

*County Clare Archives in the Irish Antiquities Division of the
National Museum of Ireland:*

Objects from the Parish of Feakle

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Introduction

Clare Museum has in its possession a catalogue of archaeological artefacts from County Clare compiled from the archives of the Irish Antiquities Division of the National Museum of Ireland.

This vast catalogue was compiled by Erin Gibbons, Jackie Mac Dermott and Felim Gibbons in October 1999 and is presented in six volumes with the co-operation and support of the National Museum of Ireland. A detailed description of the catalogue is recorded in Journal II, 2003 and is omitted here due to space restrictions.

The purpose of this article is to promote the catalogue as a valuable source of information and in this instance to highlight archaeological finds from townlands in the Parish of Feakle as an example.

Archaeological objects from the Parish of Feakle

The following twenty-one objects are listed in Volume 1 of the catalogue. They come from only six townlands out of a possible fifty-two in Feakle parish. Eleven of the finds make up the Gorteenreagh Hoard, a collection of gold personal ornaments which date to the Late Bronze Age.

Finds are recorded from the following townlands: Derrynaheila, Feakle, Core, Kilbarron, Maghera, and Gorteenreagh, and are an example of the type of information available to the researcher.

The information recorded in the various fields include the object type, dimensions and a description, but as will be seen, sometimes only object type is given.

1. Townland:, Derrynaheila, Clonloughna bog

Parish Map: townland number 37

Find: Vessel for bog butter, wooden turned, decorated

No further information is contained in the catalogue for object No. 1

Preserved butter found in bogs referred to as 'bog butter' is mainly found in Ireland and to some degree in Scotland. In other countries such as Iceland, Morocco and India other types of fat were buried and recovered during hungry times. In Ireland the practice of burying butter, either in a lump or in a container, in bogs goes back to the middle of the Iron Age, the earliest example being radiocarbon dated to 400-300 BC. It is found in a variety of containers, wooden vessels of various shapes, wicker

baskets, and in methers, ancient communal drinking vessels made of wood which have either two or four handles (Synnott and Downey 2004).

There are a number of reasons why people in the past may have chosen to bury butter in bogs. The wet, airless conditions in bogs along with the antiseptic qualities of turf would have prevented the butter from going rancid. It may have been buried in times of plenty to be retrieved in leaner times. Other suggestions include that it may have been buried as a security measure, to protect a 'food rent' material, such as butter, which had to be paid to an overlord. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries 'scorched earth' policies with the intention of inducing famine may have necessitated the hiding and preservation of high calorie foodstuffs. Another possibility is that the butter was originally deposited into lakes as an offering to gods or the fairies, and over time the lakes filled in and became bogs with the butter discovered centuries or millenia later (Synnott and Downey 2004).

2. Townland: Core, bog find

Parish Map: townland number 16

Find: Axe, stone

Dimensions: Length 12.9cm; width, cutting edge 2.2cm; width, butt 2.2cm.

Description: *"Axe is made of a slatey stone. Well bevelled cutting-edge. Slightly broken butt end. It is flat on both faces and has flat sides which would suggest that the sides were originally natural cleavage lines in a stone which was then fashioned into an axe."*

Stone axes are one of the most common artefacts from County Clare. During the Neolithic (c.4000 BC – 2400 BC) polished stone axes were a widespread and important tool. They were used to clear forests but also had a symbolic function as is shown by the ritual deposition of hundreds of them at river fords, such as at Killaloe in east Clare.

3. Townland: Core, bog find

Parish Map: townland number 16

Find: Shoe, Leather (one of a pair)

Dimensions: Length 24cm; maximum width 9.5cm.

Description: *"Rather poorly preserved leather shoe found with another (now lost) about 6 or 7 feet under the surface of a bog, about 1941. Apparently a shoe for the right foot. Consists of a double sole with an upper stitched onto it with leather thongs."*

Items made from organic materials such as cloth, basketry, wooden vessels and leather items would, in normal conditions, decay over time. However, the waterlogged and therefore anerobic conditions beneath the surface of turf bogs provides an ideal environment for the preservation of such items, allowing us a rare glimpse of long vanished styles and crafts.

4. Townland: Derrynaheila, Clonloughna Bog

Parish Map: townland number 37

Find: Keg of Bog Butter

Dimensions: Height, 46cm; diameter (top) 23cm; diameter (bottom) 25cm; diameter base 21cm.

