

133. The early prehistory in the west of Ireland: investigations into the social archaeology of the Mesolithic, west of the Shannon, Ireland

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Results of M. Litt thesis

This Masters thesis sought to review the evidence we have for the Mesolithic communities who inhabited the six counties – Clare, Galway, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, and Sligo – in the west of Ireland for approximately 4000 years, from *c.* 8000–*c.* 4000 cal BC (Driscoll 2006). The aims of this thesis were to understand the character of the early prehistoric period in the six counties west of the Shannon; to understand how people inhabited and utilised the landscape; to establish any degree of variability between the coast and the interior; and to establish any degree of regionality in the material culture. The overall intention was to interpret the evidence in terms of a social archaeology of the period.

The evidence gathered from both the research in the National Museum and the 16 weeks of field-walking has shown that evidence for the Mesolithic in the west has in some areas gone unrecognised, while in other areas it has been over-estimated. A belief in the paucity of the archaeological record for the period can easily become a self-fulfilling prophesy: as no one is out there actually investigating the period, it is left unknown. In areas such as Lough Gara (Counties Sligo and Roscommon) and Lough Allen (Counties Leitrim and Roscommon) – both of which witnessed a drop in lake levels after drainage schemes – this thesis has shown that the extent of the previous available evidence has been overlooked. The fieldwork at Lough Allen has shown that there is extensive evidence available to be researched, with 97 new find spots of either single finds or lithic scatters identified. What the evidence from these two lakes highlights is the serious bias at play in the known distribution of the Mesolithic evidence in the west – where lakes have been drained, much evidence can be found, but this creates a bias against areas away from the shores, such as the hinterland of the lakes, as well as against lakes where no drainage has taken place.

Looking at the distribution of coastal sites in the west

compared to inland sites, it is clear that only the tip of the iceberg of coastal sites has been realised, with only four definite coastal sites along the 1000km of coastline. Importantly, with lower relative sea levels in the Mesolithic, three of these four may have been a few kilometres from the coast at the time. What must be borne in mind when looking at the distribution map for coastal sites along the 1000km stretch of coastline is, firstly, the lack of research in these areas, and secondly, the fact that the Mesolithic site at Ferriter's Cove, Co. Kerry was initially noted by a find of a Neolithic artefact (Woodman *et al.* 1999). Therefore, we must be wary of seeing these as blank areas in Mesolithic inhabitation of the landscape. It should be considered that Mesolithic communities were all along the coast, but we are as yet unable to identify this inhabitation. What also has to be contended with is that the rise in relative sea levels over the period of 4000 years will have buried many coastal sites. But, as at Belderrig, Co. Mayo, those higher up on the shore can be identified with time and perseverance – and some luck.

This thesis has argued that a landscape approach is a useful way of understanding early prehistoric communities. By adopting a dwelling perspective (*sensu* Ingold 2000), we can situate the communities in the landscape, and understand that these communities had complex relations with the world around them. The evidence of the variety of platforms that were constructed and used in the Mesolithic in Ireland (e.g. Fredengren 2004; Little 2005) suggests that these communities were actively engaged with the landscape, and actively transforming the landscape. Rather than seeing the landscape as a backdrop to activities, the idea of the taskscape (Ingold 2000) unites the communities with the plants and animals, and the topography with the temporality of the landscape. While we do not need to argue that the Mesolithic communities were clearing large patches of woodland (why would they have needed to?), the evidence suggests that there was more involved

than just skirting along the woodland edges. These were a people at home in the woodlands; indeed the woodland was their home.

In terms of further research in the six counties, clearly much more remains to be done. This project was only able to spend four months in total of actual field-walking time, and this was carried out by a single researcher. In all areas surveyed, further work is necessary. In terms of surveying ploughed fields, this has been utterly neglected in the west. This thesis' field-walking programme of ploughed fields in the Tawin/Maree, Co. Galway area is the first such project in the six western counties. As the amount of land under tillage is rapidly declining in the west, I suggest that much work must be carried out in order to use this convenient access into the prehistoric landscape. In areas where no tillage is carried out, such as near the Streamstown, Co. Galway finds, and Lough Urlaur, Co. Mayo, test pitting and geophysical surveying of a wide area could be carried out. This may not produce evidence quickly, but would be a start if we wish to move beyond our current finds.

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