RESEARCH PAPER

'The Halved Heads': Osteological Evidence for Decapitation in Medieval Ireland

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This paper examines the osteological evidence for decapitation from 30 skeletal assemblages dated to the medieval period (6th to 16th century) from Ireland. This is the first time that these data have been examined in a comparative manner and across the population of medieval Ireland. Decapitation is traditionally presented and interpreted in the literature on a case study basis with decapitations being attributed to an action that was carried out as a direct result of warfare or as judicial practice. This paper aims to use the osteological data to examine these interpretations in terms of the Irish data and to use these data along with historical and literary sources to try to gain a fuller understanding of decapitation in medieval Ireland.

Introduction

As Tracy and Massey (2012: 1) have pointed out, 'the final cut, the fatal blow: beheading is one of the most pervasive modes of execution in human history […] decapitation crosses boundaries of time, culture, and genre while providing […] affirmations of power and authority'. This paper aims to examine the osteological evidence for decapitation in Medieval Ireland, which forms part of wider Irish Research Council (IRC) funded PhD research looking at osteological evidence of violence in Medieval Ireland. A particular attempt will be made here to understand the mortuary practices surrounding those who were decapitated and to put these decapitations in their historical context. This will entail an ex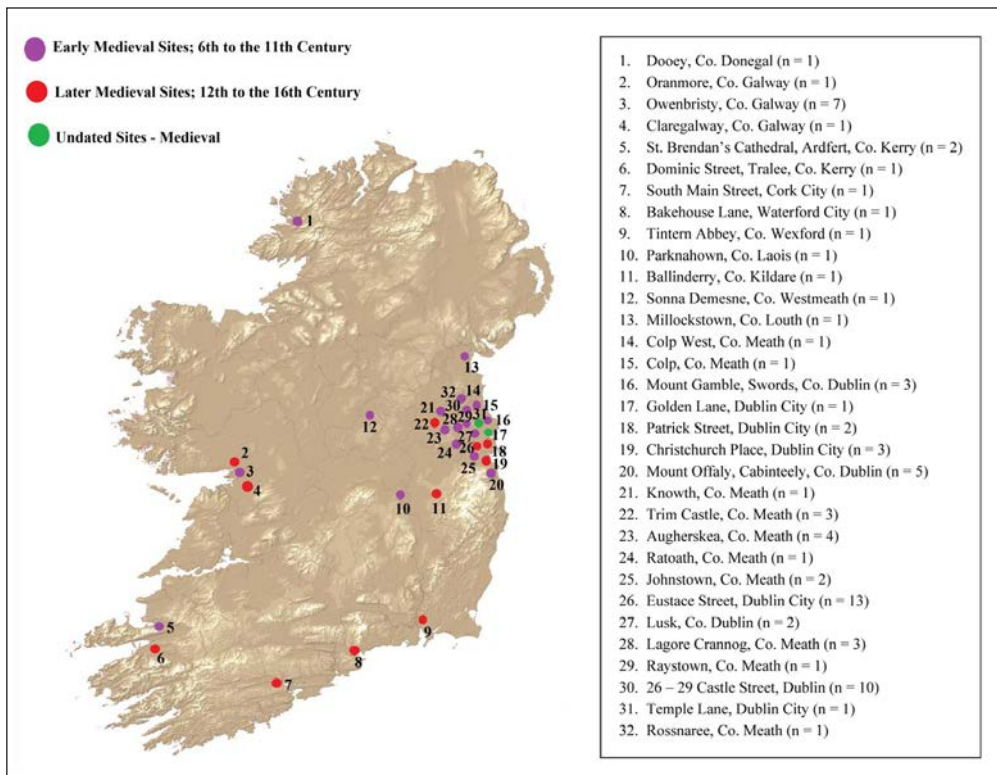amination of the spatial, temporal, and demographic distribution of burials displaying evidence of decapitation and an assessment of the possible reasons for decapitation in Medieval Ireland. This interdisciplinary study will therefore seek to compare the archaeological data with the corpus of contemporary Irish medieval accounts and with the historiography of the period.

Materials and Methods

In total 56 sites of a medieval date (6th to 16th century) displaying osteological evidence of violent trauma have been analysed, with a total of 30 of these displaying evidence for decapitation. The number of decapitations per site ranges from 13 from No. 16, Eustace Street, Dublin to just one at a number of sites (see **Figure 1**). These sites range from single interments to large multi-phase medieval cemeteries and all available material from the period was included in the study in an attempt to have the broadest data set possible. A total of 68 individuals display

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Early Medieval Sites; 6th to the 11th Century

