



Institute of
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Rethinking Irish Archaeology:

Old Ground, New Ideas

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Rethinking Irish Archaeology: Old Ground, New Ideas



Introduction and Overview

The Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland autumn conference, entitled *Rethinking Irish Archaeology: Old Ground, New Ideas* was held in Galway on 19-21 October 2007. It was the intention of the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland that this conference would be an important landmark event that would contribute to and move forward the process of formal dialogue and strategic thinking that commenced with the 2004 foresight study initiative by University College Dublin, published as *Archaeology 2020*.

The foundations for identifying and addressing many of the challenges facing the profession were established by a number of studies commissioned by the Heritage Council and its rotating Standing Committee on Archaeology (notably the study on unpublished excavations and including the CHL survey which profiled the profession and its training needs for IAI in 2002).

A formative development in the overall strategic review of the profession was initiated by the UCD-sponsored review of archaeological practice, policy and management in the foresight study *Archaeology 2020*. This process, drawing from cross-professional debate and analysis, isolated many of the issues facing Irish Archaeology and advocated a number of principles and policies for action.

The ‘baton’ of debate was energetically taken up by the Royal Irish Academy last year firstly through the work of a **Consultative Group on Commercial Archaeology** reporting to its National Committee on Archaeology, that focused its discussion on the issues of dissemination, report quality, submission and publication. This was followed by the seminal **Open Forum** event hosted by the Royal Irish Academy in May 2006 the outcome of which was recently published in summary and in full, entitled *Archaeology in Ireland: A vision for the future*.

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Recognising the dynamic return of the debate within the profession and its potential for informing policy-orientation, the former Minister of the Environment Heritage and Local Government, in early 2006, approached the Heritage Council and requested that it would prepare a consultative document outlining a *Framework for Irish Archaeological Research*.

The newly incumbent Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government has initiated a major **review of archaeological policy and practice**. In mid-October 2007, the Dept. of Environment Heritage and Local Government circulated a document *Review of Archaeological Policy and Practice in Ireland: Identifying the issues to set the template for discussion*.

The Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland can, and must, have a central, formative and enabling role in this debate and it is the responsibility of all Irish archaeologists from all sectors to participate. There is already an understanding that greater cross-sectoral professional collaboration is required to address a number of serious issues that have arisen as a consequence recent development pressure and unimagined professional expansion. These issues are not just inherent to the profession but also include external challenges to the profession.

The profession has seen unprecedented, if uneven, capacity-building across its sectors driven by Ireland's 'Celtic Tiger' economy and associated development. The opportunity this level of resourcing has presented - and continues to present – has not been grasped evenly across the profession. It can, and should now be developed responsibly in a collaborative climate with tangible benefit to all sectors.

The Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland is seeking to provide a continuing forum within which open-handed, collaborative, professional development-focused and issue-focused debate takes place. The Galway conference was intended to initiate and facilitate this process, to move the discussion forward so that the new, strategic conceptual frameworks

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that have already been tabled can be developed into principles for action, driven by professional practitioners themselves, in a collaborative, rather than fractured and adversarial professional climate.

Speakers and session chairs were drawn from all sectors of the archaeological profession and papers were presented from a wide variety of perspectives. The main sessions covered the following areas:

- Resources and knowledge - heritage management
- Fieldwork and excavation - record to future research
- Research opportunity - created at the 'coalface'
- Collection - for public display and research
- Creating the foundations - teaching archaeology

Placing archaeology in modern Ireland

While most speakers focused on the specific issues related to particular aspects of the profession, there were still many common and recurring themes across different sessions. Many issues had broad cross-sectoral significance and impacts that become clear over the course of the conference.

Themes and Issues

Heritage as an economic force

The more complex contribution of archaeology/heritage to local economies (particularly the tourist/leisure economy) needs to be emphasised, rather simply viewing archaeology/heritage as an obstacle to development and economic expansion. Initiatives, such as local museums have important economic functions, in addition to education and raising public awareness of archaeology and heritage. As has been highlighted by the recent Heritage Council promoted study, there has been a shift in public perception, whereby heritage, broadly, is viewed as a leisure activity.

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Heritage is local

Local support is critical to the success of heritage initiatives and also to the protection of archaeology as well as heritage generally. Local organisations such as museums, societies, clubs and heritage initiatives need to be included and supported. Locally based archaeologists and heritage officers can provide critical support.

Publication & Dissemination

Dissemination of data is important but data in its own right is insufficient for dissemination if it is not appropriately digested, analysed and its meanings and context adequately described and presented. This is not just an issue for the development and growth of co-operation within the profession, but also from the perspective of raising awareness in society generally of what archaeology is and what archaeologists do.

