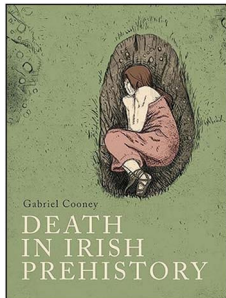




Book Review

GABRIEL COONEY. 2023. *Death in Irish prehistory*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy; 978-1-80205-009-7 paperback €30.



The book focuses on the archaeology of life and death on the island of Ireland using fictional scenarios to present examples. The volume's introductory section (Chapters 1 and 2) is followed by period-specific chapters covering the Mesolithic (Chapter 3), Neolithic (Chapter 4), Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age (Chapter 5), Middle and Late Bronze Age (Chapter 6), and Iron Age to early medieval (Chapter 7) before a summing up chapter (Chapter 8), 'extensive Notes', a 'List of Illustrations and Plates' and an extremely thorough Index. Chapters 3–7 all start with "a fictional account of a burial or ceremonial event ... to provide a different kind of reflective narrative" (p.28). These accounts, based on the archaeological record, are complemented by wonderful illustrations of reconstructions by the extremely talented Conor McHale. They also set the scene for the remainder of each chapter.

Chapter 1 provides the reader with background information, not only of the prehistory of Ireland, but also the archaeological view of death and burial. To prepare the reader, Gabriel Cooney asks the following questions: "Who lived in Ireland thousands of years ago? Where did these people come from? How did they live and die? What were they like? Did they have religious beliefs?" (p.4). Chapter 2 "tackles general issues that confront us when we begin to write about people and death in the past" (p.28), including recovery biases, taphonomy, post-depositional effects and environmental impacts. Cooney emphasises that we should view the past through the eyes of those who lived then. It is noteworthy that the book refers to several studies in which radiocarbon dates from across Ireland were compiled and modelled to estimate the following population sizes: Mesolithic with 10 000 to 50 000 people; Early Neolithic with 1 000 000 people followed by a decrease during the Middle and Late Neolithic; Bronze Age with 2 000 000 people; Early Iron Age with 1 000 000 people; Middle Iron Age with 2 000 000 people followed by a decline until AD 200. Despite the utility of this approach, Cooney emphasises the massive disparity between estimated population sizes and the small number of individuals within the archaeological record.

Chapter 3 starts with the fictional account 'Leaving the ancestor'. It describes the deposition of human remains into the sea and is based on the recovery of a human femur at the shell midden at Rockmarshall, dated to 4710–4370 BC. Although Ireland has been an island for 14 000 years, there are only nine Mesolithic sites with human remains. The site of Hermitage (Castleconnell) features frequently as a unique site with evidence for at least three cremations. 'A death in the house' is the fictional account at the beginning of Chapter 4. It focuses on the site of Ballyglass where two court tombs and a structure were excavated, dating to 3700–3550 BC. Compared to the Mesolithic, the number of known Neolithic individuals is vast, totalling more than 1000. This is significant given how short-lived the period was, around 1550

years. There is increasing diversity in mortuary practices throughout the Neolithic. More than 1500 megalithic tombs are known, represented by four main types: Portal, Court, Passage and Wedge tombs, which primarily date from the fourth to third millennium BC. Despite this, the Late Neolithic (2900–2500 BC) is poorly understood.

Chapter 5 opens with the fictional account ‘Aligning a death’. It is based on the site of Grange, dated to 2200–1700 BC. Here, the remains of a middle- to old-aged man buried in a cist grave in a cemetery mound were discovered. Despite differences in Beaker burials between Ireland and Britain, the most common grave good or mode of deposition is the ceramic container. Cooney states its omnipresence may be related to the centrality of subsistence to the living, and therefore its continuity is important for the journey to and throughout the duration of the afterlife. Alternative burial practices include inhumations and collective burials, and the change over time is evident. The archaeological record with more than 600 cemeteries, is vast. ‘A place in history’ marks the start of Chapter 6. Focusing on the Ballin-taggart barrow cemetery, the fictional account hones in on Barrow 6 dated to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age (1018–766 BC). Here, the cremated remains of a 13–18-year-old individual were found in a pit. Cremations are a feature of the Middle/Late Bronze Ages, though there are nuances in examples found, including pounding/crushing after collection from the funeral pyre. In other cases, bone fragments were deposited, while urns became more common and widespread during the later Bronze Age. Various contexts were also used for deposition: lakes or rivers, settlement sites, caves, cremation pits, stone circles and *fulachtaí fia* (mounds of burnt stones). Sometimes bodies were de-fleshed before cremation. The archaeological record is rich, with cemeteries with pits containing cremated bone, and with more than 2000 ring ditches and round barrows across Ireland. Despite this, Cooney highlights the challenges associated with establishing the Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI) based on cremated remains.

Chapter 7 begins with ‘Rings on her toes’—the fictional account of a crouched inhumation burial of a young adult woman at the site of Rath, who was buried in a ditch during the Iron Age (first century BC/first century AD), with three copper-alloy rings on her toes. This chapter focuses on the Early (800–400 BC), Developed/Middle (400 BC to AD 1) and Late Iron Age (AD 1–400). There is some overlap with Chapter 6. For instance, Cooney acknowledges that developer-led archaeology has substantially contributed to the Late Bronze and Iron Age archaeological record of Ireland. Although the total number of sites is limited, some interesting temporal patterns are evident. There is continuity from the Late Bronze Age with the use of the ring ditch and barrow tradition. Interestingly, Late Iron Age people copied Neolithic barrows and ring ditches and deposited their material (e.g. bone plaques) into Neolithic megaliths. Inhumation burials practices *re-emerged* during the Late Iron Age, continuing into the early medieval times, but cremation burial was also practised. Although the Christianisation process was relatively slow, inhumation burials and formal burial grounds increased in frequency in early medieval times (fifth century AD) with exarnation and cremation also continuing.

Concluding in Chapter 8, Cooney states “we simply do not know how the majority of people were treated at their death and whether they had graves or not” (p.342). While the “repetition of burial at particular locations over long periods of time and many generations” (p.346) took place, “at any period, there was diversity in mortuary practice and practices

changed over time” (p.348). This may be true, but *Death in Irish prehistory* has substantially expanded our understanding.

The book has few flaws. I would have liked the distribution maps, which featured in Chapters 1 to 3, to have been included throughout because they are useful for non-Irish archaeologists such as myself. Moreover, while Cooney touches upon grave goods and their representation—relationships, personhood, heirlooms, gifts, signs of grief and equipment for the afterlife—perhaps their ascribed meaning could have featured more prominently.

The book benefits from the numerous case studies, with many stemming from developer-led archaeology (see the book’s extensive list of Notes broken down by chapter). Focusing on these key sites, as opposed to the county, region, period or culture, Cooney provides the reader with snippets of particular events, rather than sweeping statements. Indeed, this may stem from his criticism of ancient DNA studies that often argue for blanket interpretations, focusing on population replacement. He states that we should draw upon “the burial record itself as a major theme across time and space in understanding lives and societies” (p.5), and make nuanced interpretations “when faced with the complexity and variability of the burial and wider archaeological record” (p.219).

Death in Irish prehistory is richly illustrated, extremely engaging and well-written. It is easy to follow (especially for non-Irish archaeologists or non bioanthropologists), meaning that it is highly accessible—for academics and the wider public alike. It should not only be used as a template for academics covering the archaeology of a country involving multiple periods, it should be listed on every undergraduate and postgraduate reading list. It is therefore no surprise that Gabriel Cooney’s *Death in Irish prehistory* was awarded the European Association of Archaeologists Book Prize 2024.

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