

Clonycavan and Old Croghan Men

IN ABOUT 500 B.C., the Celtic culture that had begun in central Europe reached Britain and Ireland. The Celts in Ireland divided themselves into about 150 kingdoms, each ruled by its own sovereign, marking the boundaries between them with wooden posts and standing stones. Now a radical theory concerning two recently discovered bog bodies, proposed by Eamonn P. Kelly, keeper of Irish Antiquities at the National Museum of Ireland, suggests a new interpretation for the brutal killings of ancient Ireland's best-preserved victims.

Seven years ago, not far from Dublin in the town of Clonycavan, County Meath, and near Croghan Hill, County Offaly, two bog bodies were found within three months of each other. Clonycavan Man had been severed in half by a peat-cutting machine, but scientists from Archaeological Development Services, who were hired by the peat company, were able to recover his body from the torso up. His skull had been split open, likely by a stone ax, and the bridge of his nose was also struck, probably with the same weapon. Twenty-five miles away, peat workers found Old Croghan Man, who, although he is just a torso with arms, shows evidence of what can only be described as overkill. He had a defensive wound on his upper left arm where he may have tried to protect himself, and had been bound by a hazel branches (withies) threaded through holes in his upper arms, stabbed in the chest, struck in the neck, decapitated, and cut in half. Radiocarbon dating showed that Clonycavan Man lived between 392 and 201 B.C. and Old Croghan Man between 362 and 175 B.C., the height of the Celtic Iron Age. Like Grauballe Man and Lindow Man, both men were young, showed few signs of physical labor during their lives, and were healthy at the time of their deaths. By examining chemical traces in his hair, scholars from the National Museum of Ireland concluded that Clonycavan Man's diet was rich in vegetables, and that he was killed in the summer or early fall when fresh produce would have been available. His hair also created much interest for both scholars and the public for the

unusual way it was twisted over his head and held in place with gel made of plant oil and pine resin. Some people called it the world's first mohawk. These ingredients were imported from France or southwestern Spain, suggesting that Clonycavan Man himself, or the people who sacrificed him, were trading with the Continent. Researchers also found evidence of Old Croghan Man's wealth and special status. He was exceptionally tall for a man of this period, standing almost six and a half feet. Analysis of his hair and nails showed that he regularly ate meat, an expensive luxury. In contrast, his last supper was

composed of cereals and buttermilk, which Kelly believes was a ritual meal. Around one bicep, he had a braided leather arm-band and a bronze amulet covered in decorative copper-alloy mounts.

Examining the details of both men's lives and deaths has led Kelly to suggest a new way of looking at the meaning of eight well-preserved Irish bog bodies. "I believe these men were failed kings or failed candidates for kingship who were killed and placed in bogs that formed important tribal boundaries. Both Clonycavan and Old Croghan men's nipples were pinched and cut. "Sucking a king's nipples was a gesture of submission in ancient Ireland," says Kelly. "Cutting them would have made him incapable of kingship." The bodies served as offerings to the goddess of the land to whom the king was wed in his inauguration ceremony. According to Kelly, both men's multiple injuries may reflect the belief that the goddess was not only one of the land and fertility, but also of sovereignty, war, and death. "By using a range of methods to kill the victim, the ancient Irish sacrificed to the goddess in all her forms," he says. ■

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