EXTREME ARCHAEOLOGY:

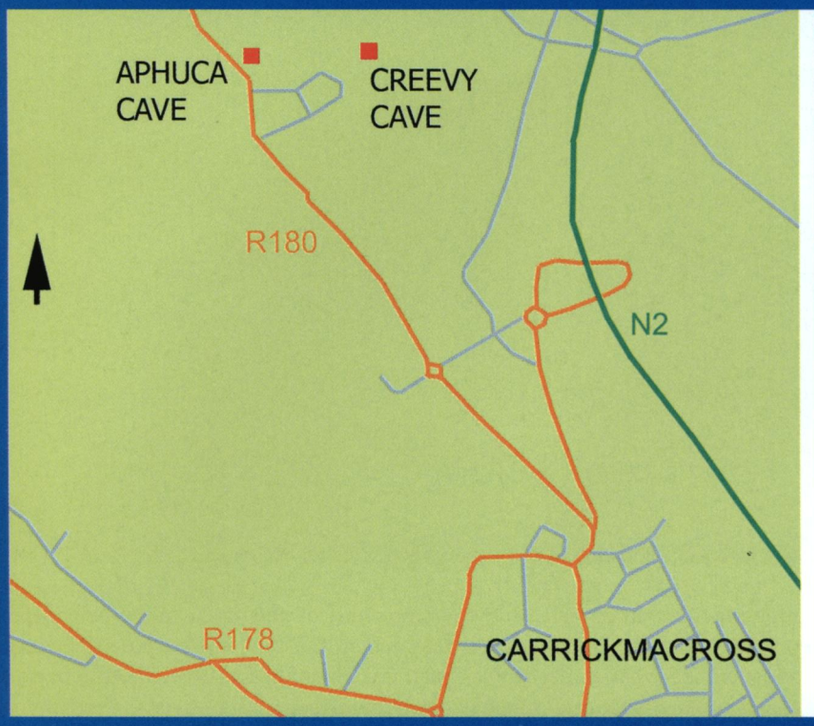


Fig. 1—Location map.

going underground in Monaghan

Marion Dowd, Alasdair Kennedy, Artur Kozłowski and **Sam Moore** push the boundaries of archaeological fieldwork.

Archaeologists are well acquainted with working in difficult environments and unpleasant conditions. Indeed, this is almost a rite of passage on the road to becoming a professional archaeologist. When in 2009 cavers discovered previously unrecorded archaeological features in a cave some 2.3km north of the town of Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan (Fig. 1), they also inadvertently pushed the boundaries of archaeological fieldwork. The only way to access the archaeological complex at present is through Creevy Cave. This is not a trip for the faint-hearted! Entering the site involves squeezing and crawling through an extremely narrow and low entrance. The Mile River runs underground through the opening and water reaches up to neck level in this part of the cave; occasionally the explorer is completely submerged, making it necessary to swim underwater through certain sections. In wet weather the cave floods significantly and can be very dangerous; hence those wishing to visit the archaeological complex must seek advice from experienced cavers.

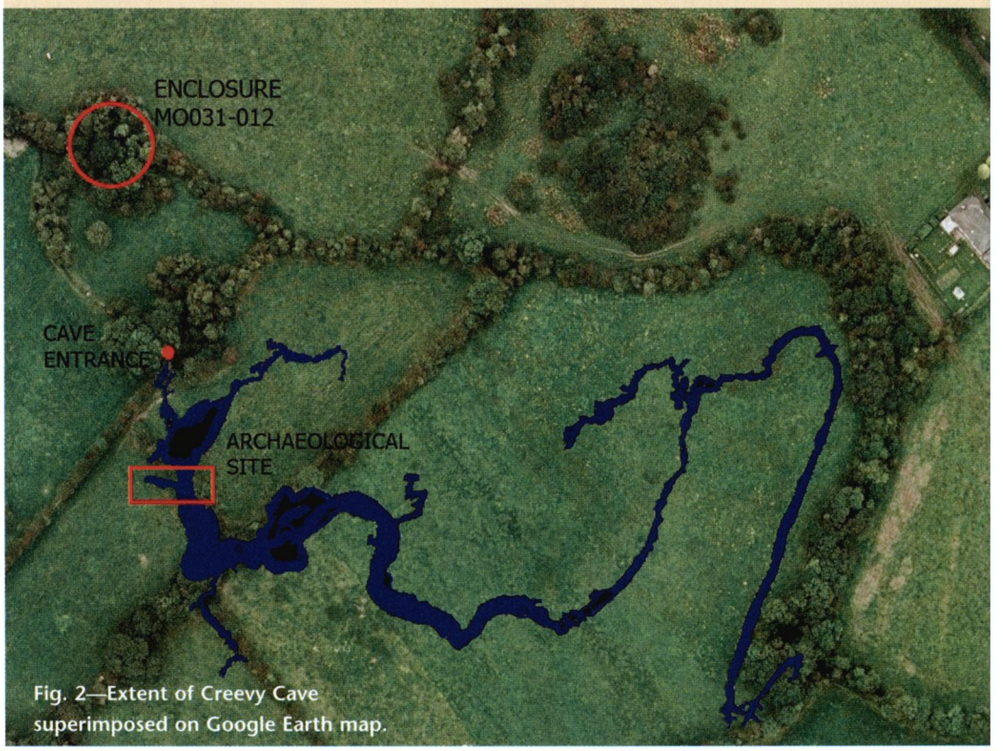
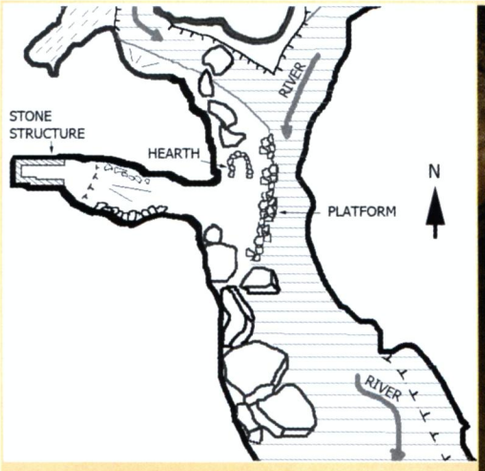


