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Textile Lacunae: Prehistoric Ireland as a Test Case

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Abstract

Some post-graduate research is currently underway focussing on the development of textile production in Prehistoric Ireland. Little is known about textile manufacturing during this period despite the significant increase in archaeological activity in Ireland during the last twenty years. The research currently being undertaken uses a multi-strand approach, based on textile research carried out across Europe. The methodology involves an extensive search through published and unpublished 'grey' literature, combined with practical artefact examination. Preliminary results are discussed including the type of evidence found and the type of site where artefacts were recovered. The number of archaeological artefacts related to prehistoric textile production remains relatively low in Ireland and the decline in direct evidence is discussed. Research will continue into other forms of indirect evidence. The application of textile products in other craft processes as a source of evidence is being examined and at least one of these may provide evidence for the earlier adoption of textile production techniques.

Keywords: Ireland, textile, tools, absence, methodology

3.1. Introduction

Archaeological evidence for textile production, as in many parts of Europe, is rarely found in Ireland and artefacts which date to the prehistoric period are even rarer. The Irish evidence for textile production is both direct and indirect, and includes woven materials, cordage, basketry and the tools that may have been used to produce them such as spindle whorls, pins, needles, pin beaters, and possible loom weights.

In terms of clothing, the best-preserved items from Ireland were those found on bodies recovered from bogs which date from the Medieval period onwards (Dunlevy 1989: 38, 56). When all the archaeological evidence for textile production is viewed together, however, most artefacts date to the Early Medieval period (61%) or are without provenance (27%) (based on data from Hodkinson 1987; Bender Jørgensen 1992; Fitzgerald 2000; Wincott Heckett 2012). Only 11% of artefacts were from the prehistoric period, which started in Ireland around 8000 BC with the Mesolithic period and continued until the end of the Iron Age (AD 400–500) when the introduction of Christianity to Ireland marked the start of the Early Medieval period.

3.2. Background

During the last twenty years, there has been a very significant increase in the amount of archaeological activity taking place in Ireland. The Excavations website (www.excavations.ie) compiles summary accounts of any archaeological mitigations (monitoring, testing and excavations) carried out, in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Submitting a summary to this website, within four weeks of completion of the mitigation, is a condition for granting an excavation licence to archaeologists in both jurisdictions. As such, this site can act as a proxy for archaeological activity, and the effect of the so-called ‘Celtic Tiger’ economic boom can be seen in the steep increase in submissions from 1998 until the collapse of the property bubble in Ireland and world-wide recession in 2008 (Figure 1). At its peak, in 2006 and 2007, there were over two thousand mitigations reported per year.

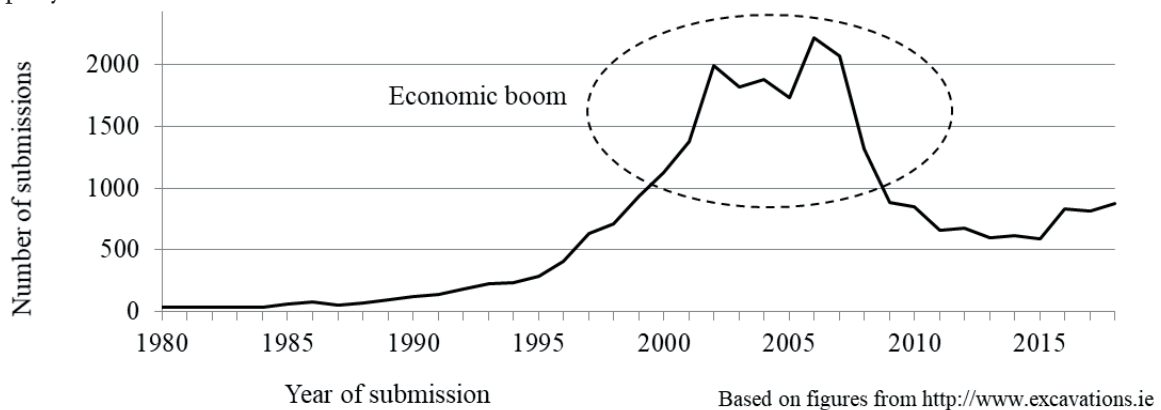


Figure 1. The number of submissions to www.excavations.ie by year from 1980–2018 with a circle highlighting the effect of the economic boom (1998 to 2008) on the volume of archaeological activity in Ireland.

