Radiocarbon constraints on the history of the western Irish ice sheet prior to the Last Glacial Maximum

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ABSTRACT

Accelerator mass spectrometer 14C dating of in situ monospecific marine microfaunas and reworked shells records high relative sea level on the western coast of Ireland between ca. 40 and 19 cal (calibrated) ka, requiring substantial isostatic loading by the Irish ice sheet (IIS) during that interval. Glacial and marine deposits also record a rapid fluctuation of the IIS margin onto the continental shelf ca. 28 cal ka. Evidence that the coast was not subsequently overridden by the IIS indicates that, at least for this sector of the ice sheet, the ice margin during the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM) was less extensive than the 28 cal ka event. Our data from western Ireland support 14C and 36Cl chronologies from the Irish Sea Basin in identifying an IIS that was as extensive and thick as the LGM IIS for much of the 20 k.y. interval prior to the LGM.

Keywords: Irish ice sheet, last glaciation, relative sea level, 14C dating

INTRODUCTION

Glacial deposits and landforms from the west coast of Ireland have conventionally been interpreted as recording advance of the Irish ice sheet (IIS) during the Last Glacial Maximum (LGM, 19–23 ka; Mix et al., 2001) onto the continental shelf followed by monotonic ice retreat (Synege, 1968; Mitchell et al., 1973; Boulton et al., 1977). New chronological data, however, demonstrate that the IIS was a more dynamic system with several ice-margin fluctuations comparable to the LGM event over the past 45 k.y. (McCabe et al., 1986, 1998, 2005; McCabe and Clark, 1998, 2003; Bowen et al., 2002). For example, at least three advances occurred in the Irish Sea Basin: a maximum advance ca. 37 36Cl ka, the LGM advance ca. 23 36Cl ka, and the Killard Point advance ca. 15.5 cal ka (McCabe and Clark, 1998; Bowen et al., 2002). In addition, 14C ages from raised marine deposits record interstadial events associated with substantial isostatic loading and attendant high relative sea level (Clark et al., 2004; McCabe and Clark, 1998; McCabe et al., 2005).

By comparison, the chronology of the western sector of the IIS remains poorly defined. Ice-flow indicators suggest multiple advances of westward flow derived from dispersal centers in central Ireland (Knight et al., 1999; Clark and Meehan, 2001), but none of these are dated. Although existing 14C and 36Cl ages suggest that the glacial and relative sea-level history of the western Irish ice margin may be similar to that from the Irish Sea Basin, most of these ages relate to events since the LGM (McCabe and Clark, 2003; McCabe et al., 2005), and major gaps remain that prevent establishing a firm understanding of the pre-LGM history. Here we present new radiocarbon ages on macrofossil and microfossil shells from glacial and raised marine sediments preserved on the south side of Donegal Bay, western Ireland (Fig. 1; Table 1), that significantly improve and extend our understanding of the glacial and relative sea-level history in western Ireland prior to the LGM.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY SITES

Sedimentology

We sampled shells for radiocarbon dating from two sites exposed in the lower part of the Glenulra Valley on the south side of Donegal Bay (Fig. 1). On the west side of the valley, at Glenulra Farm, four fossiliferous

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Figure 1. Regional ice-flow direction and location of sites from northwestern Ireland. A: Centers of ice-sheet dispersion, ice-sheet flow lines during Killard Point Stadial in British Isles. B: Ice-sheet flow lines during Killard Point Stadial from northwestern Ireland in relation to sites discussed in text. Note that raised marine and ice-contact deltas at Glenulra and Brookhill are as much as 30 km to west of Killard Point Stadial limits. C: Locations of exposures at Glenulra and Brookhill, north County Mayo, Ireland.
facies are exposed in a river cut (Fig. 2). The lowermost facies comprises locally derived, brecciated slabs of sandstone bedrock. Above this facies is 1.5 m of matrix-supported, overconsolidated massive diamict containing dispersed, glacially beveled, and edge-rounded clasts. Derived shell fragments of *Arctic islandica* are present in both of these units. The diamict facies is overlain by as much as 7 m of laminated mud containing in situ marine microfauna. This facies is overlain by 4 m of low-angle, poorly sorted matrix- to clast-supported pebble and cobble gravel beds. The gravel, which contains derived marine shell fragments, forms a distinct terrace on both sides of the valley at ~80 m above sea level (asl).

