background

Cashel in County Tipperary is synonymous with royal and saintly events throughout Ireland’s history. Designing a new road through such a rich archaeological landscape was a challenge. Archaeological testing by Mary Henry Archaeological Services Ltd in 2001 and full excavation by Judith Carroll Network Archaeology Ltd in 2003 revealed new insights into Cashel’s history. All of the archaeological work was carried out on behalf of the National Roads Authority and South Tipperary County Council.

historic cashel

The Rock of Cashel or Solic’Drum is surrounded by low-lying pastures, with the Pains of Cashel or Coro Alteach - lying at the western limit of the Skelligmore Mountains. A c. 6 km east of the River Suir, Surrounding ringforts such as Rathoherne and Balineen (Town of the King), and territorial boundaries such as Dúlbirt (Black Ditch) still form a protective ring around Cashel. Echoes of when Cashel was the seat of the Kings of Munster, under kings like Brian Boru. The Rock of Cashel, from the north-east. (Photo: Richard O’Brien)

early medieval

Cashel’s close affiliation with the beginnings of Christianity survive in place-name evidence – Rush on Easping (Fort of the Bishop) – and with the tradition of the baptising of King Aengus Mac Natfraich on the Rock by Saint Patrick (nearby Carron Henge is known locally as Fort Aengus). Two new ringforts dating to the epic era were discovered in Hughes’-Lot East. The larger site consisted of a double-ditched enclosure (c. 50 m wide) with evidence for structures in the interior. Inside the outer ditch was a cereal-drying kiln, which yielded abundant environmental evidence. The discovery of a female skeleton was the first stratified burial from a non-religious site from Cashel. The second ringfort was a single-ditched enclosure (c. 30 m wide) found in the same field. Investigations on the behawen known as the Ron Bó Phádraig (Track of Saint Patrick’s Cow), the ancient route way between Cashel and Ardmore, produced no dating evidence.

medieval

During the early years of the Norman occupation of Ireland King Henry II held a Synod at Cashel in 1172. Two enclosed rural medieval settlements were discovered each c. 3 km from the medieval town of Cashel. In Monadhreela a ditch enclosing post-built structures was discovered, dating between the 11th and early 14th centuries. In Farranamanagh an almost identical site-type consisted of a rectilinear ditch-enclosure with internal structures. An external metalworking area and a human skeleton were found nearby. The remains of a possible hut and decalcified human bones were discovered in Windmill, possibly associated with the nearby Leper Hospital founded by Sir David de Latimer (c. 1230).

A cache of 18 silver pennies, dating from the reign of King Edward II (1307–27) was found in a tree bole beside a pond at Cooper’s-Lot. Hidden perhaps during the turbulent Scottish occupation, when Robert and Edward Bruce held a Parliament in Cashel in March 1317.

post-medieval

A cobble pathway known as Coindre’s Lane was investigated and ancient wheel-ruts discovered. A beehive-shaped limekiln in Farranamanagh was found to have been partly constructed of reused architectural stones, possibly from Cistercian Hore Abbey. A number of monumental earthen township boundaries were fully recorded as were three semicircular homesteads of 18th/19th century date.