

12. What is post-excavation work?

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Remains of an early corn-drying kiln at Carrigoran, County Clare, on the N18 Newmarket-on-Fergus Bypass (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

Introduction

The archaeological heritage is a non-renewable resource. An archaeological excavation is by definition destructive and irreversible. Therefore, the recording of all archaeological data (or preservation by record) is a fundamental duty that will permit the interpretation of what has disappeared. Post-excavation work by definition encompasses all the work which remains to be done when an excavation has been completed. Its principal aim is to produce an archaeological report describing the findings of an excavation and to discuss these in an academic and professional manner.

This paper will describe the scope of post-excavation work for an archaeological project and summarise the legal framework for this. It will discuss the role of the Project Archaeologist in relation to post-excavation work and will outline the type of information required in an archaeological excavation report. Finally, it will also consider some of the problems commonly encountered at post-excavation stage.

Legal framework

Several regulatory or legal documents apply to post-excavation work. The *Code of Practice* was agreed between the National Roads Authority (NRA) and the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands in June 2000. Articles 4 and 5 state that the NRA will preserve by record all known archaeological sites and monuments, and also any other site or monument of an agreed importance that may have to be removed during the construction phase of a road scheme. Article 14 states that the Minister will arrange for a review of practices, requirements and cost implications relating to the preparation of post-excavation reports. The Code also prescribes that the Project Archaeologist will ensure that the 'quality of excavation reports is of the highest standard' (NRA & DAHGI 2000, 6).

According to the national policy paper on the *Framework and Principles for the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage*, 'preservation by record requires that appropriate archaeological excavation and recording is carried out which ensures that, as a minimum, a complete and meaningful record is preserved of all archaeological deposits, features and information likely to be damaged as a result of the development' (DAHGI 1999a, 25). Thus, excavation alone cannot satisfy national policy unless an adequate record of the work has been achieved by the post-excavation programme.

Finally, the standard conditions of the excavation licence specified by the national *Policy and Guidelines on Archaeological Excavation* (DAHGI 1999b, 23–4) include reporting requirements that are germane to the post-excavation process.

11. The licensee shall prepare a preliminary report on the archaeological excavation and shall submit a copy of that report to both Dúchas and the National Museum of Ireland not later than four weeks after the expiry of the archaeological excavation licence.
12. Except where otherwise agreed by Dúchas, the licensee shall prepare a final report on the archaeological excavation and shall submit a copy of that report to both Dúchas and the National Museum of Ireland not later than twelve months after the expiry of the archaeological excavation licence.
13. On completion of the final report the licensee shall forward to the National Museum of Ireland all relevant information regarding the current location of finds of [*sic*] archaeological objects from the archaeological excavation and the person or body in whose care they are and shall agree arrangements with the National Museum for the final deposition of those archaeological objects.

Financing post-excavation work

In the case of a rescue excavation associated with a development proposal, the developer will finance the costs of the post-excavation work and — according to the *Framework and Principles for the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage* — 'such costs include those arising from the preparation of a report on the excavation' (DAHGI 1999a, 25). A general problem has developed in Irish archaeology in deciding the appropriate time-scale and cost of post-excavation work. It will be an objective for the Project Archaeologists to define some working criteria in this area.

Role of the Project Archaeologist

As well as working at the planning stages and overseeing the conduct of archaeological excavations for national road schemes, Project Archaeologists will also oversee the conduct of post-excavation works. In this role the work of the Project Archaeologist can be divided into several elements.

At an early stage, the project archaeologist will require a method statement or post-excavation design related to all post-excavation works. This will identify the aims of the post-excavation programme, specify how the work is to be conducted, name the specialists and other members of the archaeological team, and state the time-scale for its completion. This will also determine the fees and costs for the post-excavation programme, which shall be agreed prior to the start of the works.

During the post-excavation programme, the Project Archaeologist will monitor the ongoing work and ensure that this is conducted in accordance with the agreed method statement. Progress reports will be requested from the archaeological consultant on a regular basis. The NRA and local authorities seek value for money in all aspects of their national road schemes. The Project Archaeologist will certify all post-excavation costs, including, for instance, preparation of records and materials, post-excavation processing and analyses, reproduction and distribution of all documentation, and specialists' fees.

