



## **Archaeological Excavation Report**



**Carran Mediaeval Church, Poulacarran, Carran, Co. Clare.**

Monument Number: CL009-075001

Licence: Ministerial Consent. No. C000793

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## 1. Introduction

The report details an archaeological excavation, carried out by R UaCróinín at the NW corner of Carran mediaeval church, Carran, Co. Clare. The church is a recorded monument, CL009-075001. The excavation was carried out by hand, by the licensee, on September 1<sup>st</sup> 2017. It consisted of a single trench 2m X 1m, on a low mound, abutting the exterior of the north wall of the church, from the NW corner towards the east. It is on the site of a historic collapse of a stone machicoulation, at parapet level. Material was dug by hand and sieved using a 1/8" mesh. The maximum depth was 40cm, to retrieve building stone and level the mound. Bedrock or foundation level of the church was not found at this level, and may be a further 500mm deep. Material recovered consisted of three architectural fragments, seven items of bone (probably animal) and two samples of mortar.

### **Rationale:**

Carran Church is a Demonstration Site under the GeoparkLIFE programme (LIFE 11 ENV/IE/922). It was proposed to carry out essential repairs consolidate the building and make it safe for visitors. Repairs were required to the NW corner of Carran mediaeval church due to structural cracking. The condition of the corner was assessed by ACP Ltd. Consulting conservation engineers in 2015 and National Monuments Service was notified. Ministerial consent was granted under conditions. One of the conditions was that an archaeological excavation would be carried out at the exterior of the NW corner prior to works commencing. A Ministerial Consent License was granted to Clare County Council archaeologist Risteard UaCroinin. It was proposed to excavate the site in mid July but a dispute arose with the landowner, regarding access, which was resolved in late August.

The purpose of the excavation was to:

- (a) Retrieve building stone and architectural fragments which had fallen from the corner.
- (b) Provide a level surface to erect scaffolding
- (c) To reveal a section of the lower wall, for repointing, which was covered with a low mound.

\* The GeoparkLIFE Project

Between 2011 and 2017, an EU LIFE project brought together tourism and conservation agencies, local tourism businesses and community groups to develop ways of caring for our local heritage sites into the future. By working together to safeguard these sites they are ensuring they can be enjoyed and appreciated by all for many generations to come.

**Appendices:** (1) Annotated Photographic Record

- (2) Copies of historic maps and aerial photo.

(3) Report on sifting through fallen stone outside West Gable. 23-10-17

## **2. General information:**

**Site:** Carran Mediaeval Church, Pollacarran, Carran, Co. Clare

**Monument No:** CL009-075001

**NGR:** Centre of site coordinates: 523950 697419

**Geology of site:** Shallow humus on natural limestone bedrock.

**Ordnance Datum:** 430'

**Licenses:** Ministerial Consent No: C000793

Excavation: E004819

Works: W000295 .

OS Maps (Reproduction) License: Clare County Council

**Client:** Cliffs of Moher / Burren GeoparkLIFE.

**License Holder:** Risteard UaCróinín BA, MA, MIAI, MAACO.

**Fieldwork:** Risteard UaCróinín BA, MA, MIAI, MAACO

**Company:** Clare County Council.

**Date of Excavation:** 1<sup>st</sup> September 2017

**Date of Report:** September 2017

**Report Author:** Risteard UaCróinín BA, MA, MIAI, MAACO

**Photographs:** Risteard UaCróinín BA, MA, MIAI, MAACO

### **Recorded Archaeological Monuments within 200m. radius of the site:**

CL009-075001 Church

CL009-075002 Graveyard

CL009-075003 Cairn

CL009-075005 Settlement

CL009-075006 House

CL009-075007 House

CL009-075008 House

CL009-075010 House

CL009-075011 House

### **Location / Geology**

The excavation site is abutting the north wall of Poulacarran mediaeval, parish church, between Kilfenora and Ballyvaughan, Co. Clare, from the NW west corner eastwards (2m). The church stands on a high (430 foot) Burren hill, overlooking a large depression in the karst limestone landscape, to the east. Hence the townland name Poulacarran – Poll a' Chairn – Depression of the Cairn.

