



Archaeology Research Excavation Grant Report

Recipient name:	Elaine Lynch
Discipline and subject area:	Archaeology Research Excavation Grant
Year awarded:	2023
Title of project:	Excavation of two enclosure/hut sites in Ballyganner North, Co. Clare (Phase 2).

Summary of findings:

The excavation of two enclosure/hut sites CL009-242---- and CL009-292---- in the townland of Ballyganner North, Co. Clare (Phase 2) was undertaken from 8 May to the 26 May 2023. Two trenches were excavated.

Trench I

Trench I, which investigated the larger enclosure/hut site CL009-242---, measured 19.8m by 3m. A total of 129 archaeological contexts were uncovered within Trench I. The layers and features included the stone wall of the enclosure, occupation layers, a number of burials and a pit. The enclosing wall was a drystone construction consisting of loosely set large boulders and small stones with no obvious internal or external facing stones. The north side of the enclosing stone wall measured 1.58m wide with a height of 0.75m. The external face of the wall was comprised of large boulders which were sitting on top of small stones. The inner face was similar. The south side of the enclosing stone wall measured 1.4m with a height of 0.4m. It was evident the wall was more collapsed on this side, however there were some large set stones placed along the external face of the wall. The internal face was not determined and had collapsed.

Two burials were excavated within Trench I. The remains of an infant burial was found outside the north enclosing stone wall underneath the collapsed rubble. The burial was lying in a NNE/SSW orientation with the head to the NNE. The remains were badly degraded and only a few bones were identifiable.

Within the centre of the enclosure on the south side a crouched burial was found underneath a small cairn of stones. The skeleton was lying on its left side with the head to the east and facing in a south direction. The hands were placed under the chin. This burial has recently been radiocarbon dated to the 8th/9th century AD (this information was not available at the time of the preliminary report).

Directly to the north of the crouched burial was an extended burial lying in an east/west direction with the head to the west. The burial was not excavated and remains in situ.

Directly to the north of the extended burial was a second cairn of stones, oval in plan. The cairn was not excavated and remains in situ, it is possible there is a burial underneath.

A small oval pit with a single fill with inclusions of charcoal and animal bone was found in the southeast corner of the interior of the enclosure. The full extent of the pit is not known as it extended beyond the east site of the trench, but the excavated section of the pit measured 0.98mN/S by 0.7m E/W with a depth of 0.42m.

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A large number of lithics which are probably Bronze Age in date were found, but also Early Medieval artefacts consisting of glass and quartz beads, bone and glass toggles, worked bone, stone tools, whetstones, iron artefacts and an iron socketed arrowhead. Burnt and unburnt animal was also recovered from the trench.

Trench 2

Trench 2, which investigated the smaller enclosure/hut site CL009-292----, measured 10.5m by 3m. Five archaeological contexts were uncovered within Trench 2. The enclosing south wall was exposed and measured 2.4m wide and had a height of 0.4m. The enclosing wall was a drystone construction consisting of loosely set large boulders and small stones with no obvious internal or external facing stones. Within the centre of the site a layer of mid-brown clayey silt was found which was 0.11m deep. The majority of artefacts and animal bone were found within this layer. The artefacts consisted mainly of chert and some flint lithics, iron finds and some probable worked shale pieces.

Conclusion

It is not possible to determine a primary date and function for the enclosure/hut sites at present, but it is possible that they are multi-period and had a number of different functions, burials being a notable use for one of the enclosure/hut sites during the 8th/9th century. Post-excavation analyses and radiocarbon dates will provide more specific functions and dates for the sites. The large number of lithics from the sites indicates prehistoric activity, with a later use in the medieval period.

Please outline the objectives of the project.

There are numerous similar enclosure/hut sites, both recorded and unrecorded, in the Burren. Those recorded are usually described as hut or house sites or enclosures without reference to age or function. Due to the excellent survival of monuments from all ages in the Burren it is often not possible to associate these small enclosures/house sites with certainty to any of the nearby diagnostic monuments.

