Special section

Archaeology in Ireland

edited by CAROLINE MALONE*

ANTIQUITY has always been an journal that has embraced 'World' archaeology with enthusiasm, and over the years has presented much new and novel material from places distant to its own stable in the British Isles. But in our 75th year of publishing and presenting the new, the exotic and the familiar, it is time to turn again to home, and examine trends within the isles of Britain and Ireland. There is good reason for this, since as we have discussed in recent issues regionalization and regional identities have become a political and cultural reality, both here, and in much of Europe. Regional political voices are now heard in the regional assemblies of Scotland and Wales, and in the distinctive politics of Ireland, which has a varied and rapidly changing political scene, with improving relations between the North and the Republic of Ireland. Whilst most archaeologists would not favour deeply nationalistic identities to emerge as a result of their work, it is nevertheless true that voices are now being raised regarding local restitution matters and regional decision-making in the pasts of Wales, Scotland, Ireland or, indeed, Cornwall or Lincolnshire. The smaller countries have developed distinctive local archaeological traditions and academic specialisms, well suited to the particular riches in their archaeological heritage. This wealth of archaeology has long been known, as the work of 20th-century scholars such as Cyril Fox, Gordon Childe and R.A.S. Macalister (to name just three prehistorians) has shown, but not broadcast as widely as it deserves. Regionalization and devolution bring various things, but from an archaeological point of view, they generally encourage greater investment in heritage matters and cultural research, and an increased local awareness of, and pride in, the depth of the region's history.

In this and the September issue we are pleased to present two special sections on the distinctive archaeologies of Ireland and Scotland. We have invited colleagues who work in these countries to review their various archaeologies, together with the trends and developments that have affected them over recent years. So much archaeology has been identified in recent decades because of urban and industrial expansion, European Union grants for roads, wetland drainage, forestry and other destructive developments. These in turn have stimulated new approaches that have had a major impact on the understanding of the environment and human landscapes of the past. In particular, the remarkable preservation in the wetlands of Scotland and Ireland has been important for enabling the development of world-class dendrochronological and environmental studies. The preservation of parts of these less exploited northern and western lands includes some extraordinary opportunities to examine prehistoric and historic remains, unparalleled in England or in much of western Europe. Settlement remains, industrial landscapes, funerary sites and so on, are preserved than further south and east, and offer rare insights into the past. Scholars and fieldworkers in these rich places have developed research agendas specially suited to explores this wealth, and are now leaders in their fields. These special sections thus celebrate distinctive archaeologies, and highlight some of the special features of archaeological developments in Scotland and Ireland.

Ireland

Although the monuments and archaeology of Ireland, the second largest island in Europe, emerged within a distinctive Irish world, the development of its archaeologies, following the division of Ireland three-quarters of a century ago, is quite distinct in the North and the Republic of Ireland. Political change is in part responsible, with the north and south of Ireland pursuing very differ-

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ent policies, legislation, economies and historical agendas. Deep-seated religious divisions, for which Ireland is all too famous, also underlie the differences. However, as the discipline of archaeology and its scholarly communities have shown, a new and far more international identity has emerged over recent decades. Scientific methods and studies, wide-ranging historical surveys, philosophical and theoretical preoccupations, pan-European comparisons of sites, technologies and societies, have stimulated a progressive archaeological tradition that places Ireland in the forefront of research and understanding. It is well to point out that much of the fieldwork that took place in Ireland many decades ago, such as the open-area settlement studies by O'Riordain at Lough Gur, was well ahead of its time, as was much thinking about monuments, architecture and ancient societies. But nevertheless, Ireland has seemed to be a backwater to many, who simply never bothered to find out about this island on the far western edge of Europe. In many periods, the reverse was probably true, and Ireland was in the mainstream of historical developments that have profound implications for much of Europe.

Professor George EOGAN is especially well placed to review the changes of Ireland's archaeology, having played a pivotal role for half of the twentieth century. He has seen the gradual recognition of the island's potential grow as continental and American scholars have increasingly worked there alongside their Irish colleagues. The enactment of stronger protective legislation in the Republic of Ireland, and the launch of the Discovery Programme, together with growing public interest and centres of archaeological scholarship throughout Ireland, are shown to be major stimulants in the country's archaeological development. The north of Ireland has developed a very different 'provincial' archaeology for the last eight decades, closely linked to the rest of Britain, but nevertheless distinctive. Nick BRANNON, who heads the Environment and Heritage Service in Northern Ireland, reviews how the changing legislation has made the management of the province's archaeology and heritage very different from that of the Republic and from mainland Britain. In the Republic of Ireland, recent legislative developments formed the Heritage Council, which now replaces former committees as the organization that promotes heritage matters in Ireland. Charles MOUNT is Archaeological Officer with the Heritage Council, and provides an account of how the Council works, and how its various initiatives are developed and realized.