Later Medieval Sites; 12th to the 16th Century

Undated Sites - Medieval

1. Dooey, Co. Donegal (n = 1)
2. Oranmore, Co. Galway (n = 1)
3. Owenbristy, Co. Galway (n = 7)
4. Claregalway, Co. Galway (n = 1)
5. St. Brendan's Cathedral, Ardfert, Co. Kerry (n = 2)
6. Dominic Street, Tralee, Co. Kerry (n = 1)
7. South Main Street, Cork City (n = 1)
8. Bakehouse Lane, Waterford City (n = 1)
9. Tintern Abbey, Co. Wexford (n = 1)
10. Parknahown, Co. Laois (n = 1)
11. Ballinderry, Co. Kildare (n = 1)
12. Sonna Demesne, Co. Westmeath (n = 1)
13. Millockstown, Co. Louth (n = 1)
14. Colp West, Co. Meath (n = 1)
15. Colp, Co. Meath (n = 1)
16. Mount Gamble, Swords, Co. Dublin (n = 3)
17. Golden Lane, Dublin City (n = 1)
18. Patrick Street, Dublin City (n = 2)
19. Christchurch Place, Dublin City (n = 3)
20. Mount Offaly, Cabinteely, Co. Dublin (n = 5)
21. Knowth, Co. Meath (n = 1)
22. Trim Castle, Co. Meath (n = 3)
23. Augherskea, Co. Meath (n = 4)
24. Ratoath, Co. Meath (n = 1)
25. Johnstown, Co. Meath (n = 2)
26. Eustace Street, Dublin City (n = 13)
27. Lusk, Co. Dublin (n = 2)
28. Lagore Crannog, Co. Meath (n = 3)
29. Raystown, Co. Meath (n = 1)
30. 26 – 29 Castle Street, Dublin (n = 10)
31. Temple Lane, Dublin City (n = 1)
32. Rossnaree, Co. Meath (n = 1)

Figure 1: Distribution map of all sites with evidence of decapitation (Map used courtesy of Mr Nick Hogan, Department of Archaeology, University College Cork).

evidence of decapitation; and of those who could be sexed, there were 55 males and 7 females[1].

If decapitation was encountered, a full description of the decapitation was completed. This included which bones were affected, the direction of the blow, any indication of what weapon may have been employed, and a general description of the individual cut marks associated with the decapitation. This information was expanded upon with a full schematic drawing of the location of the decapitation related wounds and a photographic record to fully record the trauma. All of the individuals with evidence of decapitation were analysed in exactly the same manner in order to allow comparisons to be drawn between the individuals themselves and between the sites.

Results
Distribution of Decapitations in Medieval Ireland

The sites are divided into three categories according to date on the distribution map (see **Figure 1**); Early Medieval (6th to the 11th century), Later Medieval (12th to the 16th century) and undated Medieval (falling sometime between the 6th and 16th century). The watershed event which separates the Early Medieval from the Later Medieval period is the Anglo-Norman invasion which occurred in the latter half of the 12th century and would have brought major social and political change to the country, along with changes in warfare and weaponry which would have had an impact on the nature of violence in Ireland (Ó Cróinín 1995).

The distribution is undoubtedly affected by archaeological visibility and the large

number of recent archaeological rescue excavations in advance of road projects and development in the east of the country in the vicinity of County Dublin. An attempt to address this was made by analysing remains from throughout the country where available, especially from older excavations where no osteological analysis had been previously carried out.

Age Distribution of Decapitations in the Medieval Period

When the individuals displaying evidence of decapitation are placed into age categories (see page 2) it can be seen that the majority of decapitations occurred in the 'Younger Middle Adult' category (see **Table 1**) which would be expected when this is compared to the age profile of those who were killed violently or as a result of warfare or conflict from previous studies (such as Inglemark's seminal 1939 study of the human remains from the Battle of Wisby). Spierenberg's study of punishment in Amsterdam in the early modern period comes to a similar conclusion: the main type of person executed in the medieval and early modern period in Amsterdam was the young, lower-class male, especially from unmarried andunsettled marginal groups. Those in their twenties represented nearly half of all those executed, and men vastly outnumber women (Dean 2001: 125). In comparison, the excavation of the Anglo-Saxon Execution cemetery at Walkington Wold uncovered 13 males and no females with evidence of decapitation (Buckberry 2008: 163) and Reynolds' study (2009) of execution cemeteries throughout Anglo-Saxon Britain uncovered 7 females in a total of 93 instances of decapitation. It is interesting to note, however, that – whilst all age categories are represented - the majority of decapitations occur in the 26 to 35 years age bracket. Four adolescents showed evidence of decapitation: Skeleton 49 from Owenbristy, County Galway who was 13 to 15 years at the time of death, Skull 6(b) from No. 16, Eustace Street, who was an older child or

adolescent, Skull 11 from the same site who was 16 to 20 years at the time of death, and Skull 10 (b) from the same site who was 17 to 21 years at the time of death. The decapitation of these younger individuals is not that unusual considering that individuals, particularly boys, would have been considered adults by the age of 12 or 13 years onwards (Scott 2006).

Sex Distribution of Decapitations in the Medieval Period

As noted above, the majority of individuals in this study (who could be sexed) showing evidence of decapitation are male. However, there are seven females in total showing evidence of decapitation. There are two females from Owenbristy, County Galway with evidence of decapitation (Skeleton 73, a female dated to the 7th century AD aged 25 to 35 years who also showed evidence of facial mutilation (see **Figure 2**), and Skeleton 75 aged 35 to 45 years). There is also a female from Parknahown, County Laois (Skeleton 484, a female dated to the Early Medieval period aged 18 to 25 years who also displays evidence of facial mutilation (see **Figure 4**)) and a female from Ratoath, County Meath (Skeleton 33 dated to the Early Medieval period aged 36 to 45 years displaying cut marks on the right temporal). There are two females from Eustace Street, Dublin with trauma indicative of decapitation (Skull 9 (a), a Young Adult female who also displays evidence of facial mutilation (see **Figure 3**), and Skull 7, an Older Middle Adult female). Finally, there was a possible female dated to the Early Medieval period with evidence of decapitation from Lagore Crannóg, County Meath.

