Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
Royal Irish Academy

Archaeology Research Grant Report

Recipient name:	Dr Griffin Murray
Discipline and subject area:	Archaeology Radiocarbon Dates Scheme
Year awarded:	2022
Title of project:	Insular crosier dating project (Part 2)

Introduction:

The corpus of Insular crosiers from Ireland is the most important body of evidence for early medieval crosiers in Western Europe. Four radiocarbon dates were granted for the dating of four elaborately decorated early medieval Irish crosiers as part of the 2021 scheme. The dating of these crosiers is essential in establishing a firm chronology for the manufacture of Insular crosiers, as well as the refurbishment of some of them in the later and postmedieval periods. The radiocarbon dating of their wooden cores provides a rare opportunity to achieve absolute dates for fine medieval metalwork. Successful dates were achieved for three of the four crosiers, giving us important insights into the history of individual crosiers, as well as contributing significantly to our broader understanding of these complex objects.

Please outline the objectives of the project

The aim of this project was twofold. The first was to discover when individual crosiers were made and thus create a firm chronology for them. This has the potential to rewrite established stylistic chronologies for Insular fine metalwork. The second aim was to discover when certain crosiers were refurbished or reconstructed. This would reveal the periods when these objects attracted renewed attention and investment and could, in some cases, help to date later medieval decorative additions. Overall, the results will have important implications for our understanding of these complex objects through time, and, when added to the existing data, may reveal significant patterns in the chronology of these complex objects. An application for five dates was made and four dates were granted. The crosiers dated include:

St Columba's crosier, Durrow, Co. Offaly, NMI 7691:W172

Crosier of St Colman Mac Duagh, Kilmacduagh, Co. Galway, NMI P1018

Crosier of the O'Bradys, Kilmore, Co. Cavan, NMI R164

St Mura's crosier, Fahan, Co. Donegal, NMI P1015

Figure 1 St Columba's crosier, Durrow, Co. Offaly

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Please describe the methodology used in conducting the research

The crosiers dated were selected on the basis of certain criteria. The first was their potential to return a meaningful date for the project. In this regard the crosiers were assessed for the potential of their wooden cores to either be original, or a pre-modern secondary replacement. The second was that the wooden core had to be exposed and in a damaged condition. This meant that the crosier could be sampled without undue interference with the object, and that the samples could be taken from an already broken surface. The crosiers, which are all in collection of the National Museum of Ireland, were sampled by Dr Paul Mullarkey of the Conservation Department, NMI. Following this, the wood species of the samples were identified by wood specialist Dr Ellen O'Carroll. Two were of yew, which is usual and to be expected, although unusually one was of willow and the other of box wood. Three of the four samples produced successful results. However, the fourth sample produced an early prehistoric date which was very inconsistent with the object. It was redated several times and it was concluded that the wood was contaminated, perhaps during conservation treatment in the 1960s. The laboratory then used soxhlet solvent extraction on the sample and redated it, but this was unsuccessful. The sample was dated a total of six times and unfortunately has been considered a 'failed' sample by the laboratory.

Please outline the findings of your research and/or milestones achieved.

Overall, the results from the radiocarbon dating were successful and they add considerably to our knowledge of individual crosiers, to our understanding of these objects more generally, and contribute to the wider chronology of fine medieval metalwork in Ireland.

St Columba's crosier, Durrow, Co. Offaly.

While mainly dated stylistically to the early twelfth century, this crosier is complex in that it incorporates at least one element from the eighth or ninth century, as well as later repairs. It is also unusual in being considerably tall and so is more in line with later medieval crosiers than those of early medieval date. Therefore, the dating of the wooden core of this crosier was key to our understanding of the development of Insular crosiers over time. It returned a date of between 899 and 1121 (2 Sigma), the implication being that the crosier in its current form and size principally dates from this period.

Figure 2 St Columba's crosier, Durrow, Co. Offaly, detail

Crosier of St Colman Mac Duagh, Kilmacduagh, Co. Galway

This crosier is one of the least well-known examples, despite being from one of the most important medieval ecclesiastical sites in Ireland. It has been stylistically dated to the mid-twelfth century, although it was significantly damaged and repaired later in its history. It returned a date of between 992 and 1146 (2 Sigma), demonstrating that its wooden core is original. Its core was identified as willow, which is the first time this wood has been identified in the case of an Insular crosier.

Crosier of the O'Bradys, Kilmore, Co. Cavan

While this crosier had been partially reconstructed in the late nineteenth century, an older wooden core survived. The crosier has been dated stylistically to the mid-twelfth century, probably sometime in the 1150s or 1160s. The wooden core was identified as box wood, which is unusual, and this returned a date of between 1455 and 1630 (2

Sigma). The use of box wood and its date correspond, proving that the crosier was remounted at a much later time in its history.

St Mura's crosier, Fahan, Co. Donegal

The wooden core was identified as yew, but the sample appears to have been contaminated and therefore failed to produce a meaningful date. See 'methodology' above.

Overall, the dates from the crosiers of St Columba and St Colman Mac Duagh add to the existing absolute dates we have for Insular crosiers through radiocarbon dating. The dates conform with an emerging pattern that suggests that most, if not all, of the surviving intact Insular crosiers date from between the tenth and mid-twelfth centuries. The later date of the wooden core from the Crosier of the O'Bradys also conforms with the practice of continued use and repair of these objects into the later and post-medieval periods. This confirms the importance of these early medieval objects in later and post-medieval periods and demonstrates clearly that it was not the wooden core that was revered as a relic in this period, but rather the object as a whole.

Please provide details of the dissemination of the outcomes from this project.

The results with respect to St Columba's crosier and the Crosier of the O'Bradys have been incorporated into the following forthcoming academic paper:
Murray, G. (2023) 'Devotion, Dispute and Destruction: Insular Crosiers in the Later and Post-Medieval Periods' In: R. Moss and H. Pullium (eds). Irish and Scottish Art: Survivals and Revivals from 900 to 1900. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Another academic paper, entitled 'Dating early medieval metalwork: the implications of radiocarbon dating Ireland's Insular crosiers' is currently in preparation, which will include all three successful dates, along with five previous dates, which will be submitted for publication to the Antiquaries Journal. Furthermore, the results will be included in a monograph on Insular crosiers that is currently being prepared by the author for publication by the National Museum of Ireland. In 2023, I will give two public talks on the findings from the project at the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and at University College Cork.

No. of Academic Papers/articles published: 2
No. of Lectures given/outreach events involved in: 2

How will you continue to communicate the results of your project and what are your publication plans?

When the main paper on the findings is published, I will issue a press release and publicise it through social media.

How did the award enhance your professional development?

The grant has enabled me to bring the number of dated early medieval crosiers from five up to eight, which is now a large enough sample for me to base an academic paper on. While these dates and previous dates have been incorporated into other academic publications by me, this gives me the opportunity to publish a paper in a major international peer-reviewed journal.

What plans (if any) do you have to further your proposal/project?

The dates from this project will also be incorporated into a monograph I am preparing on Insular crosiers.