8. The tempo of life and death during the Early Bronze Age at the Mound of the Hostages, Tara

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Introduction

Through major research projects on Tara, including the Discovery Programme and publication of the Mound of the Hostages and the Rath of the Synods, researchers have expanded the corpus of data and literature on life at Tara and provided archaeologists in Ireland with the chance to address issues of active change and dynamism in the past. Studies of the Early Bronze Age use of the Hill of Tara (e.g. O'Sullivan 2005), and the reuse of the Neolithic passage tomb called the Mound of the Hostages in particular, have provided an important and detailed look into prehistoric ways of life. Because of these works, it is possible to start to place the material remains within larger theoretical perspectives of the past. As one aspect of this, archaeologists are now faced with the challenge of taking static material remains and attempting to reconstruct an understanding of dynamic social processes in the past. Moving towards this goal, in this paper we explore synchronic and diachronic patterning at different scalar levels in Early Bronze Age mortuary contexts at the Mound of the Hostages (made possible thanks to extensive ^{14}C dating—Bayliss and O'Sullivan, this volume; O'Sullivan 2005). Rather than looking at Early Bronze Age funerary practices as monolithic and unchanging, we problemetise the archaeological record by examining multiple interrelated, and at times coexisting, mortuary strategies at the Mound of the Hostages. By examining the patterns and variability in the mortuary record we investigate the role of funerary rites in the development and maintenance of cooperative and competitive lifestyles of the people who lived around Tara.

Social relationships and mortuary analysis

To start this discussion we will focus on one major premise: people do not bury themselves. This fact highlights the problem with assuming a direct link between a body and an identity as determined by grave-goods. Brück (2004) argues that archaeologists need to think of grave-goods not as markers of an individual (abilities, role) but as an expression of relational character or identities of the deceased. Moving further, we must also recognise the myriad social relationships that could potentially be materialised in grave-goods by the living who bury the dead. It is the interconnection between identities and relationships to materiality in a funerary context that creates the possibility of a nearly infinite range of possibilities of social action. Nevertheless, even with a seemingly limitless range of relationships that can possibly affect the funerary treatment of an individual (as performed by others), mortuary evidence is never infinitely variable. Archaeologists can identify patterning in the archaeological record and demonstrate that rules and patterns exist depending on how they are contextually (temporally or spatially) distributed.

This perspective on the formation of the archaeological record is an important and necessary modification of some early approaches (e.g. Binford 1971; Saxe 1970) to mortuary analysis that focused exclusively on direct links between the treatment of the dead and their social roles while alive. At the same time, however, there are still core elements of earlier research that should not be disregarded. One of these is the argument that mortuary contexts reflect social organisation. Social organisation affects the parameters, the range of options available to people in the past, but at the same time social organisation itself is affected by the social, economic and ritual impact of mortuary practices. Burials are iterative processes that can

