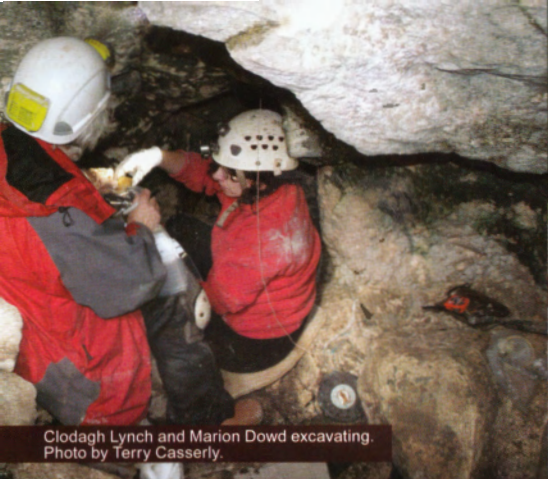
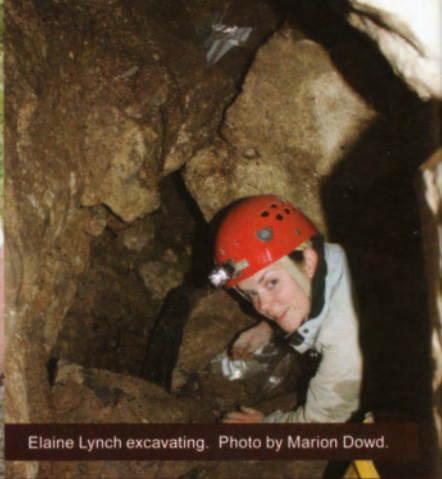




Clodagh Lynch and Marion Dowd excavating. Photo by Terry Casserly.



Tim O'Connell and Terry Casserly sieving soil outside the cave. Photo by Marion Dowd.



Elaine Lynch excavating. Photo by Marion Dowd.

A NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE IN THE BURREN MONEEN CAVE

The Burren is renowned for its rich archaeological heritage as well as for its impressive cave systems both of which made the discovery of a new cave with archaeological material especially exciting. Moneen Cave is located towards the summit of Moneen Mountain. Known to the landowner, Gerard Collins all his life, it only came to the attention of cavers in 2010 when hill walker Tony McFadden stumbled across the entrance and mentioned it to Terry Casserly of the Clare Caving Club.

In 2011, cavers Quentin Cooper, Gaelen Elliffe and Tim O'Connell were digging through the floor to see if access to a larger cave system could be reached. In the process they made some very

important discoveries: an antler hammer-head (or macehead), prehistoric pottery, a human skull, animal bones and oyster shells.

Digging was immediately suspended and Christine Grant of the National Monuments Service (N.M.S.) was contacted. The significance of the site was quickly realised and funding for a rescue excavation was provided by the N.M.S. A two-week excavation followed with a team of archaeologists (M. Dowd, Elaine Lynch, Clodagh Lynch and Michael Lynch) and cavers (T. Casserly, Q. Cooper and T. O'Connell) - the first archaeological excavation in Ireland to include a team of both cavers and archaeologists. It proved a very successful

collaboration that drew on their joint expertise in this specialised environment.

The cave consists of a small chamber 2.8m x 3.4m. Access to the interior is via a small opening in the cave roof with a drop of 1.8m to the cave floor beneath. The objective was to recover archaeological material exposed in the cave and to try and understand how the cave had been used. A significant quantity of artefacts was recovered as well as animal bones and a human skeleton. To retrieve tiny bones and artefacts, all the soil excavated was taken outside the cave and washed through sieves. Some soil was taken to Institute of Technology Sligo and sieved under laboratory conditions. Though less than



Antler hammer-head macehead. Photo by Thorsten Kahlert

half the chamber has been excavated, Moneen Cave has proved to be a very rich archaeological site used during several different periods.

A broken flint flake may be the oldest object recovered. Professor Peter Woodman dated it to either the Neolithic (4,000 – 2,400 BC) or the earlier part of the Mesolithic (8,000 – 4,000 BC). The blade was quite weathered suggesting it may have been exposed to the elements before being deposited in the cave. Objects such as this were common every-day items in prehistory and would have been used for a variety of purposes, particularly as cutting tools.

A large quantity of pottery sherds was scattered throughout the cave. Pottery specialist Elaine Lynch has established that the sherds represent six different vessels that date to the Middle-Late Bronze Age (1,500 – 1,000 BC). These would have been large bucket- or tub-shaped vessels, none of which were decorated. The pottery might appear to suggest occupation of the cave but this is unlikely because of a general absence of other domestic refuse (such as butchered animal bones, hearths etc.). The pots may have been used for storage by a family living nearby and certainly the cool stable temperature of the cave would have been advantageous for such purposes. Another possibility is that the pottery represents some form of ritual use of the cave similar to the vessels that formed part of religious offerings placed inside Glencurran Cave in the latter part of the Bronze Age.

The antler hammer-head (or macehead) is the most exciting find from Moneen Cave; it is unique in Ireland and may have been a ceremonial item. Dr Ruth Carden determined that it was manufactured from the naturally shed antler of a red deer stag. A hole had been drilled through the centre, presumably to hold a wooden haft it. Eagerly awaited radiocarbon results will establish its precise date - likely to be prehistoric.

Caves are usually rich in animal bones and Moneen Cave is no exception. A total of 3,124 fragments of animal bone (including a skull that had broken into 353 pieces) were examined by zoo-archaeologist Fiona Beglane. Those

that could be identified included (in order of frequency) sheep/goat, bird, hare, mouse, cattle, frog, rat, fish, pig, deer and cat. Almost all the bones had entered the cave by natural processes, for instance animals that had died there or carcasses that had fallen in. However, four mammal ribs with butchery marks were also found and represent human activities, probably the remains of meals.

One of the most intriguing discoveries made during the excavation was a human skeleton that was found in a niche in the cave wall. This was a small rectangular cavity measuring 60cm x 60cm x 85cm high. Dr David Drew believes that the niche was an artificial feature. The human remains were analysed by Dr Catriona McKenzie who established that they represent an adolescent aged between 14 and 16 at the time of death. It has not been possible to determine from the skeletal remains alone whether this was a boy or a girl. The bones bore no indication of violence yet the body was not in a formal burial position. The skull that was initially discovered by the cavers in the main chamber (2.5m outside the niche) derives from the skeleton. It is not yet clear how the skull became separated from the corpse. Radiocarbon dates for the skeleton are expected; only then can we begin to interpret this poignant discovery.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the landowner Gerard Collins for his support and assistance during the dig; the excavation team; the N. M. S. who funded the excavation – particularly Pauline Gleeson and Christine Grant; all the specialists involved in the project; the archaeology students at I. T. Sligo for post-excavation work; and Thorsten Kahlert for artefact photography.

by Marion Dowd

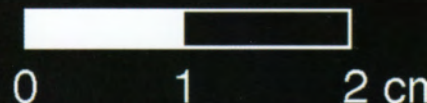
Dr. Marion Dowd is a lecturer in prehistoric archaeology at I.T. Sligo. Her doctoral research examined the role of caves in religious practice in Ireland over 10,000 years. She has excavated several caves across Ireland, most notable of which is Glencurran Cave in the Burren. She has given papers at national and international conferences on Irish cave archaeology and has published widely on the subject.



Impression of type of pottery from Moneen Cave. Photo by Elaine Lynch.

Elaine Lynch

Prehistoric flint flake. Photo by Thorsten Kahlert.



Washing bones from the cave at I.T. Sligo. Photo by Marion Dowd.

