

Beaker Material Culture and Social Change in Ireland:

a study of Beaker associated settlement, ritual and funerary practices

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1. This project will study the context of use and deposition of Beaker material culture in Ireland by analysing the manner of its occurrence within the archaeological record.



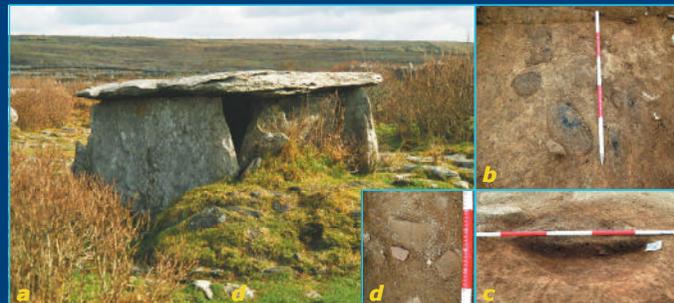
Top: Tanged copper daggers, barbed and tanged arrowheads and basket-shaped earrings
Bottom: Distribution map of Beaker activity

2. The 'Beaker phenomenon', a complex of novel material culture appeared across much of Western Europe at the beginning of the Bronze Age. The occurrence of Beaker pottery and associated artefacts with the earliest single burials in many regions is widely considered to indicate the emergence of an ideological emphasis upon the individual and the development of Europe's first hierarchical societies, whereby status was attained and represented by the competitive exchange and display of exotic goods, particularly metalwork.



(a) Wrist bracer (b) Beaker (c) Polypod bowl

3. In the case of Ireland, the manifestation of this complex differs from elsewhere because settlements are comparatively common while stereotypical Beaker burials are rare. The recent increase in development-led excavations has resulted in the discovery of many new Irish Beaker-related funerary and ritual sites. However, much of this information remains unsynthesised, despite its potential to advance Beaker studies at a European-wide level.



Beaker contexts in Ireland:
(a) Wedge tomb (b) pit cluster (c) pit (d) spread

4. Extensive typological studies of Irish Beaker objects have been carried out in the past (e.g. Brindley 2005); however, no overarching study of the Beaker complex has been conducted that interlinks all the material culture from settlement, funerary and other contexts in order to understand the social practices represented by the Beaker phenomenon.

5. All data pertaining to Irish Beaker activity is being collated to gain a better understanding of the settlement, funerary and ritual practices associated with this phenomenon. This synthesis will be used to establish the regional and diachronic development of Irish Beaker associated material culture and to facilitate comparative analysis with other European studies.



Map showing extensive distribution of Beaker activity throughout Ireland

6. An assessment of changes in both the domestic and ritual practices associated with the immediately preceding and succeeding cultural packages (Grooved Ware and Food Vessels) will be undertaken as part of a case study in order to locate Beaker-associated activities within their historical context.

This research will achieve new insights into the Irish Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age transition that will further our understanding of the nature and meaning of the Beaker phenomenon in Ireland and Europe.

References:

Brindley, A. L. 2005. The Prehistoric Mine: Specialist Studies. In O'Brien, W. *Ross Island. Mining, Metal and Society in Early Ireland*, 331-338. *Bronze Age Studies 6*. Dept of Archaeology, NUIG.