

# CAVE ARCHAEOLOGY IN IRELAND

**Renowned cave archaeologist and author Dr Marion Dowd of the Institute of Technology, Sligo has prepared an overview of the subject in Ireland: here is a brief history of the island, as told through evidence found in its caves.**

**A**LMOST 1,000 natural caves are recorded across the limestone regions of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, not including the hundreds of sea caves dotted around the coast. Humans have made use of Irish caves from the earliest times to the present day and the first scholarly investigations began in the early 19th century, generally propelled by an interest in amassing collections of extinct faunal remains. In the course of these early antiquarian explorations, archaeological material was inadvertently discovered, forming the basis of research in Ireland today.

Over the past thirty years the majority of new archaeological discoveries in caves have been made by cavers, and many of these have been followed up by excavations. In 2015 the National Monuments Service and the National Museum of Ireland (the government departments with responsibility for archaeology in the Republic of Ireland), together with the Speleological Union of Ireland and me, drew up an information

leaflet for the public about the archaeological potential of caves and what to do if deposits are encountered. It is available as a pdf from: <https://tinyurl.com/cavearchaeology>.

Until very recently, the archaeological evidence indicated that Ireland had only been occupied for some 10,000 years – from the Early Mesolithic. In contrast, for instance, early human groups have been recorded in Britain from at least 800,000 years ago. It was long believed that Ireland must have a Palaeolithic (Ice Age) human presence, but the evidence to support this only came to light in 2016. The discovery comes from Alice and Gwendoline Cave in Co. Clare, where a butchered bear patella (knee bone) produced a radiocarbon date of 12,500 BC. Analysis of the cut marks indicated they were made on fresh bone,

probably with a long flint blade, and suggests the butchery of a bear carcass to extract the tendons from the leg, which could then be used as cordage. Though a small find, it



An Upper Palaeolithic bear patella with cut marks from Alice and Gwendoline Cave  
Photo: Thorsten Kahlert

Far right: Killuragh Cave – a place of ritual significance for Mesolithic hunter gatherers. Photo: Sam Moore

Top: The area in Glencurran Cave where Late Bronze Age offerings were deposited. Photo: Ken Williams





caves at this time were associated with the dead, religion and ritual. No sign of Neolithic occupation of caves has yet been encountered, unlike in many parts of Europe. Intact Neolithic burials in caves are not common and only a small number are

**A reconstruction of a Neolithic crouched burial in Kilgreany Cave**  
*Illus: John Murphy*

**Below: Human bones from Knocknarea Cave K, dated to the Neolithic, representing two adults and one child**

*Photo: Thorsten Kahlert*

paved the way for future research and confirmed that Palaeolithic hunter gatherer communities reached Ireland during the Ice Age. The task now is to find more traces of these early settlers.

The Mesolithic hunter gatherers that came to Ireland several millennia after deglaciation around 8,000 BC occasionally used caves for ritual purposes. In fact, the oldest known site of funerary or ritual activities on the island is a cave at Killuragh, Co. Limerick. Hunter gatherers visited this cave sporadically over approximately 3,000 years, placing small numbers of human bones and flint tools at the cave entrance. A few sea caves along the north Antrim coast may also have been used for short-term shelter by these nomadic peoples on trips to collect flint nodules for tool-making and to gather shellfish. Mesolithic flint implements and small hearths from such caves suggest camps that were used for relatively brief periods.

It was only with the arrival of the first farming communities in the Neolithic, around 3,900 BC, that we find an increase in the use of caves. All the evidence reveals that



currently known, such as at Kilgreany Cave in Co. Waterford, which contained multiple burials of adults and children. Accompanying these crouched and extended burials were shell beads and animal teeth pendants; while concentrations of Neolithic pottery were found

in a deeper chamber of the cave.