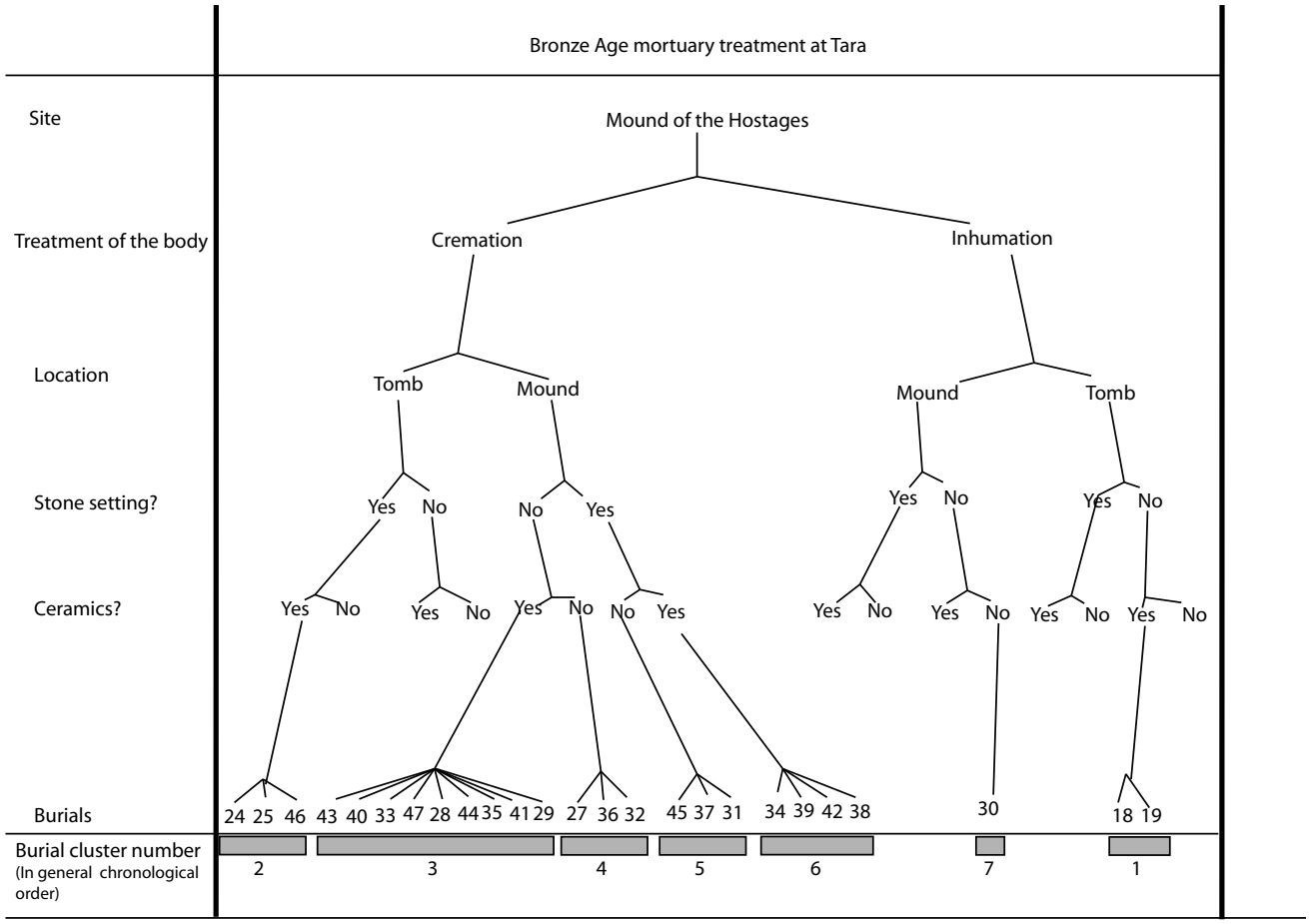

Fig. 1—Flow chart of different mortuary treatments (based on burial at Tara, the location of burial, the presence or absence of stone settings and the presence or absence of ceramics). The resultant grouping includes seven different clusters of mortuary treatments, with each Early Bronze Age burial from the Mound of the Hostages inserted into its corresponding cluster.

illuminate evidence of qualitative and quantitative social rules that may reflect aspects of social organisation as well as individual decision-making processes. This complexity should not be seen as an intellectual hurdle; rather it should be seen as an opportunity to examine dynamic social processes in the past.

The Mound of the Hostages, Tara

As a passage tomb, the Mound of the Hostages was initially constructed and used during the Neolithic period. Throughout the Neolithic, the primarily cremated remains of numerous people (over 200 individuals are represented—O'Sullivan 2005, 237) were deposited. With the completion of advanced radiocarbon dating (Bayliss and O'Sullivan, this volume), there appears to have been a hiatus in use of the Mound of the Hostages from the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age between 2927 and 2281 cal. BC. While this gap may be the result of sampling strategies, the two clusters formed by the other dates suggest that evidence for intensive use during the Neolithic and subsequent use (if not as intense) during the Early Bronze Age is not the result of archaeological sampling. While the Neolithic activity is marked by repeated use of the tomb and cists (which has resulted in significant mixing of human remains as well as associated artefacts), the Early Bronze Age activity is more spatially discrete, with multiple depositional events. There are also important regularities and patterns in the

Early Bronze Age mortuary record, such as the non-overlapping occurrence of Bowl and Vase Food Vessels and the general placement of burials in the south-eastern quadrant of the mound (O'Sullivan 2005, 240). As part of our discussion we identify and highlight some additional patterns in the funerary treatments in an effort to elucidate the dynamic social processes that led to the formation of the archaeological record.

