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Ireland in the Iron Age: A Basket Case?
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Chris Lynn muses on the problems thrown up by the paucity of evidence for Iron Age people in the archaeological record

Ireland in the Iron Age
A basket case?

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In the last issue of *Archaeology Ireland* the Heritage Guide *Ireland in the Iron Age* addressed the various topographical and tribal names at places in Ireland listed in Ptolemy's famous gazetteer, dating from the second century AD. A few of the names appear to continue into the historic period, some 500 years later, when contemporary records begin. Ptolemy's 'map', along with a small number of references by classical authors, constitutes documentary evidence that Ireland was populated in the Iron Age. This evidence for settlement can be set beside that of stray finds of Iron Age objects (mainly iron weapons, La Tène-style decorated bronzes and some 'beehive' quernstones), generally restricted in distribution to the northern half of the island. A large gap in Iron Age studies in Ireland, however, is the well-known lack of evidence for houses and settlements. This note was originally stimulated by the Autumn 2001 *Archaeology Ireland* conference on 'Houses in Ireland', which, for obvious reasons, did not have a contribution on the Iron Age. The lack of settlement evidence gives rise to various questions. Was the island underpopulated relative to other times and places? Where and in what sort of houses did the people live?

There are obvious differences between the way of life in prehistory and that at the beginning of the Early Christian period, the most obvious being the development boom in the seventh and eighth centuries, with its monumental ringfort settlements, and the efflorescence of the new faith, which owed much to 'external influences'. There are several considerations, however, that argue for continuity between the early Iron Age and the Early Christian period in Ireland. One is the similarity between insular Iron Age art styles and some Irish Early Christian decorated objects, for example the Clonmore Shrine. The second is the existence of the Irish language itself. We are told that at the beginning of history, when the vernacular language was first written down, Old Irish was so distinct from its Celtic neighbours that it must have had a long previous period of uninterrupted development in Ireland, back into the Iron Age and even beyond. There must have been a significant population to sustain it, especially in the face of presumed overseas contacts. Eventually, genetic studies may also demonstrate a continuity of population across the Iron Age, although we can note in passing that another part of the archaeological 'invisibility' of the Irish Iron Age is a dearth of burials of proven Iron Age date. This is partly accounted for by the small number of excavations on ring-barrows and the destructive nature of cremation, but the significance of Iron Age burials at sites like Kiltierney, Co. Fermanagh, is magnified by their rarity.

Over the past 50 years dozens of Early Christian period ringforts, raths and cashels have been excavated in many regions of Ireland. I suspect that in up to 50% of sites some evidence has been found for an earlier period of occupation or activity under the Early Christian settlement, but unrelated to it. In some cases earlier excavators thought they had found prehistoric raths or ringforts, but I suggest that the existence of these monument types in Ireland (as parts of a cultural continuum) before, say, AD 500 or even 600 has to be rigorously proved. Anyhow, we often find prehistoric remains under ringforts, but they are always Bronze Age or Neolithic, never Iron Age, except perhaps in a very few debatable cases. You might argue that because they didn't have diagnostic pottery or flint tools in the Iron Age any remains of that period would be more difficult to detect and identify. But I say that, since the Iron Age immediately preceded the raths, its remains, if present, should be relatively clear-cut because the land might not even have been ploughed before being covered and protected by the earliest Early Christian period deposits. The Neolithic and Bronze Age horizons, by contrast, were subject to centuries of attrition through weathering and agriculture. There does, therefore, seem to have been some form of discontinuity in settlement location between the Iron Age and the Early Christian period, even though the same sites were often used in earlier periods. The Iron Age is in effect 'missing' from this part of the settlement record.