Distinctive developments in Ireland's archaeology include maritime research, especially focused in North Ireland, where recent initiatives have begun to develop new methods and approaches to the offshore waters and shorelines of Ireland. As Brian WILLIAMS of the Environment and Heritage Service & Tom MCERLEAN of the University of Ulster at Coleraine discuss, new work is revealing the extraordinary potential of important historical material in loughs and the coastal zone. Other archaeological methodology is discussed by Professor Mike BAILLIE & D. BROWN of Queen's University Belfast, who describe the calibration of oak dendrochronology in Ireland, where an incomparable dendro-sequence is now available. Not only has this Irish work developed one of the most significant dating sequences in the world, but also can tally events such as trackway building and climatic episodes which beg many new questions of how we explain archaeological evidence. More routine, perhaps, are the methods employed by the osteooarchaeologists of Ireland, but they have made great headway in recent years in the examination of the populations of ancient Ireland. As Eileen MURPHY (also of Queen's University) describes, many new directions have been followed, examining different sample groups over the entire human history of Ireland, within a tightly structured professional environment across the island.

A full review of Ireland's changing archaeology is too large a subject to provide a comprehensive review of here, but we are pleased to include some of the recent developments to a wider readership. Interest in prehistoric landscapes in Ireland is growing, and ranges from settlements and domestic structures to field systems and ritual monuments. In particular, Ireland has made a major contribution to the study of Neolithic houses and domestic structures that have been located and studied in recent years. The survival of houses from the pre-Iron Age in any part of the British Isles and Ireland has formerly been a matter of luck and skilled recognition. Now, in Ireland the houses seem to be turning up in their dozens as intervention work proceeds across the land. Eoin GROGAN from the Discovery Programme reviews the present state of knowledge and reflects on emerging patterns of form and distribution that

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imply important insights into prehistoric societies.

Ireland has its share of remarkable prehistoric monuments, and until recently most of these were substantial earthworks and stone structures. However, aerial photography is moving apace in Ireland, and as more and more land is intensively used as a result of EU grants, more sites are becoming visible from the air. Barrie HARTWELL (from Queen's University) describes the major complex of sites south of Belfast around the great henge monument of the Giant's Ring. Aerial photography, remote sensing, fieldwork and excavation have begun to reveal a most extraordinary complex of structures around the henge, and involving a large late Neolithic landscape that competes with sites in Wessex or Orkney in its curious constructions and ritual possibilities.

Later archaeology, although still prehistory, has been actively pursued in several areas, but it is Navan, the famous fort in the North, that has captured the imagination of scholars from many disciplines. As J.P. MALLORY & C.J. LYNN (from Queen's University) relate, exploration of the Navan complex which spans from the Neolithic to the 1st millennium AD, shows a curious continuity of structural building, where earlier monument types are mimicked by much later ones. Such findings raise the possibility of the strength of folk memory and oral traditions, or else perhaps, of re-invention in the changing ideologies of early Irish society.

One of the most evocative of all periods of Ireland's early history is the 'early Christian' of the mid 1st millennium AD, with the recorded missions of St Patrick and other saints, and the building enterprises that marked the first monasteries. The monastery on Skellig Michael, the remote rocky island off the west coast of County Kerry, epitomizes the struggles of the early hermits and their amazing building works. The site is one of only two World Heritage sites in the Republic of Ireland, and it has been subject to a major programme of repair and study. Grellan ROURKE of the Heritage Service is especially well qualified to report on the excavation, recording and re-instatement that has been under way for nearly quarter of a century, and offers a personal account of how the work has progressed. Whilst the remarkable early Medieval of Ireland has not been ignored by archaeology, the full Medieval period has only recently been tackled through archaeological fieldwork. Tom MCNEILL (from Queen's University) reports on how the emerging discipline of Medieval archaeology in Ireland is at last finding a strong identity and methodology, and no shortage of material to explore and discuss. Settlements, both rural and urban, have now been assessed, alongside castles, monasteries and churches. McNeill ponders on the still problematic traditions of scholarship — Gaelic or English — that have for so long separated the formulation of the broader picture of Ireland until the 16th century AD. This continuing problem of scholarship, divided between the indigenous Irish history and that of the Plantations or English rule of Ireland over most of the 2nd millennium AD, is further reflected in the archaeological interest in the Post-Medieval periods. Colm DONNELLY & Audrey HORNING (also from Queen's) provide a timely account of the emerging archaeological disciplines of the Post-Medieval and Industrial periods. As they point out, interest in these late periods has been influenced and promoted by the wider concerns triggered through the increasing pressure of destruction throughout the United Kingdom. In the North, the industrial developments of the 18th–19th centuries left a profound legacy of processes and buildings, which were rarely equalled in the Republic. Now, though, legislation protects structures, and surveys are under way to examine the industrial archaeology of Ireland, north and south, and courses on Industrial Archaeology are being taught in many universities across Ireland.

What these papers so clearly show is how vibrant and exciting the current archaeology of Ireland has been. This wonderful and deeply evocative island is no backwater on the edge of the Atlantic. Rather, it is setting a new pace for examining a long historical sequence and developing the most up-to-date methods and ideas to tackle a rich and important past. Old histories and suspicions are thankfully being abandoned and a very positive and professional generation of archaeologists — who work across the island to tell a new and truthful story — have succeeded in uniting a common history.

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