Variability and patterns at the Mound of the Hostages

Burial practices can serve many purposes, including integrating people into a larger social collective or separating individuals from others. Both of these can be encoded in material culture. With this in mind, let us look at patterning in the mortuary record to explore synchronic and diachronic differences in the use of funerary rites as a venue of negotiating social relationships.

Early Bronze Age people buried their dead in such a way that it produced a material pattern. Treatment of the body, location, grave construction and grave-goods all simultaneously affect the structure and visibility of funerary rites. For our analysis, we selected several variables to group burials, initially independent of chronology, in order to take the static observation of variability in the burials and turn it into an observation of patterning based on prehistoric decision-making processes. The flow chart seen in Fig. 1 is not a *chaîne opératoire* or hierarchy of decisions made by people in the past. Rather, it provides one way of clustering the burials based on identified variables that are centrally important to the role of burials in information exchanges. The flow chart is simultaneously constructed from the top down and from the bottom up, where all the attributes of the burial are informing each other. The chart contains a series of categories for which there are yes/no or either/or answers. Each burial was placed within the cluster that defines its mortuary treatment.

The clustering process in Fig. 1 reveals seven different clusters of burials based on the presence of ceramics, the presence of stone settings, the location and the body treatment. From our perspective the different clusters represent different mortuary strategies. The patterned restrictions on burial location, the time and resource investment in cremation and stone cist construction, and the role of grave-goods in reflecting and affecting identities, social roles and relationships would have resulted in different costs, target audiences and visibility for each cluster. Each strategy may be linked to a particular group, a particular time or a strategy chosen by Early Bronze Age peoples at Tara.

On their own, the resulting clustering tells us little about dynamic social processes in the past. Combining these with the extensive ^{14}C dating of the skeletal material from the Mound of the Hostages, however, provides a powerful means to start to see dynamism in the material record. The persistence or change of mortuary strategies through time may provide insight into active decision-making processes of people in the past, as well as small-scale social dynamics within Early Bronze Age communities.

Stasis and dynamism—mortuary practices throughout the Early Bronze Age

How are we to make sense of the variable and shifting materiality of Early Bronze Age mortuary practices at the Mound of the Hostages? Before addressing this, it is important to outline some of the background arguments and methods of our study. In order to examine diachronic change in mortuary behaviour and rate of burials, we employ several techniques (Figs 2 and 3). We utilise ^{14}C dates provided in the Mound of the Hostages report (Bayliss and O'Sullivan, this volume; O'Sullivan 2005).

First, using OxCal 3 we calculated the sum of the posterior density estimates of each burial cluster (derived from Fig. 1) through time (Table 1; Fig. 2). The model where each cluster is sequential through time has poor overall agreements ($A_{overall}$ = 57.9%; Bronk Ramsey 1995). The individual indices suggest that clusters 5 and 6 overlap. We then made a model where clusters 5 and 6 were allowed to overlap (not sequential). The model where clusters 5 and 6 overlap has good overall agreements ($A_{overall}$ = 64.9%). No ^{14}C samples have been run for burials in cluster 4. The burials represented in this analysis are 18, 19, 24, 30, 31, 33, 34, 35, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43 and 45.

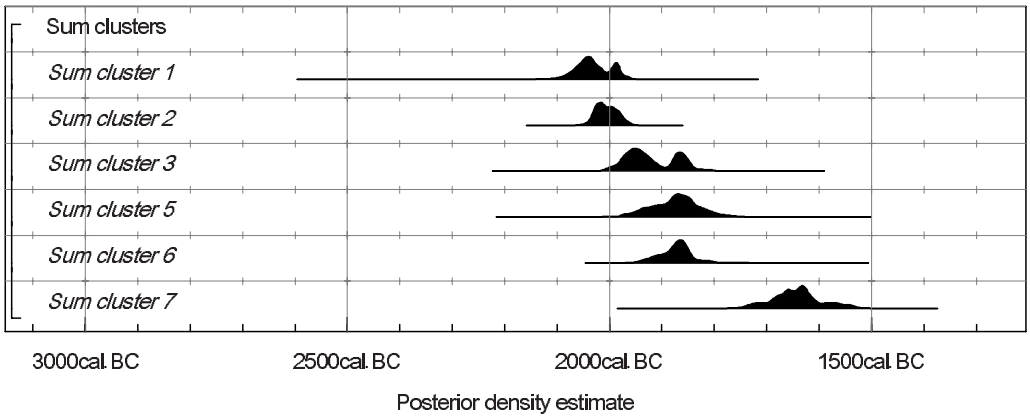

Fig. 2—The distribution of burials through time, highlighting different tempos of burial as well as periods of singularity and multiplicity of mortuary practices.