It is worthwhile to note that it is perhaps no coincidence that three of the seven females showing evidence of decapitation have also had their faces mutilated; this possibly indicates that in these instances the decapitation may have followed a specific punishment. An examination of the Brehon and Canon laws for the period did

Skeleton Number	Site	County	Age Range	Age Category	Sex	Period	Position of Skull	Site Type
Sk. 42	Owenbristy	Galway	24-29 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval AD 653–671	Skull missing - individual buried in a pile (decapitated, drawn and quartered)	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 93	Owenbristy	Galway	25-29 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval AD 634–659	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 82	Owenbristy	Galway	27-35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval AD 647–664	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 49	Owenbristy	Galway	13-15 years	Adolescent	Indeterminate	Early Medieval AD 616–647	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 9	Owenbristy	Galway	25-39 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval AD 619–655	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 73	Owenbristy	Galway	25–35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Female	Early Medieval AD 623–657	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 75	Owenbristy	Galway	35-45 years	Older Middle Adult	Female	Early Medieval	Skull missing	Cemetery Settlement
Burial CCLXXXI	Mount Gamble, Swords	Dublin	25-29 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval; AD 656 - 765	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Burial CXCI	Mount Gamble, Swords	Dublin	25-35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval; AD 810 - 975	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Burial CCLX	Mount Gamble, Swords	Dublin	25-34 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 10	Church Road, Lusk	Dublin	35-44 years	Older Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval; AD 410 - 570	Skull missing	Ecclesiastical Site

Contd.

Skeleton Number	Site	County	Age Range	Age Category	Sex	Period	Position of Skull	Site Type
SK. 9	Church Road, Lusk	Dublin	35-44 years	Older Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval: AD 410 - 570	Skull missing	Ecclesiastical Site
Sk. 356	Mount Offaly, Cabinteely	Dublin	25 - 29 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval:	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 281	Mount Offaly, Cabinteely	Dublin	20 - 24 years	Young Adult	Male	Early Medieval:	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 1347	Mount Offaly, Cabinteely	Dublin	20 - 24 years	Young Adult	Male	Early Medieval:	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 701	Mount Offaly, Cabinteely	Dublin	17 - 25 years	Young Adult	Male	Early Medieval:	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 546	Mount Offaly, Cabinteely	Dublin	30 - 35 years	Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval:	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Burial 1222	St. Brendan's Cathedral, Ardfert	Kerry	30 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Medieval?	Skull placed anatomically	Ecclesiastical Site
Burial 2217	St. Brendan's Cathedral, Ardfert	Kerry	30 - 40 years	Older Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval	Skull placed anatomically	Ecclesiastical Site
Sk. 165	Augherskea	Meath	36 - 45 years	Older Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval	Skull missing	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 87	Augherskea	Meath	26 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 2	Augherskea	Meath	36 - 45 years	Older Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement

Contd.

Skeleton Number	Site	County	Age Range	Age Category	Sex	Period	Position of Skull	Site Type
Sk. 141	Augherskea	Meath	36 - 45 years	Older Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 210848	Raystown	Meath	18 - 25 years	Young Adult	Male	Early Medieval; AD 550-660	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 145	Johnstown	Meath	18 - 25 years	Young Adult	Male	Later Medieval; AD 1230-1300	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 26	Johnstown	Meath	Adult	Adult	Male	Early-Late Medieval; AD 880-1010	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 505:3	Patrick Street	Dublin	40-55 years	Older Adult	Male	Medieval?	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Sk. 505.4	Patrick Street	Dublin	Adult	Adult	Male	Medieval?	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Burial 1	Abbey St./ Dominic St., Tralee	Kerry	25 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Later Medieval - 17th century	Skull placed anatomically	Ecclesiastical Site
Sk 15 (XV)	Millockstown	Louth	45+ years	Older Adult	Male	Early Medieval?	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 49 (XLIX)	Dooey	Donegal	25 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval?	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 1	Sonna Demesne	Westmeath	25 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval; AD 424-598	Skull placed anatomically	Isolated Burial
Sk. 484	Parknahown	Laois	18 - 25 years	Young Adult	Female	Early Medieval	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement

Contd.

