



Institute of
Archaeologists of
Ireland

Submission to
Skellig Michel World Heritage Site
Draft Management Plan
2007-2017

Introduction

The Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland welcomes the formulation and publication of the *Skellig Michael World Heritage Site Draft Management Plan 2007-2017* and particularly welcomes the opportunity to engage in this public consultation process and make observations on this first draft text of the Plan.

Skellig Michael is an acknowledged heritage complex of unique and outstanding character, composition and international importance. As stated in the Draft Plan the importance of the complex is vested in its unique and very beautiful, rocky island setting and its unique complex of ecclesiastical structures, including medieval oratories, a church, cemetery, hermitage cells, alters, terraced gardens, platforms and linking pathways and rock-cut steps. These represent a very particular Irish evocation of a type of early monastic life and the transfer of ideas and religious culture, the evocation of which stretches from this site as far as the Middle East. The rocky islands also, however, bear testimony to a later and continuing history of religious pilgrimage after the abandonment of the monastery and a more recent maritime heritage related to the historic development and more recent operation of the lighthouse for the safety of seafarers approaching Atlantic routes from the South Coast of Ireland.

Skellig Michael is also a unique repository of culturally and naturally derived archaeological material remains in a very unique and dynamic natural environment.

For these reasons, the islands and their heritage complexes have long held a fascination for researchers and visitors alike and the inscription of the complex on the World Heritage list in 1996, in recognising its unique place in World Heritage, has heightened this public interest.

The complex should, of course, be accessible to the public. What follows is a requirement that it must therefore be protected, studied, recorded, understood, conserved and managed to support that end, while providing a secure environment for the appreciation and public enjoyment of its unique cultural heritage.

Skellig Michael is also clearly a delicate and vulnerable site, perched on steep, high rock faces and subject to the most severe impacts of Atlantic weather systems and the weathering that results from these. It has also faced the impact of an increase in profile and the pressure of increased visitor numbers.

The IAI recognises that conservation actions to date sought to address issues such as structural failure and danger of collapse and loss of fabric into the sea. IAI also recognises that the preparation of the Draft Plan demonstrates that the complex faces continuing pressure and that this requires, and will require, carefully planned and ongoing archaeological and architectural conservation, maintenance and management.

IAI welcomes the opportunity, in this response, to acknowledge the skill, expertise and professionalism of those who have undertaken what were clearly urgent, securely ethically grounded conservation and restoration programmes of work in past years that were designed to address very serious erosion, collapse and significant danger of loss of structural fabric.

However, conservation and restoration works have reached a stage at this juncture where some publicly declared ill-ease, in relation to the nature and scale of the interventions undertaken must be addressed and can be readily address through greater public presentation of the rationale, operational detail and, in particular, the record of the works undertaken prior to and during conservation and the research context within which these works were carried out.

The preparation of the Management Plan has an opportunity to set out the terms of reference, nature and scope and sequence of such proposed public presentation and is a very welcome step in this direction.

IAI would like to recommend however that, once reviewed and presented in its final form, the Plan's policies, objectives and programme of phased actions should be subject to the review and advice of a dedicated Expert Review Group.

The draft plan does not make sufficient reference to the fact that past and future programmes of conservation works should be integrated into, and inform, an on-going programme of research on the developmental natural history, archaeology, cultural history and current natural environment of the island.

Notwithstanding these remarks IAI recognises and supports the long-standing commitment, expertise and qualifications of the institutions and individuals involved in conservation efforts to-date, which have been vital to securing the site both for the Irish people and for the world, to maintain and conserve the site for the future.

Specific observations

Having reviewed the Draft Management Plan, IAI has identified a number of the Plan's proposed objectives which could be developed and refined, together with a number of additional actions which may warrant inclusion.

Archaeology: Policies for intervention, investigation and research

The Draft Management Plan acknowledges the necessity for archaeological intervention and investigation as part of the conservation programme for Skellig Michael. However, the current draft text suggests that the role of archaeological excavation is considered to be limited to interventions designed to prepare for, and support, the architectural conservation programme. IAI would suggest that archaeological excavation in the context of a site of this unique character and status cannot be viewed purely as an exercise to facilitate conservation works. All archaeological interventions should be rooted in, and related to, an on-going, transparently knowledge-building research framework to ensure that the maximum knowledge gain and benefit from work undertaken is achieved.

It is noted that the description of the site makes a number of statements in relation to the chronology and date of later interventions in the complex with most of these deemed to be of 19th century date. The basis for this interpretation and the material evidence that gives rise to it is not set out. Furthermore, the text does not set out the rationale for the removal of 19th-century fabric during conservation works and the plan's text does not reflect the thinking presented in existing publications on archaeological evidence from the complex (Bourke 2005).

Limited publication and presentation of archaeological excavations undertaken within the complex to-date has given rise to concerns. The Plan needs to set out a detailed policy in relation the publication and presentation of past investigations and how these have been used to inform the on-going understanding of complex and its chronology, and how these, in turn, have informed the research and management priorities for the future.

The preliminary analysis of the inner enclosure published by Edward Bourke (2005) is a very useful document, providing a baseline survey of the chronological data relating to that section of the site. It notes important dating information (including radio-carbon dates and diagnostic artefacts) which has been obtained as result of the programme of works to date, which does not appear to have integrated into the overview of the site presented in the Draft Plan.

Section 6.2.4 sets out the approach to archaeology in the Draft Plan. IAI feels that the essential function of archaeological investigation and research (in understanding the sequence and nature of the islands material past and factors that have influenced that) does not carry sufficient weight, suggesting that the potential scope of the knowledge gain that archaeological excavation can give rise to is not fully realised and is seen to simply ‘assist in conservation work’ (6.2.4).