It appears the church was built on bedrock, as the bedrock here is very close to the surface, which it breaks, frequently. It is likely that stones for the construction of the church were quarried nearby, and by their cracked and weathered appearance were taken from shallow limestone quarries. Stones for drainage flags, corners, doorcases, windows, belfry, corbels, machicoulis, barges and other features were taken from a deeper quarry as they appear to be free of natural faults and weaknesses.



Stone Liscannor roof slates in graveyard.

It is likely that the high quality lime mortar was also burned locally using local limestone, while there is evidence that the church was roofed using stone flags from the quarries at Lough and Doolin. The practice of roofing such buildings with local stone flags is evident from examples at Dysert O'Dea tower house, Corofin and Kilmacrehy Church, Liscannor.

### **General description of Carran Mediaeval Church**

A detached, gabled, fortified, stone church, rectangular in plan with a wall walk outside the roof, protected by a stone parapet. The church is built with large, undressed limestone, quarried blocks set in erratic courses, bedded in a rich lime mortar. Corner stones, corbels, machicoulis, windows and doorways are cut from limestone blocks and finished to a fine smooth surface, as is common in 13<sup>th</sup> century masonry. The main entrance doorway is an exceptionally fine piece of craftsmanship, composed of numerous orders of convex and concave mouldings under a pointed-arch hood, as is the remaining window on the south wall.

From the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century this was the primary church of the largest parish in the Burren.

A doorway in the south wall opens into the body of the church. The altar of the church was located beneath the east window. On the west gable, protruding corbels indicate where the floor of an upper storey rested. This is likely to have been the priest's quarters.

The remains of stone cairns, medieval house footings, field walls and enclosures are still evident today in the surrounding fields.

### **Doorway**



**Elaborate Doorway at Carran.**

The finely carved, cut stone doorway has an ornamental moulding forming a pointed arch with a carved hooded dripstone above to protect it from rainwater. An incised consecration cross is carved on the west side of the inner part of the door and a plain stoup (a small stone container for holy water) on the east side. Part of a quern stone is re-used in the interior stonework to the east of the doorway.

### **Windows**

All three windows in the church have tall narrow openings with cut stone surrounds. The exterior of the ogee headed arch in the most easterly window in the south wall is decorated with floral motifs. The second window in the south wall has been badly damaged with only

the sill stone remaining. All of the windows have interior splayed embrasures to maximise



the amount of light entering the church.

South window,

### **The Stone Head**

On the interior north wall a small helmeted head of a soldier or knight projects from a plain block of stone. The face is pear shaped with a narrow, straight ended chin, a narrow thin slit mouth and a large, straight nose. The large, almond shaped eyes are closely spaced. The helmet covers the ears and side of the face. Historical sources state that the head was originally one of three, the others depicting a king and a female.



Stone head in north wall.

### **Defensive features**

The projecting corbels in the west interior of the Church indicate that an upper storey existed, at the west end, which may have been the priest's living quarters. On the exterior wall of the north-west corner is a defensive feature known as a machicolation. There was likely another one, beside it on the north wall, which has since collapsed. These were used to protect this corner from attack or undermining. This may indicate that this corner was outside a high defensive wall which may have protected the ecclesiastical complex and abutted the church gable. Vestiges of this wall can still be discerned near the western boundary wall. It indicated a necessity for the church occupiers to defend themselves in times of civil unrest, which were common in 15<sup>th</sup> century Ireland.



NW corner showing machicoulis and parapet.