But people *were* living in Ireland in the Iron Age. The question is *where*. In his *Pagan Celtic Ireland* Barry Raftery mentions houses less than half a dozen times, according to the book's index. These refer to Continental and Bronze Age examples or to probably ceremonial structures at major Iron Age religious sites. He says that the majority population of Iron Age Ireland is under-represented in the archaeological record and devotes a chapter to 'The Invisible People'. But if the people were not living on the house sites occupied by their successors in the Early Christian period, where were they? Like the Ewoks, living up in trees? Arguing *ex nihilio*, is there a possibility that in some areas the population of parts of Ireland in the Iron Age was nomadic or semi-nomadic? The small wicker-basket houses which were lived in, even by people of high status, in the Early Christian period (the main house on Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath, is the largest known, with a diameter of 10m) look like the temporary dwellings of a mobile people settling down for the first time in generations. Clearly, the ringfort-dwellers of the Early Christian period were 'sedentary', but this may not have been the case with their immediate predecessors in the Iron Age. A scarcity of heavy timber in the Iron Age and Early Christian period for more substantial buildings may have been a factor. But we know, from finds of heavy worked timbers dumped in the substructures of some crannogs and elsewhere (possibly representing the remains of mills and bridges, churches and barns), that people had the technology and materials to build substantial structures using carpentry joints, although it appears that these were not houses. The Early Christian period houses that have been found in excavations were not daubed with clay for weatherproofing. This might have prolonged their life but would have required more investment in their construction and made them more permanent. The only parts that would usefully be moved around from site to site were the doorframes. Plenty of hazel rods, poles for the wall uprights and timber for the doorframe were all that was required to build houses. Presumably these materials were plentiful over most of Ireland. The apparent absence of domestic pottery in Iron Age Ireland (and in much of the island in the Early Christian period) is another indicator of a mobile population (pots get broken if you move about a lot), but it is not coercive.

A colleague pointed out that it was odd that the characteristic house type of the Early Christian period was of figure-of-eight plan

Above left: **The Forrad and Teach Cormaic on the Hill of Tara. From what sections of society and from how far afield would people have come to these 'centres'?** (Discovery Programme)

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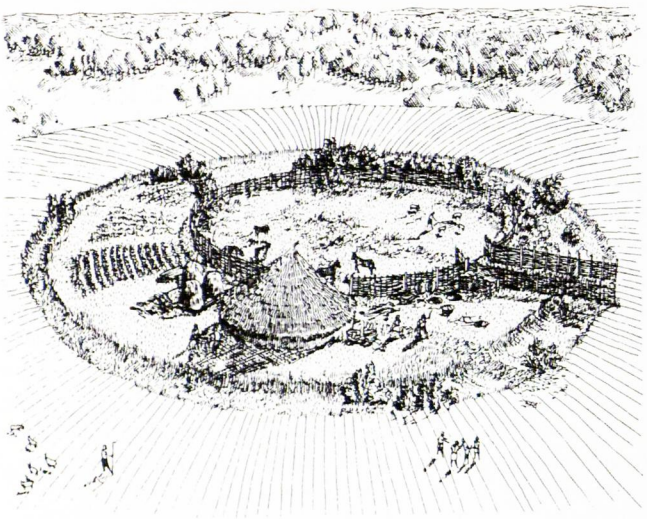
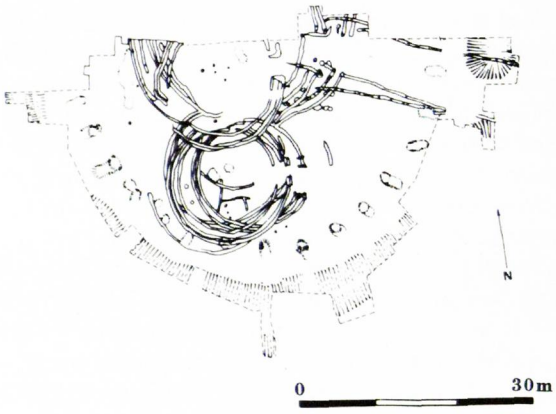