Second, using OxCal 3 we calculated the sum of the posterior density estimates of all calibrated ^{14}C dates from burials in the Mound of the Hostages (Table 1). The resulting graph is the sum of posterior density estimates for all burials through time; this indicates the probable deposition rate of burials at the site over time (Fig. 3). These techniques allow us to place the burials into a chronology that is relatively refined and provide insight into large-scale diachronic change in the tempo of deposition.

Table 1—Radiocarbon samples from Bronze Age burials at the Mound of the Hostages.

Burial	Cluster	^{14}C sample	67% cal. BC
18	1	51 GrA-17719	2281–2045
19	1	62 GrA-17680	2135–1961
24	2	69 GrA-17279	2109–1943
30	7	83 GrA-19180	1739–1533
31	5	26 GrA-17299	1877–1743
33	3	27 GrA-17159	2011–1777
34	6	29 GrA-17162	1885–1741
35	3	28 GrA-17161	1879–1693
38	6	36 GrA-17232	1855–1685
39	6	35 GrA-17198	1885–1741
40	3	32 GrA-17193	2033–1831
41	3	30 GrA-17321	1861–1643
42	6	37 GrA-17199	1859–1621
42	6	34 GrA-17196	1885–1741
43	3	33 GrA-17195	2015–1777
43	3	47 GrA-17276	2131–1921
45	5	31 GrA-17539	1945–1777

Reconstructing the tempos of death at the Early Bronze Age Mound of the Hostages

Let us now consider the implications of various diachronic and synchronic patterning in the mortuary record at the Mound of the Hostages. Our interpretation must be tempered somewhat owing to the small sample size and the need to incorporate more regional mortuary sites, as well as to consider how data from other types of sites (production sites, residences, etc.) resonate with data from the Mound of the Hostages.

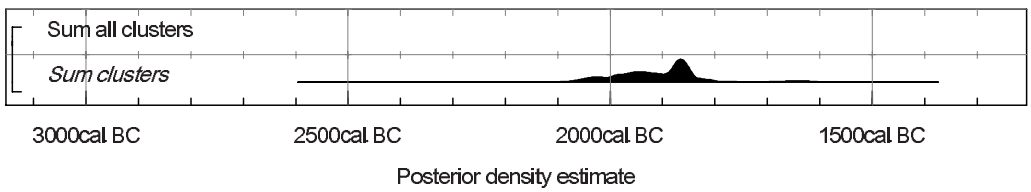

Fig. 3—Tempo of Bronze Age burials at the Mound of the Hostages. The variation in deposition rates may suggest diverse reasons as to why people were buried at the cemetery that may reflect dynamic social processes and decision-making.

Having said this, what can we now say about tempos of death and burial at the Mound of the Hostages?

The first use of the Mound of the Hostages by Bronze Age people was focused on the tomb. Uncremated remains were buried in the tomb along with ceramic vessels (although remains without vessels may also be represented among the undated remains) (cluster 1). Additionally, formalised cremated burials with ceramics (cluster 2) are found in the tomb at this time, but start after and likely last longer within the tomb. The inhumations in the tomb that date from the Bronze Age are the only inhumations in the Mound of the Hostages until burial 30, over 400 years later. We can say with confidence that the first Bronze Age burials at the Mound of the Hostages, which followed a gap in activity at the site of several centuries, were located in the tomb (and likely were inhumations followed closely by cremations) (Bayliss and O'Sullivan, this volume; Mount, this volume; O'Sullivan 2005).

In our analysis, the early burials in the mound are represented by cluster 3, and they appear sequentially after the burials in the tomb. Cluster 3 is also marked by a bimodal distribution (see Fig. 2). This suggests either that there is more variability within this cluster, which should necessitate breaking it up into two groups, or that there are two temporally distinct pulses of burial of cremated individuals with ceramics in the mound. The second mode corresponds with the highest amount of interment activity (Fig. 3) as well as with the most different overlapping mortuary practices (clusters 5 and 6—Fig. 2). It appears that this time was the second most intensely used period of the site during the Early Bronze Age.

