Researching later prehistory in North Munster

The North Munster Research Project was established in February 1992 as part of the research strategy of the Discovery Programme. The Project was given a wide brief to cover the later prehistoric period, that is, the Later Bronze Age and the Iron Age, in the area of the lower catchment of the River Shannon, essentially County Limerick and the adjacent portions of Clare, Kerry and Tipperary. The Project is intended to run for several years at the end of which it is hoped that significant advances will have been made in our understanding of the nature and extent of settlement in the area, the economy and exchange networks in operation and the scale and organisation of social organisation.

To this end an extensive range of research procedures has been devised, involving an integration of established archaeological and associated techniques, new methods of gathering, storing and analysing information and the application of remote sensing strategies. One exciting aspect of this approach is the innovative survey of the estuarine deposits in the Shannon being undertaken by Aidan O'Sullivan.

It is the goldwork from North Munster, one of the key areas in Irish prehistory, which has attracted the most attention but the region also has an important range of bronzes objects. However, these artefacts themselves tell us little about the nature of society and settlement in the period. The human context of these objects, their production, dispersal and utilisation need to be explored through the wider archaeological record. We need to develop a clearer picture of the way in which society developed during the period, how people were distributed in the landscape and the economic foundations behind the structure of settlement and society.

The fundamental aspect of the research is that of information gathering, both through the existing archives and through the accumulation of new data. The most important gap in our knowledge is about the nature and distribution of settlement sites. Although it appears that hillforts date to the later prehistoric period the function of these sites and the extent to which they were used for permanent settlement is unclear. We want to test the theory that hillforts and these enclosures enclosed the dwelling places of the social elites and that they provided a focal point for the settlement pattern of wider communities.

In addition to the hillforts a systematic search for other forms of domestic site, whether enclosed or not, needs to be carried out. Closely related is the associated structure of production, in the sense of industrial and agricultural output, and consumption. The latter includes the simple dispersal of farming produce at a local level as well as the more complex production and exchange of high status material such as the gold objects. An aspect of this which has increasingly occupied archaeologists is the way in which these more exotic items were deposited in the ground.

In both the Bronze and Iron Ages there is a discernible pattern of deliberate, ritual placement in special places, particularly rivers, bogs or lakes. These patterns need to be explored at a detailed level through the study of the artefacts themselves and the contexts in which they were deposited. This information will be integrated with our developing knowledge of settlement, burial and production sites. On the artefact side the basic research will consist of the systematic study of the existing archival material in museums. This work will be carried out under the supervision of Finola O'Carroll who has recently been appointed to the Project.

On the settlement front one focus is the targeted and systematic examination of hilltop enclosures. In order to understand the wider settlement context of these sites, the areas around the enclosures will be examined through intensive field survey. This will be assisted by the use of aerial photography, both the existing coverage and newly commissioned and targeted low-level photography. Further field work, such as detailed land survey, geophysical and geochemical survey, will also assist in the location and identification of new and potential archaeological sites. This aspect of the research will be under the direction of Tom Condit who has also recently taken up an appointment with the project.

The research strategy will also include excavation. Trial and test excavation to provide samples (such as those for soil analysis and radiocarbon dating) and detailed sections to elucidate the structure of the enclosing ramparts has already been completed for this season at Moogha, Co. Clare. This massive hilltop enclosure with three very substantial ramparts overlooks the small lakes of Ataska and Moogha where the 'Great Clare Find' of Later Bronze Age gold was found in the last century. Excavation, under the Site Director Isabel Bennett, has revealed the structural composition of the ramparts, including an outer double rampart separated by a rock cut ditch. The soil cover on the hilltop has been considerably eroded and the possibility of finding intact archaeological deposits is not great but further work on the central portion of the site may be undertaken at a later stage in the project.

The identification, assessment and excavation of burial sites is another key element in the research strategy. Almost as little is known about later prehistoric burials as about domestic buildings. To this end part of a barrow cemetery in the Knocklong area of Co. Limerick, already known to have produced later Bronze Age burials, has been excavated this year under Site Director Aoife Daly. Four barrows were investigated and although they did not produce direct evidence for burials they have been useful in understanding the construction and distribution of these small monuments. Field survey in the vicinity of the cemetery has also provided valuable information concerning the placement of the sites in the landscape and the ability of a variety of methods, including remote sensing, to identify them on the ground.

The results of this year's initial field season, together with further archaeological research on aerial photography and artefacts will be integrated with the results of other work, such as detailed pollen analysis, using the comprehensive computer facilities being set up by the Discovery Programme. This will also provide the basis for planning work in the field over the next few years.