The boom in archaeology has produced a correspondingly large corpus of new reports, although a large proportion of these are still in the form of unpublished ‘grey’ literature. The results of small-scale developer-funded excavations are published occasionally by commercial companies in journal articles. Specific publicly-funded infrastructure projects or exceptionally large, nationally significant sites such as Viking Woodstown Co. Wexford, (Russel and Hurley 2014) and Deer Park Farms Co, Antrim (Lynn and McDowell 2011) are most often published in book form. There have been a few large-scale projects such as the serial publications produced under the auspices of the National Roads Authority in Ireland (now called Transport Infrastructure Ireland) and the numerous outputs of the INSTAR-funded Early Medieval Archaeological Project (EMAP) (O’Sullivan et al. 2014).

Most of the research, however, concentrated on the Early Medieval period and there has not been a corresponding series of wide-ranging, large-scale studies of the Irish prehistoric, with the exception of research focussed on particular aspects of death and burials. The focus on the Early Medieval period is also reflected in the literature published on Irish textile production in the last twenty years. While the Early Medieval publications mentioned above have sections on textile production, the research relating to the prehistoric period is significantly more limited (Wincott Heckett 2012) or includes artefacts from the Early Medieval (Fitzgerald 2000; O’Brien 2010). As a result, there is a lack of understanding of textile production techniques from this time, with little comment in textbooks and only a few site directors have contemplated the possibility of textile production being carried out at their sites (Walsh 2011; Reilly et al. 2012).

At the same time, during the last twenty to thirty years, research into archaeological textiles and production techniques elsewhere has significantly increased, with the development of networks and

research centres such as the Centre International d'Etude des Textiles Anciens (CIETA) and the North European Symposium for Archaeological Textiles (NESAT). The resulting publications from these organisations, particularly the conference proceedings, often demonstrate the benefits of multi-disciplinary working with researchers who specialise in tools or textile analysis, scientific techniques, experimental archaeologists and craft exponents.

3.3. Research questions

The methodology for the research currently being undertaken was to use a similar multi-strand approach (on a much smaller scale) and apply it to the potential new corpus of archaeological evidence, concentrating on the Irish prehistoric period. One of the questions to be addressed is: would a combination of new and previously known data, using a wider range of indirect evidence that included iconography, environmental archaeology, mineralisation, or ceramic impressions, enable the emergence of textile production in prehistoric Ireland to become more visible? In addition, could developments be discerned in the production processes and, if so, how could this add to our understanding of prehistoric Irish society at both a local level and within its wider context? More sites with potential evidence for textile production have been identified (Table 1).

There were very few artefacts from undated sites or contexts, and these were all topsoil finds. The larger number of previously known 'Undated' finds will have been distorted by the number of finds from early antiquarians and random finds donated by members of the public. So, the difference reflects improved excavation procedures for both the dating of sites and context recording. Quite frequently, useful attributes such as the weight of spindle whorls, have not been recorded or published, and in these cases the items are being examined to collect the missing data during visits to storage facilities whenever possible.

Table 1: The number of sites where probable evidence for textile production was found by time period, and by whether the source was previously published or not (prior to 2016).

Time period	Undated	Prehistoric	Early Medieval	Medieval and later
Previously known	186	58	101	2
Recently published	7	44	42	15

3.4. Preliminary results

3.4.1. Type of evidence

Some of the preliminary results are described below, but may change when further analysis has been carried out. There were some interesting variations between the type of evidence from more recent excavations (Table 2). So far there has been very little new textile or skin clothing identified, with one possible example of mineralisation. At a small number of sites, for example Coonagh West, Co. Limerick (Reilly et al. 2012), chemical analysis of soil samples was carried out in an attempt to identify a possible location for a specific process such as dyeing. Spindle whorls and needles continue to comprise the majority of tools found. The earliest evidence for textile production in Ireland are two spindle whorls from Creggandevansky, Co. Tyrone and Ballyalton, Co. Down, which were dated by the excavators to the Late Neolithic Period (Henshall 1950; Foley 2018).

Table 2: The number of artefacts related to textile production by type of find and whether the source was previously published or not (prior to 2016). 'Environmental' evidence includes zoological and archaeobotanical, 'Other' is a possible loom slot.

