



MIND-BOGGLING WETLAND DISCOVERIES

Caitríona Moore and Jean O'Dowd provide a brief insight into material discovered in advance of construction of the N4 in County Longford.

Question: how many archaeologists does it take to excavate approximately 10,000 tons of peat? Answer: 107, with the condition that while they do it they must also record the 48 archaeological sites within, recover 42 wooden artefacts and take 8,619 samples—in five months!

Thus was the excavation carried out from April to September 2006 at Edercloon, Co. Longford, just south of the village of Roosky and the Leitrim border. The excavation was directed by Caitríona Moore for CRDS Ltd; the works were completed in advance of the N4 Dromod-Roosky Bypass and funded by the National Roads Authority. The site had been identified the previous February by CRDS Ltd during centreline testing, which revealed several deposits of worked wood beneath the surface of a reclaimed field.

Within days of the opening of

excavation trenches, it became clear that directly beneath the field surface was a substantial and previously unknown complex of well-preserved wooden toghers and platforms. While the initial discovery was exciting, the structures and artefacts that came to be revealed over the course of the following five months continued to amaze all those involved.

The excavation area at Edercloon measured approximately 170m by 30m and was divided into 28 trenches; the archaeological sites were located at a minimum of 10cm and a maximum of 2m below the original field surface. Given that most of the sites were linear in nature, only those portions within the development footprint were excavated. The most numerous site type represented in Edercloon consisted of wooden toghers or trackways, of which 25 were present. Varying from large, multi-layered

constructions over 30m long to simple short structures, they were almost entirely constructed of brushwood, roundwoods and pegs, with split timber largely absent. Notable among the large sites was the volume and depth of material used in their construction, with several sites measuring over 1.2m in depth. Also prominent was the north-south orientation of fourteen toghers, indicating a marked preference for movement in this direction and raising questions about their final destination.

In association with these trackways were six platforms, also varying greatly in structure and size. Less easy to classify and understand, the platforms at Edercloon generally consisted of parallel roundwoods and brushwood, forming square or rectangular areas. Besides toghers and platforms there were seventeen small deposits of archaeological wood, some of which are likely to relate to the large

constructions in their vicinity. A striking aspect of the complex was the sheer density of structures, with toghers and platforms situated in very close proximity, in many instances crossing each other or melding together. Of the ten radiocarbon dates achieved thus far, eight fall between 800 and 160 cal. BC; the remaining two were determined as 2470–2200 cal. BC and cal. AD 400–560 respectively.

While the density and scale of the sites at Edercloon were remarkable, the artefacts, both in quality and volume, were truly astonishing. Forty-two wooden objects were retrieved during the five months of excavation, mainly from the basal layers of the trackways and platforms. Wooden vessels, including bowls, tubs and a trough, comprised the most numerous artefact type. Other finds consisted of walking-cane and club-like objects, carved and perforated shafts of brushwood and roundwood, an extensively worked and dressed object with symmetrical pointed ends, and a split timber with six equidistant rectangular notches and dowels.

Two spear-shafts in the base of a togher dated to 390–170 cal. BC formed one of the most exciting and intriguing finds of the excavation; another was the occurrence of two wooden wheel-rim fragments in two different sites. The inclusion of artefacts in trackway constructions is quite common, although the number of finds from Edercloon is exceptionally high. The scale and importance of the assemblage raise many questions about the significance of such deposits and the potential for unknown sites within the surrounding landscape.

This article has very broadly summarised the results from Edercloon, and publications further discussing the findings and detailing the methodologies used are planned for the coming year. The task ahead—to fully research Edercloon and place it within its environmental, national and international context—will incorporate the work of several disciplines, but will undoubtedly contribute greatly to our understanding of the archaeology of wetlands and of those who utilised them.

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Clockwise from far left:
Overview of excavation.
Iron Age platform.
Wooden bowl being lifted.
Carved brushwood fragment.
Wheel-rim fragment with associated dowels. (Photo: John Sunderland)