A river cut on the east side of the valley at a sand and gravel quarry, 400 m downstream from Glenulra Farm, exposes five facies; only one contains fossils of *A. islandica*. The lowermost facies is a compact diamict similar to that found upstream (Fig. 3). The facies overlying the diamict consists of amalgamated beds of massive, mainly clast-supported disorganized boulder gravel; clast long axes suggest deposition from the south. Derived shell fragments are present throughout the unit. This facies is overlain by massive, laminated, and cross-bedded sands that contain three mud beds as much as 1.5 m thick. A marked erosional contact separates the sand from the overlying pebble gravel foresets that dip consistently at 15° to the northwest. The foresets are truncated by crudely bedded, disorganized boulder gravel. The surface of this sequence forms a terrace at ~80 m asl, which is paired with the terrace across the valley at Glenulra Farm.

A large gravel deposit at least 40 m thick, 3 km southeast of Glenulra, near Ballycastle, has enclosed depressions on its southern surface and steep-ice contact slopes on its southern margin (Fig. 1). McCabe et al. (1986) described three facies in this deposit from an exposure at Brookhill that indicate deposition as a Gilbert delta. The tops of the gravelly foresets that dip consistently at 15° to the northwest. The foresets are truncated by crudely bedded, disorganized boulder gravel. The surface of this sequence forms a terrace at ~80 m asl, which is paired with the terrace across the valley at Glenulra Farm. The in situ ages on foraminifera at Glenulra Farm, however, provide a known-age datum against which ages on reworked shells from units above and below must stratigraphically conform. Accordingly, the fact that the ages on the uppermost unit are similar to or older than the ages of the underlying marine mud indicates that the event that caused deposition of this uppermost unit reworked preexisting shells from some location upvalley after deposition of the marine mud. However, the ages on the lowermost unit must be older than the marine mud to conform to the law of superposition. Our four radiocarbon ages follow this rule.

**INTERPRETATION**

Along the Donegal Bay coast at Glenulra, striae and streamlined bedrock record a northwestward offshore ice advance onto the continental shelf (Fig. 1). The diamict preserved within the Glenulra Valley also suggests an offshore advance. Because this evidence for glaciation is ~20 km west of the limit of the most recent major ice sheet readvance in western Ireland associated with the Killard Point Stadial (ca. 15.5 cal ka) (Fig. 1) (McCabe et al., 1998, 2005), on stratigraphic grounds alone it represents an earlier glacial event.

Because all ice-directional indicators demonstrate that ice flow was offshore, the shells from the diamict cannot be derived from Donegal Bay to the north, but are probably derived from locations to the south of the Glenulra sites. These shells must therefore record an ice sheet situated on the western seaboard of Ireland with attendant isostatic loading sufficient to maintain high relative sea level for much of the ~20 k.y. interval bracketed by our radiocarbon ages. This is consistent with ³⁶Cl dating and records of ice-rafted debris that suggest that several large fluctuations of the IIS occurred between ca. 40 and 25 cal ka (Bowen et al., 2002). We are unable to distinguish from our data whether relative sea level remained continuously above the Glenulra site from 26 to 45 cal ka or fluctuated to lower elevations in response to changes in eustatic level and ice loading. Nevertheless, when compared to the record of eustatic changes, our data indicate that the Donegal Coast was isostatically depressed by 150 m to more than 180 m during much of this interval (Fig. 4).

The youngest ¹⁴C age in the lower diamict at Glenulra Farm indicates an ice advance across the site after 28,180 ± 130 cal yr B.P., whereas the oldest ¹⁴C age from the overlying marine mud indicates ice retreat before 28,295 ± 145 cal yr B.P. Accordingly, these ages constrain an extremely rapid ice-margin fluctuation. The age of this event indicates that it might correspond to a brief stadial event seen in the Greenland Ice Sheet Project 2 ice core between interstadials 3 and 4 (Grootes et al., 1993; Stuiver and Grootes, 2000) (Fig. 4), although uncertainties in the ice-core chronology and in our reservoir age corrections preclude a firm correlation.