### **Cairns and House Footings.**

There are a number of 'cairns' or heaps of stones in the field surrounding the Church which may have been used as penitential stations or places of burial in the past. The largest cairn is located to the south of the church. This may have given the townland its name: Poll a' Chairn (The Cairn Depression), which is obvious to the east of the site. An old custom required coffins to be carried around this cairn before bringing them into the churchyard. Rectangular foundations remaining to the north west of the Church are likely to have been medieval house sites and smaller out buildings.



House site to north of church.

### **The Excavation:**

The excavation was carried out on Friday September 1<sup>st</sup> 2017 by the licensee. The weather was bright and dry. A unit 2m x 1m. was excavated parallel to the church wall. Two stone corbels lying and embedded in the surface, close to the excavation were unearthed, carefully, photographed and set aside, to be deposited in the churchyard, (when help becomes available.)

#### **Level 1.**

This related to the removal, by hand, of the scraw (top grass sod). The depth was approximately 10cm. Each sod was examined for finds and laid aside for replacement. Due to the amount of rubble stone under the sods, they were easily lifted. They produced no finds.

## Level 2

Approximate depth 20cm. This required the removal of one architectural feature (squared, dressed, limestone block, laid beside the corbels) and various rough small building stones and small rubble infill. These were set aside separately for re-use, by the contractor. The earth between the stones consisted of rich, semi-dry, black humus. This was dry-seived using a 1/8 inch mesh sieve and revealed the seven bone sherds. No other finds were discovered at this level.

## Level 3

This was the final level to create a flat surface for the contractor. I came to a depth of c10cm and consisted of small rubble stone and humus as above. The material was dry sieved again and revealed two samples of lime mortar. No further depth was excavated as it was considered unnecessary, as the purpose of the excavation had been achieved. The bedrock surface or footings of the church wall were not reached and may be a further 500mm deeper. On the completion of the excavation the removed grass screws were replaced on the unit.

## **Results:**

The only finds were as discussed above:

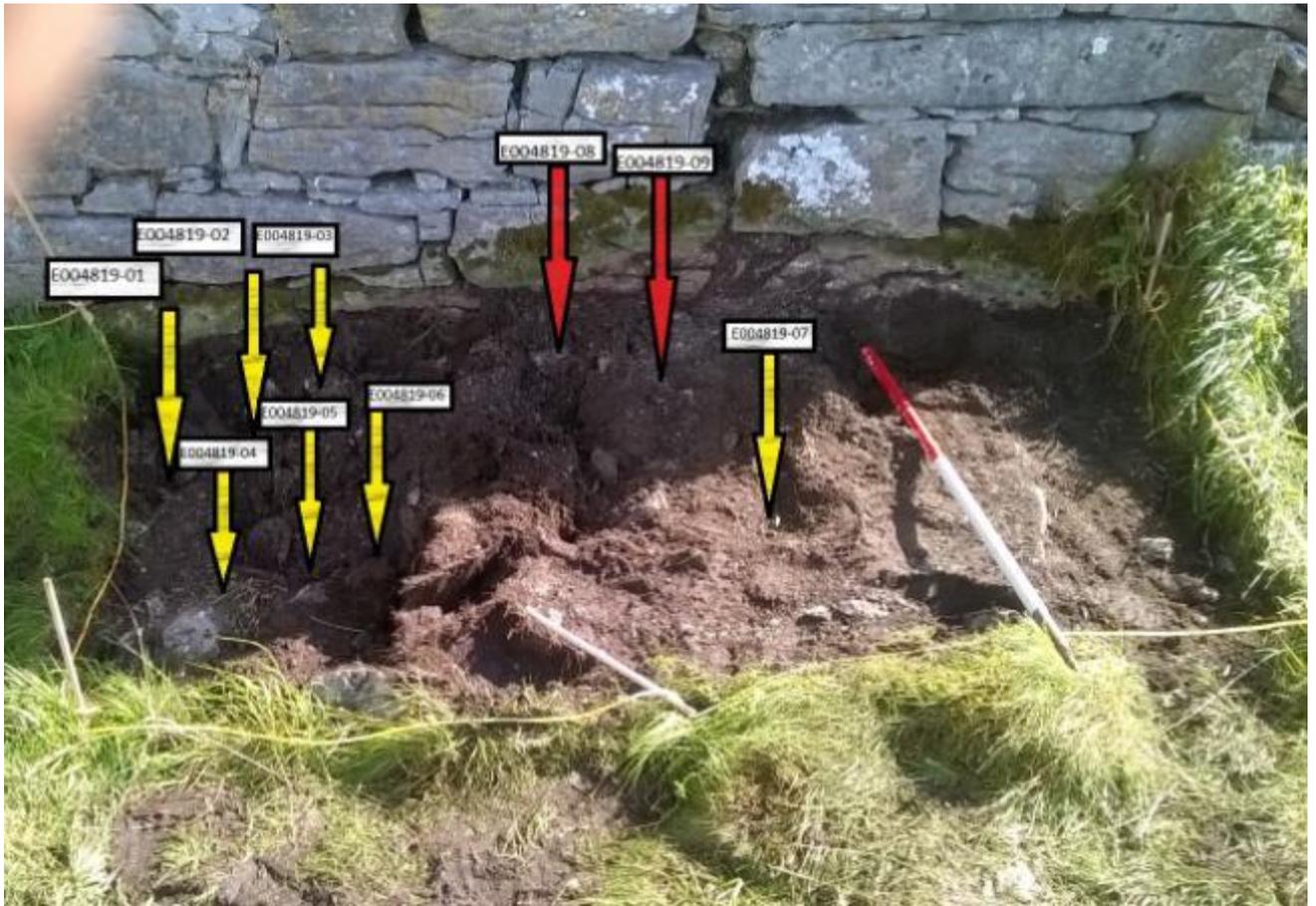
Three architectural stone fragments i.e two stone corbels (probably the remains of a second machicoulis on the north wall and a cut, dressed limestone block.