Description: *“Container made of Alnus (alder), binding made of birch. The walls of the vessel are made from a single piece of wood, apparently wheelturned as the stryae can be seen on it. When found there had been a wooden hoop around it.”*

5. Townland: Derrynaheila, Clonloughna Bog

Parish Map: townland number 37

Find: Keg of Bog Butter

Dimensions: Height 32cm; diameter (top) 26cm; diameter (bottom) 19cm; average width (staves at the bottom) 7cm

Description: *“Very well preserved wooden keg chock full of bog butter. Found along with item no. 4. Keg is made of 8 staves, two of which are longer than the others, going to make the two handles. These handles are on opposing faces.”*

6. Townland: Feakle

Parish Map: townland number 53

Find: Stone Head, Romanesque

Dimensions: Height 28cm; maximum width 18cm.

Description: *“The head is carved at one end of a block of sandstone. The head has a flattish oval face, without any indication of hair but with an eleven strand beard.”*
The Romanesque style of architecture is distinguished by its elaborate doorways, decorated chancel arches, and carvings of animals and human heads. The style was introduced to Ireland from abroad in the 12th century, possibly by churchmen and kings who had gone on pilgrimage to Rome and Spain.

7. Townland: Feakle

Parish Map: townland number 53

Find: Beetle, oak, black

Dimensions: Length 11.5cm; width of blade: 4 inches.

Description: *“Beetle of black oak. Found in Feakle, County Clare.”*
A beetle is a tool used by carpenters.

8. Townland: Feakle, bog find

Parish Map: townland number 53

Find: Ewer, bronze

Dimensions: Height 23.5cm.

Description: *“Three-legged (one leg now missing) bronze ewer of Late Medieval date which was found ‘about 80 years ago’ (from 1937) in a ‘black garden’, ie. garden on bogland. Cast in one piece with handle and spout and globular ‘belly’.”*

A ewer is an open vessel with a handle and spout for pouring. The one described here is made of bronze and dates to the Late Medieval period (c.1200 AD – c.1600 AD). Ewers like the one described above were used by guests for washing their hands between courses in the days before forks, a custom introduced into Europe by the Crusaders.

9. Townland: Gorteenreagh

Parish Map: townland number 60

Find: Collar, gold

No further information is contained in the catalogue for object No. 9

10. Townland: Gorteenreagh

Parish Map: townland number 60

Find: Terminal disc, gold, double

No further information is contained in the catalogue for object No. 10

11. Townland: Gorteenreagh

Parish Map: townland number 60

Find: Terminal disc, gold, front of

No further information is contained in the catalogue for object No. 11

12. Townland: Gorteenreagh

Parish Map: townland number 60

Find: Disc, gold, back of

No further information is contained in the catalogue for object No. 12

13. Townland: Gorteenreagh

Parish Map: townland number 60

Find: Tying wires, gold, (one of 2)

No further information is contained in the catalogue for object No. 13

14. Townland: Gorteenreagh

Parish Map: townland number 60

Find: Tying wires, gold (one of two)

No further information is contained in the catalogue for object No. 14

15. Townland: Gorteenreagh

Parish Map: townland number 60

Find: Hair ornaments, gold (one of 2)

No further information is contained in the catalogue for object No. 15

16. Townland: Gorteenreagh

Parish Map: townland number 60

Find: Hair ornaments, gold (one of 2)

No further information is contained in the catalogue for object No. 16

17. Townland: Gorteenreagh

Parish Map: townland number 60

Find: Bracelets, gold (one of 2)

No further information is contained in the catalogue for object No. 17

18. Townland: Gorteenreagh

Parish Map: townland number 60

Find: Braclets, gold (one of 2)

No further information is contained in the catalogue for object No. 18

19. Townland: Gorteenreagh

Parish Map: townland number 60

Find: Fibula, gold

No further information is contained in the catalogue for object No. 19

The Gorteenreagh hoard was found by Paddy O'Malley while clearing stones from a field on 18 March 1948 (Sheedy 1990). The hoard is a collection of gold personal ornaments dating from the Late Bronze Age (1100-700 BC) and may represent the jewellery of an individual. Gold collars such as the one found with the Gorteenreagh hoard have a very limited distribution in Ireland and are mainly found along the lower reaches of the River Shannon. This suggests a society which controlled access to gold resources or one that was wealthy enough in other goods to trade for the raw materials (Wallace & O Floinn 2000).

The hoards often represent personal ornaments suggesting that ostentatious displays of wealth were important in society at this time. The ornaments were possibly worn by chieftains or other tribal leaders and may have been buried on dry land or disposed of in lakes and bogs. The exact nature of the rituals that accompanied their disposal will never be known, but it has been suggested that tribal leaders disposed of their personal ornaments during communal rituals or important events as public displays of wealth in order to maintain the respect and support of the group. Other important gold finds from Clare dating to the Late Bronze Age include the Mooghaun hoard of over 200 gold objects, the largest in Europe, discovered in 1854, and the Gleninsheen gorget found in a rock fissure in the Burren in 1932.

