

Kingship and sacrifice:



Iron Age bog bodies and boundaries

Eamonn P. Kelly, Keeper of Antiquities at the National Museum of Ireland, presents extraordinary new evidence linking the location of bog bodies and other ritual depositions to ancient tribal boundaries which are recognisable in today's barony boundaries.

Bog bodies

The recent discovery of bog bodies at Oldcroghan, Co. Offaly, and Clonycavan, Co. Meath, provided a new opportunity to look at the reasons for the deposition of such bodies. It was noted that Oldcroghan Man was found while digging a drain through a bog along what is now a townland and parish boundary, which formerly was the boundary between two ancient territories known as Tuath Cruacháin and Tuath na Cille. This prompted the question as to whether or not the position of the body with respect to the boundary was purely coincidental. Within the townland of Oldcroghan there is a medieval castle of the O'Connors, former kings of Uí Failghe.

The precise find-place of Clonycavan Man is not known as the body was moved by machinery; however, Clonycavan townland lies along the county border of Meath and Westmeath, dividing the ancient territories of Brega and Mide. Moreover, the nearby border townland of Coolronan has also yielded a bog body.

Boundaries

Examination of recorded topographical details for dated Iron Age bog bodies showed that those from Kinnakenelly, Co. Galway, Derrymaquirk, Co. Roscommon, and Baronstown West, Co. Kildare, were all found in close proximity to barony boundaries; indeed, Derrymaquirk is precisely on the barony boundary (which also forms the county border with Sligo). A further dated bog body is the well-known Gallagher Man from County Galway, whose precise find-place

was not recorded; however, information in the museum file indicates that it was found somewhere within a small area adjacent to the townland and parish boundary. This was once the boundary of the territory of Uí Maine, ruled by the O'Kelly family, who built a castle at Gallagher in the medieval period.

When records of other discoveries were researched it became possible to isolate over 40 locations where bog bodies were found in proximity to important boundaries, mainly barony boundaries. The burials appear to have been predominantly of men but also included the remains of women and children, and certain details (the nature of the killings, accompanying stakes, animal bones) suggested that most of them were likely to be of Iron Age date. Some of the burials consisted only of body parts, such as decapitated heads and severed limbs, suggesting that some bodies were dismembered for interment at a number of different places along tribal boundaries.

The indications are that many modern boundaries have a remarkable antiquity and that barony boundaries in particular appear in many instances to coincide with ancient tribal boundaries. My observation that Iron Age bog bodies occur in bogs located on boundaries led me to investigate whether other material might also exhibit a similar pattern. This seems to be the case, as can be demonstrated by the fact that most of the provenanced metalwork of the period found in Irish bogs was deposited in close proximity to important boundaries, especially barony boundaries but including parish boundaries as well.

Iron Age bog deposition

Lisnacrogher, Co. Antrim, where a range of objects was deposited in a bog over many years, is one of the best-known Iron Age sites, albeit one for which no satisfactory interpretation has previously been forthcoming. Lisnacrogher bog is located on the boundary between the baronies of Lower



Oldcroghan Man was found during cutting of a drain precisely on a townland and parish boundary. This was also an ancient tuatha boundary, located close to Croghan Hill, where the kings of Uí Failghe were inaugurated.



Armlet on Oldcroghan Man.

Antrim and Kilconway, and the finds from it can now be regarded as boundary votive deposits. Indeed, owing to the range and quantity of finds, Lisnacrogger must be regarded as the type site for boundary deposits during the Irish Iron Age. The bog has yielded a prodigious number of objects, including weapons such as swords, scabbards, chapes, spearheads, spear shafts and their mounts, spear butts and a wooden knife. Personal ornaments included a twisted gold neck torc and bronze objects such as a neck ornament, pins, bracelets, spiral rings and miscellaneous rings. Bronze harness mounts of phalera type were uncovered, as well as a bowl or drinking cup, while iron tools included a sickle, billhook, axe and adze.

