

Caves

In Ireland, caves occur almost exclusively in limestone, which comprises the geology of approximately 50% of the country. Archaeological material has been recovered from almost 80 caves in Ireland, largely as a result of antiquarian excavations and non-archaeological discoveries (Dowd 2004, 15). Consequently, stratification and contextual information from caves has frequently been poorly recorded. The archaeological evidence indicates a striking difference between how caves were used in prehistory and in early historic times. From the Mesolithic to the Iron Age, caves were associated with burial, funerary rites and votive deposition. It is not until the early medieval period that there is archaeological evidence to indicate that caves were used for occupation and shelter (Dowd 1997, 100–20). Several of the caves at Kesh, in South Sligo, were used during the early medieval period for short-term occupation, with activities concentrated at the entrances to the caves.

A rich body of folklore surrounds the Kesh Caves, in which they are depicted as ‘Otherworldly’ places and home to supernatural individuals. The first literary reference to the caves is contained in the story ‘*Cath Maige Mucrama*’, which relates the birth of *Cormac Mac Airt*, legendary high-king of Ireland. According to the story, a female wolf kidnapped the infant shortly after his birth and reared him in one of the Kesh Caves. The earliest version of this tale was written in the 9th century (O’Daly 1975, 18), but a more complete form is contained in the 12th-century Book of Leinster (Carney 1968, 148–61). On the 1838 OS 6-inch map, one cave (Cave P) is annotated *Owey Cormac Mac Art*.

According to *Duanaire Finn*, compiled in the early 17th century, the smithy of the supernatural *Lon Mac Liomhtha* was located in one of the Kesh Caves (Murphy 1933, 9–13). However, the most famous story relating to these caves is ‘*Bruidhean Chéise Corainn*’ (the Otherworld Dwelling/Hostel at Kesh Corann). It appears in 66 Irish and Scottish manuscripts, the earliest of which dates to 1690 (Bruford 1966, 70–71). The story describes how *Fionn MacCumhail* and the *Fianna* were captured and imprisoned in one of the caves by three hags of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* (O’Grady 1970, 306–10).

Traditionally, the largest and most important *Lughnasa* assembly in Co. Sligo was held at the Kesh Caves. On ‘Garland Sunday’, the last Sunday of July, people congregated at the foot of the hill and climbed to the caves. This non-religious assembly involved music, dancing, faction-fighting and gathering bilberries (MacNeill 1982, 186–7). In recent times, sports events were held at the foot of the hill on Garland Sunday, the last event being held in 1986 (pers. comm. M.A. Timoney).

425 CLOONAGH (Corran By.)/CROSS

OS 39:4:6 (884,475) ‘Kesh Caves’ OD 500–600
17059, 31219

Caves The Kesh Caves penetrate a limestone cliff (H 15–30m) which bisects the W slope of Kesh Corann (Pl. 17). This vertical cliff-face is 90m from

the base of the hill. Prominently positioned, the caves are visible from a distance and in turn command expansive and panoramic views over South Sligo, east Mayo and Roscommon. The caves comprise sixteen simple chambers and fissures, some interconnecting. All are aligned E–W with the entrances orientated to



Plate 17—Kesh Caves (425) at Cloonagh (Corran By.)/Cross, from W.
(Photograph: Jane O’Shaughnessy.)

Archaeological Inventory of South Sligo

the W. The caves are identified by the letters A to P, from N to S. Cave P was named Plunkett Cave, in honour of Thomas Plunkett, and Cave J was named Coffey Cave, in honour of George Coffey, both of whom were involved in the first excavations at Kesh (Scharff, Coffey, Cole, Ussher and Praeger 1903, 175). In 1901, Caves J and P were excavated and trial trenches were dug in Caves D, E and F (*ibid.*, 171–214); Cave L was investigated in 1929 (Gwynn, Riley and Stelfox 1940, 81–95) and in 1929 and 1930 excavations were conducted in Cave L (Bayley Butler 1930). Five of the caves (J, L, N, O and P) have produced archaeological material.

Cave J (Coffey Cave) A short, narrow passage (L 5.5m) decreasing in width from 2.1m at the entrance to 0.3m at the rear. A narrow intersecting passage connects this fissure to Cave H to the N and to Cave K to the S. Three strata were encountered in this cave. Archaeological material was recovered from the uppermost stratum at the cave entrance where there was a concentration of animal bones and large quantities of charcoal. Artifacts discovered include a medieval armour-piercing projectile head, a whetstone, an early medieval bone comb fragment, two bone needles and two bone pin fragments (Scharff *et al.*, 1903; Dowd 2004, 482). A human tooth from the cave was radiocarbon dated to the Iron Age (Dowd 2004, 215).

Cave L Charcoal, animal bone and an iron nail were discovered in Cave L (Gwynn *et al.*, 1940).

Cave N Charcoal, a hearth and faunal remains (Bayley Butler 1930), including bones of Arctic Lemming of Late Glacial date, were recovered from

Cave N (Woodman, McCarthy and Monaghan 1997, 140).

Cave O In 1971 a caver discovered a human bone in a pool of water on the surface of Cave O (NMI).

Cave P (Plunkett Cave) A long, narrow passage (L 15.2m; Wth 1.8–3m) at the E end of which another passage (Sloping Chamber) extends S for at least 11m. A third passage (Water-Gallery) extends E from the Sloping Chamber for 6m. Two strata were recorded in Cave P. Archaeological material was recovered primarily from the uppermost stratum at the cave entrance. Significant quantities of charcoal, mussel shells and animal bone were concentrated at this point. Artifacts discovered include a polished stone axe, an iron bow-saw, two bronze ringed pins and an iron bar (Scharff *et al.*, 1903). Four human teeth and a humerus fragment were also found; one tooth was radiocarbon dated to the early medieval period (Dowd 2004, 215). Faunal remains of Late Glacial date recovered from Cave P include brown bear, red deer, hare and wolf, in addition to a horse bone dated to the early medieval period (Woodman *et al.*, 1997, 140). A local legend, recorded in 1836, told that the mother of Cormac Mac Airt gave birth to Cormac while collecting water at Tober Cormac (2733) to the NW, but while she was asleep the baby was taken by a wolf to a cave at Kesh; some years later Cormac was returned to his mother (OSL, 161). This legend probably refers to Cave P, named 'Owey Cormac Mac Art' on the 1838 OS 6-inch map. (Kielty 2001, 1–11)

SL039-034----

7-5-2003