

1. Archaeology and roads: an historic opportunity

Dáire O'Rourke

Past circumstances

In the six years since a *Code of Practice* was signed by the National Roads Authority (NRA) and the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands (2000), a major change has occurred in the way archaeology is considered. Prior to the *Code of Practice* and the employment of archaeologists in the NRA and local authorities there was an unstructured and inconsistent approach to archaeology on national road schemes. The NRA had no archaeological policy. While the State's policy of avoidance of known archaeological sites was acknowledged and enforced, where applicable, there was little or no appreciation of the wider archaeological landscape during the planning stages. The concept of the importance of individual sites in their setting was not recognised or addressed. This led to difficulties not only in the planning process but also later, out in the field. Few attempts were made to discern the archaeological potential of specific landscapes. There was little or no advance testing or resolution of archaeological sites. Previously unknown archaeological sites were almost exclusively uncovered during monitoring of the construction phase.

Competitive tendering for archaeological work on road schemes was rare and impracticable. The relative dearth of information at the planning stage and the lack of a considered programme in relation to archaeology meant that the projected costs were unrealistic and were not based on any attempt to assess the archaeological potential. Insufficient time and resources were allocated for archaeology. This led to major and costly delays to the roads programme, poor resourcing in relation to archaeology, and little follow-up as regards post-excavation costs and standards. The result was a poor end-product and a lack of publication.

Present developments

Planning

In Ireland's mainly agricultural economy the absence of large-scale development outside of urban areas has led to the preservation of buried remains of many tens of thousands of archaeological sites and monuments. There are over 170,000 recorded monuments throughout the country, and it is generally recognised that many more archaeological sites lie hidden beneath the soil. Modern farming practices have a significant impact on the archaeological heritage, however. The incremental erosion of archaeological features by agriculture continues largely unchecked. Major infrastructure developers such as the NRA have a significant impact on the archaeological landscape, but structures and resources are now in place to harness the archaeological resource in a proactive and efficient manner. It is now the archaeological policy of the NRA to examine the landscape affected by road construction thoroughly during the post-planning phase but in advance of construction.

In 2006, an important objective of the NRA is to address archaeological investigation and excavation requirements to the greatest extent possible in the window of opportunity between identification of the selected route/preparation of the Environmental Impact



Illus. 1—The recently published (2005) archaeology and architecture planning guidelines, which form part of the NRA's environmental planning guidelines

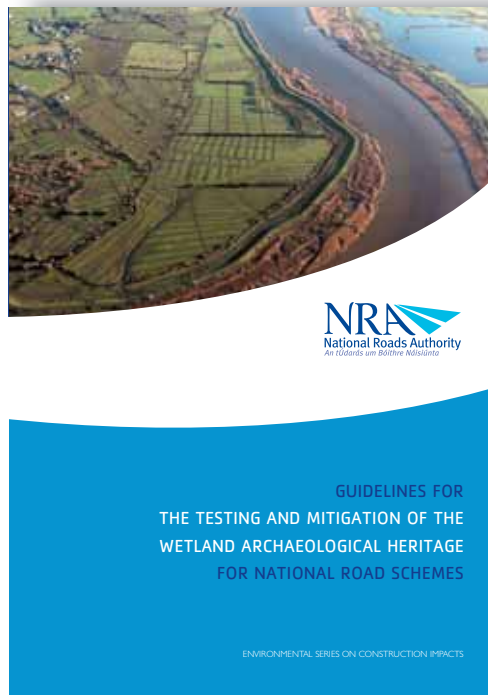
Statement, and the scheduled arrival of the road construction contractor on site. Concentrating archaeological activity in this period has made it possible to ensure that the required human and time resources are in place to carry out the work in an efficient and effective manner and that the potential for conflict between the archaeologist and the developer is minimised. It is crucial that the on-site archaeological activities are organised and supervised so as to make maximum use of the period prior to the commencement of road construction.

Guidelines

The national road-building programme continues to have a serious impact on Ireland's archaeological heritage. It is incumbent on the NRA to manage this impact in an appropriate and responsible manner, in line with best-practice procedures and legislative/regulatory requirements. To ensure that the highest archaeological standards are met during the planning process, the NRA recently launched *Guidelines for the Assessment of Archaeological Heritage Impacts of National Road Schemes* (2005a) and *Guidelines for the Assessment of Architectural Heritage Impacts of National Road Schemes* (2005b). The aim of these publications is to provide guidance on the treatment of the archaeological and architectural heritage during the planning and design of national road schemes.

Wetland archaeology has also recently been addressed. The *Guidelines for the Testing and Mitigation of the Wetland Archaeological Heritage for National Road Schemes* (2005c) are intended to assist the project design team, project archaeologist, archaeological consultants and contractors working on testing, field survey, excavation and post-excavation phases of archaeological mitigation in wetlands on national road schemes.

Illus. 2—The wetland archaeology guidelines (2005), which form part of the NRA's environmental construction guidelines



These documents form part of a suite entitled *Environmental Assessment and Construction Guidelines*, which deal with the myriad of environmental impacts caused by major road development. It is also proposed to issue new guidelines this year in relation to the use of archaeo-geophysics on road schemes. It is hoped that all these guidelines will promote a standardised approach to the production of comprehensive reports that employ all available sources.

Legislation

The National Monuments (Amendment) Act 2004 has effected a change in procedures between the NRA and the National Monuments Section of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Archaeological licences are no longer required on road schemes that have received An Bord Pleanála approval; instead, the project archaeologist, on behalf of the road authority, must apply for directions in relation to archaeological work from the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. While the Act still does not deal with the issue of what constitutes a 'National Monument', it does give the Minister discretionary powers in relation to National Monuments. If the Minister determines that a site is a National Monument, procedures are now in place either to move the road at that location or to excavate the site. However, the consolidation of the National Monuments Acts and subsequent amendments to achieve this still seem a long way off.