Dissemination of the results of archaeological research an excavation need to be decoupled from the issue of archaeological publication. The conflation of the two issues in earlier debate has led the effective ‘dumping’ of raw or poorly structured and analysed datasets, with minimal discussion, into print media.

Print media publication, particularly in popular, accessible formats such as the quarterly *Archaeology Ireland*, does make the results of archaeological investigations available to a wider, public audience and succeeds admirably in raising awareness.

However, a distinction needs to be made between the need to disseminate and make available primary data and raw datasets and the requirement to publish, coherent, considered narratives, which expand and develop research frameworks. Publication in traditional print media is only one aspect of dissemination not the sole means.

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New initiatives and new technologies are increasing the quality and diversity of means by which archaeological data can be disseminated; organisations such as the National Museum of Ireland, the National Roads Authority and the National Monuments Service are in the process of developing on-line searchable databases of their archival material.

Archaeological Archives and the curation of artefacts and ecofacts

Current legislation and policy views licenced excavation directors and archaeological organisations as temporary custodians of archaeological archives, artefacts and ecofacts. The lack of any formal standard or arrangements for the archiving and management of the archival material from archaeological investigations is a major challenge to the profession and is perhaps an even greater issue than that posed by the dissemination of data (for which some solutions exist or are in development). Despite the scope and scale of archaeological investigations which have been carried out over the last 20 years, no provision has been made for the long term management of the archives currently in the care of the individual excavation directors or archaeological consultancies. Nor has any government agency been charged with formal responsibility for dealing with this issue.

Under the current legislation the National Museum of Ireland has the responsibility for the management and care of all archaeological objects found within the state, in particular those retrieved from archaeological excavations.

However, the National Museum does not currently have the storage capacity to accept archaeological objects. Currently, objects retrieved from excavations in Ireland remain in the temporary care of individual excavation directors, archaeological companies and consultancies. The museum is also involved in a dialogue with specialists to determine what ecofacts should be retained from archaeological investigation for permanent storage and curation, though the museum does not currently have the capacity to accept such material for storage. The National Museum is presently engaged in a dialogue with the Dept of Arts,

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Tourism and Sport to determine what its requirements are for a long term storage facility for its collections and how its storage needs and responsibilities can best be met and managed into the future.

Training and Education

The majority of third level students who study archaeology at undergraduate level in the main universities do not go on to work in the profession. The universities do not feel it their role to train students in excavation and survey skills, eg. to produce skilled technicians. Current university teaching aims to produce individuals educated with developed reasoning skills. In contrast to these, study of archaeology at undergraduate level within the IT system is much more vocationally and practically focused.

Changes to the organisation and funding of the universities over the last 5-10 years appears to be leading to the commodification of education with resources linked to student numbers. The modular structure of many undergraduate degrees effectively turns the students into 'consumers' of the courses on offer, free to pick and chose across the range on offer.

There is also considerable pressure on university departments to engage in research and to obtain additional funding for their schools through this process. This situation can be observed in its most developed form at Queen's University Belfast. All staff engage in extensive research projects and programmes but very little of this work applies directly (or even indirectly) to Irish archaeology. It is entirely driven by the availability of external funding sources.

Teaching archaeology within the IT system is a much more recent development; the ethos of the IT system also facilitates the development of more vocationally-oriented, highly focused and evolving courses. There is an emphasis on building and developing strong relationships with the commercial sector, including the development of funded research programmes at graduate level.

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Concerns about the skill-level of graduates with primary degrees entering the workplace are not unique to archaeology; similar debate and concerns are to be found within other disciplines and professions such as engineering.

Formal, accredited Continuing Professional Development is essential to the growth of the profession, to ensure that appropriate and targetted technical and generic skills training is available to those coming into the profession and to allow those working in the profession to update, develop and expand their education and skill-sets. However the transient nature of employment within the profession at certain levels and in certain sectors does pose a challenge in this regard.

There is a major problem with a perceived anti-intellectualism amongst field-staff and young professionals working in the commercial sector. The lack of a strong vocational link between the teaching and practice of archaeology may create unrealistic expectations for those entering into the profession leading to a high potential for disillusionment and disengagement with the intellectual pursuit of archaeology in tandem with practical fieldwork.

Cross-Sectoral Co-operation and Interdisciplinary approaches

Increased cross-sectoral co-operation and interdisciplinary approaches have been recommended by most of the recent studies and reviews which have lead up to the conference (eg Archaeology 2020). The fragmentation of the heritage services across several disparate government departments has certainly been a road-block to the implementation of integrated strategies at a policy level.

