A rare 2500-year-old artefact uncovered along the route of the N18 Ennis Bypass has been placed on display at Clare Museum.

Archaeological company TVAS (Ireland) Ltd. discovered the partial Iron Age wooden bowl at Killow, near Clarecastle, during excavations on the N18 Ennis Bypass and N85 Western Relief Road.

The vessel is being exhibited alongside a modern replica of the entire bowl, produced by a US-based woodturner who downloaded a drawing of the artefact from the Clare Museum website.

According to John Rattigan, Curator of Clare Museum, “The exhibits will give visitors to the museum a good idea of the sophisticated level of design and workmanship that existed in Ireland between 777 and 407 B.C.”

“Clare Museum, in conjunction with TVAS, is pleased to be able to show the people of Clare this fascinating artefact. After all, the main purpose of archaeology is not just to dig and record but to show and tell”, added Mr. Rattigan.

TVAS director Graham Hull described the discovery of the partial wooden bowl as one of the ‘best archaeological finds’ of his 13-year career.
Commenting further on the discovery, Mr. Hull said, “Once extracted from the ground, the artefact was photographed and wrapped in peat to prevent the wood drying out before being placed in an airtight plastic box. Following the cleaning and conservation of the bowl in a laboratory, we were amazed at how well the vessel had survived the 2500 years in the peat.”

He continued, “I find it exciting that I had the opportunity to see the results of the fine workmanship that went into the making of this bowl. To be able to see an object, that probably held food for a person so long ago, allows a connection with the past that is difficult to explain.”

“The Irish Iron Age is, to a certain degree, ‘invisible’ compared to the preceding Bronze Age with its many finds of pottery and metalwork and so it was pleasing to add this piece of information to the archaeological record. I am especially pleased with the linking of the Iron Age with the Information Age, that has been achieved by woodturner Mark Zdepski from New Jersey”, concluded Mr. Hull.

Mr. Zdepski produced two replicas of the entire bowl, after downloading a scale drawing from the Clare Museum website. He said he had been attracted to the vessel by its unusually modern design and pointed out that it was made from ash, unlike previously discovered bowls from the same period, which were predominantly made from alder.

“Given the lack of pottery in the Iron Age, wooden vessels must have played a significant role in daily life and given the fineness of manufacture of many of the wooden vessels uncovered down through the years, this indicates that they were not merely ‘poor man’s substitutes’ for metal vessels but were highly prized alternatives”, commented Mr. Zdepski.

Archaeological excavations along the route of the N18 Ennis Bypass and the N85 Western Relief Road took place in late 2003 and early 2004. Archaeological excavation and post-excavation work was undertaken by TVAS (Ireland) Ltd, based at Ballinruan in County Clare. Works were funded by Clare County Council through the National Roads Authority and part-financed by the European Union under the National Development Plan 2000-2006.

Some of the earliest artefacts discovered include pottery fragments, stone tools and cereal grains from a cremation cemetery containing the cremated remains of at least 27 individuals, the earliest of which has been radiocarbon dated to the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age between 2450-2150 BC.

The original wooden bowl will remain on display at Clare Museum, Ennis, County Clare, until the end of April 2008 before it is relocated to the National Museum of Ireland.

For further information contact Clare Museum at 065-6823382, email claremuseum@eircom.net or log on www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/claremuseum.

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Extract from Archaeological final report

Introduction:
A piece of a wooden bowl (04E0191:1) was found in peat layer 50, not far from the burnt stone spread 51. The bowl was sent to ArchCon Labs for species identification and conservation. The vessel has a maximum external diameter of 225mm and a maximum internal diameter of 205mm. The surviving portion of the bowl is 100mm high and the wood is 10mm thick and has been identified by Lorna O'Donnell (ArchCon Labs) as Fraxinus excelsior (Common Ash or European Ash).

Conservation:
The bowl was conserved by Cathy Daly/Eraca Devine of Archcon Labs. There are no obvious turning lines, indicative of lathe manufacture, but there are two carved ridges that may represent the beginning of a rim detail or perhaps the upper part of the bowl.

The bowl on recovery was extremely soft and degraded and in five larger, and two small, pieces. The density of the wood was calculated by weighing two fragments in air and in water. This gave values for density as 0.149g/cc and 0.12g/cc.

The bowl was cleaned with a soft brush and water and traced on a Molinex overlay (exterior). The bowl fragments were placed into 2 litres of 10% v/v solution of PEG 400 in tap water. A solution of 35% PEG 3350 was added in increments. The bowl fragments were then frozen and freeze-dried until dry to touch. The bowl was reassembled with Mowilith DM427 adhesive and packed in an Addis box with acid-free tissue paper.

Radiocarbon determination:
A radiocarbon determination was made from a sample of wood from the bowl. A piece of wood, weighing 250mg, was taken from the edge of the bowl and dated by the Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory, Queen’s University Belfast. The fragment of wood returned a date of 2461±32 (2 sigma Cal BC 777 to 407). Ash trees live for no longer than 250 years and it can therefore be stated with confidence that the bowl dates to the Iron Age.

Parallels for the wooden bowl:
Of the few dozen prehistoric wooden bowls that have been discovered in Ireland or Scotland, most are from non-archaeological peat digging in the north of Ireland. Earwood (1989/90) has demonstrated clear typological affinities between wooden bowls and cauldrons and these same vessel types made in bronze. Radiocarbon dating has shown that many wooden bowls were manufactured in the late prehistoric period. The bowl from AR104 is similar in form to some of the other vessels from this period but incomplete survival means that there is no evidence of the handles that characterise those bowls. The lack of tool marks, on what are likely to be lathe-turned bowls, is typical and probably reflects high quality finishing by
sanding or polishing the vessels. The AR104 bowl is made from ash and this wood is seemingly unusual as the other examples are mostly alder.

Given the lack of pottery in the Iron Age, wooden vessels must have played a significant role in daily life, and Earwood (ibid.) observes that, given the fineness of manufacture of many of the wooden vessels, this indicates that they were not merely ‘poor man’s substitutes’ for metal vessels but were highly prized alternatives.

A lathe-turned reproduction of the complete bowl has been made by New Jersey wood turner Mark Zdepski (Zdepski 2008). The bowl is on exhibition at the Clare Museum, Ennis, Co. Clare.

Archaeological final reports for all the excavations on the N18 Ennis Bypass can be accessed at http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/archaeology/index.htm


Above: Mr. John Rattigan, Curator of Clare Museum and Mr. Graham Hull, Archaeologist with TVAS (Ireland) Ltd pictured placing on display a 2500-year-old Iron Age wooden bowl and replica of same in Clare Museum, Ennis on Tuesday, 11th March 2008. pic Ger Leddin

The bowl being discovered at Killow, Clarecastle.