A more common practice, however, was to use caves for excarnation. Corpses were laid out in caves that typically consisted of long, narrow passages; the entrances appear to have been deliberately blocked. Months or years later, when decomposition of the soft tissue had occurred, the dry bones were collected and removed to another location. Small skeletal elements, such as finger and toe bones, were typically overlooked and left behind, and limited excavations in Knocknarea Cave K, Co. Sligo, resulted in the recovery of thirteen small human bones. This small assemblage represented two adults and one child, all being radiocarbon dated to the Neolithic. Where the greater parts of these human skeletons were taken is unclear, though possibly to the passage tombs on the summit of Knocknarea Mountain, a short distance away. Other caves in the Neolithic landscape

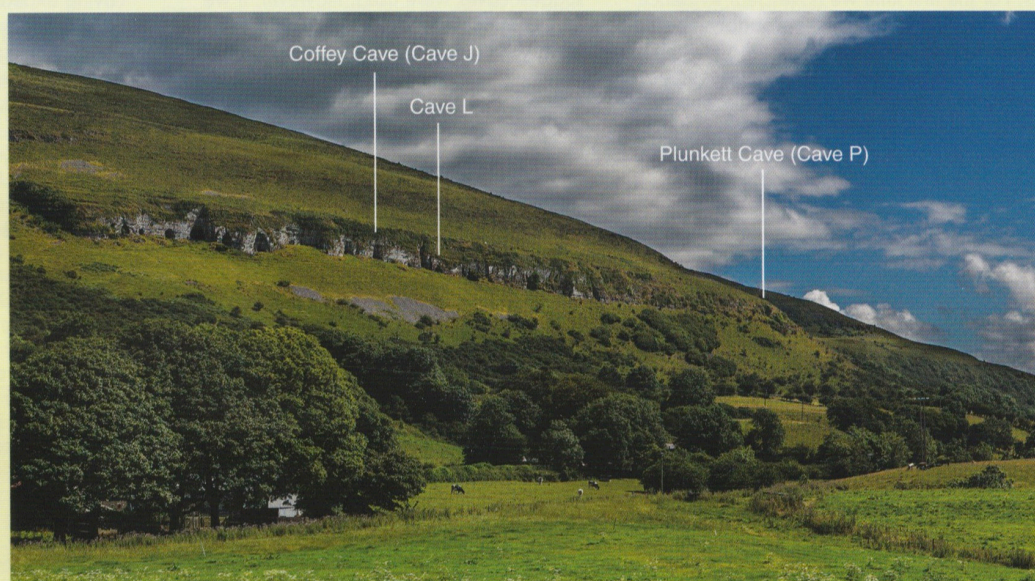
took on a sacred role and became places at which these early farmers left offerings, such as hoards of stone axes or small quantities of human bones.

During the Bronze Age (2,400 BC to 700 BC) metal-working communities continued to use caves for burial and ritual purposes. At this time, however, many of the caves selected for use lay in prominent places in the landscape. Arguably, the richest Bronze Age burial known in Ireland was discovered in a cave at Knockane, Co. Cork. Here, in 1806, men quarrying limestone broke into a cave where they discovered a human skeleton covered in thin gold plates with several amber beads around the head. Unfortunately, the majority of the gold was sold and melted down and only one piece now survives. The artefact clearly indicates that this cave was used to inter a high-status individual.

In the later part of the Bronze Age, caves became important places for votive deposition where individuals or communities left offerings, presumably to spirits or deities or the dead. One such site is Glencurran Cave in the



**A piece of early Bronze Age gold plate associated with an inhumation burial from Knockane Cave. Photo courtesy National Museum of Ireland**



**The Keshcorran Caves, where human teeth of Iron Age date have been recovered. Photo: Thorsten Kahlert**



Burren, Co. Clare where archaeological excavations revealed that, over several centuries, people entered the cave to leave offerings near what would then have been the end of the cave, about 50m inside the entrance. The material left on the floor included loose human bones, curiously with a preference for clavicles (shoulder bones)! The remains of a young child were also recovered, who had been placed on a bed of rushes with a large number of perforated periwinkle and cowrie shells deposited nearby – probably indicating an item of jewellery or a piece of clothing with shells sewn on. Newborn calves, lambs and piglets were also left inside Glencurran Cave, as well as pottery and amber beads that came from the Baltic region.