Skeleton Number	Site	County	Age Range	Age Category	Sex	Period	Position of Skull	Site Type
Burial CLIX	Golden Lane	Dublin	25 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval	Skull placed anatomically	Ecclesiastical Site
Sk. 33	Ratoath	Meath	36 - 45 years	Older Middle Adult	Female	Early Medieval	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 54	Colp	Meath	26 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	N/A	Early Medieval	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk. 4	Oranmore	Galway	25 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Later Medieval?	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Sk. 159	Ballinderry	Kildare	19 - 25 years	Young Adult	Male	Late Medieval	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Sk 1942: 19A	Rossnaree	Meath	26 - 45 years	Older Middle Adult	Female	Early Medieval	Skull placed anatomically	Isolated Burial
Burial 14	Knowth	Meath	35 - 45 years	Older Middle Adult	Male	Early Medieval; AD 668-870	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement
Burial 7164	Bakehouse Lane/St. Peter's Church	Waterford	20 - 24 years	Young Adult	Male	Hiberno-Norse (mid 11th - 12th century)	Skull placed anatomically	Ecclesiastical Site
Sk. 48	Tintern Abbey	Wexford	25 - 30 years	Young Adult	Male	Later Medieval (16th century)	Skull placed anatomically	Ecclesiastical Site
C120	South Main Street	Cork	45+ years	Older Adult	Male	Later Medieval?	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Burial 1	Colp West	Meath	Mature Adult	Older Adult	Male	Medieval? Timber below inhumation 132-339AD	Skull placed anatomically	Cemetery Settlement

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Skeleton Number	Site	County	Age Range	Age Category	Sex	Period	Position of Skull	Site Type
338.1	Christchurch Place	Dublin	20 - 30 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Hiberno-Norse (mid 11th - 12th century)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
338.5	Christchurch Place	Dublin	30 - 40 years	Older Middle Adult	Male	Hiberno-Norse (mid 11th - 12th century)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
338.3	Christchurch Place	Dublin	30 - 40 years	Older Middle Adult	Male	Hiberno-Norse (mid 11th - 12th century)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
173.15	Trim Castle	Meath	Adult	Adult	Male	Late 13th/Early 14th Century	Disarticulated skull	Urban
164.6	Trim Castle	Meath	20 - 24 years	Young Adult	Male	Late 13th/Early 14th Century	Disarticulated skull	Urban
164.7	Trim Castle	Meath	30 - 40 years	Older Middle Adult	Male	Late 13th/Early 14th Century	Disarticulated skull	Urban
F99	The Green Building, Temple Lane	Dublin	Younger Middle Adult	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Late Medieval	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Skull 3	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	Adult	Adult	Male	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Skull 2	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	20 - 25 years	Young Adult	Male	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Skull 4	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	25 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Urban

Skeleton Number	Site	County	Age Range	Age Category	Sex	Period	Position of Skull	Site Type
Skull 1	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	25 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Skull 9 (a)	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	17 - 21 years	Young Adult	Female	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Skull 9 (b)	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	Adult	Adult	Male?	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Skull 7	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	25 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Female?	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Skull 6 (a)	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	Adult	Adult	Male	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Skull 6 (b)	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	Older Child/Adolescent	Older Child/Adolescent	N/A	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Skull 6 (c)	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	Adult	Adult	Male	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Skull 10 (a)	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	Adult	Adult	Male?	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Skull 11	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	<21 years	Older Child/Adolescent	N/A	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Urban
Skull 10 (b)	No. 16, Eustace Street	Dublin	17 - 21 years	Adolescent	Male?	Later Medieval (post 1600 AD)	Disarticulated skull	Disarticulated skull
231	Lagore Crannog	Meath	Adult	Adult	Female	Early Medieval	Disarticulated skull	Crannóg
262	Lagore Crannog	Meath	Adult	Adult	Male?	Early Medieval	Disarticulated skull	Crannóg

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Skeleton Number	Site	County	Age Range	Age Category	Sex	Period	Position of Skull	Site Type
264	Lagore Crannog	Meath	Adult	Adult	Male?	Early Medieval	Disarticulated skull	Crannóg
Sk. 3	Claregalway	Galway	Adult	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Later Medieval; AD 1290 - 1410	Buried in pit with another skull (Skeleton 2)	Cemetery Settlement?
C. 2685	26 - 29 Castle Street	Dublin	25 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Mid - Late 10th century	Disarticulated skull	Urban
C. 3263	26 - 29 Castle Street	Dublin	20 - 24 years	Young Adult	Male	Mid - Late 10th century	Disarticulated skull	Urban
C. 4127a	26 - 29 Castle Street	Dublin	20 - 24 years	Young Adult	Male	Mid - Late 10th century	Disarticulated skull	Urban
C. 4031	26 - 29 Castle Street	Dublin	25 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Mid - Late 10th century	Disarticulated skull	Urban
C. 4127	26 - 29 Castle Street	Dublin	Adult	Adult	Male	Mid - Late 10th century	Disarticulated skull	Urban
C. 3197	26 - 29 Castle Street	Dublin	25 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Mid - Late 10th century	Disarticulated skull	Urban
C. 4134	26 - 29 Castle Street	Dublin	35 - 45 years	Older Middle Adult	Male	Mid - Late 10th century	Disarticulated skull	Urban
C. 2668	26 - 29 Castle Street	Dublin	25 - 35 years	Younger Middle Adult	Male	Mid - Late 10th century	Disarticulated skull	Urban
C. 4134c	26 - 29 Castle Street	Dublin	20 - 24 years	Young Adult	Male	Mid - Late 10th century	Disarticulated skull	Urban
C. 304	26 - 29 Castle Street	Dublin	35 - 45 years	Older Middle Adult	Male	Mid - Late 10th century	Disarticulated skull	Urban

Table 1: Summary Table of all Analysed Individuals with Evidence of Decapitation.