The four AMS ¹⁴C ages obtained from the in situ marine microfauna indicate that after the ice margin retreated from the continental shelf, relative sea level remained high (>70 m asl) from 25,360 ± 310 to 28,295 ± 43890 ± 520
145 cal yr B.P (Fig. 2), suggesting the persistence of a thick ice mass over western Ireland throughout that time.

The presence of thick, stratified, coarse-grained facies at Glenulra quarry downvalley from the marine facies at Glenulra Farm suggests that the Glenulra quarry facies were deposited in association with ice retreat from the coast. The lower three facies are subaqueous and record rapidly retreating ice from the immediate area, loss of accommodation space largely by sediment deposition, and progradation of gravelly topsets. The range of sedimentary structures within the lower gravel indicates subaqueous deposition from high-density flows along the valley (Lowe, 1982; Postma et al., 1988). The overlying horizontal sand and mud beds record low-density flows and quiet-water sedimentation from sediment plumes. The third facies, consisting of northward-dipping foresets, records prograding coarser-grained sediment and decreasing water depths. The uppermost facies of boulder gravel was deposited within shallow channels deposited in shallow, high-energy channels. The foresets at this site record sea level at ~74 m asl.

The ice-contact slopes and kettle holes along the southern margin of the Brookhill delta suggest that it was deposited in contact with an ice margin that had withdrawn only a few kilometers from inland of Donegal Bay (McCabe et al., 1986). The gravelly foresets of the delta northward and record a water plane infilling Bunatrahir Bay and the Ballinglen Valley to ~78 m asl.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS
Bowen et al. (2002) first documented evidence for extensive pre-LGM ice cover over Ireland. In particular, 36Cl ages indicate ice extent ca. 35 ka that was similar to or perhaps greater than that associated with the LGM event. Records of ice-rafted debris provide additional temporal constraints that support the near-continuous presence of a marine ice margin off the western Scotland coast since at least 45 cal ka (Knutz et al., 2001). Our new 14C ages confirm the presence of extensive ice for ~20 k.y. prior to the LGM. Moreover, our evidence for an ice advance over the Glenulra site ca. 28 cal ka, as well as the evidence that Glenulra was never overridden again, indicates that at least for this sector of the ice sheet, the LGM margin was less extensive than the 28 cal ka event.

Although the western LGM margin was less extensive than the earlier advance, two lines of evidence suggest that it remained in Donegal Bay during the LGM. First, the presence of marine muds recording high relative sea level at Glenulra Farm requires ice loading until at least 25,650 ± 330 cal yr B.P. Second, fissiliferous glaciomarine muds at the Belderg and Fiddauntawannoneen sites ~5 km west of Glenulra (Fig. 1) have 14C ages that range from 18,740 ± 180 to 20,840 ± 310 cal ka B.P. (Fig. 4) (McCabe et al., 2005). In this case, the marine sediments only constrain relative sea level to be at least 10 m asl, whereas the Glenulra record suggests that it never exceeded the 80 m deltas there. Accordingly, because these muds were deposited during the LGM, when eustatic sea level was ~130 m lower than present (Yokoyama et al., 2000) (Fig. 4), isostatic depression was at least 140 m but not more than 210 m. The existing sea-level data thus indicate significant isostatic depression of the south coast of Donegal Bay for much of the interval between ca. 40 cal ka until at least 19 cal ka, with little difference between pre-LGM and LGM ice loading.

The best constraints from 36Cl ages for extensive pre-LGM ice come from sites bordering the Irish Sea (Bowen et al., 2002). Although no evidence of pre-LGM high relative sea level has yet been identified from this region, the evidence for extensive pre-LGM ice suggests that substantial loading must have occurred. This is supported by raised marine deposits along the Irish Sea coast that record high relative sea level associated with the northward retreat from the LGM margin (Eyles and McCabe, 1989) and subsequent readvance during the Killard Point Stadial (McClure and Clark, 1998; McCabe et al., 2005). The marine limit following retreat of the LGM ice in the Irish Sea, for example, suggests isostatic loading of ~160 m (Clark et al., 2004), broadly similar to that documented here for western Ireland.

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