



The Archaeology of Kerry - An Overview

The considerable number of monuments and features that have thus far been recorded reflects the archaeological wealth of the county and the importance of the area throughout the past 8,000 years. Indeed, the range of monuments in the county is as diverse as the landscape in which they are located from: the Mesolithic camp at Ferriter's Cove on the shore of the Dingle Peninsula to the early Neolithic portal tombs at Killaclohane near Milltown and passage tomb at Ballycarty in the Vale of Tralee; the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age alignments and wedge tombs in the upland areas of the Iveragh and Dingle peninsulas to the earliest copper mine in north-western Europe at Ross Island on the shores of Lough Leane; the stone circles of the uplands in Iveragh and Beara to the hillfort at Glanbane and the mountain-top forts at Caherconree and Benagh on Mount Brandon; the monastic hermitages on Sceilg Mhichíl and Illaunloughan to the earthen ringforts of the rolling north Kerry plain, settlement in Kerry has been continuous and it has left its mark.

Iveragh & Beara Peninsulas

The general archaeology of the Iveragh peninsula is dominated by early ecclesiastical sites and secular sites of the Early Medieval Period, such as hut sites, and enclosures. Prehistory is represented by fulachtaí fiadh, standing stones, stone pairs, wedge tombs, rock art, promontory forts and pre-bog field systems, trackways and platforms. The finest examples of these prehistoric monuments in the area are located in the townlands of Teeromoyle/Gortnagulla/Caherlehillian/Coulagh at the head of the Ferta River valley. This extensive upland landscape adjoins the rock art landscape at Kealduff/Letter/Coosaharn must be seen as part of the same continuum, representing the earliest settlement of the peninsula in the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age when the copper resources of the area became so important. Indeed, one of the largest hoards of bronze axes in the country is from within the area at Carhan Lower. The area also includes the extensive rock art landscape at Derrynablaha/Derreenny, near Ballaghbeama Gap, and the iconic Staigue Fort (National Monument included on the UNESCO World Heritage 'Tentative List' as part of the Western Stone Forts nomination).

The archaeology of the Kenmare area and Beara peninsula dominated by stone circles, with over 20 extant examples or sites of circles recorded stone alignments, standing stones and wedge tombs with significant numbers of burnt mounds also recorded. These monument types often occur as part of complexes within early field systems such as at Drombohilly/Garranes, Glanmore and Derrynacaheragh.

Ecclesiastical and early monastic sites are common across the peninsula and examples such as Church Island and Illaunloughan are of international importance. The UNESCO World Heritage site at Sceilg Mhichíl is the finest example of an early ecclesiastical hermitage in Europe and is one of its most important and iconic archaeological monuments.

The Dingle Peninsula

The archaeology of the Dingle Peninsula is dominated by early ecclesiastical sites and secular sites of the Early Medieval Period, such as clocháns and ringforts. Ecclesiastical sites such as Reask, Kilmalkedar and Gallarus are of international importance, while palimpsest landscapes such as those around Ventry and Brandon provide a vital commentary on the landscape archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland. These Early Medieval landscapes include early monastic and ecclesiastical sites as well as secular features such as the extensive clochán and enclosure settlements in Fahan and Glanfahan and the more diverse landscape on the slopes of Mount Brandon.

Prehistoric sites are also known with rock art, megalithic tombs and standing stones scattered throughout the area and prehistoric landscapes identified around Lough Adoon and Maumnahaltora. Excavations at Ferriter's Cove, 11km west of Dingle town, uncovered remains of a temporary camp dating to the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition around 4,000 BC. The inland promontory forts at Caherconree and Benagh on



Mount Brandon are important late prehistoric tribal centres, both included in the UNESCO World Heritage 'Tentative List' as part of the Western Stone Forts nomination.

The outstanding Early Medieval heritage of the area is reflected in the density of National Monuments located here; there are 44 National Monuments of which 36 are in state ownership, 2 are in state guardianship and 6 are subject to preservation orders.

North Kerry

The surviving monuments of north Kerry are in stark contrast to the archaeological record as reflected in the artefacts that have been recovered from the area. Whereas the ubiquitous ringfort – the family farmstead of the Early Medieval period – dominates the monument record the artifact record indicates widespread activity during the Neolithic and Bronze Age – most of the stone axes from the county are recorded from around Listowel and Lixnaw, while the Kilmoyley hoard, the hoard of three lunulae from Banemore indicate activity throughout the Bronze Age.

That is not to say that there are not prehistoric monuments in the area – fulacht fiadh are scattered around north Kerry, while standing stones are also recorded. Promontory forts occur along the coast with a particular density around Ballybunion while a number of wooden trackways or toghers have been uncovered in the peat bogs of the region.

Large bivallate and multivallate examples of the ringfort are known from the area, particularly around Ardfert, Abbeydorney and immediately north of Tralee. Some of these large forts may have been the seats of tribal/local chiefs. The fine example at Rathkenny near Ardfert was the find-spot of the exceptional Kilgulbin hanging bowl. The importance of the area in the later medieval period is reflected in the presence of abbeys and castles at Lislaughtin, Listowel, Abbeydorney and Carrigafoyle.

Mid-Kerry

Mid-Kerry is diverse geographically and archaeologically, with Early Medieval being the most visible strata in areas of better land though this can be misleading as extensive excavation and research around Tralee over the last 10 years has uncovered possibly the richest vein of prehistoric archaeology in the county – Neolithic and Bronze Age houses, Bronze Age burials, passage tomb at Ballycarty, possible ritual avenue at Ballingowan etc. The area is also the location for two hillforts at Glanbane near Gortatlea and Knockanacraig on the outskirts of Tralee. Recent excavation and conservation of two portal tombs at Killaclohane, near Milltown, has provided evidence for the very early Neolithic settlement of this area as well as securing the immediate future of the oldest extant structure in the county.

Similarly, the area around Killarney has a wealth of prehistoric monuments such as the stone circle at Lissyviggeen, the copper mine at Ross Island as well as the more obvious Early Medieval structures many of which are important National Monuments – Aghadoe Romanesque Church, Round Tower & Castle, Innisfallen & Muckross Abbeys. Mid-Kerry has the highest density of burnt mounds or fulachta fiadh in the county and these monuments are a very reliable indicator of prehistoric settlement patterns and activity.

Mid-Kerry also has the highest density of fulachtaí fiadh and barrows in the county indicating strong settlement activity during the Bronze Age and into the prehistoric Iron Age. The ringfort is again common in areas of good farmland along the major rivers and the importance of a number of crossing points on these rivers is reflected in the presence of strong medieval castles at Castleisland, Castlemaine, Ballymalis etc.