Fig. 2—Extent of Creevy Cave superimposed on Google Earth map.



Above: **Fig. 3—Plan of archaeological features in Creevy Cave** (A. Kennedy and A. Kozłowski).

Right: **Fig. 4—Hearth** (Danny Burke).

Although County Monaghan does not boast caves on the same scale as other counties in Ireland (such as Fermanagh or Clare, for example), it has a compact and unique limestone landscape in the south of the county, centred on the town of Carrickmacross. In this area a small inlier of limestone has enabled the development of several shallow river cave systems, which were first catalogued by Jack C. Coleman (1952; 1965). In the mid-1960s the Irish Caving Club explored the area, adding several caves to those listed by Coleman (Shiels 1965). Among these was Creevy Rising, which appeared to sump after 10m (a 'sump' is a completely flooded cave passage). Although several dives were made in the region in the early 1970s by divers from the British-based Cave Diving Group, Creevy Rising remained unexplored until February 2009, when two of the writers (cavers Kennedy and Kozłowski) entered the cave with the intention of diving the sump. To their surprise they found that it was possible to follow the underground river—without diving—upstream for some 600m to emerge at the river sink (the point on the surface where a river disappears underground). This was a significant discovery in Irish caving terms: the longest cave in County Monaghan—with a total surveyed length of 1,024m—had been discovered (Kennedy and Kozłowski 2009) (Fig. 2). Towards the end of the cave survey it became apparent to the cavers that they were not the first to enter Creevy Cave. They discovered a hearth, charcoal, lenses of ash and post-medieval pottery on the surface of an artificial platform. Adjacent to this was a stone structure (very similar to a souterrain) which had been built overground, against an opening in the cave passage. As this was a previously unknown site, the cavers promptly brought it to the attention of two of the writers (archaeologists Dowd and Moore).

In the past the cave interior would have been accessed via the stone structure, which would have had an entrance opening on the ground surface overhead. This opening is now blocked, however, and to visit the archaeological complex it is necessary to make a precarious journey through the cave. This requires suitable equipment—including wetsuits and helmets fitted with water-resistant lights—and considerable nerve. The initial squeeze through the cave entrance, the river sink, is the most difficult. This is a short, low, tight, water-filled passage (called a 'duck' by cavers). The trip involves crawling with one's head just above water level. After several metres the passage opens out into a small chamber, and thereafter increasingly larger passages can be followed to reach the most spacious part of the cave, where the underground river meanders around banks of mud and gravel.

Underground archaeology

The archaeological complex is concentrated at the upstream (northern) end of the cave passage, about 35m from the sink entrance. Here a low earthen platform (4m by 6.5m) to one side of the underground river was deliberately delimited by a rough arrangement of stones. A horseshoe setting of stones (0.75m by 0.65m), in places two to three courses in height, was constructed on top of the platform (Fig. 4). Lenses of grey ash and fragments of charcoal lie exposed against the outer edge of this setting, suggesting that it may once have functioned as a hearth. Three sherds of black-glazed ware, probably from a large jar, were also discovered scattered on the platform. This type of pottery was imported into Ireland from Lancashire in the later eighteenth century (Clare McCutcheon, pers. comm.).

Crawling under a low shelf of limestone at the western side of the platform, one follows a low, natural cave passage to the point where the terminal end of the stone structure meets the cave passage. This artificial structure slopes down to the cave passage and runs perpendicular to it. At some point in the past the entrance was deliberately blocked with boulders and stones, and is represented in the field above the cave as a slight depression (Cloghvalley Lower td at

Left: **Fig. 5—Stone structure from terminal end** (Danny Burke).