Similar objects have been found in smaller numbers in bogs located on boundaries elsewhere in Ireland. Bog hoards that contain mainly bridle bits and/or Y-shaped leading pieces or pendants have been found on barony boundaries, including three from County Galway (Attymon, Urraghry, Saintclerans), two from County Westmeath (Kilbeg and Mullingar) and a hoard from Kishawanny, Co. Kildare. The hoard from Abbeyshrule, Co. Longford, should probably be similarly regarded as the parish of Abbeyshrule lies on the border with County Westmeath, which is also the border between the baronies of Shrule and Rathconrath.

Wooden yokes have been recovered from bogs along significant boundaries, such as those from Carrowreagh (Cooper), Co. Sligo, and Loughduff Bog, Derrykinlough, Co. Mayo, both on barony boundaries. Up to twenty yokes are known for which a number of

radiocarbon dates have been obtained, placing them in the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age. The yokes should therefore be considered when discussing the metal harness pieces and their possible use and function.

A number of single finds of harness items, such as a Y-shaped leading piece from Drumanone, Co. Roscommon, and bridle bits from Leap, Co. Offaly, and Annashanco, Co. Fermanagh, are also bog finds from barony boundaries. A bridle bit was found in a bog at Ballybogy, Co. Antrim, where the three baronies of Dunluce Lower, Dunluce Upper and North East Liberties of Coleraine all meet. However, this bog also appears to be the find-place of a mirror handle and a cauldron. Iron Age cauldrons have been found in other bogs on barony boundaries at Ballyedmond, Co. Galway, Urlingford, Co. Kilkenny, and Drumlane, Co. Cavan. A drinking vessel known as a tazza, a bridle bit, spearheads and five swords that were reported to have been found (though not as a hoard) near Edenderry, Co. Offaly, are probably from the bogs to the east of the town where the baronies of Coolestown and Carbury meet, while the Monasterevin, Co. Kildare, discs may have been discovered in the bog beside the town that lies on the barony boundary between Offaly West and Portnahinch. Another well-known Iron Age antiquity is the Ardbrin trumpet, which was found in a bog on the barony boundary between Iveagh Upper (Upper Part) and Iveagh Upper (Lower Part).

Isolated weapon finds from bogs on barony boundaries include a sword from Ballinderry, Co. Westmeath, and a spear butt from Clonalee, Co. Meath, which is in the immediate vicinity of where Clonycavan Man was found. A leather shield from Clonoura, Co. Tipperary, was found buried upright in the bog facing across the Slieveardagh/Eliogarty barony boundary to where a female bog body was discovered in the adjoining townland of Newhill. Wooden swords (perhaps substitutes for the real thing) have been found in bogs at Ballykilmurry, Co. Wicklow (where three baronies meet), and at Cappagh, Co. Kerry, on the parish border of Killinane and Caher. This appears to have been a significant boundary as Iron Age bog butter was also found on the Caher side of the border at Inchimacteige. There are nine provenanced Irish finds of bog butter that have been dated to the early Iron Age, all of which appear to have been deposited along boundaries, mainly barony boundaries. Beehive querns follow the same pattern, with finds from bogs on barony boundaries at Ballynakill and Rappareehill, Co. Longford; Derrycashel and Emlaghkeadew, Co. Roscommon; Coologe, Co. Cavan; and Moylough, Co. Sligo.

Among the most spectacular finds are two gold collars from Ardnaglug bog, Co. Roscommon, which lies on the boundary between the baronies of Moycarn and Athlone. At Runnabehy, also Co. Roscommon, two conical bronze horns from an Iron Age headdress were dug up in a bog almost directly on a parish boundary that bisects the bog on an east-west axis. However, the eastern edge of the bog lies on the boundary between the baronies of Frenchpark and Boyle.

Deposition in water

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Major rivers such as the Shannon, Bann and Boyne form the boundaries of townlands, parishes, baronies and counties, and, in the case of the Shannon, a provincial border as well. In some instances Iron Age finds have been found on the shores of rivers or



Oldcroghan Man's right hand. The condition of the hands and fingernails suggests that this was a man who did not have to engage in manual labour.

were found in the River Corrib, Co. Galway, which now forms a boundary between parishes and which was probably a significant boundary during the Iron Age. Unprovenanced finds from the nineteenth century probably also fitted the pattern as a great many of them are believed to have been found during drainage works on the rivers Shannon, Boyne and Bann.

