

Archaeology Legacy Grant Report

Recipient name:	Michael Monk
Discipline and subject area:	Archaeology Legacy Projects Grant
Year awarded:	2023
Title of project:	Lisleagh I: Excavation Report

Summary of findings:

Introduction, basis of the site and acknowledgments.

The full interpretative report of Lisleagh I ringfort consists of an introduction to the genesis of, and basis for, the excavation project, an introduction to the site (description) and geographical location as well as an outline of the methods used, including single context recording. Also included are acknowledgements to all concerned, contributors to the volume and to the Royal Irish Academy for the funding.

The stratigraphic history of the site.

(i) Prehistoric beginnings and earthwork.

The main body of the report consists of a period- by- period description and some discussion of the archaeology of the site from pre-ringfort prehistoric Bronze Age activity and just pre-ringfort metal working and a central fire pit. The significant features of the ringfort, its short-lived beginnings as a smaller enclosure and then the larger sized and formidable earthwork with palisade trench is outlined and discussed.

(ii) Structures.

The main period of occupation is represented by the evidence for seven round buildings. Their stratigraphic sequence, verified by AMS C14 dates, from the beginning of the 7th C AD to the last quarter of the 8thC AD is outlined and their features that made up their individual phasing is outlined and discussed. Five of the seven showed evidence of rebuilding in particular the central house Structure V and Structure III built over the backfilled earlier ringfort ditch, which of necessity, because of subsidence, went through several phases of re-building.

(iii) Later occupation by specialist bloom smith.

Towards the end of the domestic occupation phase of the site, when the outer ditch seemed to have little or no significance it was used as a dump for a significant quantity of waste debris from iron working. Analysis by Dr Tim Young, the archaeometalurgist, has interpreted the debris as resulting from the remelting of primary blooms to refine them and increase their iron content. This was a specialised task undertaken on a large scale and dated to between the late 7thC to the early 11thC. While the furnaces for this operation were not found, in the interior





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cutting evidence for smaller scale iron smithing activity was discovered. It is not clear that any of the houses were occupied at that stage, but marginally it seems unlikely. A phase of large timber building construction seems possibly contemporary but none of the groups of post-holes form a convincing building plan.

(iv) Souterrain

Possibly contemporary with this phase or earlier (early- mid 8thC) a souterrain was constructed. It is not clear how long it was in use, but it seems it was backfilled in the 8thC/9thC. There is a possibility that it was contemporary with the round building Structure IV but this could not be confirmed stratigraphically.

(v) 19th /early 20thC cultivation of the interior.

The report covers the evidence for these phases and finishes up with the final 'period of use' in the 19th/early 20thC when the site was used for a short time as an enclosed space to grow potatoes in characteristic raised ridges.

Summary discussions of main features and finds from the site and catalogues of artefacts.

There then follows a summary discussion of the archaeological evidence. The penultimate section of the report is the catalogue of finds by material, with supporting introductions and discussion. The entries are in sequence beginning with copper alloy objects then followed by the iron objects, ceramics (Bronze age, e-ware, crucibles) glass beads, the stone artefacts chipped stone lithics, the ground stone objects – lignite bracelets, hone stones, perforated and unperforated stone discs, querns stones.

Dating list and Scientific reports.

The final section is made up of the specialist (scientific) reports beginning with an introduction and listing of the C14 dates. There then follows the reports on the iron working debris, the calcine bones, the charcoal, the non-wood macro plant remains and last by not least the oat cake fragments.

The report concludes with an overview of the evidence.

The full biography terminates the report.

Please outline the objectives of the project.

(a) To bring together and complete the finds catalogue, outstanding specialist reports, drawings (finds plans and sections), and photographs.

(b) To add these sections to an edited and re-phased interpretative stratigraphic report (based on new AMS dates) in order to produce a complete draft of the interpretative report, including discussions of key features and remains of the archaeological evidence, in particular the houses, iron working, non-wood macro-plant remains the oat cake fragments.

Please describe the methodology used in conducting the research.

(i) At the beginning of this part of the RIA funded project the specialist work and reports were outstanding for the iron working, charcoal, and calcine bone samples.

