

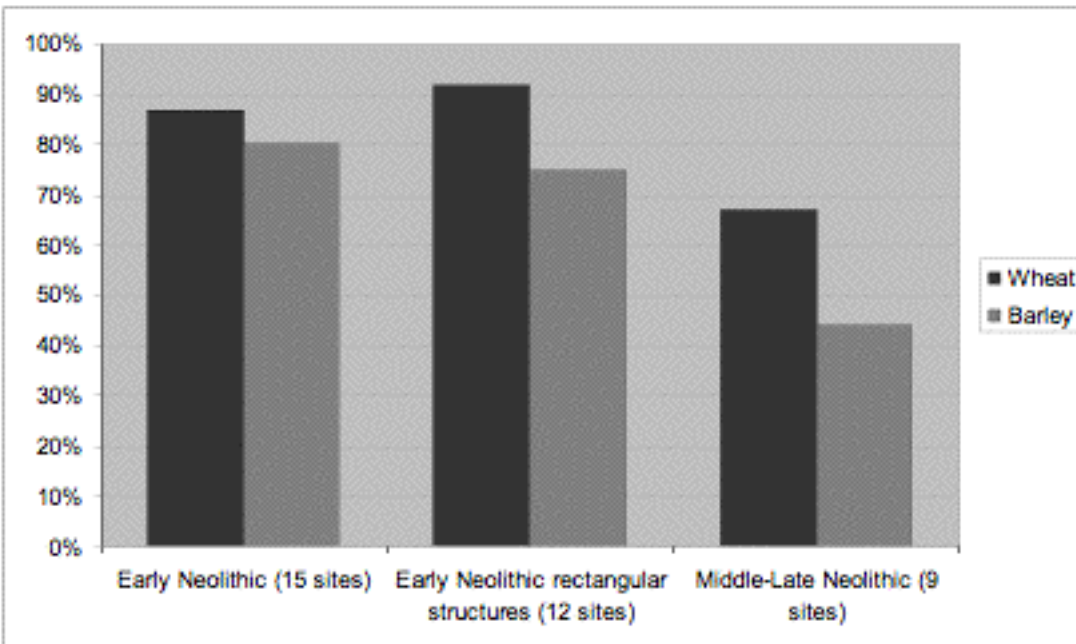
# Cultivating societies: assessing the evidence for cereal remains in Neolithic Ireland

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The ‘first farmers’ are often referred to in archaeological texts relating to Neolithic Ireland, but their mention is usually accompanied by little discussion of how farming was being carried out, and the situations in which crops were consumed and deposited. Even less attention is paid to understanding how the production and use of these crops may have changed over the course of the Neolithic period.

This lack of focus on farming systems and the consumption of crops is likely to have been influenced by the non-publication of the vast majority of data relating to Neolithic cereal remains in Ireland. As a result, there has been an over-reliance on evidence from a very small number of Early Neolithic settlements, such as Tankardstown South, Co. Limerick (Monk 2000), to provide the basis for a framework in which to view Neolithic farming throughout Ireland. Based mainly upon the evidence from Tankardstown South, it was often suggested that emmer wheat was the predominant cereal type of the Neolithic period in Ireland, with occasional, but generally very little evidence for barley or other crops. It was decided to test this hypothesis by collating unpublished data from Neolithic sites in Ireland, focusing on recent excavations carried out under the auspices of the National Roads Authority. The collation of unpublished data was not comprehensive – it was instead decided that this pilot study would seek to gather data from around 25 sites, with further work envisaged at a later stage if appropriate.

This initial study uncovered evidence for cultivated plant macro-remains from 15 Early Neolithic sites (12 of which were rectangular structures) and nine Middle-Late Neolithic sites. Combination of these published and unpublished records clearly demonstrates that there was more variety in the types of crops being cultivated in Neolithic Ireland than previously thought (Figure 1). While wheat does appear to be predominant throughout the Neolithic period, there is also much evidence for the cultivation of barley.



**Figure 1: Cereal types recorded at published and unpublished excavations of Neolithic sites in Ireland.**

Percentages refer to the percentage of sites producing cereal remains at which wheat and barley were recorded.