The Iron Age (700 BC to AD 400) is a problematic period in Ireland in that the archaeological record is quite sparse. Similarly, little Iron Age material has been recovered from caves although, occasionally, a small number of human bones from caves date to this period. For instance, human teeth dated to the Iron Age have been recovered from several of the Keshcorran Caves in Co. Sligo. What these teeth represent is unclear: they derive from different individuals and may represent some form of ritual deposit. A hill-fort surrounds the hill above the level of the cave and it is possible that the occupants of the fort left teeth in the caves.

The arrival of Christianity to Ireland in the early 5th century heralded widespread social, cultural and economic changes. Cave use intensified at this time and, until the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in AD 1169, caves were appropriated for a variety of different purposes. For the first time we have clear evidence of people living in caves – probably itinerant smiths or agricultural workers who sought short-term occupation. Settlement debris at such sites includes hearths, spindle whorls (for spinning wool), iron knives and tools, bone combs and ringed pins (for fastening cloaks). Other caves were used as workshops for specialised craft activities, while more served as convenient places for storage. Manuscript sources tell us of caves within monastic complexes that were regarded as places where saints retreated in prayer and contemplation. These caves continued to be revered as sacred foci centuries after the monastery in question was abandoned, though whether the cave was ever actually used as a religious retreat is doubtful in many cases.

Viking artefacts have been recovered from several Irish caves and may represent concealment of wealth or some form of religious ritual, particularly at Cloghermore Cave, Co. Kerry, where Viking burials have been

The cave archaeology information leaflet downloadable from: <https://tinyurl.com/cavearchaeology>



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A 17th century coin and token from Kilgreany Cave. *Illus: Nina Koeberl*

Kilgreany Cave, Co. Waterford, a series of 17th century finds – including a clay pipe, pottery vessels and coins – indicate that a person of means spent time in the cave, probably using it as a hideout. In recent centuries some caves were associated with holy wells and were visited as part of popular Catholic religious pilgrimages.

When caves are mentioned in Medieval manuscripts and more recent folk-tales, it is either as places where male saints came to pray and serve penance, or as abodes of supernatural females. These formidable and omnipotent cave-dwelling females were portrayed as either seductive women or hideous hags. The cave in which they dwelled was their seat of power and they posed a threat to mortal men (but not to mortal



A Viking necklace of glass beads from Glencurran Cave  
*Photo: Thorsten Kahlert*

*Right: An illustration based on a folk-tale about a supernatural woman who lived in a cave at Mitchelstown, Co. Tipperary, and a mortal farmer who lived nearby*  
*Illus: Dómhnaig Ó Bric*



discovered. A spectacular Viking necklace composed of over seventy glass beads was discovered in Glencurran Cave, Co. Clare and may represent a valued item that was hidden but never retrieved.

From the High Medieval period onwards there is little archaeological evidence to suggest caves were used. However, if we turn to Medieval manuscripts, folklore and later historical sources, it is clear that many caves were active places in the landscape. Caves functioned as short-term shelters for poor families and individuals who had become dispossessed as part of English colonisation programmes and plantations. Other caves were used as hideouts by political fugitives, criminals and individuals on the run. At

women or children). Frequently, a conflict ensued between the supernatural woman and mortal male – if she managed to get him into the cave, he disappeared or died; but if he was successful in enticing her out of the cave, she met her death. This forms a word of warning, therefore, for all male cavers planning a caving expedition to Ireland!

As a final note, if you wish to learn more about how humans have interacted with caves in Ireland over the past 10,000 years, further information is available in my book *The Archaeology of Caves in Ireland* (see review, *Descent* 245). I would like to say how delighted I was that the book won the Tratman Award 2015, and I thank the judges for their feedback.

## Note

ARCHAEOLOGICAL legislation in the Republic of Ireland is significantly different from the archaeological legislation that covers Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. If you discover archaeological material in the Republic of Ireland, please do not remove the artefact/object/bones/material, but contact the National Museum of Ireland immediately (e-mail: [antiquitiesdo@museum.ie](mailto:antiquitiesdo@museum.ie)).

## CAG

READERS may also be interested in BCRA's Cave Archaeology Group – see: [www.cag.bcra.org.uk](http://www.cag.bcra.org.uk).