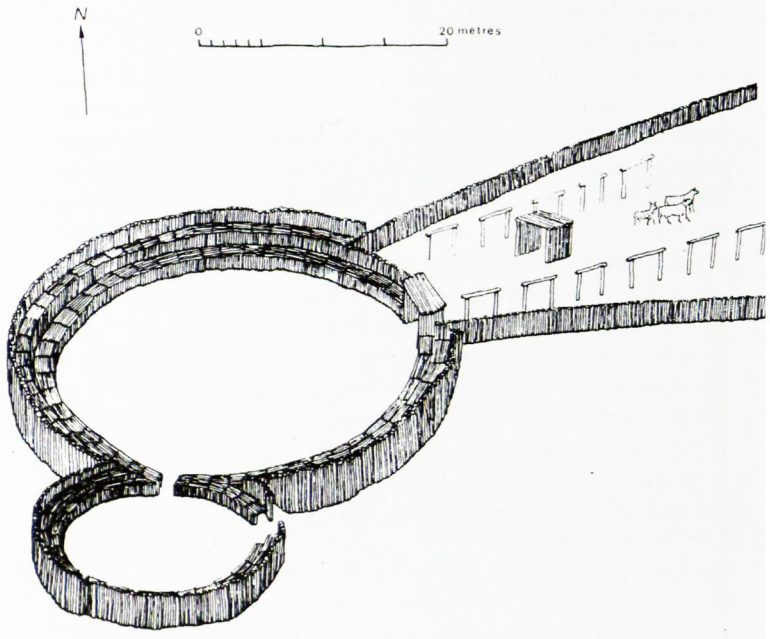
Left: **A reconstruction of the complex features of circular structures at Navan, Co. Armagh.**

Below: **A reconstruction of features at Knockaulin, Co. Kildare.**



and that the type of wooden structure best known from the early Iron Age was the large figure-of-eight building known from Navan Fort, Co. Armagh, and Knockaulin, Co. Kildare. Any connection, however, seemed unlikely, given the differences in scale, materials used, construction techniques and likely purposes between the Iron Age (ceremonial) and Early Christian (domestic) buildings, which were separated in time by at least 600 years. Now I'm not so sure. What if the 'ceremonial' figure-of-eight structures of the Iron Age were large-scale expressions in a religious context of smaller, 'normal' (so far invisible) round wicker houses of the period? Certainly there are significant differences, for example in scale, size of timbers used, and the number and positioning of entrances. But there is another telling similarity beyond the figure-of-eight form: this is the multiplicity of slots around the Iron Age structures, normally three with only the inner one showing clear evidence of vertical timber 'walling'. This may relate to the fact that Early Christian houses were generally double-walled with soft vegetable material packed between as a form of cavity wall insulation. In essence it seems worth considering the possibility that Iron Age houses were similar to the kind typical of the beginning of the Early Christian period and so well preserved, for example, at Deer Park Farms, Co. Antrim.

If people in Iron Age Ireland were living in round wicker houses, but not in settlements that immediately pre-dated ringforts, what further speculation can ensue? A lack of evidence in the pollen record at this time for settled agriculture may indicate that the population was relatively small and/or that there was more emphasis on stock-raising than on cultivation. There is a further possibility that the population was smaller and more mobile in the Iron Age than in the Early Christian period. In the Iron Age, house form, size and construction methods (if the Early Christian examples are their successors), coupled with other cultural indicators such as lack of pottery and lack of evidence for settlements, seem to correspond with this possibility. Aspects of the Early Christian period heroic tradition that hark back to prehistory (Kenneth Jackson's 'Window on the Iron Age') delight in the



actuality of mobility—warriors going off to fight at or beyond tribal borders, the use of horses and chariots, the primacy of herds as wealth, adventures in sequences of places covering large tracts of landscape, and feasting in large palaces. These aspects could be explained individually in a variety of different ways—this is how warriors and heroes were expected to behave, 'extra-societally', not like ordinary settled folk—and of course there may be little historic reality in the tradition. On the other hand, the object types that we can generally date to the Iron Age because of their design and