The shores of large lakes constitute major boundaries, as does the seashore. Lake finds include a bridle bit found on the shore of Lough Corrib at Cong South, Co. Mayo, which is effectively the boundary between the baronies of Kilmaine and Moycullen. The most famous Iron Age finds from the seashore are the gold objects found at Brough, Co. Derry, which included a large decorated buffer torc, two bar torcs, two wire necklaces, a bowl (probably a model cauldron) and a model boat. Another coastal find of Iron Age gold was made at Dooyork, Co. Mayo, in a hoard that included three complete ribbon torcs and a fragment of another, two bronze bracelets, a fragment of a third bracelet and seven amber beads. Part of an Iron Age headdress or crown known as the 'Cork horns', found in the estuary of the River Lee, must be regarded in the same light.

The seashore, lakes, rivers and bogs all constitute watery environs; however, research indicates that boundary offerings were also deposited at locations where this consideration did not apply. A horse bit and Y-shaped leading piece were discovered on farmland at Clongill, Co. Meath, where six parishes and three baronies meet (Morgallion/Upper Kells/Lower Kells). A range of single finds (bridle bits, Y-shaped pieces, pins, fibulae, spear butt, armllet) have also been identified that appear to have been disposed of in proximity to barony boundaries where watery locations were not in evidence. Although research is still at an early stage, it appears that the deposition of human remains other than bog bodies in proximity to boundaries was also practised in the early Iron Age, and may have continued into the Christian era.

lakes, perhaps indicating that the boundary, rather than the water, is the crucial element. For example, a hoard (bridle bit and Y-shaped leading piece) from the shore of Lough Allen at Cormongan, Co. Leitrim, was situated on the barony border between Leitrim and Boyle.

Iron Age finds from rivers include the same range of objects as those found in bogs, such as weapons (swords, scabbards, spearheads, spear butts), personal ornaments (a range of pins and an armllet), bowls or drinking vessels, bridle bits and Y-shaped leading pieces.

Finds appear to cluster in certain places, such as Athlone, Banagher, Killaloe, Carrick-on-Shannon (River Shannon), and the River Bann in the vicinity of Toome and Coleraine, but many isolated river finds occur also. At Kinnafad Bridge on the River Boyne a bridle bit was discovered where the three baronies of Warrenstown, Upper Moyfenrath and Fertullagh meet. Other examples include the bronze cup from Keshcarrigan, Co. Leitrim, found in a stretch of water that forms the barony boundary between Leitrim and Mohill; an armllet from Ballymahon, Co. Meath, found at the junction of the rivers Deel and Boyne, on the barony boundary between Moyfenrath Upper and Lune; and a pin from the River Erne at Portora, Co. Fermanagh, on the barony boundary between Magheraboy and Tirkennedy. Iron Age swords

Sovereignty and kingship

The deposition of votive offerings along boundaries might be interpreted as having a protective function. In this respect the withies that were passed through the arms of Oldcroghan Man and a garrotte of withies around the neck of Gallagher Man may provide vital clues. In the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, Cuchulainn places a withy wreath over a standing stone on the Ulster border; this invokes a powerful taboo preventing passage of the invading Connacht army, which obliges Maeve and her forces to cut a new route through a wood. However, the range of Iron Age material uncovered on boundaries suggests that we are dealing primarily with sovereignty rituals associated with sacral kingship and kingly inauguration.