Type of evidence	Number of possible items from new sites	Number of possible items from previously known sites
Basketry/Fish trap	2	–
Environmental	5	5
Other	1	–
Skin clothing	–	4
Woven textile	1	11
Tools	55	114

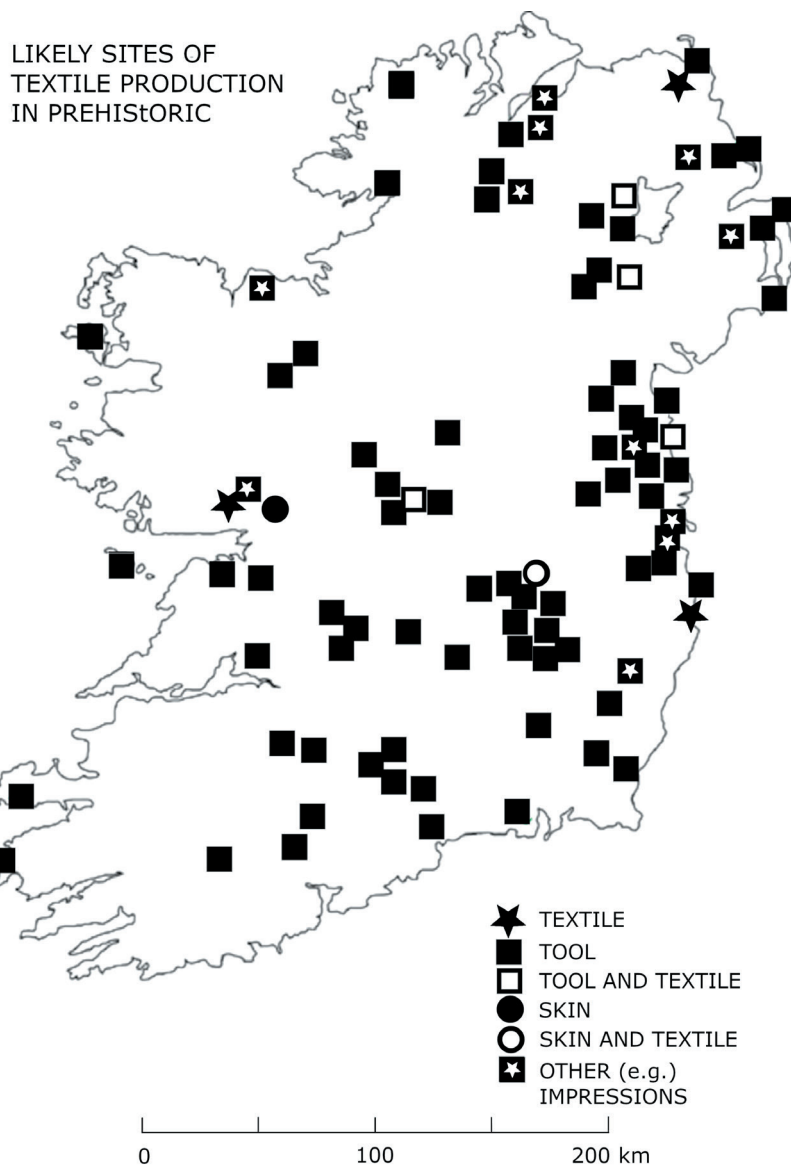


Figure 2. Map of Ireland showing the location of sites with probable evidence for prehistoric textile production. (Map: C. Privilege)

3.4.2. Location and type of deposition site

There is some form of evidence for prehistoric textile production from nearly every county in Ireland. There are fewer sites to the west (Figure 2), although excavations carried out in advance of motorway construction can distort mapping with sites appearing in lines across the country. The map is a very early version, and has been plotted manually. The coordinates will be more precisely mapped using geographical information software in due course.

3.4.3. Type of site

Evidence for textile production has been identified at a wide range of different types of sites (Table 3). Burials are the most frequently occurring site type, and the finds here are nearly all single spindle whorls deposited as grave goods. At smaller habitation sites, such as houses, raths, and settlements, the small number of finds per site may indicate small-scale domestic production whereas at larger sites, such as hillforts and crannogs, there were many more finds per site which may either show more organised production or represent a larger number of inhabitants over time.

3.4.4. Other evidence

Osteoarchaeologists are increasingly suggesting that the position of leg and arm bones indicates the use of shrouds or winding-sheets, as seen at Ballykeel South, Co. Clare. This burial was dated to the transition period between the Late Iron Age and the Early Medieval Period (AD 345–539 cal. Grn-18567) and was also notable for the signs of dental wear and muscle strain that indicated the person who occupied the grave had frequently dragged “a narrow band of a relatively soft material between his clenched front teeth” which was not leather (Cahill and Ó Donnagháin 1988) and may be linked to a process of preparing fibres to make into thread.