Research strategies and themes can be usefully redacted from the investigations necessitated by the technical requirements of conservation. There is an equivalent need, however, to integrate archaeological investigations into research frameworks. This is a theme which has been highlighted and explored in a number of recent archaeological studies such as *Archaeology 2020* and the Heritage Council’s recent *Review of Research Needs in Irish Archaeology*.

The Plan commits to the implementation of methodologies which meet the standards of best international practice. However, it does not include a mechanism for the regular presentation and review of these methodologies, during the lifetime of the plan to ensure that future changes and developments in best practice are reflected in the on-going programme of works.

Development of Research Strategies

It is noted that the research programmes proposed under Objective 9.1.6 have completion dates within the first 2-3 years of the plan. These, however, do not appear to prioritise the presentation of the existing results of archaeological excavation and conservation works undertaken to date, which form an essential element of the baseline information for such research programmes.

A mechanism for reviewing such research projects, as mentioned above, and proposing successive or additional avenues of research should be included with the management plan, to ensure that maximum benefit is obtained from the annual programme of works at the site and that the annual programme is firmly integrated into an evolving and developing research framework to enhance our knowledge and understanding of the site. To this end IAI would recommend the establishment of an Expert Group to engage in a review of the proposed and evolving strategies and associated phased actions.

The 'consultative forum' proposed under Objective 9.1.4 could be utilised in this context to aid in the review and development of research strategies, but may not satisfy the scope and detail of peer review that is required. Nonetheless, a similar approach was recently employed by the Discovery Programme to examine the potential of future avenues of research.

Management of the Archive

The goal of establishing an accessible public archive is laudable; however, the action, as proposed, would delay the establishment of the archive until after full publication, which is likely to place it late in the lifetime of the plan. Some level of public access to archival material in the early years of the lifetime of the plan, prior to full publication needs to be considered.

It would be important to include a formal undertaking to facilitate access to the archival material prior to full publication (and also the island itself) for those carrying out research directly relating to Skellig Michael or research which may inform in a complementary way the on-going programme of works and research outlined in the management plan.

Consultation

The remit and purpose of the forum proposed under Objective 9.1.4 is not clear and should be defined and be used for the active evaluation of the on-going research programmes, while suggesting further useful avenues of research. Furthermore, the discussions and activities of such a body should feed into the 5-year review of the plan (also proposed under Objective 9.1.4) or any other review process which may be adopted. In addition the instatement of an Expert Group to actively and transparently peer review the work during the lifetime of the plan is recommended.

Publication and Dissemination

With regard to the actions proposed under Objective 9.1.5, to disseminate information, there is a lack of clarity particularly regarding the scope of the proposed actions and the timescales proposed.

While the preparation of an information booklet in 2008 is welcomed it does not appear to address the scope of work urgently required to bring the existing record (since 1978) sequentially to timely publication.

The current wording in then draft document is such that it could be understood to mean that only those works undertaken during the lifetime of the Plan would be subject to publication and that the urgent issue of presenting the results of archaeological investigations and the scope of conservation and restoration works undertaken during the period 1978-2007 is not addressed in the Plan.

The proposed development of a website by 2009 is equally to be welcomed. However, this action should be seen as an urgent priority designed to address the publicly articulated disquiet in relation to the nature and scope of some works undertaken in recent years. The potential for the virtual 3-D presentation of the site (for which a remarkable survey exists) should be developed.

Regular reporting of annual programme of works

Works, under the current programme, are carried out every summer; therefore rather than 'periodic updates on the implementation of the plan' at a minimum there should be a real commitment to producing an Annual Report summarising the main undertakings that year with contributions from the key project members or specialists. Such a report could be a simple informative document, in the style of a newsletter, rather than a detailed technical report, perhaps distributed as an e-document.

Development of internet resources

Further the establishment of a website which would disseminate these updates and the recommended annual report as well as providing general information about the site should be prioritised, and developed in conjunction with the information booklet in 2008, rather than deferred to 2009. The internet provides a very important and accessible medium through which information can be quickly disseminated. The compilation and presentation of the report would provide baseline information for the website, which could then be further expanded and developed over the course of the lifetime of the plan as works progress.

Publication

The proposal for full publication of the record of works undertaken under the current programme during the lifetime of the plan is a laudable principle. However, as outlined in the draft plan, the current programme of works commenced in 1978 and has been on-going on an annual basis since then, with next year (2008) being effectively the 30th anniversary; this management plan is designed to run for a further 9 years beyond that date. Some form of interim publication or staged publication should be envisioned which

would (in particular) disseminate the record of the works undertaken prior to the commencement of the plan (i.e. 1978-2007).

IAI would draw attention to the findings of the *Unpublished Excavations Survey 1930-1997*, which was compiled in 2002 by the Heritage Council. Skellig Michael has been classified as a Category 1 site by this study.

'Category 1 of considerable significance: capable of demonstrating much of the development of a particular class of monument, landscape or town; or of considerable importance for major periods, classes of finds or environmental sequences; or of great significance methodologically (within either an international or national context); telling a full story in its own right. Worth publishing fully as a site on its own.' (Doyle et al, 2002, 21)

The report suggested that the excavations at Skellig Micheal could be published as part of a monograph series for the publication of excavations undertaken at National Monuments and monuments in State care.

This study viewed the inception of the Clonmacnoise Studies monographs as an important example of what can be achieved. This publication series could provide a useful template for initiating a process of staged or interim publication of results

Margaret Gowen

Acting Chair

on behalf of the Board of the **Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland**

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