
ARCHAEOLOGY IRELAND

Volume 4 Number 1
Spring 1990
Published Quarterly

CONTENTS

News	3
Island Focus, Clare Island	7
Ogham Inscriptions	13
The Concept of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum	15
To Be a Mill Girl	18
Scientific Excavation Recording	22
Why Are We Digging Anyway?	25
The Crannog Survey Project	27
The 'Prehistoric' Irish Annals? Fable or History	30
Events	34
Bookview	36

Subscription Rates
IR£10 £9stg \$25

Send to
Wordwell Ltd
9 Herbert Lane Dublin 2

EDITORIAL TEAM

Gabriel Cooney	Emer Condit
Tom Condit	Paul Gosling
Una MacConville	Nicholas Maxwell
Mary O'Donnell	Brian Williams

PRODUCTION AND CIRCULATION

Una MacConville
Nick Maxwell
Janet Sheehy

Printed by—Craftprint
Typeset by—Wordwell Ltd
Published by **Wordwell Ltd**—Academic Publications
9 Herbert Lane, Dublin 2. Tel. 01-612542

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE CHEST OF DRAWERS

Central to archaeology is the study of material culture, the objects and structures used by people in the past and recovered through techniques such as excavation. The development of the subject has centred around the concept that order and classification had to be brought to bear on archaeological evidence if advances were to be made in understanding the past. The classic example of this is the 'three age' scheme for prehistory formulated by the curator of the Danish National Museum, Christian Thomsen, in the early nineteenth century. At all levels of activity, from the study of individual artifact types to the examination of the long-term sequence of the evidence on particular sites, in a region or at a national level archaeologists have found it necessary and useful to create a myriad of overlapping classifications to explain the past. While recognising the value of this line of approach it is also valid to question whether in some cases it is taken too far. A consequence of this thought process is that we often think of changes in objects or house types or burial practices as representing a replacement of what was currently in use. Yet in the past as today several varieties of the same type of artifact for example could have been in use at the same time, with perhaps some of them used only at certain times or in particular contexts. As new styles became available what they replaced may not have disappeared but simply moved down the social scale. After all people have always been trying to keep up with the Joneses!

It is perhaps no surprise that the way in which archaeological organisation and activity is structured often reflects the same 'chest of drawers' mentality. We may talk about an archaeologist as being either a field or museum person. In turn in his or her chosen area the archaeologist, as a result of a deliberate strategy or more often by a series of curious twists of fate, will end up being an expert in the nuances of at least one classification. What is perhaps more serious is the frequent sub-division of archaeology into the object/portable element, looked after by museums, and the site/monuments element (the latter immovable by the archaeologist but no trouble to the bulldozer), cared for by bodies such as the Office of Public Works and the Department of the Environment, Northern Ireland. This organisational subdivision of course can be justified on several grounds but is it capable of withstanding what should be the ultimate test of an archaeological classification - does it give us a better understanding of the past? Perhaps we could all profitably spend less time thinking about make more complex classifications and sub-divisions and more time thinking about why we are doing it.