Figure 2: Skeleton 73 from Owenbristy, County Galway, a female dated to the 7ᵗʰ century AD aged 25 to 35 years who displays evidence of stab wounds to the facial bones (Image reproduced courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland).

Figure 3: Skull 9(a) from No. 16., Eustace Street, Dublin, a young adult female who also displays evidence of cut marks to the face, indicative of the nose being cut off (Image reproduced courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland).

not uncover any prescriptions for specific mutilation of females that could relate to these injuries, but there does appear to be a pattern to these injuries that is unlikely to be coincidental.

Number of Decapitations in the Medieval Period

As can be seen in **Table 1**, a small majority of decapitations date to the later medieval period. These data are no doubt affected by archaeological visibility and the number of sites which have been excavated. However, what differentiates the two time periods is the nature of the contextual information and the mortuary practices relating to those who have been decapitated and, in particular, the placing of heads in relation to bodies.

Context of Burials

When the data are divided into the categories 'skull missing' (**Figure 7**), 'disarticulated skull' (**Figure 9**) and 'articulated skull' (**Figure 8**) it can be seen that the majority of disarticulated skulls date to the later medieval period (**Figure 5**). These decapitations probably relate to individuals who have been decapitated publicly and whose heads have been displayed on town walls on spikes (see Ó Donnabháin 1995 and 2011 for examples of this from Medieval Dublin) and subsequently disposed of in pits near where they were displayed. The interesting thing to note

Figure 4: Skeleton 484, female from Parknahown, County Laois dated to the Early Medieval period aged 18 to 25 years who also displays evidence of stab wounds to the internal surface of the mandible (Image reproduced courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland).
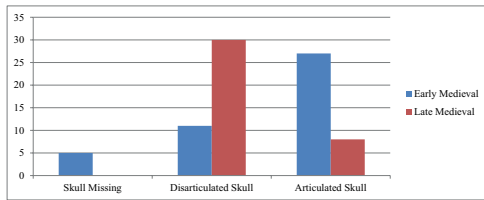
Figure 5: Positioning of the skull of decapitated individuals by date. 'Skull Missing' refers to a burial of an intact or almost intact individual where there is osteological evidence for decapitation and the skull is missing. 'Disarticulated Skull' refers to a skull that is found without a body. Finally, 'Articulated Skull' refers to the burial of an individual where there is osteological evidence for decapitation yet the skull is placed in the grave anatomically.
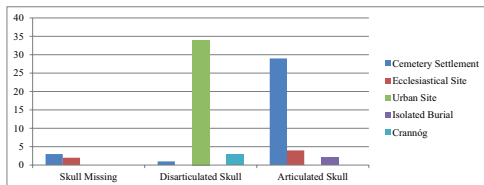
Figure 6: Positioning of skull of decapitated individual by site type.

Figure 7: Skeleton 42 from Owenbristy, County Galway, a cemetery settlement, who was an adult male dated to AD 653 to 671 who was decapitated with the skull missing. He also displayed evidence of 114 stab and cut marks and from the burial position appears to have been drawn and quartered (Lehane et al. 2010, 33).

is the high number of articulated skulls in decapitation burials of the early medieval period (those in which the severed head has been placed in the grave anatomically).

Mortuary practices associated with those who were decapitated

As Janes has pointed out 'although severed heads always speak, they say different things in different cultures' (Janes 1993: 245). Study of the mortuary practices surrounding the burials presented here is essential if we are to attempt to understand the reasons behind decapitation in medieval Ireland.

The majority of decapitated individuals were buried with the rest of the community in cemetery settlements or ecclesiastical sites[2] (see **Figure 6**) and there appears to be no segregation of these burials from the rest of the community. An important factor in the location of these burials is perhaps the primacy of familial burial places that continued throughout the medieval period. Even as late as the 13th century, Canon Law adopted for cemeteries (1205 to 1214) states that Christians were not required to be buried in a consecrated cemetery (Leigh Fry 2001: 180; O'Brien 1992: 130). However, in early Christian Ireland it was expected thatihose of a dubious spiritual character or those who had met their end suddenly, without a chance to make amends would be buried in a 'place apart' (O'Brien 2009; Leigh Fry 2001). Slain men often died without receiving the last rites and traditionally were buried on the less favoured north side of the church (O'Brien 2009), and there are churches dedicated solely to the slain such as Relig-na-Firgunta (Church of the Slain Men) at Carrikmore, County Tyrone and one of the churches at Inis Cealtra in Lough Derg, County Clare which is known as Teampeall-na-bhfear-ngonta, "the church of the wounded (or slain) men" (Hamlin and Foley 1983: 43). However, although such places existed, some of the individuals from this study (who were buried in cemetery settlements and ecclesiastical sites) were for

Figure 8: The double burial of two adult males CCLXXX and CCLXXXI dating from AD 656 to 765 from Mount Gamble, Dublin both displaying evidence of decapitation with both skulls in situ (O'Donovan and Geber 2009, 73).

Figure 9: Skull 505.4 from Patrick Street, Dublin. This was an adult male skull without a body that was dated to the later medieval period and was found in the lower levels of a drained river with another skull that had been disarticulated as a result of decapitation (Image reproduced with the kind permission of the National Museum of Ireland).

the most part not separated from others in death. It was important that they were buried with the rest of the community.