(ii) For the iron working study to be completed metallurgical analysis was needed on sub-samples of 47 samples of the iron working debris taken by Brian Scott during the excavations in 1981 and 1982. The majority of the samples were from the slag dump and associated debris in the outer ditch. Dr Tim Young was commissioned to undertake analysis of a sub-sample of 30 items from the original 47. The study which involved morphological, microstructural and elemental analysis was undertaken on 8 samples. This has now happened, and the report is completed on those



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samples as part of the report on the remaining complete assemblage (represented 20% of the total). His report highlights the continuing national significance of this assemblage. It is one of the few specialised assemblages indicating refinement (and re-melting) of iron (blooms) from a wide range of ore sources.

(iii) 120 samples were targeted from contexts for charcoal analysis by Dr Susan Lyons of which seventy were searched and thirty produced quantities of identifiable charcoal suitable for analysis. The charcoal samples have been identified and analysed and the report completed.

(iv) In the same way, a small collection of 1,689 calcine bone fragments were recovered from 51 samples by Roisin Navin of which 50 were identifiable and have been analysed and reported on.

(v) Fifty of the key artefacts from the assemblage of c.260 have been photographed by Dr John Sunderland for inclusion in the artefact catalogue to illustrate the report.

(vi) Seventy-five photographs of the key contexts and context complexes to support the report, as identified during the excavation, have been scanned for printing and inclusion in the interpretative report.

(vii) Circa 78 site plans and other drawings have been edited and drafts have been finalised and scanned ready for inclusion in the report and compiled with the rest of the report by Robin Turk .

(viii) The existing interpretative stratigraphic report has been revised and re-written with the re-phasing of the section on the structures and the full report has been edited and references updated.

(ix) The existing draft of the specialist report on the non-wood macro-plant remains (on 211 samples that produced remains from 290 fully searched) has been completed and the discussion changed and updated. A summary report of this including illustrations has been completed.

(x) The existing report on 7 oat cake fragments was only in draft form and had to be completed and the references found and confirmed. This is now done.

(xi) Catalogues for the c260 artefacts that were incomplete and in draft form have been finalised including discussions for various categories of artefact.

(xii) Ten samples of short-lived organic material (cereal grains) found associated with key contexts were selected and sent to the I4 Chrono radio-carbon laboratory in Queens University Belfast. The dates have been done and returned.

Please outline the findings of your research and/or milestones achieved.

(1) Confirmation of the stratigraphic sequence of the Lisleagh I structures via the AMS C14 dates obtained with funding from this year's grant from the RIA. It is noted that their construction covered a relatively short period from c600-774 AD.

(2) The metallurgical analysis of the iron debris from the dump in the outer ditch highlights and confirms the importance of these remains indicating large scale specialist production of refined blooms by remelting that would be traded widely. This evidence demonstrates that Lisleagh I is one of still less than ten sites nationally where it came be said that iron working was becoming more specialised during the early medieval period.

(3) The dated evidence for the excavations indicates a change from a small diameter to a larger diameter ringfort with larger earthworks and a palisade.

(4) However, from the Lisleagh I evidence it cannot necessarily be assumed that topographical appearance of a site is how it was throughout its occupation history. Lisleagh I was never intended to be bi-vallate ringfort.

(5) The archaeobotanical study includes a full analysis of the assemblage and an overall discussion. Given that the excavation of Lisleagh I was a research project it was possible to take and process a larger number of samples than

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on a commercially funded project. In total 1,486 of which 290 were selected and fully searched. Hence it was possible to provide greater insights into both distributional variation across the site and changes through time.

(i) The representation of the different cereals was quite different from other sites in the area. Had the site been later it is possible that *Avena* sp., oats would have had a greater representation in the Lisleagh samples, with the switch to oats cultivation away from barley beginning in the late 7thC but being more significant from the later 8thC.

(ii) Therefore six-row hulled barley is more present and as well as dominant in samples across Lisleagh I.

(iii) Perhaps the most interesting feature of the Lisleagh I assemblage is the significant presence of rye. This contrasts with not only the other sites in the locality, but also regionally and nationally.