Table 3. The number of each type of prehistoric site (as stated by the excavator) where textile-related artefacts were recovered and the total number of textile-related artefacts from that type of site. Nearly all the finds from burials were single spindle whorls deposited as grave goods.

Site type	Number of Pre-historic sites	Number of items	Site type	Number of Pre-historic sites	Number of items
Ancient road	1	1	Settlement	5	5
Bog	5	10	Enclosure	6	12
Bog body	2	3	Promontory fort	1	2
Lake	1	1	Hillfort	3	28
Marine	1	1	Earthwork	1	1
Industrial	3	3	Burial	17	22
Burnt mound	4	4	Cave	2	3
Midden	1	1	Cemetery	1	1
Pit	1	1	Court tomb	1	1
House	9	10	Ritual	4	4
Habitation	1	8	Monument	1	1
Rath	2	4	Multi-period	2	6
Crannog	6	21	Not stated	36	44

There has been very little research carried out on the detail of cords used to decorate prehistoric pottery. Previous studies (Ó Ríordáin et al. 1993; Brindley 2007) have focussed on the nature of the pottery itself, with very limited descriptions of any cord décor (Table 4).

Cord can be examined in the same way as yarn or thread, for example, thread count, spin directions, and whether it was single or plied, among other attributes. As there can be a good deal of difference between the cords used to decorate sherds of prehistoric pottery found at the same site, there are many questions still to be answered here.

3.5. Discussion

Cord décor is an area with great potential to provide more information about both Irish cord and pottery manufacturing. Finds of impressed cord décor support the evidence from the earliest finds of spindle whorls that the techniques of spinning and plying were known widely during the late Neolithic. The list of site types will need some refinement, but there is potential to draw out more information on the distribution or deposition of tools and textiles.

Perforated weights, or possible loom weights, are still reported as single finds. There is, therefore, no evidence to contradict previous conclusions about a preference for a two-beam loom (whether vertical or horizontal) over the warp-weighted loom during Irish prehistory (Fitzgerald 2000: 245; Wincott Heckett 2012: 430).

The lack of textiles may be partially explained by the effect of two major factors that can influence the preservation and survival of fragile organic remains in Ireland. The first factor is environmental: Ireland does not have the extremely dry or cold conditions that can help preserve large items of clothing elsewhere. Over all time periods, most Irish textile finds are recovered from bogs or other wetland environments. They have a better chance of survival if they have been charred before deposition, but this combination is rare in Ireland. Even though Ireland has large areas of bog land, and therefore

Table 4. Full extent of data currently available on type of cord used to decorate impressed prehistoric pottery. Based on data from Ó Ríordáin, Waddell and Sheridan 1993; Brindley 2007.

Type of impression	Unclear	Plaited	Twisted	Whipped	County total
Antrim	4	2	3	8	17
Armagh	1	–	3	2	6
Carlow	1	–	–	1	2
Derry	1	–	–	1	2
Donegal	1	–	–	1	2
Down	1	–	–	–	1
Dublin	2	–	1	3	6
Fermanagh	1	–	–	–	1
Sligo	–	–	–	1	1
Tyrone	–	–	–	1	1
Wexford	–	–	–	2	2
Wicklow	1	–	–	–	1
No county	–	–	1	1	2

have significant potential for finds, archaeological excavations are now rarely carried out at bog sites and peat bogs in Ireland have been heavily mined as a source of fuel (Raftery 1999: 200). Raftery has highlighted how commercial peat cutting has damaged ancient trackways, and it is likely to represent a greater threat to more fragile organic remains such as textiles.

The second factor is related to a combination of the reactive nature of development-driven excavations and the very high number that occurred in Ireland recently. Although in theory there is similar legislation in both jurisdictions that requires mitigation before development as a tactic to protect archaeology, in practice this may not always have the intended effect.

- Timeframes and budgetary constraints can mean that fragile finds may not be examined by a conservator within an appropriate timeframe if post-excavation work is delayed or is not carried out.
- Finds are not surrendered to museums until the final report has been submitted and accepted by the relevant authorities, potentially further delaying access to conservation treatments and storage.
- There is a lack of transparency around storage outside museums.
- There appears to be no framework that can be applied to ensure the safe-keeping of items when a private commercial archaeological unit goes bankrupt.