There were a number of later medieval examples of decapitated skulls found in isolation at urban sites such as at Oranmore, County Galway; Trim Castle, County Meath; and Patrick Street, Eustace Street, and Christchurch Place in Dublin. It seems likely that these represent the decapitation and possible display and subsequent disposal of heads from the walls of buildings or towns and these burials date to the Hiberno-Norse and Later Medieval periods (Ó Donnabháin 1995; 2011).

There are three multiple burials represented in this study, at Augherskea, County Meath, Mount Gamble and Lusk, County Dublin. Leigh Fry (1999) noted that the medieval sources referring to the warrior society of pre-Christian Ireland often speak of warriors being buried together. The poem *Tulach Eogain* tells; 'Here rest a brave quartet in one place, in one abode...Four there were, as is well known, that did red deeds of valour...Those are the ten sons of stern Cathair, and his six grandsons, in one tomb; a band of lions undaunted were they, here round Eoghan...' Another poem, *Lumann Tige Srafáin* states: 'together likewise do we lie in the grave, we four stout fighters', and in a poem from *Duanaire Finn* we read that 'Caoil met his death beside Patrick himself... and he was buried in Crosa Caoil with the son of Lughaidh beside him'. A mid-thirteenth century poem on the Battle of Ballyshannon tells of 'three noble heroes, who do not seek praise-poetry, are in one pale, tapering limestone grave, a trio of warriors side by side'.

These three double burials also come from cemeteries that have other unusual features. Burial 87 from Augherskea was decapitated and was buried with a pig mandible on his pelvis. This practice was also seen at Kevin Street, Dublin, where a male skull showing evidence of weapon trauma had the skeleton of a dog buried with it. A way to dishonour a dead person (and thus grievously insult his kin group) was to place the corpse in contact with an animal. Giraldus Cambrensis and the author of 'MacCarthaig's book' both recorded that Donnchad, father of Diarmait Mac Murchada, was buried under the Dublin

assembly hall with a dead dog, 'as a mark of hatred and contempt'. This type of insult was not unknown elsewhere in Europe, for example, Galbert of Bruges recorded that one of the murderers of Charles the Good, Count of Flanders, was hanged without his breeches and a dog's intestines were then wrapped around his neck (Leigh Fry 1999: 107). Reynolds (2009) has noted similar practices in a total of three Anglo-Saxon decapitation burials from two execution cemeteries: the remains of four neo-natal lambs buried with a decapitated male from Old Dairy Cottage and a decapitated dog and a sheep's head buried with two decapitated individuals from Stockbridge Down.

The burials from Lusk were buried outside the monastic enclosure. The seventh century *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* outlines that: 'There ought to be two or three termini around a holy place: the first in which we allow no one at all to enter except priests, because laymen do not come near it, nor women unless they are clerics; the second, into which its streets the crowds of common people, not much given to wickedness, we allow to enter; the third, in which men who have been guilty of homicide, adulterers, and prostitutes, with permission and according to custom, we do not prevent from going within'. The excavator of the site, Aidan O'Connell (2009), suggested that the interred individuals at Lusk may have been members of an underclass, referred to in the passage from the *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* quoted above, and were denied access to the central and middle monastic precincts. Therefore, these two burials may represent a double burial of two 'warriors' who were buried together after a violent event but with the rest of a small group who may also be termed 'deviants'.

Finally, the burials at Sonnagh Demesne appears to be different from those mentioned above. These date from the 5th to 7th centuries and consist of two males, both of whom suffered violent trauma and one who was decapitated and buried alone. Although these individual burials had been buried separately from the rest of the community, they were nonetheless buried with some care. This initially appears to be unusual, as the burial location is isolated and apparently within unconsecrated ground - there is no evidence to suggest that this had ever been a place with special Christian significance. *The Táin* regularly suggests that the deceased were buried where they died and there is no mention of cemetery burial for those who died violently (Kinsella 2002). Unfortunately, this cannot be demonstrated by any other independent evidence and the possibility cannot be excluded that Christians may have also been buried independent of a cemetery or other formal Christian mortuary structure. This view is further supported by passages from written sources which document the separate burial of heads of Christians throughout the Middle Ages. For example, Hugh de Lacy's head and body were buried separately in 1198 and Caithréim Thordhealbhaigh reports that in 1312 Melachlainn MacNamara was beheaded, and his head and body were not left together: 'The good chieftain was beheaded and, for the fear lest his friends might recover him, he also was not left both head and body in one place' (Leigh Fry 1999: 46).

A more likely scenario is that perhaps these two burials represent what could be termed 'deviant' burials. In a Christian context adult social deviants such as unrepentant murderers, their victims, suicides, strangers, execution victims, and excommunicates (among others), as well as some children, particularly the un-baptised, may have been denied burial in consecrated ground. Perhaps individuals excavated from sites that are not normative cemeteries represent those who were denied a Christian burial (Murphy 2008).

In summary, the majority of individuals showing evidence of decapitation were buried with the rest of the community and no attempt was made to segregate them further in death. The other burials seem to also display patterns; the double burials at Lusk,

Mount Gamble and Augherskea are similar to each other and to the burial of disarticulated skulls interred. Perhaps what we are seeing from the mortuary practices is that those buried normally with the rest of the family were not decapitated as a result of warfare, but that those interred in double graves died as a result of violent death after a battle or skirmish. It is also important to consider the placement of skulls within the grave, and to do so it is necessary to examine the possible reasons for decapitation in medieval Ireland to fully interpret this information.

