

Dr. Marion Dowd

Lecturer in Prehistoric Archaeology, Institute of Technology, Sligo

Excavation of Glencurran Cave

Glencurran Cave is located in Tullycommon. Although current research indicates that the cave reaches a total length of 700m, evidence shows that only the outermost 65m of cave passage is of archaeological interest. Excavations were undertaken at the site over ten weeks in 2004, 2005, 2008 and 2009. These excavations led to the recovery of almost 40,000 animal bones and bone fragments, over 500 artefacts and 100 human bones.



Excavation at Glencurran Cave. Photo by Dr Marion Dowd.

It is thought that the cave was used during two main periods.

1) Disarticulated unburnt remains of at least two adult individuals radiocarbon dated to the Bronze Age [approximately 3,500BC] were recovered at the base of a drystone built cairn located 15m from the cave entrance. The bones were associated with amber beads, perforated cowrie and periwinkle shells, a stone chisel axe, a net sinker and bones of cattle, sheep and pig. The disturbed unburnt remains of two 2-4 year old children radiocarbon dated to the Bronze Age were encountered 45m from the cave entrance. Surrounding the child were a series of discrete deposits including two Late Bronze Age pottery vessels; bones of four unburnt hares; cremated remains of neonatal piglets, lambs and calves; a cache of 85 perforated cowrie and periwinkle shells; human clavicles representing at least four individuals; amber beads; an organic deposit possibly representing a deliberate deposit of rushes. These remains may represent a series of votive deposits or they may indicate an exceptionally rich (and rare) series of grave goods accompanying the children's burials.

2) Deposits immediately inside and outside the cave entrance indicate that this part of the cave was also occupied during the Early Medieval [circa 7-10th century AD] period. A low wall or plinth across the cave entrance may have been constructed at this time and a hearth outside the cave is contemporaneous. Artefacts indicative of occupation include a ringed pin, spindle whorl, iron sickle and iron knife. Animal bones indicated butchery outside the entrance and meat consumption inside. A necklace of 69 glass beads of Viking type recovered from the area of the Late Bronze Age deposits may be related to occupation of the exterior of the cave.

The archaeological material recovered from Glencurran Cave is unparalleled in Ireland or Britain and it is clearly an important site with regard to our understanding of Middle and Late Bronze Age burial and ritual practices.

dowd.marion@itsligo.ie