The Project Archaeologists recognise that value for money lies not only in the cost of the work, but also in the quality of the products, and especially in the quality of reports. The Project Archaeologist will ensure that reports are of the highest standard, as required by the *Code of Practice*. To this end, draft copies of all reports shall be submitted to the Project Archaeologist for review prior to final submission. Clarifications and corrections may be requested at this stage for which due time should be allowed in the post-excavation programme.

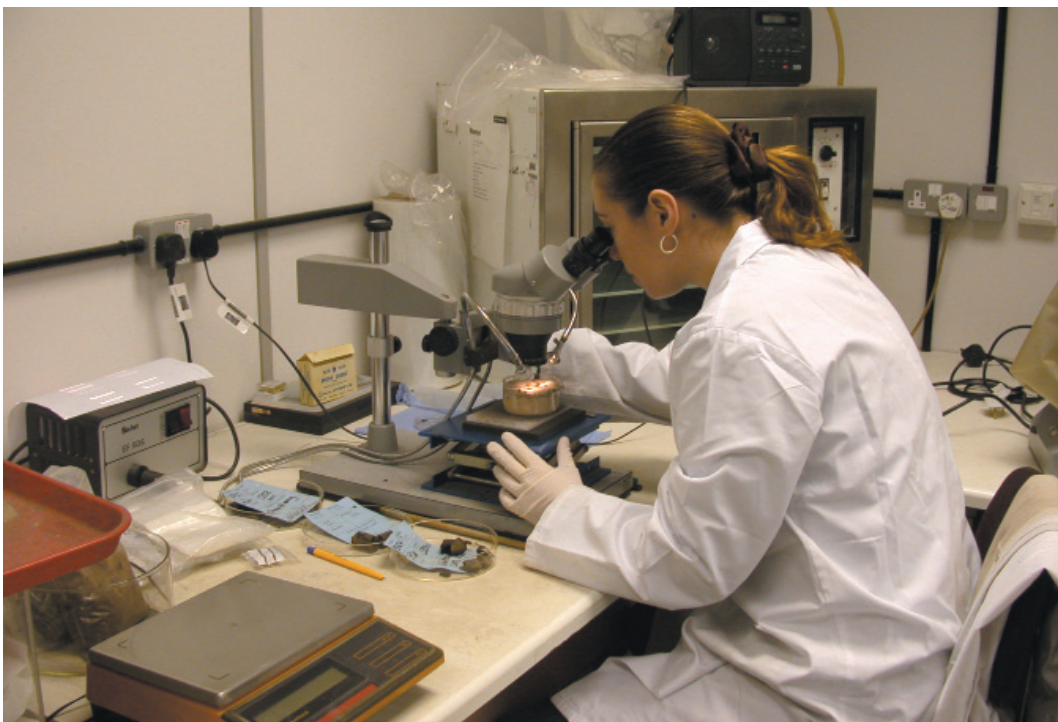


An Early Neolithic pottery vessel is encased in supporting material before it is lifted from the earth during an excavation on the M1 Drogheda Bypass (Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd)

Reviewing the primary data

The first objective of post-excavation work is to organise and review all of the data accumulated in the course of the project to date. A typical site archive consists of a site diary; numerous feature sheets or context recording sheets; plans, sections, elevations and other measured drawings; photographs; and records of finds and samples. Apart from the diary, registers of all these records should be maintained on site in dedicated lists or catalogues. Good post-excavation work emanates from good excavation techniques and records. The transition between the two depends on a thorough review of the records, involving the following tasks:

- carefully cross-reference all data
- check and update feature or context records as required
- sort, clean and repackage all objects under the direction of relevant specialists
- check and sort samples, and initiate primary processing, in consultation with specialists
- ensure the secure storage of all finds and samples
- check, index and digitise all measured field drawings



Charcoals and other charred plant remains are identified using low-power microscopy (AOC Archaeology Group)

- catalogue and annotate all photographs
- complete and check the stratigraphic matrix
- enter all lists and records on a digital database or equivalent record
- draft a preliminary report to Dúchas, the National Museum and the Project Archaeologist.

