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

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 as 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 It was decided to test this hypothesis by collating unpublished data from Neolithic sites in Ireland, focusing on recent excavations carried out under the auspices of the National Roads Authority. The collation of unpublished data was not comprehensive – it was instead decided that this pilot study would seek to gather data from around 25 sites, with further work envisaged at a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 Combination of these published and unpublished records clearly demonstrates that there was more variety in the types of crops being cultivated in Neolithic Ireland than previously thought (Figure 1).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.

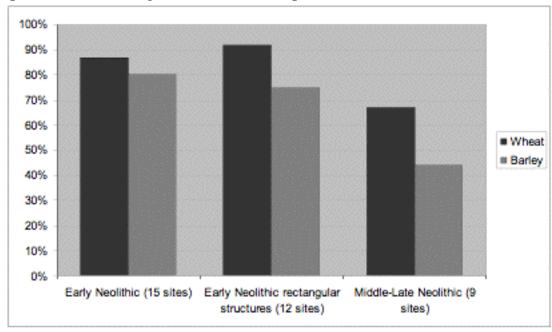


Figure 1: Cereal types recorded at published and unpublished excavations of Neolithic sites in Ireland.

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

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This new study highlights the danger of over-reliance on the data from Tankardstown South – a site that produced emmer wheat and little else. As well as evidence for the regular recovery of barley remains, a number of sites in this new study also provided tentative evidence for the cultivation of wheat species other than emmer. There appears to be much more variation in the record than previously assumed, and this variation may also exist at a regional level. It is now generally accepted that there were differences in how the Neolithic 'package' was used across Ireland – with respect to farming, we clearly need to reconsider the hypothesis that cereal cultivation was being practised in the same way across the island.

The trends identified as a result of this study indicate that further work would be helpful – a more comprehensive study could attempt to gather <u>all</u> unpublished evidence for cereal cultivation, also considering the types of sites and contexts that are producing these remains. In the case of Early Neolithic rectangular structures, it has been suggested that a number of these 'houses' were deliberately burnt down on abandonment – these massive fires could enable the preservation of cereal remains through charring. Is there more evidence for cereals on these sites that appear to have been deliberately burnt down? This may explain why cereal remains are so often associated with rectangular houses in Neolithic Ireland – activities on these sites could be more likely to enable the preservation of cereal remains in the archaeological record. More critical analysis of how and where these cereal remains are preserved may therefore be useful. In conclusion, further study of the ever-growing database of crop remains from Neolithic sites in Ireland has the potential to provide new insights into how people interacted with the landscapes and communities around them.

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