

Excavations in 2006
at Belderrig
Co. Mayo
04E0893

Outline of results



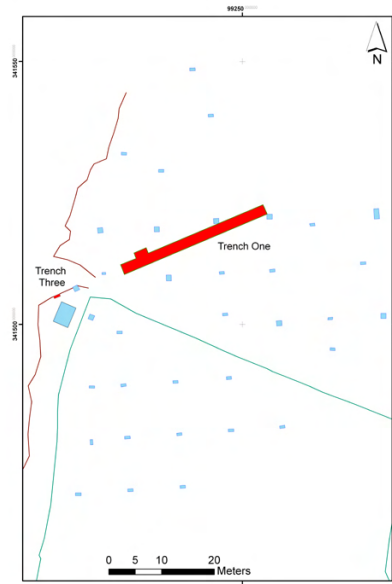
UCD School of Archaeology

BDG06 Interim Statement

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Excavations continued in 2006 at the site of Belderrig, Co. Mayo (Licence 04E:0893). The project, which is directed by Graeme Warren, UCD School of Archaeology, is funded by the National Committee for Archaeology of the Royal Irish Academy. From June 12th - July 5th this year, a team of 11 volunteers and 4 supervisors focused on continued excavation of Trench 1, with Trench 3 excavated in an area where fish bone was exposed in section.

In 2005 a 50cm wide section had been excavated along the south face of Trench 1, this year, the lower 20m of the trench were cleaned down to an extensive stone deposit. The interpretation of this deposit is key to the site as a whole, as it represents either an erosive feature or culturally constructed surfaces. Field observations, reinforced by comments by specialists suggested that natural origins for the surfaces are hard to sustain. In particular, clustering of raw materials, apparent breaks in the surfaces and the sheer density of stone suggest an anthropogenic origin. In a narrow trench it is hard to assess the extent of these surfaces, but test pits in previous years and last year's Trench 2 suggest that they may extend for some 50m. The possibility that the surfaces were deliberate constructions led to a significant change in sampling strategy. Until 2006 all spoil was dry sieved at 5mm, with bulk samples selected at random. This year a systematic approach to sampling was used with every other 50cm grid square being sampled in its totality, and 2 litres of sediment from each other square also being sampled. An enormous quantity of samples resulted from this strategy and many still require processing. Planning of the stone layers, and the extensive sampling slowed excavation considerably.



Excavations focused upon two areas of the stony surface with a large sample left unexcavated for completion in 2007. The upper portion of was targeted for excavation and large areas of the stony surface, and underlying peat/silts were removed. Artefacts were found above, within and below the stony layer. Excavation of this area was incomplete due to the discovery of a complex lens of redeposited material within the peat/silts sealed by the stony layer. The extent of this lens, and its origins, could not be ascertained in the time available. The presence of this lens, and the striking similarity of the material to soils previously described as natural, also necessitated a deepening of the slot trench from 2005 to ensure that clean deposits had been reached. Small features, including two truncated pits, were observed at base. One was cut through



Trench1, showing stone layer

the redeposited lens. Organic remains, including hazelnut shell, have been recovered from beneath the stony layers and will be submitted for dating.



Trench 1, after removal of stony layer

At the extreme west of the Trench a thin stony layer was removed giving way rapidly to natural sands. In the south west corner the stony layers rapidly increased with depth, and were associated with the buried peat/silt horizon found elsewhere in the trench. It would appear that excavation in this area have clipped the edge of this deposit, and the striking spatial variation in its extent offers further support for a cultural origin.

A small cutting was excavated to examine an area of fish bone exposed in the cliff section (Trench 3). This excavation revealed a very similar sequence to that in Trench 2 last year, a clearly metallated surface overlying more irregular stony deposits, both sealing organic silts overlying clean sands and gravels. Fishbone and hazelnuts were recovered from the peat/silts, and

hazelnuts from the layers above this. Dates will be obtained on this material. Stake holes were identified beneath the peat/silts and appear to correspond with gaps in the metallated surfaces above.



Trench 3, stakeholes

Artefacts include numerous lithics, mainly in quartz, but also including some chert and a little flint. Siltstone proved more numerous this year than previously, including some very fine large flakes and a formal core. Two exceptional flakes of rock crystal were recovered: both are of a remarkable quality raw material,



Trench 1, point, scale in 10cm divisions

almost completely glass like, and of considerable size. The pieces, which include a retouched flake, are of some beauty. Most remarkably, an unusual stone tool was recovered lying, pointing straight downhill, on top of the redeposited layer in Trench 1. This object is a thin, elongated piece which has clearly been fashioned into a point and may have had its base shaped. It is degraded and fragmentary and will require conservation work before its form can be assessed. Ecofacts include: further fishbones, possibly including more species than the wrasse and conger eel identified to date; mammal bone; plant macrofossils and insect remains.

The excavations in 2006 have been a considerable success. The provisional identification of an extensive stony surface, apparently of Mesolithic age, is unprecedented in Irish archaeology. The proximity of this material to field walls of Neolithic age is of key analytical importance. Finally, the continued presence of high quality and diverse artefacts and organic remains will contribute greatly to our understanding of the period.

Graeme Warren (July 24th 2006)