

Archaeological discoveries in Glencurran Cave, Co. Clare

by Dr Marion Dowd

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Presented is a report into excavations carried out in Glencurran Cave, Co. Clare between 2004 and 2009. The excavations have revealed a history of occupation dating back to the Middle Bronze Age when the cave had a ritual significance, with later human occupation in the Early Medieval Period. The discovery of a rare Viking necklace is noted.

Introduction

Glencurran Cave is located in the Burren National Park close to the villages of Kilnaboy and Carron. In 1986 caver Brian Judd found a human mandible in the cave and in 2002, after hearing about this discovery from Graham Mullan of the University of Bristol Speleological Society, I visited the cave with Amy and Colin Bunce. Human and animal bones were scattered over the cave floor and amongst one scatter of bone was a perforated dog/wolf canine (fig. 1). Disturbance to archaeological layers had been caused by animal and human activities in the cave in addition to occasional flooding. After consultation with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DEHLG), it was decided to carry out rescue excavations at the site with the twin aims of recovering archaeological material that was most at risk from further disturbance and establishing the nature of archaeological activities in the cave. Excavations began in 2004 but the results were so spectacular and unique in an Irish and British context that we returned to the site in 2005, 2008 and 2009 – overall for 12 weeks.

At present Glencurran Cave reaches over 750m in length. However, it seems that only the outer 65m are of archaeological interest. Though excavations involved a small team due to lighting and space limitations, approximately 30,000 animal bones and bone fragments, 500 artefacts and 100 human bones have been recovered from the site. An intensive sieving programme was put in place where 100% of all deposits excavated both inside and outside the cave were sieved. Consequently, even the tiniest bones and artefacts were recovered. Two main periods of activity are represented from the excavations: Bronze Age ritual activity (circa 500 BC) and Early Medieval occupation (circa 7th - 9th century AD). This year a bear scapula (Fig. 2) was also discovered and the radiocarbon date – 8,000 BC – confirms this as the oldest bear in Clare.

Bronze Age ritual

An artificial stone-built cairn is located about 15m from the cave entrance at the end of the sloping cave passage. This cairn is semicircular in plan, of drystone

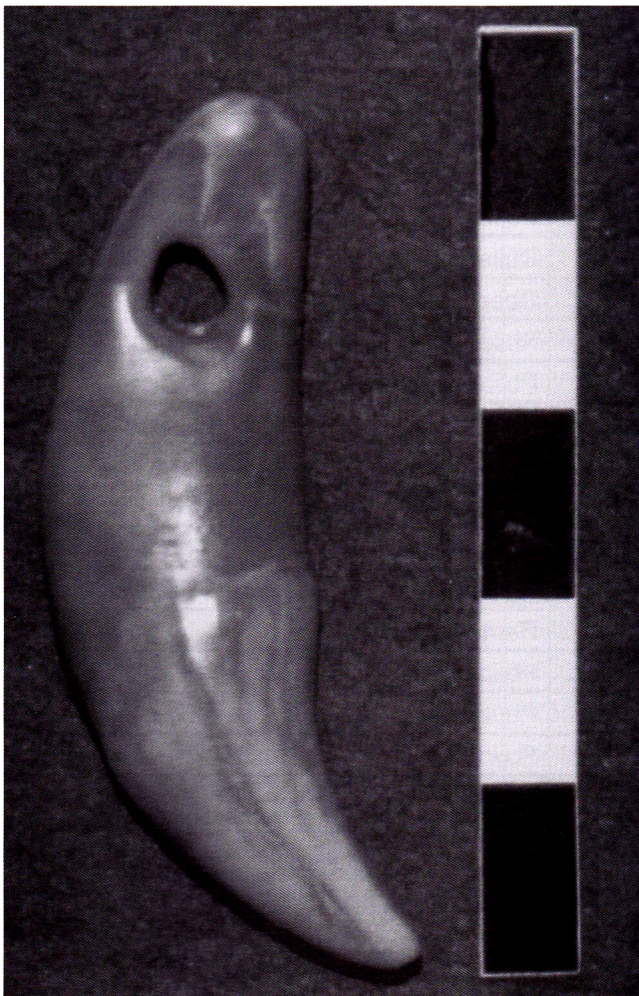


Figure 1. Perforated dog/wolf canine (M. Dowd)

construction and was topped with a deposit of decayed calcite which was taken from the cave walls and floor when wet to 'cement' the structure. Above ground, the cairn measures 2.5m x 1.5m x 1.6m high but upon excavation, a lower sunken stone built chamber was revealed. Both the upper and the lower levels of this structure had been filled with layer upon layer upon layer of decayed calcite dug up from the rear of the cave in addition to calcite that was cleaved off the cave walls. Some of the extraction pits are still visible today and chisel marks have been identified on the ceiling and walls of the cave. The function of the cairn is not



Figure 2. Bear scapula (R. Hinchy)

yet clear. Certainly it served as some form of ritual monument, perhaps marking the transitional point of the cave where the inward sloping passage terminates and the flat cave floor begins. The human mandible found in 1986 was discovered within the wall of this cairn in addition to two human clavicles (shoulder bones). On the cave floor, directly beneath the cairn, a concentration was discovered including a shale axe, a rubbing stone, a copper-alloy object, a net sinker, three bone beads, three perforated cowrie shells, a perforated periwinkle (fig. 3) and an unperforated periwinkle shell and 42 amber bead fragments with a few complete beads (fig. 4). Amber is a relatively rare find and, coupled with a probable Baltic origin for the beads, suggests that Glencurran Cave was used by high status members of the community. Intermingled with the artefacts were 17 human bones representing two adults; one bone produced a Middle Bronze Age date of 3035 ± 36 BP (UB-6660). Animal bones from this area represented four sheep (most under 6 months), two cattle and two pigs. Some bones were scorched and bore butchery marks.