During medieval times, following the inauguration of a king, the king's horse and harness, his weapons and his attire (which was worn by him only on the inauguration day) were shared out among certain of his major lords, his chief poet and the church. In the pagan era, as part of his sacred marriage to the territorial earth



Detail of the arm and wrist of Oldcroghan Man

goddess, it would appear that objects associated with kingly inauguration were buried on tribal boundaries as a statement and definition of the king's sovereignty. The presence of yokes and pairs of both bridle bits and Y-shaped leading pieces suggests that in some instances kings rode in procession to the place of inauguration in a wheeled vehicle. A pair of block wheels dating from around 400 BC found in a bog on a barony boundary at Doogarymore, Co. Roscommon, probably represent the remains of one such vehicle. However, finds of a single bridle bit together with a Y-shaped piece indicate that some candidates for kingship may have ridden on horseback. Cauldrons and drinking vessels—including wooden bowls and cups—along with other vessels were objects associated with the feasts that were an integral part of the inauguration ceremonies. The Runnabehy horns, Cork horns, Petrie crown, and collars and torcs from Broughter, Ardnaglug, Lisnacrogher and Dooyork are evidence of the nature of kingly regalia, to which may be added objects such as the armllets from Ballymahon and Newry, rings of various sorts and a range of pins and fibulae. A beautiful cape, possibly of wolf skin, radiocarbon-dated to the first century AD was found at Derrykeighan, Co. Antrim, in a bog on a barony boundary between Lower Dunluce and Upper Dunluce. It is probably an item of kingly attire as it was not associated with human remains and is moreover more resplendent than any item of clothing found with an Irish bog body.



Top: Drinking cup used at an inauguration feast. Found deposited in a tract of water that forms the boundary between two baronies at Keshcarrigan, Co. Leitrim.

Above: Leather shield found upright in a bog at Clonoura, Co. Tipperary, located in the barony of Slieveardagh. A female bog body was discovered across the barony boundary with Eliogarty in the adjoining townland of Newhill, Co. Tipperary. The details of the burial suggest that like the shield it was of Iron Age date.



One of two gold collars found in a bog at Ardnaglug, Co. Roscommon, where two barony boundaries meet.

Cover: Clonycavan Man was found in a bog where three baronies meet. The townland is also on the Meath/Westmeath border, along which two other bog bodies were found at Coolronan and Kilwarden.

why so much Iron Age metalwork has been found in rivers and bogs and why objects of a similar nature are rarely to be found associated with settlements or burials of the period. More importantly, the gaining of an understanding into the ritual practices that underlie the deposition of Iron Age and Bronze Age votive material opens up the exciting prospect of being able to map the ancient political landscape of Ireland through analysis of the nature and location of finds.

The ideas put forward here form the background to the exhibition 'Kingship and Sacrifice' which opened in the National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, in June 2006. Four bog bodies (Oldcroghan, Clonycavan, Gallagh, Baronstown West) are exhibited along with a range of other votive objects, many of which have been referred to here.

Continuous tradition

The bog burials that involved human sacrifice can now be seen to be part of a wider practice of ritual deposition in the early Iron Age. The burial of bog butter, quernstones and the sickle from Lisnacrogher are all reminders that a central function of the marriage of the king and the earth goddess was to ensure the fertility of the land and the well-being of the people, who were dependent for survival on reliable yields of corn, milk and milk products. These finds may also give an important context to the final meal of Oldcroghan Man, which consisted of cereals and buttermilk. What few references we have in early Irish written sources to human sacrifice link the practice to the god Crom Dubh, who is associated with Lughnasa, the Celtic harvest festival, and this association may provide a religious context for the killings that, at a practical level, may represent the execution of royal hostages to ensure the compliance of subordinate lords or the elimination of rivals for kingship.

Human sacrifice appears to be represented on the famous Iron Age cauldron discovered at Gundestrup bog in Denmark, in what I now believe may depict scenes from the inauguration of a king in a ritual that closely corresponds to the Irish tradition.

The ritual of kingship that is implied by the Iron Age finds is not exclusive to that time and survived in many of its essential aspects down to the destruction of the Gaelic way of life at the end of the Middle Ages. However, preliminary research into Bronze Age finds in Ireland appears to demonstrate that the origin of the practice extends far back into the Bronze Age. Hoards and single finds of Bronze Age weapons, shields, horns, cauldrons and gold personal objects can all be shown to occur on boundaries, and even some early Bronze Age lunulae appear to follow the pattern. This suggests a continuous kingship tradition of extraordinary conservatism and remarkable antiquity.

The hypothesis presented here provides an explanation as to



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