Seven bone sherds from level two (see photos) and two mortar samples from level three.

The bone samples have been sent to Dr. Mara Tesorieri, Bio-archaeologist, Dublin, for identification. She has stated that they are likely ancient human bones, not unusual in a graveyard which was likely often disturbed for multiple burials.

The mortar samples can be sent to Jason Bolton, Stone and Mortar consultant, if required.

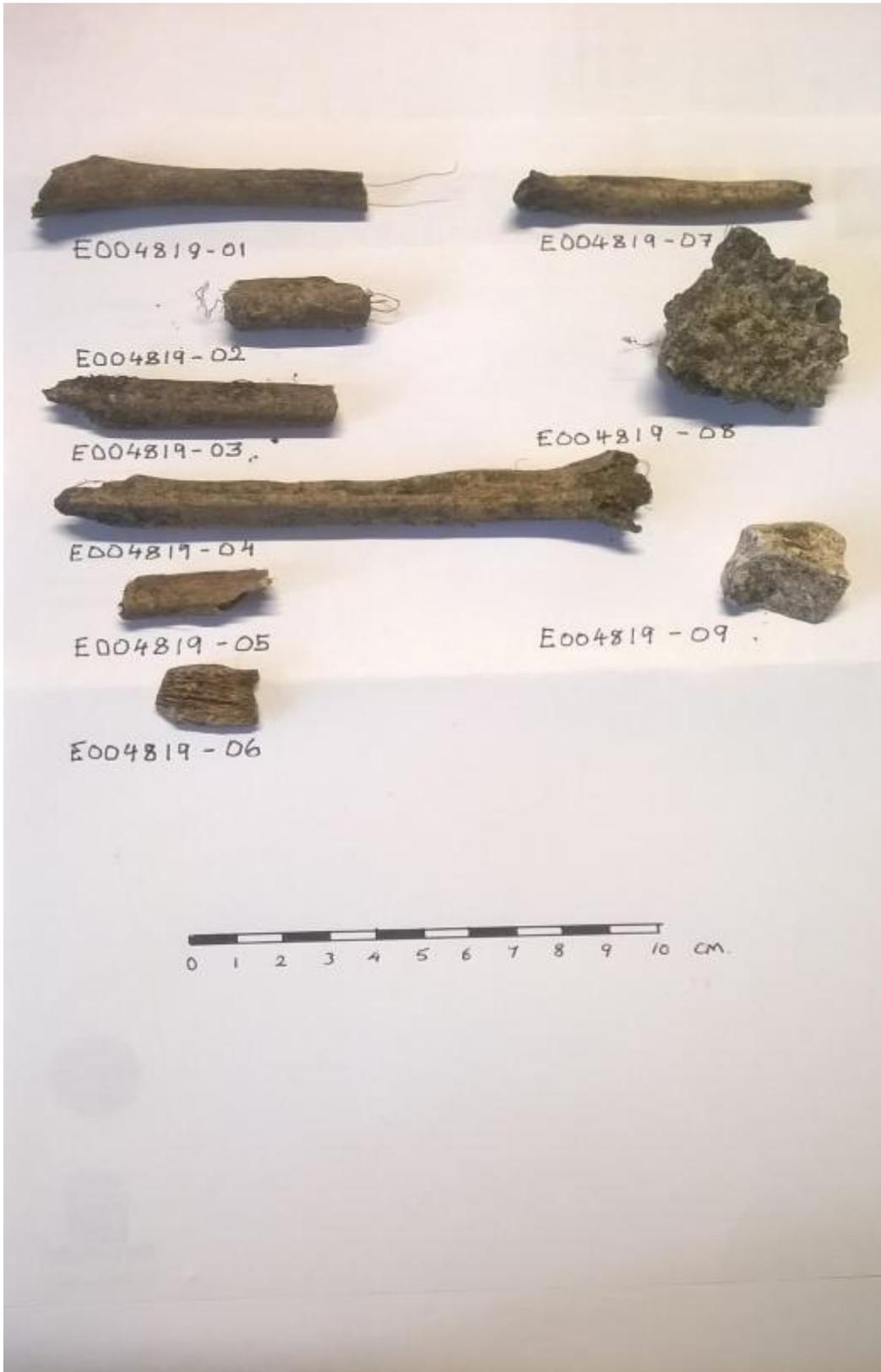
There is a pile of loose stone, heaped against the exterior of the west gable, above ground level to a height of c. 700mm. This is on the surface and does not interfere with archaeological levels. It will be removed and examined for architectural fragments, under archaeological supervision over the next few weeks, prior to repair works commencing.



Provenance of finds.

Yellow arrows – bone

Red arrows – mortar samples.



Finds.

Bone and mortar samples.

## Appendix 1

□

Annotated Photographic Record.



Site prior to excavation 1-9-2017





Pair of limestone corbels lying on surface beside site.

- (a) 1200mm x 260mm x 160mm.
- (b) 800mm x 200mm x 160mm.



Excavation site and corbels prior to works.



Long corbel from side.



Short corbel from side.



Excavation site. Scraw (top sod) removed.



Scraw removed (detail).



Scraw removed. Perspective view. Cut stone block to left.



Cut stone block lifted.



Cut stone block removed. 650mm x 300mm x 240mm.



Excavation at 10cm. depth showing historic rubble stone collapse from wall top.



Rubble stone removed to 30cm. depth.



East section excavated to 40cm. depth (level). Rubble stone removed.



Complete unit excavated to 40cm. depth. (level) Rubble stone removed.



Stones retrieved. Building rubble to right, infill stones to centre.



Top sods and earth spoil.



Site backfilled and re-sodded. 1-9-2017 Stain on wall shows the height of the excavation.



Pair of corbels and dressed stone block left on grass to be re-located in churchyard.



