
Agricultural strategies and climate change in later prehistoric northern Europe

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Abstract

Agriculture in northern Europe during the Bronze Age is often considered to have provided a strong basis for economic growth and emerging social power. In Ireland, for example, there is extensive archaeological evidence for farming during the Late Bronze Age (1200–800/700 BC). Significant changes relating to environments and the organisation of societies then occur, affecting what and how people were farming. Evidence for farming is rather difficult to detect during the Early Iron Age (800/700–400 BC), coinciding with a time of climate change. This may reflect dramatic collapses in societal organisation and crises in food-management strategies, or more simply reorganisation of food systems. By the time of the Developed Iron Age (400 BC–AD 1), evidence for farming is more easily recognisable in the archaeological record, coinciding with the beginning of so-called Celtic migrations. Detailed research has been undertaken in recent years on the timing and nature of environmental change during these centuries, particularly in relation to climate. A detailed understanding of farming practices is, however, less well developed. Extensive scientific data from excavations – particularly archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological evidence – have become available over the past two decades. Despite this availability of data and the recognised importance of changing farming practices during the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, detailed analysis of what was being farmed, and how farming was undertaken, is often absent from archaeology narratives. To address this issue, an INSTAR-funded research project was established, "Settlement and Landscape in Later Prehistoric Ireland – Seeing beyond the site", which aims to contextualise the archaeology of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age Ireland within its contemporary prehistoric landscape, focusing on farming strategies and broader landscape interactions. This paper will reveal results from collation and analysis of archaeobotanical and zooarchaeological data, focusing on south-east Ireland during the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age. The paper will explore farming practices in the context of changing climates and environments, and within the broader context of northern Europe.

Keywords: Bronze Age, Iron Age, Ireland, Europe, Archaeobotany, Zooarchaeology

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