

# What early medieval archaeological sites were excavated in Ireland, 1970–2002?

## A Very Preliminary Review

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*Excavations ongoing at an Templeteenaun church site, Ballinagee townland, Co. Wicklow in 2005. (photo: UCD School of Archaeology)*

### Introduction

The Early Medieval Archaeology Project (EMAP) recently established in UCD School of Archaeology seeks to promote the analysis and publication of the extraordinary range of new archaeological evidence recently uncovered by 'Celtic Tiger' infrastructural development (NRA road schemes, Bord Gais pipelines, housing construction, etc). EMAP, through generous Heritage Council funding from the Archaeological Research Grants Scheme 2007, is currently employing a researcher to prepare initial databases that will quantify the scope and scale of the challenge facing Irish archaeology.

EMAP's aims and objectives are to enable scholars to access emerging archaeological data and thus to create new understandings of the landscapes, environments, technologies and social identities of the peoples of Ireland, AD 400-1100.

EMAP intends to a) prepare databases and enable the production of synopses of key early medieval site excavations to be made available as on online Digital Archive/ website as a resource for the entire research and academic community; b) The project will also publish a series of books and articles and will also organise, edit and publish thematic conferences on the subjects of (i). Early Medieval Settlement and Landscape; (ii.) Early Medieval Environment, Agriculture and Economy; (iii). Early Medieval Crafts, Technology and Material Culture and iv) Early medieval populations in life and death. c) Organise Research Colloquia of invited national and international experts to formulate long-term research agendas for the archaeology of early medieval Ireland.



This project is also intended to be multi-disciplinary and collaborative between academic researchers, professional archaeologists and a range of institutions and will enable archaeological, historical, environmental and geoarchaeological research to investigate this time of dramatic social, cultural and political change. EMAP has established an International Expert Panel of early medieval archaeologists and academic scholars at both a national (experts from Irish archaeological institutions and companies and scholars in UCD School of History; NUI Dept. of History; UCC Dept. of Archaeology) and at an international level (e.g. Depts. Of Archaeology at University of York, University of Oxford, University of Glasgow, University of Wales at Bangor) to enable overview and comparative discussion of the experience of Europe's emerging peoples in the early Middle Ages.

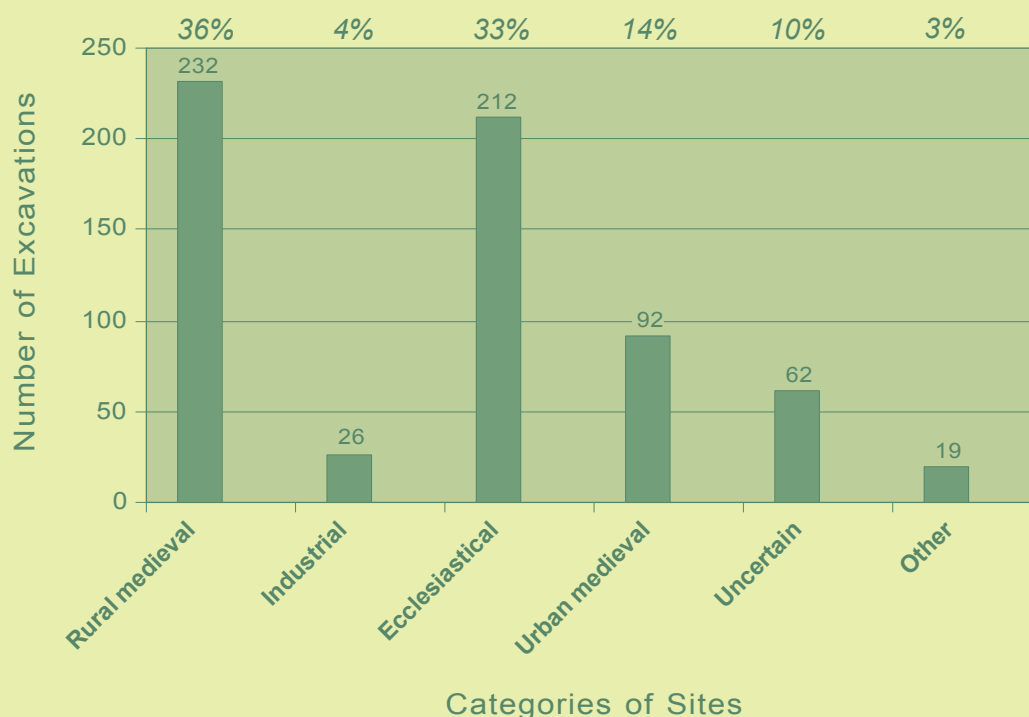
**Early Medieval Archaeology Project (EMAP)**  
Recent archaeological excavations in Ireland have revealed a range of quite different early medieval sites; from unenclosed settlements to complex settlement-industrialburial sites. To date, no study has sought to quantify the amount and range of

2002. This preliminary review is merely the first step of EMAP's research which hopes to promote and disseminate our knowledge of early medieval Ireland and particularly to enable national research of this important period.