Reasons for Decapitation in Medieval Ireland

Anthropological and historical texts provide many examples of social reasons that motivate decapitation across cultures and from many periods. In order to distinguish one from another it is necessary to combine the physical evidence left by the act with the archaeological contexts in which it occurs. Decapitation may occur for the following reasons (Carty and Gleeson 2013; Harman, Molleson, and Price 1981; Buckberry 2008; Borsje 2007; Boylston, Knüsel and Roberts 2000; Buckberry and Hadley 2008) which can be combined in a variety of individual circumstances and cultural contexts:

1. As a form of corporal punishment in which an individual is executed by severing the head from the body through the use of an edged weapon.
2. As a consequence of armed confrontation in which the neck becomes a target in order to disable or kill a foe.
3. To provide a trophy of armed confrontation.
4. As a form of relic collection of veneration.

Perhaps among the most familiar and recent excavated examples of decapitation comes as a consequences of execution. During the medieval and early modern period, this form of corporal punishment was frequently

Figure 10: Skeleton 484 from Parknahown, County Laois, a young adult female dated to the early medieval period, showing cut marks to the posterior side of the fifth cervical vertebra (Image reproduced courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland).

employed for those deemed to be traitors against the state. During the medieval period, execution by beheading was performed with the individual either kneeling or standing upright and appears to have been associated with ignominy (Waldron 1996). Beheading would be expected to produce traumatic lesions affecting the posterior aspects of the vertebrae with chop marks delivered from the posterior to the anterior (such as Skeleton 484 from Parknahown, County Laois – see **Figure 10**). The physical evidence from the skeletal remains appears to agree with this interpretation; the only individual displaying evidence of cut marks on the anterior surface of the vertebrae is Skeleton 26 from Johnstown, County Meath; an older middle adult male dated to AD 880 to 1010 (see **Figure 11**). It has also been suggested that when the mandible is involved (such as with Skeleton 49 from Dooey, County Donegal – see **Figure 12**) it is likely that the individual was kneeling down with their head bent which is the traditional pose adopted for judicial decapitation. Nine individuals display evidence of cut marks to the mandible.

In general, Irish canon law places more emphasis on the death penalty than the secular law tracts. Thus the introduction to the

Figure 11: Skeleton 26 from Johnstown, County Meath, an adult male dated to 880 to 1010 AD, showing cut marks on the anterior surface of the second cervical vertebra (Image reproduced courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland).

Figure 13: Burial CCLX from Mount Gamble, Swords, County Dublin, a 25 to 35 year old adult male dated to the early medieval period, showing defensive wounds to the left hand (Image reproduced courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland).

Figure 12: Lateral side of right mandible of Skeleton 49 from Dooey, County Donegal, a 25 to 35 year old adult male dated to the early medieval period, displaying numerous cut marks indicating several attempts at decapitation (Image reproduced courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland).

Old Irish version of Canon IV states: 'There are three types of crime which a person commits: a crime which is of lesser value than himself for which he pays from his own property; a crime which is of equal value to himself for which he goes (into slavery); a crime which is of greater value than he is for which he is killed and a fine paid by his kindred'. In the secular law-texts, on the other hand, the death penalty seems to be employed only

as an alternative to payment or enslavement (Kelly 1988: 216–217). Brehon Law outlined that a fine or *eric* is paid to the victim's family by a murderer or criminal and this was preferred over capital punishment. However, as Ginnell (1894: 204) pointed out, 'the Brehon Laws do not expressly forbid persons suffering actual personal outrage to chastise a criminal caught red-handed; and there is even a passage translated in these words: "A person who came to inflict a wound on the body may be safely killed when unknown and without a name, and when there was no power to arrest him at the time of committing the trespass"'. Therefore, it is quite possible for the law of reparation and *lex talionis*, or law of personal vengeance, to exist side by side in the same country as alternative modes of redress.

Another interesting point to note is a passage in the 'Brehon Law Tracts' that specifically limits the amount of damages the living may seek from kin of the dead: 'Stock does not increase on a tomb; his crime dies with the criminal if he has been lawfully buried after death under the sod of any lawful tomb'. This may also explain why it was necessary to bury those who may be considered 'deviant' as their crime died with them if they were buried in consecrated soil (Leigh Fry 1999: 185).

One would expect to encounter combat related trauma throughout the medieval period in Ireland. Normally, decapitation in such a situation leaves evidence of a chop mark (not an incised or cut mark), indicating that a heavy weapon was involved, coming from one side of the neck or the other (depending on the hand preference of the assailant or the way that the victim was facing) with the weight of the weapon and force of the blow creating a fracture than then removes the head. Usually in such instances one would expect to have other evidence of weapon trauma to another part of the body, often in the form of defence injuries to the forearms and hands as the individual attempted to ward off the blow (such as with Burial CCLX from Mount Gamble, Swords, County Dublin – see **Figure 13**). Of the 68 individuals who displayed cut marks indicative of beheading, 38 displayed evidence of other perimortem sharp force trauma to the postcranial skeleton[3]. Perhaps it could be deduced that these 38 met their death as a result of warfare rather than execution. Combat-related trauma is most often associated with males, and the 38 individuals mentioned above are all adult males. The fact that these individuals are not buried in mass graves, which are often associated with massacres as a result of battle and the fact that they are buried in normative circumstances indicates that even if they were victims of warfare they were not being treated differently to the rest of the community after death and a deliberate attempt had been made to recover them - presumably from a battlefield - for burial.