Scope of specialists' analyses

The potential variety of specialists' contributions to the post-excavation stage of an archaeological project is continually expanding. Traditional inquiries focused on artefact typology; macroscopic plant remains and pollen; animal, bird and fish bone; and radiocarbon dating. An exciting range of new techniques in the archaeological sciences is now emerging, encompassing, for instance, analysis of lipids on pots, isotopes and trace elements in bone, soil micromorphology, metallurgy and electron scanning microscopy of lithics and other edge tools

Whether old or new, no specialist analysis should be pursued merely because the finds and samples are available. Instead, it is important to consider carefully the interpretative questions to be asked of the excavated site, and then to assess the potential of the finds and samples to answer some of those questions. This assessment may involve some preliminary processing by specialists, for instance, to establish whether a pottery assemblage is typical or unusual; or to ascertain whether bulk soil samples contain a large and varied number of macroscopic plant remains or just some charred hazelnut shells. The product of this review — or post-excavation assessment — should be the post-excavation design which was already mentioned, above, setting out the aims, methods, schedule and costs of specialists' contributions to the project. No processing or conservation work should be undertaken without specialist advice and any work likely to alter the character or condition of an archaeological object requires the consent of the National Museum of Ireland, in the form of a licence.

Reports

As described above, the conditions of the excavation licence require that the licensee submit a preliminary report and final report on the archaeological excavation within four weeks and twelve months respectively.

Dúchas and the National Museum do not prescribe in detail what should appear in the preliminary report, but the following seems to be a reasonable minimum contents list:

- summary of the aims, methods and duration of the excavation
- summary of the results, highlighting any elements of especial significance

- lists of all finds and samples
- outline proposals for post-excavation analyses and further reporting.

Similarly, Dúchas and the National Museum do not prescribe in detail what should appear in the final report (i.e. the full unpublished report due twelve months after the excavation). Again, however, following good examples and the direction in which best practice is developing in this area, it is possible to suggest a minimum contents list for the final report also:

- site name and excavation licence number
- abstract or executive summary
- acknowledgements
- circumstances or background of the project
- site location and landscape setting, including geology and drainage
- statutory protections (where relevant)
- historical and archaeological background
- aims and methods of excavation
- account of the stratigraphic results (beginning with the earliest phase)
- discursive catalogue of finds
- specialists' reports on finds and samples
- interpretative discussion of all of the above
- statement on archive location and finds allocation
- conclusion
- bibliography
- glossary
- appendices as required.

The illustrations to accompany this report may include some or all of the following:

- scheme location map
- site location map
- photographs of the site and its setting prior to excavation
- map of local sites and monuments and other relevant topographic features
- extracts from significant historic maps or other early illustrations
- general photographs of the excavation in progress
- general site plan showing all excavated areas and principal features
- general plans of each stratigraphic phase
- drawings or photographs of significant individual features or artefacts
- drawings and photographs of specimen and representative artefacts
- images relevant to specialists' analyses (e.g. pollen slide; X-ray of iron object)

Both the preliminary and final report should be of a professional standard yet also accessible to non-archaeological readers. The final report, especially, should be fit for publication.

Publication plan

Although the final report (i.e. the unpublished full report) should be fit for publication, it is unlikely to be published in its final form. For instance, it may need to be modified or condensed for publication in a journal, or as part of a larger monograph. In view of this, in tandem with the post-excavation design, a publication plan should also be drafted and agreed between the Consultant Archaeologist and the Project Archaeologist. The publication plan may simply be a table which describes the content of each section of the proposed publication, indicates the required number of words, illustrations and tables for that section, and identifies the author. It should also identify the outlet for the published report (i.e. journal or monograph; printed or digital) and offer some pointers on style. All of this should be discussed by the Consultant Archaeologist not only with the Project Archaeologist, but also with all of the contributing specialists or other co-authors. This is most important, as a good deal of awkward and unnecessary editing work can be avoided if the scope, length and style of the publication is agreed by all parties early in the post-excavation programme.