Deeper in the cave, approximately 45m from the entrance, a series of Late Bronze Age ritual deposits were discovered which indicate that the cave was perceived at this time as a sacred place - a place of veneration - where offerings were left presumably to the gods. Scattered throughout the area were human bones representing five adults, two 2-4 year old children and a newborn baby. It seems that one of the children was placed in the cave as an intact corpse. However, the remainder of the bones seem to have been introduced into the cave in a disarticulated state particularly as there were a disproportionate number of clavicles present. The most likely scenario is that graves outside the cave were opened, particular bones selected and then brought into the cave. Several of the human bones were radiocarbon dated and all returned Bronze Age dates.

In addition to the human bones, amber beads, sherds of three typical Late Bronze Age pots and a scatter of 85 perforated cowrie shells and perforated periwinkle shells were found. Presumably these shells would

have been strung to form an item of jewellery or may have been attached to clothing. The faunal assemblage from this part of the cave is also intriguing including 21 sheep, eight cattle and five hares. Some sheep and cattle bones bore butchery and skinning marks suggesting joints of meat while full carcasses were also present. Remains of 15 pigs were also found and the presence of neonatal remains suggest that at least some of the pigs were deposited in spring time when farrowing commences. Spring was also indicated by the presence of a shed antler tine of a red deer. What is particularly remarkable was the concentration of burnt/cremated neonatal animals including at least six neonatal lambs, three neonatal piglets, one possible foetal pig and two neonatal calves. Neonatal animals are of little or no nutritional value and so their deposition in a burnt/cremated state near the remains of a young child must be of symbolic significance. The age of the sacrificed animals may have been seen as 'sympathetic' to the age of the child.

Early Medieval occupation

The area immediately inside the cave entrance was occupied during the Early Medieval period and the platform outside seems to have been used as a working area. A series of limestone blocks were neatly fitted across the cave entrance and it is possible that they functioned as a plinth for a wooden door, particularly as an iron barrel padlock key was discovered inside



Figure 3. Perforated periwinkle (T. Kahlert)

the cave. The remains of a crude hearth occurred immediately outside the entrance and contained a rich charcoal deposit and burnt and charred animal bones. Charcoal analysis indicated local collection of dead wood and twigs or small branches. Artefacts found on the platform outside the cave included a socketed sickle, a tanged knife, a stone spindle whorl and a perforated iron strap possibly from a wooden bucket. Such items are frequent finds on ringforts and cashels throughout the country and indicate that the occupant/s of the cave carried out a range of everyday activities involving typical everyday tools. Just inside the cave entrance, a ringed pin was discovered where it seems



Figure 4. Amber beads (T. Kahlert)

to have been deliberately placed under a flat stone with a certain degree of care.

The animal bones from the entrance chamber and the platform represent butchery and consumption. Outside the cave entrance, the faunal remains consisted mainly of bones of cattle, sheep and pigs associated with primary butchering waste. Hare bones from this area also displayed skinning marks indicating that this animal was trapped and killed presumably for meat and fur. Inside the cave entrance, most of the bones represented meat-bearing elements of cattle, sheep and pig. The evidence suggests that animals were butchered outside the entrance, meat was presumably roasted over the hearth and then consumed inside the cave. The occurrence of domestic fowl, mallard and goose bones in the entrance area may also represent the remains of meals. The quantity of animal bones indicates either long-term domestic occupation of the cave or repeated intermittent periods of occupation. Glencurran Cave is one of 17 Irish caves that have produced evidence for Early Medieval occupation, probably short term in nature. The size of these caves suggests one occupant, possibly an itinerant, shepherd or someone travelling away from home. Ethnohistorical information from Scotland indicates that travellers and peddlers lived in caves on a regular but intermittent basis, usually for a few months at a time. While the occupant of Glencurran Cave is unlikely to be an individual of high status, the artefacts suggest that neither was this person unfree. However, a discovery deep in the cave points to another possibility.

In the same part of the cave where the Late Bronze Age burial was located, a Viking necklace of almost 70 glass beads (fig. 5) was recovered. The necklace can be dated to the mid 9th century AD. A large proportion of the beads were segmented and covered with gold foil. Similar beads are known from Viking burials at Kilmainham, Islandbridge and Fishamble Street, Dublin as well as from the Viking trading site of Birka in Sweden. In Scandinavia, these necklaces are associated with Viking women where they represent status, prestige and sometimes religious affiliation. The nearest Viking settlement is at Limerick and the necklace most likely found its way to the Burren via trade between Limerick Vikings and local wealthy Gaelic



Figure 5. Viking glass beads (T. Kahlert)

families. How the necklace ended up in Glencurran Cave is another matter altogether! One explanation is that it was stolen and hidden deep within the cave but never retrieved, maybe by the individual/s who lived in the cave for a time. The nearby high status settlement of Cahercommaun could have been a likely place of origin for such a prestige item.

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