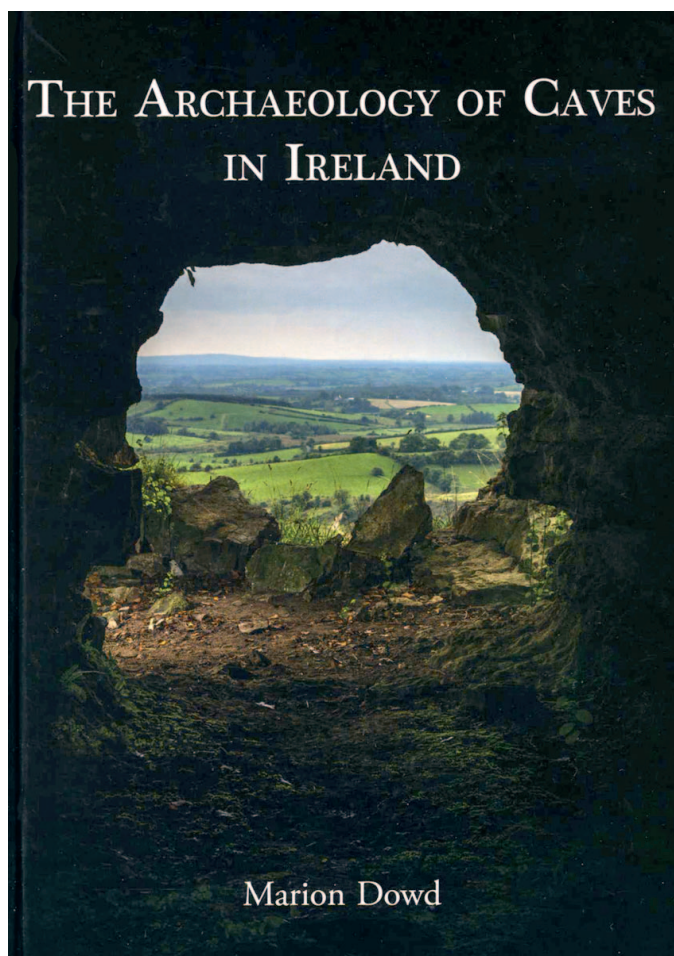


BOOK REVIEW



The Archaeology of Caves in Ireland

Marion Dowd. Oxford & Philadelphia, Oxbow Books, 2015. ISBN 978-1-78297-813-8 (hardcover); 24.7 × 17.5 cm, 314 p., US \$85; digital edition 978-1-78297-814-5.

This is a well-researched book that is comprehensive in its coverage. It is based on an impressive review of the literature and historical archives and the author's personal visits to more than one hundred caves in Ireland. It is well-illustrated with excellent color plates, drawings, and other illustrations. The research began as Dowd's master's degree topic and continued through her doctoral research. Ireland does not necessarily jump to the forefront when one thinks of karst regions of the world. However, approximately 40 percent of Ireland is underlain by limestone, and there are 980 recorded caves, 45 of them greater than 1 km in mapped length. The longest is the 16-km Poulmagollum–Poulelva cave system, but there is no known archaeology in this cave. Dowd indicates that 91 caves

have recorded archaeological remains dating from the Mesolithic Period (beginning at 8000 BCE) up to the present day.

The book contains three background chapters, followed by seven chapters describing archaeological cave sites by chronological period, an endnote on the future of cave archaeology in Ireland, and an appendix listing significant cave sites with map-coordinate locations. American cavers and archaeologists might find the publication of cave coordinates to be either ill-advised because of problems with trespassing, landowner relations, and looting or refreshing because the Irish public has a much stronger sense of heritage preservation.

Chapter 1, titled “People in Caves, Caves and People,” is a thoughtful discourse on the multiple meanings of caves as sacred or spiritual realms and the symbolic importance of caves in antiquity and in modern times. Dowd places the archaeology of Irish caves into a world context, demonstrating a very good command of archaeological cave literature from around the world. A summary of Dowd's research would have been a good contribution to the recent book edited by Holley Moyes, *Sacred Darkness: A Global Perspective on the Ritual use of Caves* (University Press of Colorado, 2012).

Chapter 2, “Excursions into Places of Fearful Darkness – 300 Years of Investigating Caves,” is a history of Irish cave research from the antiquarian interest in artifacts and bone deposits through the founding of speleology as the science of caves. Important contributions to Irish speleology are noted, such as those of E. A. Martel, who visited Ireland in 1895 and inspired interest in cave research, and Jack Coleman, who is considered the father of Irish caving.

Chapter 3 provides a brief background on cave origin and karst geology in Ireland and a much longer discourse on the archaeology of caves. Of particular interest is the discussion of recent research projects to radiocarbon-date more cave sites using material from older collections and newer excavations. Dowd also provides an interesting meditation on why cave research in Ireland still remains largely ignored, despite a boom in archaeological excavations in that country during the first decade of the twenty-first century, corresponding to the so-called Celtic Tiger economic boom. While part of the explanation is practical most development during the economic boom did not involve karst regions—the other part is a familiar story. Despite the association between archaeology and caves in the public eye, most archaeologists are reluctant to work in caves because of the logistical difficulties and the complex geological contexts. Cave and rock-shelter sites present some of the most difficult depositional contexts to interpret that archaeologists will encounter.

The remaining chapters summarize what is known about cave archaeology for the major chronological periods, the Mesolithic (8000–3900 BCE), Neolithic (3900–2400 BCE), Bronze Age (2400–600 BCE), Iron Age (600 BCE–400 CE),

Medieval Period (400–1550 CE), and Post-Medieval Period (1550 CE to present). There are some common themes that have parallels in other parts of the world. For example, during the Mesolithic caves were primarily used for human burial. This trend continued during the Neolithic, with an increase in ritual behavior and perhaps a greater emphasis on secrecy and isolation. Use of caves intensified during the Bronze Age, with burial ritual and votive offerings still an important component. However at that time, rather than being isolated, archaeological sites in caves were found in prominent locations in conjunction with other monuments. Although there is some evidence for domestic occupation in caves throughout the earlier periods, it was not until the Bronze Age that coastal caves acquired the most convincing evidence for longer-term domestic occupation.

In contrast, evidence of Iron Age use of caves is impoverished, and by the fifth century CE, when Christianity reached Ireland, caves appear to have lost their ritual and spiritual significance. Instead we see evidence that caves were used for more mundane purposes such as storage and habitation. As Dowd suggests, “Adoption of Christianity may have led to somewhat of a general ‘demystification’ of caves” (p. 174). In the Post-Medieval Period caves became important places of refuge and stashing of arms during the

years of Irish rebellion (1641 and 1798), War of Independence (1919–1921), Irish Civil War (1922–1923), and, in northern Ireland, up to the more recent “Troubles” of 1969–1994. Another use of caves in this period was the clandestine distilling of *poitín*, an Irish version of moonshine, which was outlawed by King Charles in 1661.

In summary, Dowd’s book is rich in detail. It is an enjoyable read and I learned much about a cave region about which I had little previous knowledge. However, it is a book about archaeology first and caves second. As Dowd states, “This book is the first dedicated examination of the relationship between people and caves on the island of Ireland spanning a period of 10,000 years” (p. 262). There are relatively few cave maps or description of specific caves beyond their archaeological remains. I don’t mean this as a criticism, but the general cave enthusiast should be aware that the theme that ties this book together is the archaeological remains in caves. It is primarily a book about the human perception of caves and evolution of that perception through time.

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