

Woven Into the Stuff of Other Men's Lives: The Treatment of the Dead in Iron Age Atlantic Scotland.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

'It must always be borne in mind that the evidence visible to the archaeologist is precisely that, and that alternative forms of the disposal of the dead might have been used within any given period that have left little or no physical trace'

(Reynolds 2009: 35-6)

Funerary remains provide us with our most direct and emotive link to past communities. Aside from the information that skeletal analysis can provide on diet, disease and daily life, an examination of mortuary traditions can shed light on the ways in which people in the past dealt with the trauma of death, sought to prepare their loved ones for the afterlife, and viewed the continuing role of the dead within society.

Only certain forms of mortuary treatment are visible in the archaeological record, and there is a widespread dearth in formal burial evidence over all but a few isolated areas of Iron Age Europe. The apparent 'de-ritualisation' of society, with a move from investment in burial monuments in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age to an investment in domestic architecture in the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, may, however, have been overstated (Brück 1995: 245). Recent research has focused on the ritualisation of many aspects of daily life in the Iron Age, such as the use of household space (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2005: 534), building foundation and abandonment rites (Bradley 2007: 52) and the structured deposition of animal remains and artefacts (Hill 1995). The impetus for these studies seems to be the relative absence of formal burial evidence, the traditional forum for discussion of past belief.

Atlantic Scotland provides some of the most impressive Iron Age settlement remains in Britain. Archaeological evidence shows that this area was densely settled during the first millennia BC and AD, by people with sufficient resources to invest in monumental architecture, high-quality pottery manufacture and, towards the end of this period, personal ornamentation (Armit 1996: 127, 180). Despite the large amount of archaeological work focused on domestic sites in Atlantic Scotland, however, very little is yet known of the funerary customs of their inhabitants. Due to the extreme rarity of recognised burials, it has often been assumed that the Iron Age dead of Atlantic Scotland were disposed of using an archaeologically invisible burial rite, most probably exposure (Armit and Ginn 2007: 129). Though persuasive, this argument has often led to existing funerary evidence being ignored, or dismissed as representing minority or deviant practices.

Despite the current negative view of the burial evidence, human remains have in fact been recovered from a large number of Iron Age sites in Atlantic Scotland. Treated in a wide variety of ways, from inhumation and cremation to dismemberment and modification, and deposited in many different types of features from purpose-dug graves to wall fills and middens on settlements, these human remains provide a rich resource for analysis, and indicate a surprising plurality in funerary treatment during the long Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland. This mortuary evidence suggests that the remains of the dead held great symbolic importance for living communities, and a thorough analysis of the ways in which human remains were treated and deposited is therefore vital to understanding daily life in this area throughout the Iron Age.

This study aims to provide the first thorough assessment of all current evidence for the treatment of the dead in Atlantic Scotland during the long Iron Age, stretching

from 800 BC to AD 800. It will examine what this funerary evidence can tell us about the daily lives and religious beliefs of communities in Atlantic Scotland, and about attitudes to the dead in the wider prehistoric world.

The starting point for this study is the identification of all sites where human remains likely to date to the Iron Age have been found, and a detailed analysis of the varied depositional contexts in which these remains were placed, which is clearly central to any understanding of the funerary processes that preceded and accompanied these events. Unfortunately, due to the number of archaeological investigations that took place in Atlantic Scotland during the 19th or early 20th centuries, particularly on Atlantic roundhouse sites, contextual evidence is often poor. This does not mean that this valuable group of evidence should be ignored. Rather, it makes further research vital.

Many of the human bones and skeletons recovered from Atlantic Scottish sites were never recorded by an osteological specialist, which impedes any analysis of which members of society were receiving these rites, and what processes human remains went through before their final deposition. In this study, all accessible Iron Age human remains have been located and examined according to modern osteological standards. Aside from assembling basic demographic data, this study focuses on examining the physical evidence for funerary treatments such as dismemberment and exposure.

A further problem with the existing mortuary evidence, again particularly in the case of early and antiquarian excavations, is poor dating information. One of the aims of this study is to obtain radiocarbon dates for a sample of the human remains recovered from Atlantic Scotland, targeted towards filling in current chronological gaps, tying down the date of important depositional events, and examining evidence

for the long-term curation of human remains.

It is hoped that the funerary evidence from Iron Age Atlantic Scotland, despite its limitations, will provide the answers to several important questions. First, analysis of the nature and condition of the surviving osteological remains may help to address the issue of whether an archaeologically invisible, destructive funerary treatment or treatments were in use in Atlantic Scotland during the long Iron Age. Although the physical remains of the majority of the dead may have been destroyed, the mortuary processes involved may have been related to those that preceded the deposition of human remains in more protected environments. The social factors behind, and implications of the use of destructive funerary rites will also be examined.

Secondly, this study will examine the manner in which human remains were recovered, altered and deposited in the immense variety of settlement contexts in which they have been discovered by archaeologists. The domestic deposition of human remains was not restricted to Atlantic Scotland during the Iron Age, but forms part of a widespread European phenomenon, and provides an insight into the ritualisation of domestic spaces in the later prehistoric world (Bradley 2005: 109-119). The material examined in this study forms a particularly important group of evidence for this practice, not least because the partially standing stone structures of this region allow a more detailed analysis of the point in the settlement's history at which deposits were made.

Thirdly, this study will examine the extent of formal burial during the long Iron Age; over what time-frame this practice appears to have re-emerged, how widespread it became as the Iron Age progressed, and what factors may lie behind this change in funerary behaviour. Cremation, as well as inhumation burial must be examined in

these terms, although inhumation appears to have been more common in Atlantic Scotland during the period under study. No assumptions should be made about inhumation burial in terms of its social or religious meaning, and the frequent equation of this form of funerary behaviour with the spread of Christianity will be critically examined. Modern views of formal burial as the most natural or respectful form of funerary treatment should also not be automatically applied to past societies; in this study, the possible relationships between burial and other funerary practices such as exposure, dismemberment and secondary burial will be explored, to place this mortuary treatment within its Iron Age context.

Finally, this study will seek to investigate why such a wide variety of treatments appear to have been accorded to the dead in Atlantic Scotland during the long Iron Age, and how these different practices conflicted or related to each other within wider society. Does this diversity in funerary behaviour indicate a complex religious system, dramatic social differentiation, the presence of different ethnic or religious groups, changing views on the importance of the community and individual identity, or fluid and ever-changing ritual practice? In turn, it is hoped that this in-depth study of mortuary treatment within one area of Iron Age Europe will help to confront the present lack of understanding of funerary behaviour within later prehistoric Europe, and contribute to wider debates on the treatment of human remains and attitudes to the human body in the past.