefactual assemblages from British and Irish caves, and in terms of the osteology chapters, human bone assemblages more widely. It is also a necessary addition to the Irish archaeological literature, in allowing this once understudied material to be woven into broader landscape narratives. Taken together, these two volumes play a major role in understanding the place (and changing place) of caves within the lives and cosmologies of past societies.

## References

- Armit, I. & Büster, L. Forthcoming. *Darkness Visible: Later Prehistoric Ritual and Identity at the Sculptor's Cave, North-East Scotland*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland
- Benton, S. 1931. The Excavation of the Sculptor's Cave, Covesea, Morayshire. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 65, 177–216

Booth, T. & Madgwick, R. 2016. New evidence for diverse secondary burial practices in Iron Age Britain: A histological case study. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 67, 14–24

Dowd, M. 2015. *The Archaeology of the Caves of Ireland*. Oxford: Oxbow Books

*Lindsey Büster*

*University of Bradford*

Review submitted: May 2017

*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor*