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Violence in Later Medieval Ireland: The Osteoarchaeological Evidence and its Historical Context

Colm J. Donnelly and Eileen M. Murphy

Introduction - Ireland in the later medieval period

In 1515 a document was compiled for Henry VIII that provided the English king with an overview of the current state of Ireland with plans for how the monarch might in essence reconquer the island. Authorship of the document may rest with John Kite, archbishop of Armagh, in consultation with key figures within the Anglo-Irish community in Ireland,¹ and – leaving aside the fact that it provided a draft blueprint for what actually did happen as the sixteenth century progressed and the Tudor government's involvement in the country became increasingly interventionist – the text provides a view of how politics worked among the indigenous aristocracy. The document states that Ireland was made up of some 60 countries of the 'Kinges Irishe enymyes', each with their own 'Chyef Capytaynes'.² These 'enymyes' of the Crown are the Gaelic Irish lords whose names the document goes on to list; men who:

'lyveyth onely by the swerde, and obeyeth to no other temperall person, but onely to himself that is stronge: and every of the said Capytaynes makeyth warre and peace for hymself, and holdeith by swerde, and hathe imperiall jurysdyction within his rome, and obeyeth to noo other person, Englyshe ne Iryshe, except only to suche persones, as maye subdue hym by the swerde'.³

Clearly in the eyes of the king's advisors these were dangerous men who were beyond the pale, both literally and metaphorically, but what has the document to say about the 'Middle

Nation', as they evidently called themselves,⁴ those lords descended from the Anglo-Norman adventurers who had arrived in the island from the late twelfth century onwards? The assessment of the Crown's advisors in London was that this category of aristocrat had indeed become and belonged to Ireland, and the 'more then 30 greate captaines of thEnglyshe noble folke' were described in similar form to those of their Gaelic Irish neighbours, to the point that they:

'folowyth the same Iryshe ordre, and kepeith the same rule, and every of them makeith warre and pease for hymself, without any lycence of the King, or of any other temperall person, saive to hym that is strongeyst, and of suche that maye subdue them by the swerde'.⁵

For the purposes of the current study the 1515 text is relevant since it provides a fairly accurate – if somewhat basic – assessment of how Ireland was politically organised in the period prior to the Tudor Reconquest; it is a text that emphasises a lack of central government and a resultant devolution of political control among 90-odd power brokers, each competing for domination over their 'countrys' against internal and external competition, but with 'an acknowledgement that the "Englishry" and "Irishry" formed a single political nation'.⁶ While ancestral distinction still existed between *Gaedhil* and *Gaill*, the Anglo-Irish were viewed by the former as clearly distinct from the 'Saxon' English of England, the implication being that in Gaelic eyes they may still have been considered as foreigners, but they were 'their' foreigners⁷ and by the late medieval period the elites within both ethnic groupings had been brought close together through intermarriage and fosterage, with a shared common culture. Examples of this would be the adoption of defensive armour by the Gaelic nobility⁸ or the advent of the tower house as the status symbol and defensive

home used by both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish lords in the period between *c.* 1400 and *c.* 1600.⁹ In addition, language now united both populations. As Bliss has noted, one of the key aspects of the Statutes of Kilkenny of 1366 is the fact that it presupposed the existence of people of ‘English’ origin who were monoglot speakers of the Irish language.¹⁰ Indeed, by the late medieval period Irish had become the sole language in use throughout the country, with the exception of the towns (where it was used in conjunction with English), Fingall in north Dublin, and south-east Wexford. This is perhaps the strongest indicator of how the Anglo-Irish had become and belonged to Ireland.

There is a temptation, however, to read the 1515 document as evidence to indicate that Ireland was in a perpetual state of strife during the later medieval period, portraying as it does a political landscape that has been dominated by local warlords – men who held power through their own strong-arm methods, and men who evidently were not to be trifled with. But does it follow that the ‘Chyef Capytaynes’ had reduced Ireland to a land of violence to the unhappy detriment of all its inhabitants? The study of documents, architecture and material culture can be of use as a means of assessing the impact of warfare and violence, particularly within elite society, but the following paper will use osteoarchaeological data in the form of the weapon-trauma that has been identified among skeletal populations in both Gaelic and Anglo-Norman areas of Ireland in an effort to assess the scale and nature of violence within society during the later medieval period. At the core of this study are the large human skeletal populations recovered from two rural sites in particular. The first of these is from Ardreigh in County Kildare, an Anglo-Irish region during the period we are reviewing, while the second assemblage is from Ballyhanna and represents a Gaelic population from the southern shore of the River Erne in County Donegal.

The nature of warfare in later medieval Ireland

Katharine Simms has noted that the primary forms of warfare in Gaelic Ireland during the later medieval period was harrying and cattle-raiding, but such tactics were not restricted to the Gaelic population and were used to equal effect by the Anglo-Irish.¹¹ The objective of such warfare was not to exterminate an enemy population and seize their lands; it was to force the submission of the lord of that territory in order that they – and their people – might then provide their new overlord with tributes and services. We see the political framework behind this situation in documents such as the *Ceart Uí Néill*, in which was set down the claims of the Ó Néill lordship of Tír Eóghain to the tribute and services of the other lordships in Ulster, including the Ó Domhnaill lordship of Tír Conaill.¹² How enforceable such a claim might be, however, would be variable over time, and in general it should be viewed as aspirational. To make it a reality would require the prosecution of a successful campaign in the Ó Domhnaill territory and then it would only be binding for as long as the Ó Domhnaill lordship remained in a weakened condition. The objective of these raids, therefore, was to destroy crops, steal livestock, and burn houses, thereby forcing a political submission by the ruling lineage; the Church, however, frowned heavily on attacks on women, children and clerics.¹³

Such warfare was certainly not about killing on a grand scale, and late medieval Ireland was spared the general political turmoil – and associated violence – experienced in England during the second half of the fifteenth century and the ‘Wars of the Roses’ (1455–87), with its associated battles such as that at Towton, Yorkshire, on 29 March 1461, where as many as 28,000 combatants may have been killed in one day and where perhaps as many as 76,000 soldiers were present on the field of battle.¹⁴ An osteoarchaeological perspective on the slaughter that occurred that day was provided through the discovery in 1996 of a mass

grave containing 39 soldiers, who displayed an age-at-death range of sixteen to 50 years, and a mean age-at-death of *c.* 30 years.¹⁵ A notable proportion of these individuals had attained weapon injuries at, or around, the time of their death – some 33% (13/39) displayed peri-mortem injuries on the post-cranial skeleton, while such injuries were apparent on 96% (27/28) of skulls. The wounds were classified as sharp force, blunt force and puncture injuries that had been made with a variety of weapons, including swords, the top-spike of a poleaxe, the beak of a war hammer and arrowheads. Nine (32%; 9/28) of the crania also displayed well-healed sharp force and blunt force injuries that appear to have arisen as a consequence of previous battles or incidents of armed conflict and are suggestive of the presence of professional soldiers in this mass grave.¹⁶ The common grave was located one mile from the battlefield and it has been suggested that those buried in it had either been massacred by the victorious Yorkists during the rout of the Lancastrian forces that happened following the initial engagement of the battle or that Towton Hall had been a place where injured Lancastrians had been taken, only to then be killed.¹⁷

While Irish lords might hold their power by the sword, the scale of warfare was small in comparison to contemporary England. The Battle of Knockdoe in August 1504, for example, was one of the largest battles in Ireland during the late medieval period, yet the combined total for both armies involved may have been as low as 10,000 men.¹⁸ As many as 4,000 of this number may have died on the battlefield, however, and Edwards has highlighted how the carnage of that day seems to have traumatised those involved and left Irish lords reluctant to engage in any similar ventures.¹⁹ ‘The next battle of any real size did not occur until September 1520 [at Mournabbey, County Cork], when the new earl of Desmond and his enemies came to blows in south-west Munster’.²⁰ The annals indicate that raiding remained the principal form of military activity after Knockdoe, and in the period

from 1501 to 1550 a total of 95 raids are reported;²¹ it would seem that Ireland had returned to low-level conflict. Edwards, however, has highlighted that it was not only combatants who were effected as a result of these raids. Just because you don't kill a farmer during a raid doesn't mean that you haven't placed his life – and that of his family – in danger. As noted above, raids were a form of economic warfare, waged with the intention of impoverishing a neighbouring lord to the point that he would be forced to become your vassal, but the raids themselves involved the stealing of cattle and possessions, the destruction of crops, and the burning of homes belonging to that lord's tenant farmers and their labourers. As a consequence, it was the lower orders within society who were 'driven towards destitution, and faced serious malnourishment and even death from starvation, because of the military methods of their social superiors'.²²

Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill: a case study in Gaelic political power

From the writings of contemporary English authors such as John Hardyng it is apparent that law and order in England had effectively broken down in the fifteenth century as a consequence of the ongoing dynastic struggles between the Yorkists and the Lancastrians. Politically-motivated murder was also rife, and continued to be used as an effective means of dealing with opponents – even only potential opponents – well into the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII;²³ it is at the level of the political elite, however, that we find comparability between England and Ireland with regards to the use of violence as a means of achieving personal political goals. Within Gaelic society the medieval annals enable us to track the dynastic power struggles that occurred among the great lineages during a comparable time to the 'Wars of the Roses', and a consideration of the life of Aodh Ruadh ('Red Hugh') Ó Domhnaill (*c.* 1427–1505), *taoiseach* (leader) of Tír Conaill, provides a suitable case-study (Pl. 1) to illustrate this point.

The death of Neachtan Ó Domhnaill in 1452, at the hands of his nephews Domhnall and Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill, the sons of Neachtan's brother – and former ruler of the lordship – Niall Garbh Ó Domhnaill, threw Tír Conaill into 'great war and dissensions'. Evidently there had been dynastic tensions in the run-up to this event since we are informed that Neachtan had previously banished his two nephews 'some time before',²⁴ but this was evidently part of a more longstanding enmity between the branches of the lineage. Niall Garbh had become lord of Tír Conaill following the abdication of his father, Toirdhealbhadh 'an Fhíona' ('of the wine'), in 1422, but by 1434 he was campaigning against his brother Neachtan, as a consequence of the death of their brother Éigneachán;²⁵ no explanation is provided by the annals as to why Éigneachán was killed, and it is not explicitly stated who killed him, but it was an event that commenced a cycle of raid and counter-raid between the two brothers and their forces; and it was while Niall Garbh was involved in a raid in Oirghialla and Meath that year that he was captured by a party of English cavalry, in an encounter in which his son and *tánaiste* (heir) Toirdhealbhadh was killed. Niall Garbh was handed over to Sir Thomas Stanley, the Lord Lieutenant, who seems to have dispatched him first to Dublin and then to London in 1435,²⁶ subsequent to him being taken in 1439 to the Isle of Man 'that he might be ransomed from the English; and one hundred marks were paid for information of the price of his ransom'.²⁷ Who paid the money for this information is not detailed but it is hard to imagine that it would have been Neachtan; on a more sinister note is the fact that Niall Garbh rather conveniently died in captivity in 1439, and his place as the overlord of Tír Conaill then formally passed to Neachtan.

From his obituary in 1505 we are informed that Niall Garbh's son Aodh Ruadh died 'in the seventy-eighth year of his age',²⁸ which would indicate that he was born *c.* 1427, that he was about twelve years old when his father died on Man, and that he was around 25 years old when he joined with his brother Domhnall in the murder of their uncle Neachtan. How Aodh Ruadh – and indeed Domhnall – had passed the intervening years between 1439 and 1452 is not known but their action should be seen as an effort by them to regain power for their branch of the lineage from that of their uncle and his sons. When this activity commenced is not known either, but Simms has highlighted how their grandfather Toirdhealbhadh 'an Fhíona' had endured political exile in north Fermanagh with a small warband engaged in guerrilla-style attacks against his kinsman and *taoiseach* Seaán Ó Domhnaill prior to his own coming to power in 1380.²⁹ Might it be possible that Toirdhealbhadh's grandsons took a similar path when Neachtan had his two nephews banished?

With Neachtan dead, however, the Ó Domhnaill lordship did not pass to Domhnall but was retained by the dead lord's son, Ruaidhrí. Cousin now fought cousin; following the capture of Domhnall by the Ó Dochartaigh in 1454 he was imprisoned within the former's castle on Inch Island in Lough Swilly. Learning of this, Ruaidhrí and his forces attacked the castle but Domhnall, now freed by his captors, dropped a rock down from the top of the castle onto Ruaidhrí that 'fell on the crest of his helmet, on the top of his head, and fractured it, so that he instantly died'.³⁰ Domhnall then assumed the lordship for two years until he in turn was killed by Énrí Ó Néill, lord of Tír Eoghain in 1456. Political power now transferred back to the sons of Neachtan, and Toirdhealbhadh Cairbreach became lord of Tír Conaill, while Aodh Ruadh – captured by Énrí Ó Néill in the same encounter which had seen the death of his brother Domhnall – now became a prisoner. Upon his liberation in 1460 Aodh Ruadh recommenced his struggle against the sons of Naghtan; in a battle near Kilmacrenan in 1461 Toirdhealbhadh

was captured and maimed – reputedly having one of his hands and one of his feet cut off according to the account in the *Annals of Ulster*³¹ – and political power within Tír Conaill then passed to Aodh Ruadh.

All of this action had occurred within a period of nine years and this must have been a tumultuous period in the history of the lordship. That said, while Aodh Ruadh's reign was to last 44 years there were further episodes of dynastic turmoil, such as in 1488 when Domhnall's son – also Domhnall – was executed, presumably because he had become a threat to Aodh Ruadh's power,³² while in 1497 Aodh Ruadh abdicated in favour of his son Conn – presumably at the instigation of the latter – only to resume the lordship later that same year upon Conn's death fighting against Énrí Óg Ó Néill who had attacked Fánad.

Evidently Conn had faced a challenge to his leadership from his brother Aodh Dubh that had resulted in the latter being kept a prisoner with the de Burghs in Connacht. With Conn now dead, however, Aodh Ruadh set his house in order. Aodh Dubh was released and his father offered him the lordship; his son refused, but both 'commenced governing their principality, and humbling their neighbours and borderers, who began to resist their authority, by reason of the contests of O'Donnell's sons with each other'.³³ The last vestige of this conflict was played out in 1503 when Donnchadh na nOrdóg ('of the thumbs') – another of Aodh Ruadh's sons –

died after having been maimed by his brother Domhnall, *tánaiste* to Aodh Dubh. Present the following year – and now in his mid-70s – as part of the Ulster Gaelic contingent on the side of Gerald, eighth earl of Kildare at the Battle of Knockdoe near Galway, Aodh Ruadh died on 11 July 1505 and was buried at his monastery in Donegal. His son Aodh Dubh was

inaugurated as the new Ó Domhnaill on 2 August. He would reign over Tír Conaill for the next 32 years.

The obituary for Aodh Ruadh contained in the pro-Ó Néill *Annals of Ulster* stated that ‘there came not from Brian Borumha, or Cathal Red-hand, down a king, or lord, that was of better sway and rule and was of more power than that king’.³⁴ High praise indeed for a Tír Conaill lord, but matched by the contents of his obituary in the *Annals of the Four Masters* which stated that he was:

‘the full moon of the hospitality and nobility of the North, the most jovial and valiant, the most prudent in war and peace, and of the best jurisdiction, law, and rule, of all the Gaels in Ireland in his time; for there was no defence made of the houses in Tirconnell during his time, except to close the door against the wind only; the best protector of the Church and the learned; a man who had given great alms in honour of the Lord of the Elements; the man by whom a castle was first raised and erected at Donegal ... and a monastery for Friars de Observantia –in Tirconnell, namely, the monastery of Donegal; a man who had made many predatory excursions around through Ireland; and a man who may be justly styled the Augustus of the north-west of Europe’.³⁵

Violence and power in later medieval Ireland

Within the Anglo-Irish lordships in the late medieval period the succession of a new ruler rested on the concept of primogeniture, whereby a lordship passed from father to eldest son. This, however, might not always be the case. During the early years of the fifteenth century, for example, the earldom of Desmond was surrounded by hostile forces, both Gaelic (Mac Carthaigh and Ó Briain) and Anglo-Irish (the Butlers of Ormond). The lordship required a

strong leader to withstand such pressures and it received this through James, the seventh earl, who ruled from 1411 to 1463. The ascent of James to this position, however, did not happen through primogeniture; the sixth earl, Thomas, was James's nephew but he was deposed by his uncle and forced into exile. Although his claim to the earldom was not secure until the death of Thomas in 1420, James proved to be an astute and powerful magnate and no military weakling; the available sources would certainly suggest that his claim to the title was not questioned by any other members of the lineage and that he retained a strong grip over the earldom until his death.

There is a sharp difference, however, in the events in Desmond (and the usurping of the lordship by an uncle for the good of the earldom in 1411) when compared to the dynastic struggles within a Gaelic polity such as has been outlined during the career of Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill. At the core of these Gaelic power struggles lay the membership of the ruling lineage from among whom a lordship's new *taoiseach* would be selected. Aodh Ruadh's grandfather Toirdhealbhadh an Fhíona had eighteen known sons by ten different women, and 59 grandsons.³⁶ All of these individuals had – at least in theory – a call on being made the next *taoiseach*. That this struggle could lead to violence was an issue acknowledged by James Hogan some eighty years ago, who noted that the 'chief sufferers in all this were the dynasts themselves' who lived dangerous lives and often met with violent deaths.³⁷

The reason advanced by Hogan was the nature of the succession process within the hierarchy of a ruling lineage since it created tension for those members of the hierarchy who found themselves at the outer margin of eligibility for the role of *taoiseach*. If they did not secure the lordship then they ran the risk of falling out of the succession and, as a consequence, they would drop down the social order, thereby incurring economic and social

losses;³⁸ as such, securing the leadership of their *sliocht* ('division') became an all-consuming affair for such nobility which – as we have witnessed in Aodh Ruadh's story – could, and did, lead to bloodshed. In addition, however, Hogan cheerfully noted that: 'Behind the dynastic turmoil, which looms so largely in the annals, the people, clergy, and lower ranks of the nobility lived unchronicled but comparatively peaceful lives'.³⁹ No information is provided by Hogan, however, in support of this statement, but the *Annals of Ulster* recount how in 1492 during a Mág Uidhir raid on the Mac Maghnusa two 'inoffensive farmers' were slain by the raiding party. 'But themselves were taken in their pride and the Lord visited their iniquity. And they were turned to flight and fourteen of their elect sunk as lead in the waters and went down like a stone into the depth'.⁴⁰ In a text that is dominated by accounts of raid and counter-raid and the actions of the political elite, the passage is of interest since it highlights that the author clearly thinks that this divine retribution is appropriate for those who might harm inoffensive members of society, albeit that such references to this class of folk are rare indeed within the annals.

Violence in Medieval Ireland: The osteoarchaeological evidence

In 2012 a research paper was published by Jonny Geber on the results obtained from his osteoarchaeological study of the skeletons excavated from two early medieval Irish cemetery sites at Mount Gamble in Dublin, and at Owenbristy in Galway. The former site dated to AD500 to AD1150 and comprised 176 skeletons of which six males displayed evidence for weapon trauma, representing 3.4% (6/176) of the adult and adolescent population. The Owenbristy cemetery dated to between AD550 to AD1000 and comprised 56 adult and adolescent individuals but with 17.9%, or ten individuals, displaying weapon injuries, some of which were of a particularly frenzied nature.⁴¹ Geber also noted that 12.9% (18 sites) of the 140 early medieval burial grounds excavated in Ireland have

skeletons with evidence of peri-mortem trauma from at or around the time of their death. This osteological evidence for weapon injuries was achieved through his review of the information included in the on-line database of the INSTAR Mapping Death project.⁴² However, the details for the seven sites that Geber quoted specifically in his text represent a total of 873 early medieval skeletons and only 30 actually displayed peri-mortem weapon trauma – this represents an overall percentage of 3.4%. The implication is that while eighteen sites out of the 140 excavated cemeteries have individuals with evidence for weapon trauma, the overall frequency of individuals displaying weapon trauma within these cemetery populations is actually low. It is also improbable that soft-tissue injuries associated with violence – and invisible in any case within the osteoarchaeological record – would be numerable or the cause of death. As such, one can surmise that death caused as a consequence of interpersonal violence does not seem to have been particularly prevalent in the early medieval period in Ireland.

Over the course of recent decades human skeletal assemblages have also been retrieved from a number of late medieval cemeteries and these can be used as a means to generate and compare frequencies of peri-mortem violence between the early and late medieval periods (Table 2). The late medieval assemblages include those from Kilroot, Co. Antrim (AD 1022-1440),⁴³ St Patrick's Church, Armoy, Co. Antrim (AD 1400-1700),⁴⁴ and the major assemblage from the graveyard associated with Ballyhanna Church (AD 1200-1650) on the outskirts of Ballyshannon in County Donegal, and located on what was an erenagh estate of the bishop of Clogher.⁴⁵ To this corpus we can add the information published on skeletons associated with the Cistercian Abbey at Newry in County Down (AD 1460-1660),⁴⁶ while the study of 882 Late Medieval adult and adolescent skeletons from Ardreich in County Kildare (AD 1100-1600)⁴⁷ provides evidence from Leinster which can be used to

compare and contrast the data from Ulster. To ensure comparability with Geber's findings for early medieval Ireland the same methodology was used for the current study.⁴⁸ The prevalence rates are based on the numbers of adolescents (13–17 years) and adults, while only sharp force or puncture peri-mortem injuries caused by weapons around the time of death are considered in the study.

Before dealing with the analysis of the skeletons from these late medieval cemeteries, however, mention must be made to the remains of four individuals with peri-mortem weapon trauma that were discovered in non-cemetery contexts and – specifically – ditch (or near ditch) features. These include an eleventh- to twelfth-century disarticulated skull of an adult male with clear evidence of decapitation found in one of the *trian* ditches in Armagh city;⁴⁹ two skull fragments, one from an adult and one from a juvenile, with puncture injuries recovered from fourteenth to fifteenth-century contexts in the ditch of the castle at Greencastle, Co. Down;⁵⁰ and an adult skull fragment with evidence of a probable puncture wound from a probable medieval or later medieval layer from Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim.⁵¹ Barra O'Donnabhain has considered similar remains from early medieval to early modern contexts across Ireland and is of the opinion that they represent heads which were displayed in public arenas largely as a deterrent towards anyone else who might transgress the power of an area's ruling authority.⁵² The recovery of the cranium from Armagh in a ditch near the entrance to Trian Saxon certainly fits with the idea that the severed head may be displayed but no definitive evidence for this was visible on the cranium. The recovery of the two crania in the ditch at Greencastle is similarly suggestive – particularly since they displayed puncture injuries. The skull fragment with a probable puncture wound from Carrickfergus was recovered from a layer near the inner line of the medieval town's defences. As such, the contexts for all of these finds – at high-profile boundaries – seems to

correlate well with the idea that the heads were deliberately displayed for socio-political reasons.⁵³

The analysis of the data from the Gaelic erenagh burial ground at Ballyhanna has revealed that only fifteen of the 938 adults and adolescents displayed definite evidence of peri-mortem weapon trauma, representing a prevalence rate of 1.6 percent. Twelve of the individuals displayed peri-mortem sharp force injuries that had been attained as a result of a sword (1.3%; 12/938). The affected individuals comprised nine males, one of whom was a teenager, two adult females and an adult of indeterminable sex. A further adolescent and two adult males (0.3%; 3/938) displayed dagger or skayne injuries – one of the adults had his throat cut (SK 81), while the other appears to have attained a defence wound and been stabbed in the hand (SK 852) and the teenager (SK 35) had been stabbed at least twice in the chest. When the numbers of adult males (3.1%; 10/322) and females (0.6%; 2/333) with peri-mortem injuries was compared to the numbers of individuals without evidence of injury by sex the male preponderance is clear.⁵⁴

None of the individuals from St. Patrick's Church, Armoy, Co. Antrim, displayed evidence of weapon trauma,⁵⁵ while a single middle-aged adult male (SK 199) from the burial ground at Kilroot, Co. Antrim, displayed sharp force injuries. A large peri-mortem wound was visible on the left side of the cranium (Pl. 2). Two long-standing, and well healed, non-fatal wounds were also present on the cranium and the degree of healing would tend to indicate that both injuries may have been attained during a single event. It is probable that the individual had been able to survive the two blows because they had failed to fully perforate the cranium.⁵⁶ Three individuals with clear evidence of peri-mortem weapon injuries were recovered from the precinct of the Cistercian Abbey at Newry. Some ten injuries – nine

sharp-force and one puncture – were visible on the incomplete cranium of a young adult male (SK 4), while another adult of indeterminable sex (SK 14) displayed a further sharp-force injury. Both of these crania were recovered from a late medieval charnel pit. An adult male recovered from a contemporary individual grave displayed at least four sharp force peri-mortem wounds on his cranium.⁵⁷

When the adults and adolescents from Armoy, Kilroot and Newry are amalgamated they make a total of 119 individuals, with the one individual from Kilroot and three cases from Newry displaying peri-mortem weapon trauma, providing a prevalence rate of 3.4 percent (4/119). If the figures from these three sites are added to the data from Ballyhanna total we get a total Ulster population of 1,057 individuals, with a peri-mortem weapon trauma rate of 1.8 percent (19/1,057).

Clear cases of ante-mortem sharp force trauma were identified in the crania of four adult males and two adult females from Ardreigh, Co. Kildare (0.7%; 6/882) – no examples of weapon trauma were identified in any post-cranial remains. In all cases the injuries had been made using either a sword or an axe. For the individuals to have survived such blows – some of which had caused considerable damage to the cranium – is suggestive that these individuals had access to a high standard of medical care.⁵⁸

Since all of the injuries from Ardreigh were healed they do not increase our count of individuals who died as a result of weapon trauma. As such, the addition of the Ardreigh population to the individuals from the Ulster assemblages generates a total population of 1,939 adult and adolescent skeletons, and an overall trauma rate of 1.0 percent (19/1,939). The osteological evidence is therefore indicative of a rate of 1.8 percent for Ulster, and just

1.0 percent for Ardreigh and the Ulster sites combined. To put this into context, at any given time in the late medieval period in Ireland it is possible that perhaps over 98% of the entire population died for reasons that were not definitely associated with violence caused by weapons. Obviously, a degree of caution has to be exercised in reaching this conclusion given that violent death – as we know from our own time – does not have to involve weapons. It can also be achieved, for example, through strangulation or poisoning, and these are traumas that are normally impossible to detect in the osteoarchaeological record. Suffice to say it is probable that such murders would have been rare, however, and it is highly unlikely that they would significantly alter the overall figures generated through the current analysis. As might be expected, adult males (1.6%; 12/726) displayed greater levels of weapon trauma compared to females (0.3%; 2/766).⁵⁹ The only adolescents with evidence of peri-mortem trauma were two possible male individuals from Ballyhanna, while apart from the juvenile skull fragment recovered from the ditch at Greencastle we have no evidence at all for children displaying weapon trauma.

The peri-mortem trauma rate of 1.0% for the late medieval Irish assemblages also represents a decrease in the rate of 3.4% for similar trauma that was obtained by Geber's study of 873 early medieval adults and adolescents in Ireland.⁶⁰ The late medieval Irish trauma rate is more in keeping with what has been calculated for contemporary cemetery sites in England. The eleventh to sixteenth-century rural population of 395 adult and adolescent skeletons from the graveyard at Wharram Percy in Yorkshire, for example, had a peri-mortem weapon trauma frequency of 0.5% which represents two people out of the entire population (Mays 2007, 143).⁶¹

Although the use of peri-mortem weapon injuries might be considered to be a rather crude measure of levels of violence it is a definitive one. If a person displays an unhealed weapon injury then we can be confident that the individual's death was related to this trauma. The inclusion of blunt force injuries may have increased the overall prevalence values to some extent but the data would be less definitive; while some blunt force injuries may well have been caused by weapons others could have arisen as a result of everyday accidents. It could also be suggested that certain peri-mortem injuries might be invisible in the skeleton but there are specialised cemetery populations where notable concentrations of peri-mortem injuries are evident, such as in the individuals from the mass grave associated with the Battle of Towton where some 110 sharp force or puncture peri-mortem wounds were identified in the remains of 39 men.⁶² It would seem unlikely that very high levels of injuries would originally have existed that are now invisible in the skeleton. As such, the very low prevalences for definitive unhealed weapon injuries can only lead us to conclude that death at the end of a sword, axe, arrow, or other cutting or puncturing weapon, was a relatively rare occurrence in later medieval Ireland.

Conclusion

It is probable that the vast majority of the skeletons excavated and studied as part of the current exercise represent the mortal remains of 'ordinary folk'. If we wanted to analyse the bodies of those who died in raids or during dynastic struggles then this would require archaeological excavations to be conducted at the traditional noble burial places of the elite (for example, Assaroe Abbey or Donegal Friary for the Ó Domhnaill lineage), while – as yet – we have not encountered any common burial pit associated with Irish medieval battles such as Knockdoe. Suffice to say, however, the results of the current study would certainly suggest that Hogan's statement that 'the people, clergy, and lower ranks of the nobility lived

unchronicled but comparatively peaceful lives' finds support in the osteoarchaeological record, but that this was not just restricted to the Gaelic territories, and life in late medieval Ireland – both in the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish territories – was less violent than in the early medieval period. Why might this have been the case? Could it be that the 90-odd 'Chyef Capytaynes' of both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish background who are listed in the text prepared for Henry VIII in 1515 actually did exert such power over their lordships that violence in society was kept in check? Perhaps having gained control by the sword, these individuals could then apply the same control as strong rulers over their people and bring stability to their land? In his study of violence in thirteenth century Ireland based on the contents of the *Annals of Connacht*, Finan notes that in 1224 when Áed Ó Conchobair becomes king of Connacht he severely punishes two individuals – a robber and a rapist – who had engaged in their wrongdoings 'at the moment of his accession'.⁶³ As Finan concludes, Áed was asserting his authority through his actions in dealing with these criminals since it was his duty as the new overlord to administer law and justice within his jurisdiction.⁶⁴

Hogan's 'peaceful lives' may, however, be a relative concept.⁶⁵ It is one thing to enjoy peace, and not be the direct target of violence, but if we return to Edwards' observation regarding the impact of raids on the life of the ordinary people, these are the individuals who will be most affected directly by the actions of the combatants.⁶⁶ They are the ones who have their livestock stolen and their houses burned down, and they are the ones who have to manage in the aftermath of an attack, facing economic hardship perhaps leading to malnutrition for themselves and their families, and even starvation. The evidence of high rates of young adult death and physiological stress markers, in addition to low statures, witnessed in the skeletal population from Ballyhanna, for example, is indicative of a community enduring poor health and malnutrition.⁶⁷ One is forced to consider this small

erenagh estate's location on the River Erne in proximity to Ballyshannon and the crossing points across the Erne that provided access routes between Connacht and Ulster. As such, the inhabitants would have witnessed and encountered armed forces moving through this landscape on raid and counter-raid.⁶⁸ While physical violence leading to death may not have been visited upon the inhabitants of Ballyhanna, evidently life was tough and one has to wonder was this because as a frontier population they were at the mercy of those raiders stealing their livestock and possessions? Furthermore, was life made all the more harsh for them by the fact that this was a community whose overlord was the bishop of Clogher and not a secular warlord? The medieval registers of the archbishops of Armagh would certainly indicate that ecclesiastical censure through excommunication was the only real weapon that was available to use against the excesses of the Ó Neills with regards their cattle raids and harassment of church tenants on the archbishop's landholdings *inter hibernicos*.⁶⁹ Presumably it was the case that similar measures were available to the bishop of Clogher, although how effective these would be in protecting his interests and those of his tenants must remain questionable.

A weak lord would evidently be seen as an easy target for raiding by an ambitious neighbouring ruler. As such, the best way for a lordship and its people to remain safe would be for that population to be ruled by a competent warlord. In short, having a tough and capable *taoiseach* such as Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill as your overlord may have been viewed as a great boon by the people of medieval Tír Conaill. It is certainly the case that when we read Aodh Ruadh's obituary in the *Annals of the Four Masters* we could be forgiven for forgetting the dynastic violence and turmoil associated with the early years of his career when we read of this jovial, valiant man who had the 'best jurisdiction, law and rule of all the Gaels in Ireland in his time; for there was no defence made of the houses in

Tirconnell during his time, except to close the door against the wind only; the best protector of the Church and the learned'.⁷⁰ The temptation is to read this obituary and view it as being full of hyperbolic praise. Perhaps, however, it really *was* safe to leave the door of your house open under his long reign, and perhaps the dynastic struggles really did achieve their objective of ensuring that the best man for the role of *taoiseach* actually did succeed to the inheritance of a lordship.

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⁵³ O'Donnabhain, 'The Social Lives of Severed Heads', p. 132. It should be noted that a left parietal and occipital, which had originated from an adolescent, were recovered from the post medieval town ditch at Carrickfergus (CF27:F83). Although no evidence for trauma was apparent on the cranial bones their discovery in the fill of the town ditch is suggestive of the remains of a decapitated head. Since no injuries were apparent on the bones, however, they have been excluded from the main discussion.

⁵⁴ McKenzie, 'Life in Medieval Ballyhanna', pp. 94–7; Murphy, 'Lives Cut Short', pp. 119–20. Three adults, two males and a female, from Ballyhanna also displayed evidence of healed sharp-force injuries but these are not included in the current study since the focus is on injuries that were probably responsible for the death of an individual.

⁵⁵ Murphy, 'Human Remains from Armoy, Co. Antrim'.

⁵⁶ Murphy and Russell, 'Human Remains from Kilroot, Co. Antrim'.

⁵⁷ Dawkes and Buckley, 'Before Bagenal's Castle', pp. 133–6. A tibia with evidence of weapon trauma was also recovered from among the disarticulated remains but since we cannot be certain that it did not belong to one of the individuals with the skull trauma it has been excluded from the calculations used in this study.

⁵⁸ Carty, 'Evidence for Cranial Trauma and Treatment in Medieval Kildare', p. 49.

⁵⁹ Two individuals of indeterminable sex have been excluded from this count – one from Ballyhanna and one from Newry.

⁶⁰ Geber, 'Comparative Study of Perimortem Weapon Trauma', p. 257.

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Captions

Figures

Fig. 1 – Map showing the location of the Irish sites mentioned in the text.

Plates

Pl. 1 – The tower house at Amoganmore, near Rathkeale in County Limerick. Radiocarbon dating of a sample of the surviving hazel rods from the underside of the wickerwork centred vault over the building’s ground floor main chamber returned a date-range that placed the castle’s construction within the first half of the fifteenth century.

Pl. 2 – The statue of Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill erected at the quay in Donegal Town in 2007. The work of sculptor Maurice Harron, it commemorates the close connection that Aodh Ruadh had with the origins of the settlement in the late fifteenth century, through his foundation of the friary and the construction of the castle.

Pl. 3 – Peri-mortem trauma in the skull of 35-50 year old adult male from Kilroot, Co. Antrim (SK 199). While the injury in this individual is very dramatic and undoubtedly caused his death it should be noted that he was the only individual with such a definitive injury from this population of 50 adults and adolescents. The occurrence of two healed weapon injuries in the individual's cranium, along with other joint lesions, are suggestive that he may have been a professional soldier (Murphy and Russell 2011, 38). (Crown Copyright).

Tables

Table 1: Radiocarbon dates from two tower houses in County Limerick.

Table 2: Details of the osteological assemblages discussed in the text. *A fragment of juvenile cranium with evidence of a probable puncture injury was also recovered from Greencastle, Co. Down.