Following this period we see a drop in the interment rate (Fig. 3). At the end of this apparent lull in activity, two new burial types emerge and coexist with the cluster 3 strategy. These mortuary strategies (burial clusters 5 and 6) included cremated burials with and without ceramics in stone cists rather than pits. Within a period of approximately twenty years, about six interments were made into the mound and at least three different mortuary practices were employed. This period is the most diverse in terms of burial types, as well as having the greatest frequency of burials throughout the Early Bronze Age (see the large spike in Fig. 3).

Following this period of intense and varied use, there were no more burials placed into the Mound of the Hostages for several hundred years. The sudden abandonment of the site as a cemetery after its most intense use may not be coincidental. After a hiatus of activity at the site, people returned and inserted burial 30 (cluster 7) into the mound. This burial has long been identified as an outlier from the rest of the burials at the Mound of the Hostages based on many variables. It contains a diverse and rich collection of grave-goods and is located in the mound away from other burials (O'Sullivan 2005). Our clustering technique and chronological assignment reaffirm these perspectives on this burial. Collectively, our analysis highlights that, rather than looking at the Mound of the Hostages from the perspective of a monolithic Early Bronze Age set of practices, we need to pull apart the complex weavings of multiple, and at times coexisting, mortuary strategies that make up the Early Bronze Age record at the Mound of the Hostages.

This analysis has illuminated patterning that helps us understand the dynamic use of multiple funerary strategies and, by extension, aids in reconceptualising shifting Early Bronze Age perspectives on the materialisation of identity. As seen in Fig. 2, this analysis highlights periods where one burial strategy was utilised and periods where several coexisting strategies were employed. The coexisting strategies may indicate numerous things, including variation in lineage membership, community use of the cemetery, social roles, political competition, identities and cultural mechanisms for regulating mortuary treatment. The periods where one strategy persists may indicate stability in the same variables. These dynamic and static social processes likely formed the Early Bronze Age mortuary record at the Mound of the Hostages.

The complex dynamics of burial practice are not limited to shifting burial techniques; they also reflect different tempos and periods of variable materialisation of individuals. The variation in tempo in rate of burial, as seen in the distribution of burials in Fig. 3, may be due to specific events and circumstances in the lives of Early Bronze Age people, although the nature of the prehistoric archaeological record may preclude us from saying exactly why the rate of burial changed over the

course of the use-life of the cemetery. These variable burial tempos support the argument that the Mound of the Hostages existed as a mortuary centre and locale for negotiation of social relationships for Bronze Age people.

Interpreting the tempos of death at the Early Bronze Age Mound of the Hostages

The tempo and rate of human action and deposition of burials at the site are not constant. The time during the Bronze Age when there are several different mortuary practices being employed also coincides with a spike in the number of burials being deposited at the Mound of the Hostages. It is unclear at this point why variable mortuary strategies coexisted at the Mound of the Hostages. There are a number of possible explanations for this. First, this patterning may represent different lineages or kin groups linking themselves to the monument, perhaps as the creation of ancestors (see Mount, this volume). They may represent strategies to mitigate increasing social tensions or represent displays aimed at increasing an individual or small group's political power. They may have served to destabilise the existing political structure and reflect shifting ideologies—perhaps even competing ideologies—related to shifting social relationships in communities around the site. They may simply represent a relaxation of cultural rules surrounding funerary rites, and they may even be a ritualised response to environmental fluctuations and dealing with potential hardship and survivability.

The potential reasons for this coexistence are complex and are complicated by the fact that Bronze Age people may have been attempting to link their practices to earlier (in this case what we call Neolithic) peoples who built the monument, and the differences between cremation and inhumation in terms of visibility and time investment may be great (see Kuijt and Quinn, this volume). There would have been pay-offs for Bronze Age groups to associate themselves with the dead buried at Tara. This includes political legitimisation (of authority or rights to territory), the creation of a collective ancestry, and increased social cohesion and shared membership within the community. The differences between the two strategies may have slipped in and out of the consciousness of Bronze Age people; certain motivations (or lack thereof) for the utilisation of different mortuary practices affected decision-making in the past at different times. At the same time, it is likely that the structural differences in these strategies fundamentally structured the funerary rites in highly variable ways.