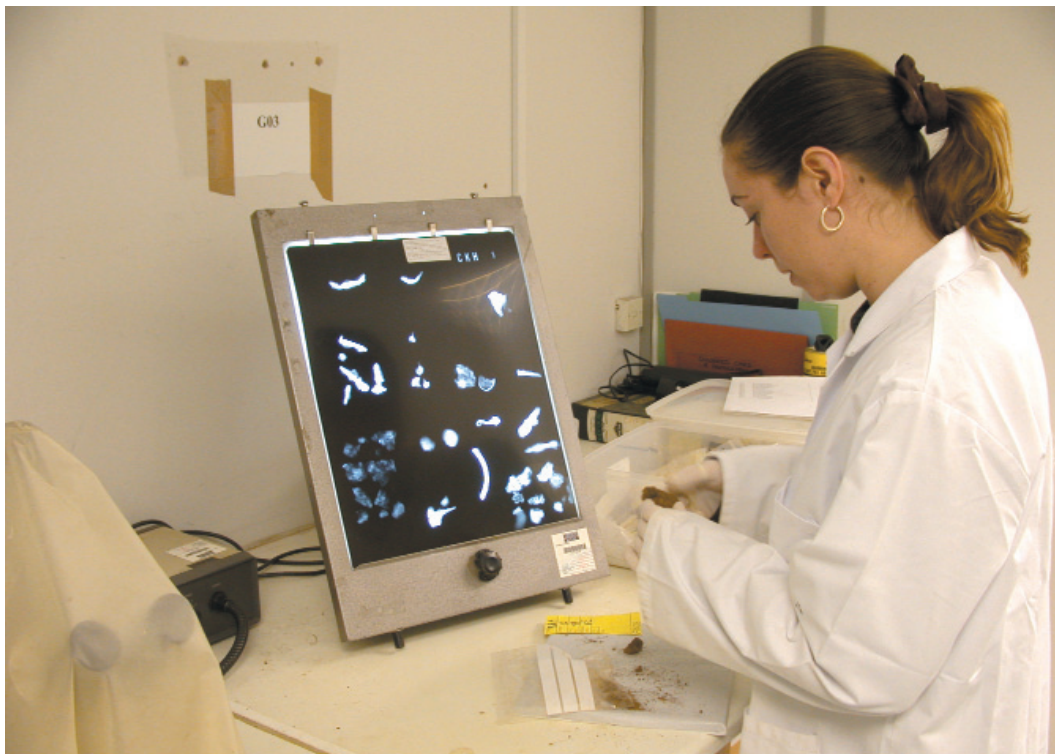
Avoid the pitfalls

This final section is a snapshot of some things that commonly go wrong at post-excavation stage. Consultant Archaeologists who manage to avoid most of these pitfalls should enjoy a fair degree of success in bringing their projects to a conclusion.

Records Make sure from the outset that excavation records are complete, consistent and well organised. Poor excavation records mean poor post-excavation results. This applies especially to large excavations, where the volume of data can appear overwhelming. To avoid this, thoroughly check all data, sort it into stratigraphic phases or groups, and carefully cross-reference it with finds and samples.

Planning Do not commission post-excavation analyses aimlessly. Consider the relevant interpretative questions and assess the potential of the records, finds and samples to address these questions. Seek advice or preliminary analyses from specialists. Document this process in the form of a post-excavation design and publication plan.

Costs Estimates of post-excavation costs should be attempted at the outset of every project. These estimates should be refined and agreed as soon as post-excavation needs have been assessed. For accurate estimates, consider comparative figures from other, recent projects and consult specialists and other colleagues with relevant experience.



The original forms of iron objects with heavy accretions can be seen in X-ray images, assisting the work of the conservator and allowing a more accurate record of the objects (AOC Archaeology Group)



Bulk soil samples are wet sieved to extract plant remains and other inclusions (AOC Archaeology Group)

- Time* Schedules should be realistic rather than hopeful. Learn from experience or consult someone who has done it all before. Ask all contributors to make a full and frank assessment of any other work which is making demands on their time before they agree deadlines.
- Liaison* Consult with specialists and other contributors as things progress. Encourage them to keep their commitments to your project. For large projects, especially, hold regular meetings to review progress and exchange information.
- Facilities* Post-excavation work requires, at a minimum, clean, secure work spaces with adequate light, water, equipment and packaging materials. Make sure someone on your team is responsible for organising and maintaining this.
- Rival projects* It is the licensed excavation director's legal obligation to see a project through to a timely conclusion, including all stages of post-excavation analysis and reporting. Resist pressure to initiate new projects elsewhere until current ones are completed.

Dissemination Sadly, most Irish excavations remain unpublished. The Project Archaeologists are determined that this shall not happen to archaeological results from national road schemes. Share our determination and help to get the results into the public domain.

Post-excavation work is not the end-point of a project but is, instead, the means to delivering the paper archive, archaeological objects and reports which represent both new information and also preservation by record. These are the legal obligations of the licensed excavation director. The Project Archaeologists are charged with responsibility to assist Consultant Archaeologists in fulfilling these obligations. The keys to this are clear focus, good data control, effective liaison, and realistic estimating of time and costs, all documented within the post-excavation design and publication plan.