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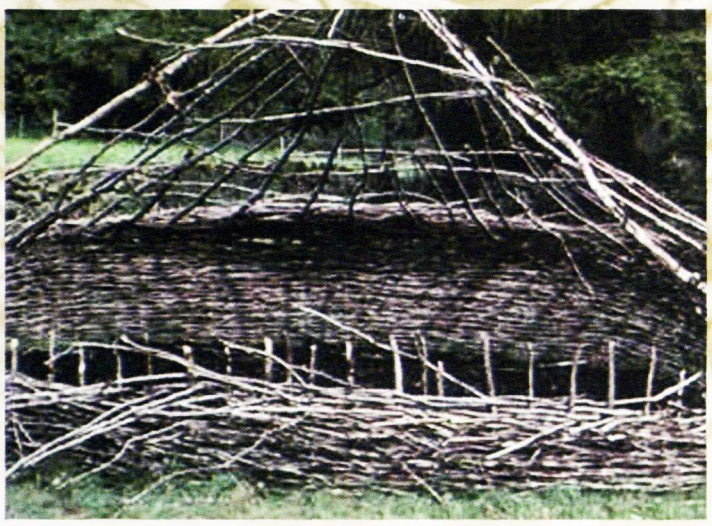
decoration are mainly connected with warfare or transport (the latter maybe a subset of the former)—swords, spear-butts and horse-bits—with dress ornaments such as fibulae relatively uncommon.

It is still the practice for archaeologists and historians to talk about the Iron Age provincial 'royal sites' of Ireland, Tara, Navan, Cruachan, Knockaulin and Din Rig, with the implication or expressed view that they were used for tribal gatherings at certain times of the year, the so-called 'Celtic festivals'. From what sections of society and from how far afield would people have come to these 'centres'? Does the existence of the concept of congregation at regional centres belie an assumption that in the Iron Age there would have been greater ability to organise on a regionally larger scale than would be normal in a land of settled agriculturalists?

In summary, the evidence for a substantial population in Ireland in the Iron Age is provided by documentary references in external sources, finds of locally-made prestige Iron Age equipment (mostly weapons and horse furniture, but including a number of beehive querns as evidence for cereal-processing), traditions of Iron Age 'migrations' from Ireland into Scotland and Wales, and the construction of major 'public works'. These included earthworks at the 'regional ceremonial centres' and works related to communications, such as large trackways (Corlea), or their control, such as major linear earthworks (the Dorsey, the Black Pig's Dyke and the Dun of Drumsna). The case, on the other hand, for a relatively reduced and/or more mobile population consists of the lack of evidence for houses and settlements where we would expect to find them (under ringforts); the absence of Iron Age pottery (though this is only an assumption); Agricola's statement that he could easily conquer Ireland; small-scale external activity in Ireland (the Stoneyford burial); pollen evidence for forest regeneration at the expense of agriculture; Irish raids on the west coast of Britain for slaves ('immigrant workers': Patrick was employed as a herdsman rather than as a ploughman); the 'heroic traditions' of the Early Christian period about the Iron Age; and the insubstantial houses of the Early Christian period that might be descended from an Iron Age tradition. It is possible, however, that the 'major public works' should be shifted from the list of evidence for a large population to the other side, because what they might show is simply that society was able to concentrate (mobile) resources from larger areas at various places and times. The existence of the earthworks does not prove that locally there was a large number of people to build and use them.



Above: **The characteristic figure-of-eight house structure from Deer Park Farms.**

Top right: **Wicker house reconstruction in progress** (DOE NI).

In some respects it is facile to debate 'Iron Age Ireland' in general terms because of obvious contemporary regional differences in the island and because the 'Iron Age' lasted for about 800 years, during which time there could have been numerous cultural revolutions at local, regional and all-island levels. Nevertheless, in terms of the population it remains characterised by its obscurity, despite concentrated research. Recently two eminent scholars published a suggestion that a contingent of Alans may have settled in Ireland in the late Iron Age. The Alans are a population group of whom some are known to have travelled westwards through Europe over several routes from their homeland in the Caucasus. It is suggested that they may have reached Ireland from northern Spain, creating a historical basis for the story of the Milesians and their wanderings in *Lebor Gabhala Erenn*. At first this sounds unlikely, but like other proposals made for this obscure period it is intriguing and difficult to refute. Archaeological speculation about what might have been happening in the Iron Age more than compensates in terms of romance and imagination for what it lacks in evidence, making interpretation of Ptolemy's 'map' of peoples and places a key contribution to our understanding of the time. ■

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