### Methodology

The *Excavations.ie* bulletin was the principal resource for this brief preliminary review. Establishing a preliminary excavations summary of early medieval sites proved difficult as many sites were listed under a variety of general headings that comprised excavations of various periods and types. It was also important to note which excavations were of 'no archaeological significance' as well as to quantify those numerous excavation licenses associated with particular sites, so as to establish a preliminary number of Irish early medieval excavated sites of archaeological significance. Considering these methodological issues, the results from this preliminary review should be treated cautiously and will likely be revised as EMAP project develops.

## Early Medieval Excavations 1970–2000



early medieval excavated sites or synthesise the implications of this new data on our interpretation of early medieval landscape and society.

The Early Medieval Archaeology project (EMAP) recently established in UCD School of Archaeology and funded by The Heritage Council has carried out a very brief review of early medieval excavations reported on *Excavations.ie* between the years 1970-

### Preliminary Results

A huge number of early medieval sites have been archaeologically investigated in some form either through testing, monitoring or excavation. However, EMAP's brief review revealed that only some 651 excavated sites (approx) from 1970-2002 within the available data set could be considered to be of early medieval 'archaeological significance'.



*Animal bone from midden deposits at Coolure Demesne crannóg, Co. Westmeath. The crannóg was most intensively used between the 7th and 11th centuries AD. Specialist analysis demonstrated the presence of cattle (adults and calves), sheep/goat, pig, horse and red deer (photo: UCD School of Archaeology).*

Within these categories, the *Excavations.ie* bulletin revealed a whole range of early medieval sites. Archaeological excavations of ringforts at Lisleagh II and Garranes, Co. Cork, Glebe Co. Dublin; D-shaped enclosures at Roestown and Dowdstown Co. Meath; crannogs like Coolure Demesne, Co. Westmeath and Sroove Co. Sligo; unenclosed settlements and high status settlement-industrial complexes at Colp West and Knowth Co. Meath, Killickaweeny Co. Kildare and Clogher Co. Tyrone all illustrate the range and diversity of early medieval rural sites. Variety in the size and organisation of ecclesiastical sites is also evident with both excavations at large multi-functional monastic complexes like Armagh, Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly and Nendrum, Co. Down and western hermitages at Skellig Mhichil, Co. Kerry and Inismurray Co. Sligo. Different forms of burial were another feature which emerged strongly from this review and can be illustrated by excavations of Iron Age-early Christian burial cemeteries at Ballymacward Co. Donegal, Knoxspark Co. Sligo, Claristown II and Ardsallagh Co. Meath and high status settlement-industrial-burial complexes at Raystown and Johnstown Co. Meath. Both unenclosed cemeteries like Kilshane Co. Meath and enclosed Christian burial grounds at Mount Offaly and Gracedieu Co. Dublin, Corbally Co. Kildare and Marlinstown Co. Westmeath were also other important forms of burial in the early medieval period.

EMAP's preliminary review revealed that 274 (42%) early medieval sites of archaeological significance were excavated from 1998-2002. This compared with 176 sites from 1970-1989 (27%) and 181 sites (28%) from 1990-97 – confirming the well-known increase in archaeological excavation. The preliminary trends have suggested that rural excavations of ringforts, crannogs and souterrains, often research based, were the predominant type of excavations prior to the 1990. In contrast, excavations in the 1990's appear to have concentrated particularly on ecclesiastical sites within urban centres as towns were redeveloped. This appears to have quickened pace by c.2000 with frequent early medieval cemeteries and previously unidentified high status multi-functional complexes being discovered within urban centres and particularly along large NRA road schemes.

EMAP's next step currently involves inputting information from the excavations bulletin and excavation reports into a database that can be used to systematically quantify and appraise the amount and range of early medieval sites across Ireland. It is hoped that this information will be made available online and will develop into an important resource which can be used to re-conceptualise early medieval settlement and society.

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