Another consequence when post-excavation work is not carried out is the effect on the publication of excavation reports. While a survey of all publications from the last thirty years was beyond the scope of this research, even a review of the dates of published and unpublished literature on sites with evidence for textile production showed an increase in the rate of publications occurred only after a decrease in mitigation activity (Figure 3).

This may indicate that often the publication of excavation reports does not follow the excavations in a timely manner. It is tempting to speculate that it was only when the pressure of constant excavation decreased that site directors were allowed sufficient time to finish their reports. This is not an ideal

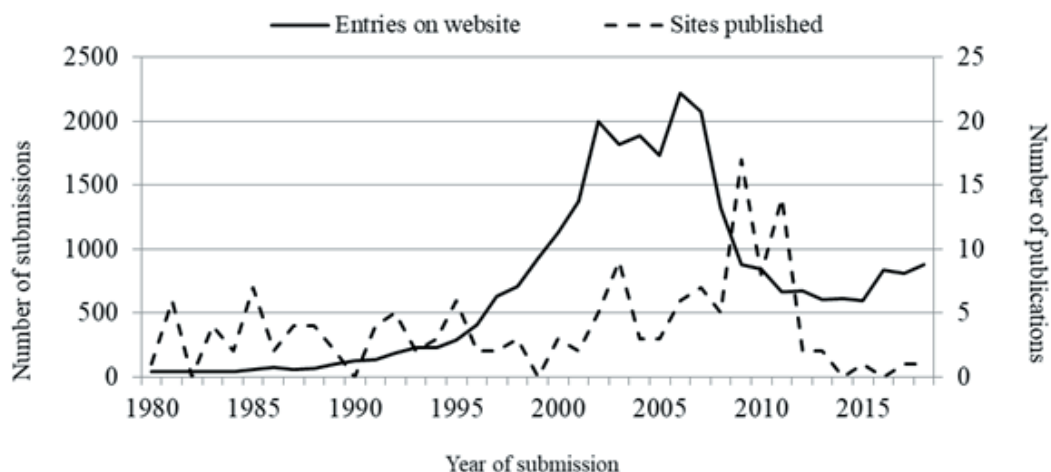


Figure 3. Number of submissions to www.excavation.ie by year from 1980-2018 and the number of publications of sites with textile production evidence. Based on figures from www.excavations.ie up to 2018 and date of publication from Hodkinson 1987; Bender Jørgensen 1992; Fitzgerald 2000; Wincott Heckett 2012, data from www.tii.ie/technical-services/archaeology/, plus other journals and textbooks.

situation for any artefacts but for fragile organic remains such as textiles, any delays in carrying out post-excavation examination and conservation is detrimental and poses a risk to the survival of the item (Gillis and Nosch 2007: 11).

3.6. Conclusions

Although the number of artefacts related to prehistoric textile production remains low at this time, there is certainly more potential information to be gained from further investigation. Including a wider range of indirect evidence as well as the usual tools and actual textiles has increased the number of potential sites for textile production in prehistoric Ireland.

Although the woven cloth from prehistoric Ireland dates to the later part of the Bronze Age, other textile-related techniques such as the knowledge to create yarn and basketry has been known from at least the late Neolithic. It would also appear that the prehistoric people were selective in their adoption of technologies, preferring to keep a form of two-beam loom rather than change to a warp-weighted loom.

Elsewhere in Irish archaeology, there are calls to discuss how best to utilise the huge corpus of grey literature, for example, the themes of the Institute of Archaeological in Ireland (IAI) Conference in April 2022. The challenge for textile production researchers is to raise awareness of the potential information about textile production that can be found in 'grey' literature. Highlighting indirect evidence increases the likelihood of finding evidence for Irish prehistoric textile production if archaeologists are aware of all the forms it can take (Wincott Heckett 2017: 131). When more evidence is found, it may confirm these tentative conclusions: whilst there may be a lacuna where textiles are concerned, there is more evidence for the production process than previously thought.

3.7. Further work

Work is continuing into the evidence of the application of textiles other than clothing. Textiles are occasionally mentioned in research into other craft processes such as in salt production (Harding et al. 2013) or later glass making (Gaskell Brown and Harper 1984). In addition, there has been a lack of evidence, to date, for textile production in Ireland in areas where there has been elsewhere, for example, matting impressions on pot bases, evidence for netting or anthropomorphic iconography showing clothing and research is ongoing here.

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