Some of the variations in mortuary practices through time reflect differences in resource costs and time investment. The variable use of the Mound of the Hostages through time may reflect an increase in the use of the site as a location for performance, cooperation and competition among different ethnic groups, political factions or lineages. This evidence of potentially dynamic social processes materialised in the mortuary record is an interesting possibility and requires further investigation.

Early Bronze Age implications

While the tempo of burials at the Mound of the Hostages may provide insight into the social context in which burials were occurring, it is important to recognise (1) the restrictiveness of burial at the Mound of the Hostages, (2) the other pathways to death for those not buried there and (3) the implications of various scenarios of burial on social organisation and the archaeological record.

Restrictiveness of burial

Drawing on the numbers of cemetery burials, palaeodemographers have developed important insights into past population levels, the changing mean life expectancy and the time-span over which people were buried (see Acsádi and Nemeskéri 1970 for full life tables and the derivations of the models). This provides a way to model demographic characteristics statistically and illustrates that most people were not buried at the Mound of the Hostages.

For the sake of discussion, let us assume that the number of Early Bronze Age burials at the Mound of the Hostages is 50 and that the average lifespan of Bronze Age people was 30 years. Let us also assume that the duration of Bronze Age activity was 300 years (from 2100 to 1800 cal. BC) (this does not include the later deposition of

Table 2—Estimated population size of groups burying their dead in a cemetery based on three variables: the number of dead, the duration of use of the cemetery and the life expectancy at birth (from Acsádi and Nemeskéri 1970, table 9).

Number of dead	Life expectancy at birth (in years)					Period during which the cemetery was used (in years)
	20	25	30	35	40	
2000	880	1100	1320	1540	1760	50
	440	550	660	770	880	100
	293	367	440	513	587	150
	220	275	330	385	440	200
	146	183	220	257	293	300
1000	440	550	660	770	880	50
	220	275	330	385	440	100
	146	183	220	257	293	150
	110	138	165	193	220	200
	73	92	110	128	147	300
500	220	275	330	385	440	50
	110	138	165	193	220	100
	73	92	110	128	147	150
	55	69	83	96	110	200
	37	46	55	64	73	300
300	132	165	198	231	264	50
	66	83	99	116	132	100
	44	55	66	77	88	150
	33	41	50	58	66	200
	22	28	33	39	44	300
200	88	110	132	154	166	50
	44	55	66	77	88	100
	29	37	44	51	59	150
	22	28	33	39	44	200
	15	18	22	26	29	300
100	44	55	66	77	88	50
	22	28	33	39	44	100
	15	18	22	26	29	150
	11	14	17	19	22	200
	7	9	11	13	15	300
50	22	28	33	39	44	50
	11	14	17	19	22	100
	7	9	11	13	15	150
	6	7	8	10	11	200
	4	5	6	6	7	300

burial 30); then the average population size of the group(s) burying their dead at the Mound of the Hostages was approximately six (Table 2). This number, which is little more than the size of one nuclear family, does not appear to fit with the archaeological data from the Mound of the Hostages during the Early Bronze Age. As such, we can conclude that not everyone in the group(s) using the Mound of the Hostages was buried there.

Approached from the other direction, the restrictedness of burial is even starker. If we assume that one Early Bronze Age community is made up of about 100 people and lasts approximately 300 years, there

should be almost 1,000 deaths (resulting in 1,000 bodies) (Table 2). When compared with the assessment of 40–41 people interred at the Mound of the Hostages during the Early Bronze Age (O'Sullivan 2005), it suggests that around 95% of the population who lived and died around Tara were *not* buried in the Mound of the Hostages. If more than one community was using the Mound of the Hostages to bury their dead, then the number of people *not* buried there is even higher.

Another line of evidence is the demographic profile of the skeletal remains: the overwhelming majority of individuals buried during the Bronze Age were adults (O'Sullivan 2005). Infant and childhood mortality was likely high, as it is in most prehistoric contexts, which would result in fewer adults than infants/children if the cemetery were fully representative of the individuals who died.

Other pathways of death

The evidence provided above underscores the fact that, instead of one type of mortuary strategy once a person died, Early Bronze Age peoples engaged in a multiplicity of mortuary strategies. The result was a community of practices, with different individuals receiving different treatments in various places in the landscape. These different patterns can inform us about ritual organisation as well as the organisation of social groups during the Early Bronze Age.