The main objectives of the project are:

- To identify the function of these sites.
- To date the sites.
- To provide researchers with answers to some of the questions on the prolonged habitation of the Burren.
- To establish the relationship of these lesser-known sites to the better known monuments on the Burren.
- To reach out to the local community by having local volunteers partake in the excavation.
- To enhance the preservation of these sites by raising the awareness of them.
- To provide training in all aspects of archaeological excavation, including 'best practice' recording of archaeological features, to the volunteers.
- To disseminate the findings of the excavation to the local community and wider audience through social media, presentations and outings.
- The excavation involved the local community and local volunteers from the Burren Programme (BP) farmers and Burrenbeo Trust Conservation Volunteers (BCVs) including some current NUIG archaeological students. The excavation



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provided useful training on all aspects of archaeological excavation and the value of 'best practice' recording of archaeological features.

Please describe the methodology used in conducting the research.

Two trenches were excavated, Trench 1 measured 19.8m by 3m and Trench 2 measured 10.5m by 3m. Both trenches incorporated the wall and centre of the enclosures/hut sites. The trenches were divided into grids (1m by 1m) to record the location of artefacts and animal bone. A single context method of archaeological recording was employed on site. Records were kept in Registers (context; drawing; photography; finds); context sheets; drawings (permatrace for scanning at post-ex stage); and digital photos.

The extent of the excavation area was fully surveyed and recorded at pre-ex, mid-ex and post-ex stages. All excavation work was done using hand tools and all contexts excavated were sieved on the site with the aim to uncover artefacts, animal bone and organic material which may have been missed during excavation. A metal detector under licence 23R0108 was used on the topsoil sods and excavated soil. Levels were taken on the excavated layers and artefacts which were found in situ. A 3d photogrammetry model was done of the crouched burial for recording purposes.

Digital photos were taken of all individual contexts. Record shots and those suitable for future publication were also taken throughout the excavation. A UAV ('a drone') was used to provide vertical aerial images of the excavation as it progressed and upon completion. All contexts and features were planned and the site plans were digitised after the excavation. All the site registers, plans and photos were converted and saved digitally for archival purposes.

A number of samples were taken of the archaeological layers during the excavation to ascertain information on the nature and extent of archaeology, or for dating purposes. All secure contexts were bulk sampled and processed off site at post excavation stage.

All finds recovered were bagged and recorded according to the licence number, context number, and unique identifier number from that context e.g. I-infinity. All finds requiring conservation have been stored as per specialist advice and packaged as per National Museum of Ireland guidelines.

After the excavation the site was backfilled and covered in. A preliminary report on the findings was completed within one month of the excavation and submitted to the NMS.

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

The excavation of the two trenches revealed layers and features were associated with a range of activity within the centre of these enclosures/hut sites which included enclosing stone wall, habitation layers, rubble layers, a number of human burials and a single pit feature. A large number of artefacts were uncovered from the sites which comprised



of chert and flint lithics which are probably Bronze Age in date, along with a number of early medieval finds consisting of glass and quartz beads, bone and glass toggles, stone tools, whetstones, iron artefacts and an iron socketed arrowhead. Quantities of burnt and unburnt animal bone were found throughout the layers on the site. Charcoal and animal bone was collected for radiocarbon dating. A small number of heat shattered stones were also uncovered.

A number of burials were also found within the larger enclosure/hut site CL009-242----, one of which was a crouched burial beneath a small stone cairn. This burial has been radiocarbon dated to the 8th/9th century AD. The discovery of



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burials were unexpected. Two remains were excavated, the crouched burial and that of an infant. Also revealed was what appears to be an adult extended burial (unexcavated). A second cairn 4 of stones was also found which was not excavated.

Initial interpretation of the function of the enclosures/hut sites is still in the preliminary phase and the original functions of the sites are undetermined. It is possible that the enclosing structure is contemporary with the burials or the earlier Bronze Age activity that occurred on the site, evident from the lithics.

The preliminary report has been completed and submitted to the NMS, NMI and RIA. Three samples have been sent for radiocarbon dating, one of which has revealed a date of 8th/9th century AD. The artefacts have been cleaned and stored awaiting the post-ex stage. The samples are due to be processed over the next few months. The human remains have been cleaned and stored appropriately with guidance from the osteologist. The site plans are currently being digitized. Post-excavation analyses on the artefacts and human remains will be carried out in 2024/2025 following application for funding from the RIA (Phase 4).