Below: **Fig. 6—Aphuca Cave.**

IGR 683547/805999). This drystone construction measures approximately 3m long by 0.75m wide by 1m high. The two side walls were built of small rounded stones and the structure was roofed with large, regular lintel slabs (Fig. 3). Between the end of the stone structure and the delimited platform, a short section of natural cave passage had been dug out to deepen the floor level; the spoil remains stacked against the cave walls. A small piece of slag was found on the clay floor of the structure.

Date and nature of activities

In the absence of archaeological excavation it is impossible to establish whether the stone-built structure, the hearth, the slag, pottery and charcoal reflect one phase of activity at Creevy Cave or different periods of use. The evidence seems to suggest that at some point the cave served as a place of short-term occupation or refuge. The fresh water provided by the underground river would have been especially important if it had been used as a hideout for any length of time. Furthermore, the cave is very extensive, which would make it somewhat easier to evade capture.

The stone structure built against the cave closely resembles an early medieval souterrain in terms of morphology and method of construction (Fig. 5), although any feature built with the intention of accessing the cave interior would have a similar appearance. It is not associated with

Left: Fig. 7—Extreme archaeologists!

any identifiable archaeological site above ground, but an earthwork (MO031-012) lies 117m south of the original entrance to the structure, overlooking the 6m drop down to the river sink (the present cave entrance). Now heavily overgrown, this earthwork was marked 'fort' on the 1835 OS map and was depicted as an oval enclosure measuring 30m north–south by 22m east–west. It is possibly the remains of an early medieval settlement. Perhaps the occupants, having discovered the natural opening into the cave, constructed a souterrain to create a more formal entry point. The cave could then have been used for storage or as a place of refuge.

The post-medieval pottery indicates, however, that the stone structure was open at the end of the eighteenth century, suggesting that it may only have been constructed at that time. But why were people coming into the cave then? One possibility is raised by historical references relating to Aphuca Cave, which lies 480m west of the entrance to the Creevy Cave stone structure. In 1652 Edmond Ludlow, Oliver Cromwell's commander-in-chief, wrote a first-hand account of the massacre of a group of Catholics celebrating Mass at Aphuca Cave (Fig. 6). When apprehended by Ludlow, the group took refuge in the cave and a stand-off ensued, with one of the Irish firing his pistol from the cave and shooting one of Ludlow's soldiers. A fire was subsequently lit at the entrance in an attempt to smother those in hiding. The following day the soldiers entered Aphuca Cave, murdering fifteen 'by the sword' while another five or six were dragged out alive, together with the priest's robes, a crucifix and a chalice (Ó Gallachair 1957, 103–4). The proximity to Aphuca Cave and the eighteenth-century pottery suggest that Creevy Cave may have been similarly used in post-medieval times as a place of refuge or to celebrate Mass in secret.

A further archaeological discovery was made in Creevy Cave approximately 200m downstream from the archaeological features described above. Here the cavers discovered half a sandstone mill-wheel lying in the river. This is also probably of post-medieval date, but its occurrence deep inside the cave is difficult to explain. Because it is heavy and cumbersome (approx. 15kg), the mill-wheel was probably not deliberately brought into the cave. It may have fallen in through an opening in the cave roof. Alternatively, it may have been washed downstream during flood pulses, but the site from which it originated is not known and may even be totally destroyed. The nearest recorded mill lies *c.* 1km to the north-north-west, while a second occurs adjacent to Donaghmoyne motte and bailey and castle, *c.* 1.9km to the north-east. Neither of these mills, however, is linked to the Mile River, which flows through the cave.

Cavers and archaeologists

The Creevy Cave discovery highlights the importance of communication between archaeologists and cavers (Fig. 7). Not only is this the longest cave in Monaghan, it is the only cave of archaeological significance that we are aware of in the county. It is highly unlikely that this series of archaeological features would ever have been discovered by an archaeologist or casual visitor owing to the difficulty of accessing the site and the specific expertise needed for navigating through caves that are totally or partially submerged in water. It is cavers, not archaeologists, who have made almost all archaeological discoveries in Irish caves over the past 60 years. It is therefore of paramount importance to increase dialogue between the two groups. We need to develop a relationship whereby cavers can communicate their discoveries to archaeologists, and whereby archaeologists consult with cavers with regard to excavation and surveying underground. In other countries, where cave archaeology is a developed field of research, many archaeologists undertake training to become qualified cavers, while cavers complete courses in archaeology and train on archaeological excavations in caves. Cave archaeology is a specialised field of study; cooperation between cavers and archaeologists is essential if we are to better our understanding of how past populations used and perceived their underground landscapes. ■

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