(7) The charcoal study, indicated that all the main woods were used on site; oak and hazel were especially represented. There seems to have been a change in the later phased/dated samples, with an increase in woods of ash, willow and pine relative to oak.

(8) As a consequence of soil acidity there was practically no bone beyond a few teeth fragments present in the samples. However, a study of calcine bone has indicated representation of all the main domesticates and in particular a somewhat greater representation of pig.



Conclusion.

The Lisleagh I excavations had produced a number of individual significant pieces of evidence relevant to the study of the early medieval period as a whole but particularly for settlement and aspects of socioeconomic research.

Please provide details of the dissemination of the outcomes from this project.

The following publications were written to disseminate the results of the ongoing work on the Lisleagh project prior to the receipt of the 2022 RIA grant.

Monk, M.A (1988) 'Excavations at Lisleagh ringfort, north County Cork, Archaeology Ireland 2 No 2, 57- 60.

Monk, M. A (1995) 'A Tale of Two Ringforts: Lisleagh I and II' – Journal of Cork Historical and Archaeological Society 100, 105 – 116.

Monk, M. A (1998) 'Early Medieval Secular Settlement in Munster' in M. Monk and J.Sheehan (eds) Early Medieval Munster – Cork University Press. Cork, 33 – 52.



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McLaren, F., Monk, M and Sexton, R (2004) 'Burning the biscuit': evidence from Lisleagh excavations reveals new secrets twenty years on. *Archaeology Ireland*, Volume 18 No 3 Issue 69, 18-20.

Monk M (1983). 168 Lisleagh Medieval *Archaeology* 27, 217

Monk M (1984). 188 Lisleagh I Medieval *Archaeology* 28, 255

Monk M (1985). 186 Lisleagh I Medieval *Archaeology* 29, 213 – 4

O'Donnell M (2002) Lisleagh I/Lisleagh II in Ian W Doyle et al (2002) Unpublished Excavations in the Republic of Ireland 1930 -1997 prepared by the Heritage Council and Oxford Archaeology. Heritage Council. Page 93 listed with brief description as important single/multi-period site and page 106 Listed as category/priority I for publication.

How will you continue to communicate the results of your project and what are your publication plans?

Plan for report publication:

It is intended that Lisleagh I and Lisleagh II are published together in a monograph once the postexcavation work on Lisleagh II is completed. I do not as yet have publisher in mind but I have been impressed by Archaeopress Press in Oxford who published the monograph on Garranes by Professor William O'Brien and Nick Hogan in 2021. I am however willing to be guided by members of the committee.

Open access and digital archive availability:

I would agree that once the reports are completed and the site archive has been organised and in a suitable easily accessible form to make it searchable I would be happy for that to be available as an open access on-line, password protected digital resource. In the early 2000's I made parts of Lisleagh II paper archive (single context plans and drawings) available to taught master's students in UCC for an assessed exercise to derive a stratigraphic report from those sections of the site record. It would be excellent to have a digital version of the Lisleagh reports and archive for future students to search and learn whether that be by self or directed learning. Indeed, there will be parts of both sites where arguments could be made from the site record for alternative interpretations to the ones argued – provided the archive was all digitally accessible for such interaction. There is no such thing as a definitive report and digital availability potentially allows continuous interactive dialogue can be a reality. It does however, require investment beyond funding for report completion in order to facilitate that happening.

Papers:

There is considerable potential for several papers to arise from the completion of the Lisleagh I and II reports.

(i) 'The Lisleagh Ringfort project in the light of recent evidence for early medieval settlement in Ireland'. This would be a suitable paper for the *Journal for Medieval Archaeology*, *Medieval Europe* and nationally. The *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy (PRIA)*, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquities of Ireland* or *Journal (JRSAI)* the *Journal of Irish Archaeology (JIA)*.

(ii) A shorter version or a reflective piece viewing the changes in approaches, knowledge, in field work and post excavation over time would be good to place in 'Archaeology Ireland'. The title could be 'The Lisleagh Project 42 Years On'.