The excavation has been exceptional in achieving the raising of awareness of the archaeology of the Burren amongst the local community. By involving local farmers and Burrenbeo Trust volunteers in the project, the awareness of these lesser known monuments has been enhanced. Also, valuable training on all aspects of archaeological excavation including 'best practice' recording of archaeological features was provided.

The licence holder is involved in the Field Monument Adviser (FMA) programme for Co. Clare, through which, the results of the excavation were disseminated to the local community and wider public. This excavation is playing a major role in raising awareness of the Burren archaeology among the local and farming community.

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

- I presented at the Geopark Conference in May 2023 on the preliminary finding from the excavation at Ballyganner North.
- I gave a presentation for a teacher training course on Burren archaeology and the processes of excavation using examples from Lismohr and Ballyganner North in June.
- I gave a farm walk to the excavation sites at Limohr and Ballganner North to the Shannon Archeological and Historical Society in July.
- For heritage week I gave a public presentation in Kilfenora Community Hall on the recent works of the Field Monument Advisor Programme which included the excavations at Lismohr and Ballyganner North.
- I also gave an online presentation run by Burrenbeo Trust as part of their monthly seminars in September on the preliminary findings from the excavation at Ballyganner North. This presentation is uploaded onto youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVeHREIVOXQ>



- Preparations have been made to present both excavations at the RIA Conference 2023.
- Preparations have been made to presentations to the Ennistimon historical Society and to Shannon Archeological and Historical Society early in 2024.

No. of Lectures given/outreach events: 5

Media Coverage (article in local newspaper, feature on University website etc.): The Field Monument Advisor Programme has a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/FMAProgramme>) and an Instagram page (<https://www.instagram.com/fmaprogramme/>) which published numerous posts on the 2023 excavation. Also, a



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number of posts about the excavation were created by the Burrenbeo Trust (<https://www.facebook.com/BurrenbeoTrust>).

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

I will continue to share any updates on the excavation through social media (FMA facebook and Instagram page) and continue to give presentations on the excavation such as presenting at RIA Conference 2023 in December. There are plans to give two presentations, one to the Ennistimon Historical Society and the second to the Shannon Archaeological and Historical Society early in 2024. Once the post-ex report has been completed, a publication on the excavation will be submitted to the Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy if appropriate. Also, articles will be submitted to The Other Clare and/or The Journal of IAI.

How did the award enhance your professional development?

The grant gave me an opportunity to continue to excavate previously unexcavated sites in the Burren and to broaden the excavations into a project with the aim of understanding these lesser-known monuments. The unexpected burials has thrown a whole different interpretation into the function or at least the possible reuse of these sites as familial cemeteries of the 8th/9th century. It has also given me the opportunity to enhance my professional development by directing a second research excavation. My skills in training the volunteers in most aspects of archaeological excavation/recording and in communicating with the local community have also been enhanced. The excavations have also given me the opportunity to present and engage with the community. 6 The artefacts recovered to date have already provided opportunities to communicate and collaborate with specialists and researchers in several areas. These developments would not have been possible without the support of the RIA.

What plans (if any) do you have to further your proposal/project?

Due to the unexpected findings of burials and lithics from Phase 2 excavations, I intend to return and excavate a second trench (Phase 3) through enclosure/hut site CL009-242----. The aim is to excavate the extended burial and the second cairn of stones and determine if there is another burial beneath. The main aim of this phase is to determine if the all the burials are contemporary or not. It is likely that all the burials on the site were later insertions into the enclosure/hut site, however further dates and investigations should confirm this.

The extension of the trench within the interior and across the enclosure wall should answer further questions on the construction of the enclosure/hut site. The aim is to determine the extent of the probable Bronze Age activity on the site and understand the relationships between the different features uncovered during Phase 2. The amount of lithics which were recovered indicate prehistoric activity which possibly relates to the construction of the enclosing stone wall or possibly predates this feature. This will also help determine whether the burials were inserted into an existing prehistoric enclosure, an aspect of these enclosures/hut sites not previously investigated.

It should answer the many questions outlined above and also whether the site was used as a familial cemetery in the Early Medieval period a feature not previous recognised or excavated in the Burren. Phase 3 will be the final excavation and an application for funding for post-ex will be submitted in September 2024