Research

Work is continuing on a number of research projects initiated by the NRA and relevant local authorities. The M3 Archaeology Research Framework has been implemented, under the supervision of the project archaeologist with Meath County Council, and a number of



Illus. 3—One of 1,272 skeletons from a medieval cemetery at Ballyhanna, Co. Donegal, discovered along the route of the N15 Ballyshannon–Bundoran road scheme. (Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd)

independent academics have been retained to assist with the archaeological, historical and palaeoenvironmental aspects of the scheme. A Newman Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Landscape Archaeology in University College Dublin is being funded by the NRA and should start delivering results in 2007. The focus of this research is twofold. On the one hand it assesses the archaeological testing techniques being carried out on national road schemes, and on the other it examines how the archaeological information from a number of specific schemes has augmented the archaeological record in those areas. This is a very exciting project as it deals with the interface of archaeological investigation techniques and information retrieval (i.e. how that information, once found, is processed). Finally, the Ballyhanna Bones Project is also a new departure for the NRA. Excavations along the N15 Ballyshannon–Bundoran road scheme revealed a medieval cemetery with 1,272 skeletons (Illus. 3). Rather than conducting a standard post-excavation study and report, the project archaeologist with Donegal County Council proposed working with third-level institutions in the north-east and north-west to develop a research agenda. A joint initiative between the NRA, Donegal County Council, Queen's University, Belfast, and the Institute of Technology, Sligo, has been developed and approved to examine the skeletal assemblage thoroughly. The various studies will include an MSc in Biomolecular Archaeology, an MSc in Archaeological Chemistry and a PhD in Osteoarchaeology. Work is due to commence on these various projects in late 2006.

The future

Outlined above is a snapshot of the innovative and expansive developments in the archaeology of national road schemes in recent months. In November 2005, the Government announced a new transport initiative—Transport 21. Following completion of the main inter-city routes, road development will concentrate on the other national primary routes, together with some work on the national secondary roads. Thus the unprecedented level of road development is set to continue.

The project archaeologists have become important elements of the National Regional Design Offices, hosted by 12 local authorities with funding by the NRA and, in most cases,

integral members of the Road Design Teams. Their presence has added greatly to the quality of the archaeological aspects of the roads programme. The recent delivery of road schemes has been enabled in part by the efficient management of the archaeological resource, and by the significant pre-construction archaeological investigations carried out by consultant archaeologists under the supervision of NRA/local authority project archaeologists. It is imperative that private and public sector archaeologists continue to work together and that the skills base generated by the current work climate is maintained and, indeed, augmented.

As regards the work undertaken to date, it is planned that a number of road schemes will be published by late 2006/early 2007. Dissemination of information continues through websites, lectures, seminars, posters, brochures and media interviews. A feasibility study is currently being carried out on the status of archaeological reports resulting from work carried out on NRA road schemes from 1993 to 2001. A decision will then have to be made on what can be done and what needs to be done with this material. It is hoped that the study will highlight the gaps in the record as regards uncompleted excavation reports and unpublished significant archaeological discoveries.

Challenges

There are many challenges ahead for Irish archaeology. The archaeological work being carried out in Ireland is largely development-led, and this will continue for the foreseeable future. The ongoing pace of development, whether private or public sector, continues to put archaeological resources under pressure. For the first time in Irish archaeology, finance is not the issue. Money is in place to carry out the work but there is a shortage of people and of time. There are not enough field archaeologists, site directors, finds specialists, conservators, illustrators and managers. The profession is stretched to capacity. The work keeps coming and the post-excavation work and dissemination of results are struggling to keep up. Post-excavation work put on the long finger may never get finished. Under these conditions one must look to different methods of disseminating information—public seminars, seminars for the profession, brochures, posters, websites, magazines—to augment the traditional style of publication.

Ironically, this time of economic boom does not see a united profession. The archaeological profession has not sought to embrace this economic prosperity and to work together for the benefit of archaeology. Such benefits might include the advancement of knowledge creation through the development of national and regional archaeological strategies and research agendas, publication policies, improved field methodologies or investment in continuing professional development. While consensus may never exist in relation to archaeological thinking, there has been little attempt to keep the public abreast of the many facets of archaeological debate.

For many in the profession, the lack of publication is the main challenge facing Irish archaeology. In my view, however, the main challenge for Irish archaeology is Irish archaeologists. We have not sought to co-operate to do the best we can for our heritage or our profession. We, as a profession, have no big plan. The Foresight Study initiated in 2004 by the School of Archaeology, University College Dublin, is innovative and unique in attempting to determine where archaeology will be in 14 years time (Cooney et al. 2006). It has attempted to identify the main challenges facing the profession in the years ahead. Perhaps this study is the first step to developing this plan or vision for the future.

However, the world will not stand still. Development is ongoing in our cash-rich society. The NRA will continue to oversee the building of new roads and we will continue to carry out our archaeological work. We will continue to broaden our brief in relation to archaeological excavation and post-excavation work. We will continue to work with the State institutions and the universities. If only we can work together to satisfy clearly defined research agendas which facilitate development-led archaeology then maybe we are on the right road. We inhabit a small island that happens to be undertaking major development on the back of an economic boom. It is not going to last forever. Will future generations thank us if we squander this opportunity to maximise the benefits for our heritage and our profession?