Although there are eleven entries from Gorteenreagh in the catalogue they actually represent six items of jewellery as the collar was found in a disassembled state. The collar has three raised ribs and a single row of short strokes between the ribs while the terminals are decorated with patterns of bosses set in concentric circles. The lock-rings, which were possibly worn in the hair, are made from fine gold wire, and are "*the two largest and finest found in Ireland*" (Wallace & O Floinn 2002, 102). The

bracelets are small with slightly expanded terminals. A sixth object, originally thought to be a small dress-fastener is now considered to be an ear ornament (Wallace & O Floinn 2002).

20. Townland: Kilbarron, bog

Parish Map: townland number 63

Find: Axehead, stone

Dimensions: Length 15cm; width (cutting edge) 6.8cm; width (butt) 2cm; max T. 3.4cm.

Description: *“A fairly well preserved example of a polished stone axehead. A small portion of the butt and some slivers of the cutting-edge are missing. It is oval in cross-section. The butt is somewhat pointed. The cutting-edge is fairly steeply bevelled on one face.”*

21. Townland: Maghera

Parish Map: townland number 81

Find: Spearhead, bronze (looped)

Dimensions: Length 11.9cm; length (blade) 6.1cm; maximum width 2.55cm.

Description: *“Small spearhead or javelin head of bronze in excellent condition except for a rather large hollow corroded through the blade’s mid-rib. The blade is slightly shouldered and has bevelled edges. The mid-rib for half its length is a continuation of socket...”*

Bronze socketed and looped spearheads date to the Middle Bronze Age, c. 1500 BC – 1200 BC. Ireland, being rich in copper and gold resources, was one of the most important metal producing areas in Europe during the Bronze Age. This importance is reflected in the the number of artefacts found in Ireland from that period and in the degree of skill and craftsmanship which they demonstrate. During the Bronze Age new technologies and styles were introduced and different types of artefacts are associated with different periods. For instance the tanged blades of the Early Bronze Age eventually gave way to the more sophisticated socketed and looped spearheads of the Middle Bronze Age such as the one described here. This spearhead is on display in the Power section of Clare Museum.

References:

Gibbons, E., Mc Dermott, J., Gibbons, F., (1999) County Clare Archives in the Irish Antiquities Division of the National Museum of Ireland. Unpublished catalogue.

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Sheedy, Kieran, (1990) Feakle, Feakle GAA Hurling Club.

Synnott, Chris and Downey, Liam (2004) Bog butter – its historical context and chemical composition, Archaeology Ireland Vol. 18, Archaeology Ireland Ltd, Co. Wicklow.

Wallace, Patrick F. and O Floinn Raghnaill, eds., (2002) Treasures of the National Museum of Ireland, Irish Antiquities Gill & Macmillan Ltd,

Clare Museum is located in the centre of Ennis, at Arthur's Row, off O'Connell Square, adjacent to the Temple Gate Hotel. Visitors can also access the building via the Francis Street car park, adjacent to the Franciscan Friary.

Opening Hours

October-May: Tuesday-Saturday 9.30-13.00 and 14.00-17.00

June-September: Monday-Saturday 09.30-17.00 Sunday 9.30-13.00

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Sliabh Aughty, the journal of the East Clare Heritage Company is now available in selected outlets. This year's edition, vol 13, is packed with items of historical and genealogical interest, particularly for people with East Clare connections.

East Clare Heritage

East Clare Heritage was formed in 1989 as a not for profit voluntary group, with the primary objective of protecting, promoting and ultimately creating access to the vast heritage of East Clare. Just two years later, President of Ireland, Mary Robinson opened the East Clare Heritage Centre at St. Cronán's 10th Century Church. Since then, the committee have published 11 editions of the acclaimed historical journal 'Sliabh Aughty', six publications on local history and many other heritage projects dedicated to the promotion of heritage in East Clare. Another significant project undertaken by us, Cathsaoireach, was the restoration of a famine graveyard in Tuamgraney in the mid 1990's. It stands as a memorial to the thousands who were buried here during the Irish Famine and is also a testament to the dedication of a committed group of volunteers. We have continued against the odds to keep the heritage centre open on a seasonal basis for almost 15 years and recently become a sponsor of a FÁS scheme to support this major cultural initiative.

EAST CLARE HERITAGE

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