In addition, several papers would arise from the assemblages of remains recovered from the site.



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(i) Foremost among them would be on the iron working. This would merit a joint paper with Dr Tim Young, Jacinta Kiely and Tomás Ó Carragáin that would involve the exploration of the basis for the development of ironworking in the area of the early monastic site of Brigown (Bri Go dhan) (hill of the smiths) for which there is Iron Age antecedence at the site of Ballynamona 2 found prior to the M8 road building programme. Then there is the evidence for bell making at Gortnahown and the Ballinglana North I site which produced a similar assemblage of iron residues to Lisleagh I.

(ii) The Plant remains assemblage discussed in both a broader context from other contemporary sites and in terms of the methodological lessons learnt related to 'formation history' of the deposits they were found in, and their recording would justify separate papers.

The comparative study could be published in JIA and the latter specialist study in the Journal Environmental Archaeology.

Lectures/Conferences:

Several of the above papers will give rise to lectures or vice versa. These could be presented at conferences or stand-alone lectures to national/international or local societies and university groups. In terms of regular annual conferences that are potential possibilities for when I am close to completion or after completion of both reports there are two international conferences I would consider for the historical and archaeological aspects of the sites. There is the International Medieval Congress in Leeds UK every year. There is also the International Congress for Medieval Studies at the University of Western Michigan Kalamazoo USA that regularly hosts Irish Scholars.

In Ireland I have lectured to the Historic Settlement Group annual conference. The Institute of Archaeologists in Ireland hold a regular conference every year and I haven't lectured to them about the Lisleagh project in many years. In 2014 a conference was held in Fermoy ('Fir Maige-Fermoy from Gaelic Kingdom to Anglo-Norman Lordship'. Papers were presented at it by Dr Paul McCotter, Dr Tomás Ó Carragáin, Jacinta Kiely and myself amongst others.

With the archaeological work in the area then just finished and now published, 'Hidden Voices' (2019) plus the completion of the Lisleagh project within the next year or so and subsequent publications since then by others including Tomás Ó Carragáin the time is ripe to revisit some of the themes explored then as well as others. Such a conference will be the ideal vehicle to re-ignite interest in the Lisleagh project and acknowledgement the Academy's support for it throughout. There is even a possibility of having a day conference on the archaeology of Lisleagh and its historical landscape context. I think that would be best held at the time of the publication of the monograph.

One off lectures will be offered to the National and local societies for example the Society of Antiquities of Ireland, the Academy (RIA) and indeed off Ireland societies for example The Society of Antiquaries of London. The Cork Historical and Archaeological Society had approached me to present a lecture to them this year, but I suggested it we postpone until next year when I had the work on Lisleagh I completed and Lisleagh II well started. I regularly gave talks to the Mitchelstown Historical Society and the Fermoy Field Club when we were excavating at Lisleagh. It is certainly time for a revisit to both. I have lectured to Fermoy Historical Society and to the The Ballindangan Community Association and now I have more to say to those local communities it is time to do so.

In terms of public engagement beyond lectures to learned and local societies I have it mind to approach the Cork City Museum to with them put together an exhibition to coincide with the publication of the Lisleagh excavation monograph. Such an exhibition would certainly attract the media's attention and now that means engagement with social media and potentially can result in a podcast, so I am told. I am open to suggestions of the best ways to publicise the project from members of the committee.



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How did the award enhance your professional development?

The grant this last year has given me the opportunity to bring closer to fruition a project I began when I was in fulltime employment to follow up a piece of research I had committed a lot of time of energy to which not only enhanced my career before retirement but also opened up several areas of discussion and enabled me to test new methodologies. It also importantly provided an opportunity for over 50 students to excavation experience. Half of those students have gone on to a professional career in archaeology career themselves. It therefore helped to enhance their careers. The collaboration with other colleagues throughout has enhanced the experience and knowledge gained from this excavation project.

Please outline current plans to lead to completion of a final excavation report as per licence/consent and original grant condition

I have successfully applied for a further grant from the Academy for 2024 to complete the excavation report of Lisleagh II, the second and concluding part of the excavation project. The intention is to publish them both together.