



archaeological DISCOVERIES

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**.



The Rock of Cashel with pond in the foreground, from the north. (Photo: Richard O'Brien)



The ring-ditch at Monadreela with Ballyknock hilltop fort at the top right. (Photo: Richard O'Brien)

prehistoric cashel



Two Early Mesolithic flint blade fragments from **Farranamanagh**. (Photo: Studio Lab)



Two flint scrapers from the cist cemetery at **Owen's and Bigg's-Lot**. (Photo: Studio Lab)



Early Bronze Age Beaker pottery from **Windmill**. (Photo: Studio Lab)



Cremated bones from a cist burial at **Windmill**. (Photo: Studio Lab)



Saddle quern found inverted in a pit beside the Late Bronze Age settlement at **Hughes'-Lot East**. (Photo: Studio Lab)

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, javelins/spearheads and, curiously, 262 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 on the Rock of Cashel itself.

mesolithic

The first human evidence from Cashel has been dated to the Early Mesolithic period (c. 6000 BC), with the discovery of two flint blade fragments from **Farranamanagh**. In addition, three blade cores found in **Windmill** and two chert blades from **Monadreela** highlighted the potential of further discoveries. A large flint knife from **Owen's and Bigg's-Lot** was also dated to the later Mesolithic period.

early neolithic

An Early Neolithic (c. 4000–3700 BC) flat cremation cemetery of over 20 cist burials was discovered at **Owen's and Bigg's-Lot**, on the east-facing slope of a hilltop enclosure at **Windmill**. Evidence was also found for a potential funerary structure when artefacts found included three flint scrapers from around the structure.

Further west a Neolithic flint hollow scraper and an unfinished leaf-shaped chert arrowhead were found in **Farranamanagh**.

Discoveries of Early Neolithic Carinated Bowl pottery east of Cashel in the adjoining townlands of **Boscabell** and **Monadreela** and to the north in **Gortmakellis** date to the period 4000–3700 BC. On the east-facing slope of **Monadreela** ridge 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.

final neolithic/early bronze age

Discoveries made both east (**Boscabell** and **Monadreela**) and west (**Windmill** and **Farranamanagh**) 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 **1940–1610 BC**. Sherds of Bowl and Vase Food Vessel pottery were recovered from adjoining sites in **Windmill** and **Owen's and Bigg's-Lot**. In **Hughes'-Lot** 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?