background

The setting of the Rock of Cashel in County Tipperary is an iconic image of Ireland’s ancient past. Designing a road through such a rich archaeological landscape was challenging but rewarding. Archaeological investigations consisted of testing by Mary Henry Archaeological Services Ltd in 2001 and full excavation by Judith Carroll Network Archaeology Ltd in 2003. All of the archaeological work was carried out on behalf of the National Roads Authority and South Tipperary County Council.

prehistoric cashel

Prior to archaeological investigations little was recorded of Cashel’s prehistory, with a few stray finds from around Cashel including a stone axehead and various artefacts of bronze, including axes, javelin/arrowheads and curvature 326 bronze rings. No settlement or burial sites were recorded, a situation that was to change with the bypass investigations.

The new prehistoric sites discovered spanned the entire 8 km length of the bypass and the 1.9 km length of the link road. These sites ranged in date from the Early Mesolithic period to the Late Bronze Age. Certain landscape characteristics determined settlement location, primarily beside ponds. The slopes of hilltops also attracted settlement and burial activity. No doubt a precursor to the occupation of the Rock of Cashel itself.

Neolithic

The first human evidence from Cashel has been dated to the Early Neolithic period (c. 4000–3700 BC). On the east-facing slope of Monadhreela a circular slot structure enclosed an area 2 m in diameter. Stratified finds of a flint blade and Neolithic pottery from the structural elements may point to this being Cashel’s first Neolithic structure.

early neolithic/early bronze age

Finds made both east (Boscabell and Monadhreela) and west (Windmill and Farranamang) of Cashel highlighted intensive Beaker period settlement across the landscape, c. 2450–2200 BC.

bronze age

Twenty-two fulachta fiadh (burnt mounds) were discovered including a cluster of seven sites around two ponds in Owen’s and Bigg’s-Lot. A single cremation burial in Gortmakellis was radiocarbon-dated to 1610 BC. sherds of Beaker and Vassar Food-Vessel pottery were recovered from adjoining sites in Windmill and Owen’s and Bigg’s-Lot. In Hightower East a rectilinear ditch surrounded a roundhouse and nearby a saddle quern had been inverted deliberately into a pit.

iron age

No sites have as yet been dated to the Iron Age period (600 BC-AD 400). Is this absence real or was Iron Age Cashel centred on the as yet unexplored hilltops?