



# archaeological DISCOVERIES

## background

Archaeological excavation undertaken by **Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd** on the N15 Bundoran-Ballyshannon Bypass, on the outskirts of Ballyshannon town in County Donegal, led to the discovery of a substantial medieval graveyard and the foundations of a stone building, thought to be the remains of Ballyhanna Church.

Men, women and children were buried at **Ballyhanna**, laid to rest in the sub-circular graveyard that measured no more than 40 m in diameter. Most were buried in the Christian style, that is laid supine (on their backs) in shallow graves set around the church, with their bodies oriented west-east. Over 1,000 burials were recorded within this small area during the excavation. Such density of burial led to the severe disturbance of many earlier burials during the digging of later graves. Fortunately, due to the favourable soil conditions on site, the skeletal remains, though in cases, disturbed, were extremely well preserved.



Reconstruction drawing of church and graveyard at Ballyhanna. (Drawing: John Murphy)

## ballyhanna research project



Skeletal remains on site. (Photo: NRA)



Ballyhanna researchers: Caitriona McKenzie, Róisín McCarthy, Sheila Tierney and Tasneem Bashir. (Photo: NRA)



Skeletal remains from Ballyhanna. (Photo: Studio Lab)



Caitriona McKenzie and Róisín McCarthy examining skeletal remains. (Photo: Studio Lab)



Sheila Tierney conducting scientific analysis. (Photo: NRA)



Tasneem Bashir conducting scientific analysis. (Photo: NRA)

A cross-border research team was established with the aim of identifying the areas of scientific research that would glean the most information from the **Ballyhanna** human skeletal material. The result of that collaboration is the Ballyhanna Research Project, funded by the **National Roads Authority** through **Donegal County Council**. The project's academic partners are **Queen's University, Belfast (QUB)**, and **Institute of Technology, Sligo (ITS)**. These two institutions, sharing facilities, expertise and resources will produce three significant bodies of research on the **Ballyhanna** material through two Masters of Science (**ITS**) and a doctorate in osteoarchaeology (**QUB**).

The QUB component of the project involves the osteological and palaeopathological analysis of the human skeletal remains recovered during the excavation. Ms Caitriona McKenzie MSc, under the supervision of Dr Eileen Murphy and Dr Colm Donnelly, is undertaking doctoral research on the adult remains. She will determine each person's age at death, sex and stature, and any evidence for past diseases or injuries. Dr Murphy is studying the children's skeletons and the information retrieved will undoubtedly provide new insights into the lives and deaths of Irish children in the past. Ms Róisín

McCarthy MA is research assistant on the project and assisting with some aspects of the osteological analysis, including the disarticulated remains.

The two MSc research projects are based in **ITS**. Ms Tasneem Bashir MSc, under the supervision of Dr Ted McGowan, is attempting to generate quantitative multi-element data to aid in the reconstruction of the palaeodiet, environmental conditions and to gain insights on diseases impacting on the assemblage, through analysis of representative samples of male, female and child bones from **Ballyhanna** graveyard. Ms Sheila Tierney BSc, under the supervision of Dr Jeremy Bird, is attempting to extract and amplify ancient DNA (aDNA) from the archaeological human remains. She hopes, by using a biomolecular approach, to be able to establish the sex of individuals in the skeletal assemblage, with specific interest in juvenile remains that may not be sexed using conventional osteological methods.

The results of the research project will be published upon its completion and it is hoped that this multi-disciplinary approach will add greatly to our understanding of medieval Ballyshannon, and more generally, of medieval Ireland.