There has been little work thus far on theories about the importance of absence of individuals in the mortuary record (Fowler 2005). While a difficult methodological question, the answer to who is buried at the Mound of the Hostages is critical to understand the structure of Bronze Age funerary practices in general, as well as the way in which the Mound of the Hostages was used in particular. Burial of individuals at the Mound of the Hostages was restricted: not everyone was afforded this treatment. The selection of people in the past may reflect an individual's social status. Mount (this volume) alludes to this possibility when discussing the potential for foundation ancestors being buried at the site. In addition, archaeologists' inability to distinguish different socio-economic statuses based on grave-goods at the Mound of the Hostages does not mean that the Bronze Age people buried in the mound were not of higher status; perhaps the 'honour' of being buried at the site was reserved for high-status people, and when we compare different burials we are simply comparing burials among élites, which is why we do not see large status differences among the burials.

It is possible that burial was a rite that was normally reserved for individuals who had reached adulthood. Infants and children who died at a young age may either have not received any formal mortuary treatment or have been buried at another location. Even among adults it is unlikely that all who died were buried at the site, as there are significantly fewer adults than expected given the likely size of the population using the mound as a cemetery. This means that the rest of the adults were either not buried or were buried at a different location in the landscape. Together, the variability in mortuary practices utilised by the community or communities using the Mound of the Hostages implies that there were numerous social roles and many different pathways from life to death for the Early Bronze Age peoples.

In addition to reflections of social status, it is possible that the burial of individuals at the Mound of the Hostages had less to do with the individual themselves and more to do with the performance of the funerary event and its potential role in enhancing communal integration (e.g. Kuijt 2008) or as a form of social competition, perhaps among different lineages. Our ability to evaluate these different hypotheses would be greatly enhanced by a more nuanced understanding of other depositional contexts in the area (graves, hoards) as well as the region's social organisation (settlements and domestic contexts), although this takes us beyond the scope of this paper.

It is difficult to evaluate different hypotheses for why only some people were buried at the Mound of the Hostages while others were buried elsewhere. The primary reason for this is that we have so few comparative data on community mortuary practices. Existing variation, however, suggests that there were different social segmentations in Early Bronze Age communities. It is as yet unclear whether these represent different social statuses, genders, lineages, places in life histories, ethnicities, personal preferences or social roles, to name just a few. To evaluate these hypotheses, more examinations on the regional level must be done.

Important work, such as that described by Murphy and Ginn (this volume), has identified other Early Bronze Age burials (Ardsallagh 1) in the area around the Hill of Tara. A thorough comparison of the burials at Ardsallagh 1 and the Mound of the Hostages (as well as other Early Bronze Age cemeteries, domestic contexts and hoards) might be able to elucidate these issues.

Social organisation reflected in mortuary practices

We must consider who was burying their dead at the Mound of the Hostages, the reason(s) for this and how this might be manifest in patterns of material culture (Table 3).

We see four possible scenarios for why different social units buried their dead at the site for numerous different reasons. One possibility is that a single domestic unit or lineage living at the Mound of the Hostages (for the sake of discussion let us define this as residence within 200m) was burying its dead there. The monopolisation of one site by one lineage may have had strong implications for the legitimation of political authority and the alignment of a lineage with sources of past power (as represented by the Neolithic tomb). Additionally, the repeated burial of individuals of one lineage at the site may have allowed for claims of territoriality and restricted access of people from other lineages not only to the sacred landscape of Tara but also to land and other resources in the area. While the number of burials over the 300-year duration of the site would be more in line with a single domestic unit (see Table 2), the age profiles of the burials (mostly adults) as well as the synchronic and diachronic variation in ceramic decoration and burial strategy suggest that the mortuary record at the Mound of the Hostages is not representative of a single lineage.

The second option is that the mortuary remains at the Mound of the Hostages are made up of several lineages from the same general community who were living at the Mound of the Hostages. With this social unit, there are multiple different scenarios explaining why people buried their dead at the Mound of the Hostages. One reason is for communal integrative purposes, to create a collective social memory and to mitigate potential social strife between different lineages

Table 3—Potential explanations for the burial of human remains in the Mound of the Hostages.