Half of door arch marking grave outside main entrance door.

Ordnance Survey Letters by John O'Donovan and Eugene Curry, 1839  
Parish of Carron (a)

Inis Diomain,  
October 23rd 1839.

Dear Sir,

The next part of Burren which I have examined is the extensive Parish of Carron. It is bounded on the west and northwest by the Parishes of Noughaval, Kilcoarney and Oghtmama; on the northeast by the Co. of Galway; on the east by the Parish of Kilkeedy and on the south by that of Killinaboy.

This Parish is now called in Irish Paráiste an Chairn and the old Church Teampull a Chairn, i.e., the Parish and Church of Carn, or the Sepulchral Heap, and yet there is no cairn near the old Church at least in the same Townland with it. The nearest cairn to the old Church of this Parish is about one mile to the west of it, and in the Townland of Ballydoory; but whether the Parish was originally called after this or from some other now destroyed, which stood nearer the old Church, is a question that cannot be easily answered. Nothing, however, is more certain than that Teampull a Chairn, the present name of the old Church means the Church of the Cairn. The word Cárn, which is pronounced long in the north of Ireland, is here pronounced short - Carn.

The old Church of Carn is situated in a Townland of the same name about six miles to the northwest of Corofin. It measures in the clear fifty six feet ten inches in length and twenty feet eight inches in breadth. The west gable contains no feature but a broken belfry on its top. The south contains a pointed doorway six feet ten inches in height and three feet eight inches in width, and two windows, one of which is pointed, but the other is so broken at the top that its characteristics cannot be ascertained, but nothing is surer than that it also was pointed. The east gable contains a pointed window broad inside and narrow outside. It measures on the inside fourteen feet in height and six feet four inches in width, and on the outside ten feet in height and six inches wide, and at two-thirds of its height a small stone extends across but for what purpose cannot be easily determined.

A broken stone altar remains under this window and on its left corner a Holy Water Font of curious formation. In the north wall not far from the east gable are inserted in the wall (from which they project a little) three heads, two of males and one of a female. The walls of this Church are three feet six inches thick and about fourteen feet high. This Church is of the fifteenth century.

APPENDIX 2 Maps.



Modern OS Map showing site of excavation.



Aerial photo of Carran mediaeval church and graveyard.



Second Edition OS Map. C1890



1<sup>st</sup> Edition OS Map c. 1840

## Appendix (3)

### Report on sifting through fallen stone outside West Gable. 23-10-17

On the morning of October 23 2017, The author met the team from Mid West Lime Ltd., who were contracted to carry out repairs and consolidation works to the NW gable of the church.

Before scaffolding was erected it was necessary to sift through a pile of fallen stone from the corner of the gable, inside the boundary wall of the graveyard. The archaeologist was required to be present to identify architectural stone and ensure it was separated from building rubble and smaller pinnings.

The grass scraws on top of the pile were carefully removed for later re-instatement and the stones were carefully removed by hand. The under layer consisted of large, dressed, limestone blocks, architectural fragments and limestone rubble in gravel and humus, mostly composed of old lime mortar. Architectural fragments were placed against the wall c. 4m. West of the gable, while rubble, building stone was piled for re-use c.2m from the gable.

Eight architectural fragments were identified, including:

One thick flagstone which was likely a broken drainage flag on the wall walk.

One limestone barge-stop, which likely came from the top of the NW corner.

Two lime-stone, barge stones, from the gable.

Four limestone blocks, dressed on one or more sides.



Pile of fallen stones against west gable prior to removing grass sods.



Pile of stones. Grass sods removed.



Heavy stones removed.



Lifting stones by hand.



Limestone barge stone identified.



Dressed barge-stop, identified.



Rubble infill set aside for re-use.



All stones removed and set aside.



Architectural fragments.



Investigation completed.



Architectural Fragments.



Architectural fragments and rubble separated.