The majority of the burials with evidence of decapitation have the head included anatomically in the grave (as outlined above). It has been suggested that in Celtic culture, the head was considered the most important part of the body (Coe Powers 1989; Billingsley 1998). The heads of chieftains and warriors were flaunted (it is supposed) in order to shame opponents, and the portability of a severed head made it especially suitable as a trophy of war (Ó Donnabháin 1995; 2011).

Christianity enhanced the meaning of head-stealing because medieval Christians believed a corpse without a head would not be able to enjoy physical resurrection on the Day of Judgement. A variety of sources indicate that the practice of taking heads was still occuringin Ireland in the Middle Ages and later. In 1185, Gilla-Crist Mac Cathmail 'head of counsel of the north of Ireland', was killed and his head was taken. The fact that it was obtained by his people a month later, may suggest that it had been held for ransom. The Anglo-Irish chronicle, 'Grace's Annals' contains numerous mentions of heads being taken as trophies by Irishmen and Englishmen alike between 1315 and 1318. In 1315, for example, it records that Edmund Butler retaliated against the O'More's depredations in Laois by killing 'a great number' and bringing back 'eight hundred heads to Dublin'. In the same year William Comyn slew O'Bryne and twelve of his of his men and 'brought their heads to Dublin', the Irish of Uí Máil ' attacked Tullow, and lost 400 men, whose heads were brought to Dublin': and 'John Hussee, butcher of Athenry, by the orders of his lord went from Athenry by night to look for Kelly among the dead…he slew his own servant, then O'Kelly and his servant; he brought back their three heads to his lord; for this deed he was knighted and gifted with great estates' (Leigh Fry 1999: 97; Edwards 2009).

The fact that the crania of most of the individuals represented in the data included in this paper were replaced anatomically in the grave (the two burials from Church Road in Lusk, County Dublin, Skeleton 156 from Augherskea, County Meath and Skeleton 42 from Owenbristy, County Galway being obvious exceptions) and were not separated from the post-cranial skeleton suggests that display of the decapitated head was not a motivating factor in these instances. Likewise, although heads were collected as relics during the medieval period, the fact that the heads are in the graves, rules this out as an explanation for the decapitations in this study.

It can perhaps be suggested that the burial evidence points toan attempt to 'recapiate' the

individual after decapitation so that they were able to face God on the Day of Judgement to be judged for their crimes (by being decapitated on earth, these individuals had paid their corporeal punishment). There are also numerous accounts of recapitation in the hagiographies (Johnson 2007). Technically, the bodies of executed criminals could be buried in holy ground, on the grounds that a man paid for crime by his execution, and God would not punish a man twice for the same transgression (Leigh Fry 1999). This is illustrated by the case of Lord William de Birmingham, a friend and supporter of the earl of Desmond. De Birmingham was arrested in Clonmel, County Tipperary, and then hanged in Dublin in 1332 by order of Anthony de Lucy, the lord justice. Despite being in disfavour with the government, de Birmingham was given burial in the Dominican friary in Dublin. The sources record that numerous people were sentenced to hanging for robbery and other crimes, but remain silent about the ultimate fate which befell their bodies. There is one exception: the Annals of the Four Masters records in 1452 that Farrel Roe Oge Mageghegan was beheaded at Cruachabhall by the son of the baron of Delvin, who carried his head back to Trim, County Meath and later Dublin 'for exhibition'; but it was afterwards buried, along with his body in Derry (Leigh Fry 1999: 186).

It is not possible to give one single explanation for the decapitations presented in this study. The likelihood is that the individuals represent those who had been decapitated as a result of a judicial practice or those decapitated as a result of warfare. By using the osteological data in conjunction with the information about mortuary practices, it is possible to begin exploring the motivating factors behind decapitation in medieval Ireland.

Acknowledgements

"The halved heads" are "like grains of seasand, stars in heaven, dew-drops on May Day, flakes of snow, hailstones, leaves in a forest, buttercups in Brega and grass blades, under the hoofs of a horse-herd on a summers day"(*Aided Con Culainn* ("The Death of Cú Chulainn") an 8th century poem about the death of the mythical Irish warrior Cú Chulainn, quoted in Palmer 2007, 131–132).

Notes

[1] These individuals were sexed and aged using the standards outlined by Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994).

[2] A cemetery settlement is an early medieval site with evidence of burial, agricultural practice, craftworking and other settlement features but without any obvious signs of ecclesiastical involvement. Whereas an ecclesiastical site refers to a site with evidence of burial and a church (Stout and Stout 2008; Ó Carragáin 2009).

[3] Perimortem trauma refers to an injury occurring around the time of death,

slightly before or slightly after (see Loe 2009, 267).

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