Who buried their dead at the Mound of the Hostages	General motivation	A few potential specific motivations	Possible based on data?
Single lineage	Horizontal integration	Ancestral burial ground, create lineage cohesion	No
Single lineage	Hierarchical integration	Legitimising that lineage's authority, separating the lineage from others	No
Single community	Horizontal integration	Mitigating social tension, community identity, communal ancestors	Yes
Single community	Hierarchical integration	Venue for competing lineages for status, marking different social roles, competition with other communities in the region	Yes
Numerous communities within the region	Horizontal integration	Creating regional identity, mitigating conflict and social strife, building a sense of equality and commonality	Yes
Numerous communities within the region	Hierarchical integration	Increasing authority of a set of high-status individuals, exerting control over territory or other sources of legitimisation and authority, emphasising differences among different communities	Yes

through communal action (e.g. Kuijt 2008). Alternatively, the mortuary event could have been a time for social competition, with competing lineages burying their dead with elaborate displays of wealth and consumption. The creation of lineage founder ancestors might qualify as a form of interlineage competition (e.g. Mount, this volume). The presence of potentially valuable grave-goods is one line of evidence that may suggest conspicuous consumption. It is important to note that funerary events can often be prolonged, particularly through secondary mortuary practices, and involve feasting, gift-giving and other forms of exchange that can create economic and social debt (e.g. Moka exchange in New Guinea; Strathern 1971). These events can also be integrative as arenas for competition and Early Bronze Age peoples at the Mound of the Hostages may have employed either strategy, although it is important to keep in mind that these strategies may have shifted throughout the Early Bronze Age.

The third option is that the deceased at the Mound of the Hostages were representatives of a particular identity or class within a residential community living within a couple of hundred metres, but this was not strictly linked to lineage membership. The various potential classes or identities that cross-cut lineages include such possibilities as individuals with high social status (which can be achieved or ascribed, depending on social organisation), members of a 'warrior' class or individuals from different lineages who happened to die at times when communally prescribed ritual burial occurred. The interment of people based on these types of identities can be either integrative or competitive, and distinguishing between the two often requires a more holistic treatment of social organisation, including studies of settlement patterns, residential contexts and other venues for social information exchanges.

The fourth possible scenario is that the mortuary remains from the Mound of the Hostages are an aggregate of regional communities (for an ethnographic case-study from South America see Dillehay 2007). It is possible that the mound served as a centralised ritual site for communities spread around the region. The timing and tempo of deposition of burials at a regional burial centre can range from periodic (such as annually) to opportunistic (either when important individuals required burial or when a funeral was needed to negotiate social relationships, either to integrate the region or as a venue for competition). The implications of multiple communities utilising the Mound of the Hostages as a cemetery include the possibility that there may have been a shared regional identity around Tara during the Early Bronze Age, that there was shared space in the landscape and little territoriality, and that funerary rites may have had an important role either in integrating the larger region or as a vehicle for social competition among groups in the area.

While the mortuary data may support some of these possible reconstructions of the role of the Mound of the Hostages in understanding social organisation of the past over others, there does not appear to be a definitive answer based on burial data alone. Larger considerations of settlement, domestic contexts, other regional burial sites and other types of ritual performance (such as hoards; see Becker 2006) are needed to address these issues fully.

Conclusion

The Early Bronze Age mortuary record at the Mound of the Hostages is complex and nuanced. At different scales we are able to see variation and patterns, each of which has important ramifications for information exchanges using material culture in the past. Funerals are important events in most cultures, and the restrictions on burial location, the investment in individualised and valued grave-goods, the visibility of cremations and interments and the infrequency of burial all suggest that these events were especially important for Early Bronze Age communities. It appears that people in the past not only buried the dead at the Mound of the Hostages in such a way as to materialise identities and relationships of the living as well as the deceased but they also used these mortuary events to negotiate complex social, economic and political relationships. The different rates and tempos of burial, along with the fact that burial was probably restricted to a subset of the entire population, suggest that people actively engaged in strategies that created venues for ritual performance, communal action and competition, and that these strategies were not always

the same throughout the Early Bronze Age. Challenging the perception of the Early Bronze Age as a static and monolithic period helps us to reframe our understanding of this fascinating period and archaeological site into a more detailed and time-sensitive consideration of the actions of human communities with multiple interrelated, and at times coexisting, mortuary practices at the Mound of the Hostages.

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