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Within the general profession of archaeology there are three main sectors: commercial; academic; public/state. While individual and ad hoc communication and co-operation has developed and is to be lauded, there is a need for more formalised strategies for communication and co-operation between sectors to off-set the tendency towards fragmentation and isolation.

Increasingly the models for best practice in archaeology, and in particular, field archaeology, stress the importance of interdisciplinary approaches and the integration and incorporation specialist analysis. Ad hoc models for interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral co-operation are being developed on a project-specific basis; these need to be examined and their wider adoptability considered.

Research Frameworks - All archaeological endeavour is research

There is currently only one organisation within Ireland whose sole remit is archaeological research, namely the Discovery Programme. Research has also been perceived for a long time as a particular remit of third level institutions.

However, all archaeological work should be carried out within the context of research frameworks and all archaeologists should be conscious of the need to work in such contexts. The communication and the dissemination of research concepts and ideas within the professional – and across sectors - is critical to ensuring that such frameworks are well-established and can evolve and progress in tandem with the archaeological works which they inform and the evidence from which, in turn, informs their development.

The development and integration of research frameworks across all sectors of the archaeological profession is of critical importance. While many projects within the commercial sector openly and effectively incorporate research objectives, there is still a need to develop the confidence of those working in the commercial sector to acknowledge the research value of their work, and the function of the research, to contextualise underpin and support their projects.



Principles for Action

Heritage is an economic driver

Heritage is elemental to Irish cultural identity and a rich resource for its citizens. The IAI will continue to articulate the significant value and contribution of archaeology to Irish cultural heritage and to demonstrate that as such, it has an integral role to play in supporting the development of the Irish economy and in its policy focus on sustainable development.

Heritage is local

Local awareness, support and understanding is critical to the success of any heritage initiative. The IAI will support initiatives which develop local awareness, support and the creation of infrastructure for the promotion of Archaeology & Heritage. In particular, IAI supports the existing pilot programme for the provision of County Archaeologists and would advocate that this programme be extended to include all Local Authorities.

Cross-Sectoral Co-operation and Interdisciplinary approaches

The IAI feels that the dissolution of Dúchas was regrettable; fragmentation of Heritage Services frustrates efficiency and hampers the potential for communication and for the coherent forward planning and management of heritage resources.

The IAI will support initiatives to promote communication and integrated strategies for the long term management of archaeology and heritage.

Current ad hoc and informal structures for cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary co-operation need to be developed and formalised. The IAI represents all sectors of the profession and has an important role in the areas of advocacy, the facilitation of cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary dialogue, exchange and dissemination to all areas of the profession.

The IAI, though its emphasis on greater cross-sectoral communication and exchange will seek to explore means by which members of the profession can move across different sectoral divides during the course of their careers in archaeology.

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Publication and Dissemination

The IAI publishes an annual peer-reviewed journal (Journal of Irish Archaeology) which takes a wide range of research and excavation based papers from our members and will support all initiatives to publish or disseminate archaeological data and raise awareness of the activities and investigations carried out by archaeologists.

The IAI will seek to provide guidelines on the dissemination of archaeological information and datasets, outlining for its members the means and media that are currently available (including traditional publication). In this regard, the IAI will recommend the development of new formats and outlets for dissemination, advising on appropriate formats for different audiences, including the general public.

The IAI will promote the development of new and more diverse means for the dissemination of archaeological findings, information and datasets, for the professional as a whole. Certainly, there is a great need to expand current internet resources and, as a matter of urgency, to create a dedicated and accessible digital repository for primary datasets.

Archaeological Archives and the curation of artefacts and ecofacts

The IAI has already carried out some preliminary investigations on the requirement for an archive of the records from archaeological excavations, and acknowledges the work of others undertaken in this regard.. Work on this topic has also recently been undertaken by the Heritage Council and, in particular, Dublin City Council. IAI will seek, as a matter of urgency, to promote the development and implementation of a strategy for the quality control and management of Archaeological Archives, with reference to the pioneering work which has already been undertaken by Dublin City Council.

The IAI will seek to liaise with the National Museum of Ireland and stakeholders to articulate the position of the profession regarding the ongoing need for curation and storage of artefacts and eco-facts, in particular those retrieved from archaeological excavation.

It has been suggested that an integrated facility for the storage and curation of archives,

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artefacts and ecofacts deriving from archaeological excavations should be considered as a solution. However the fragmentation of the heritage services across several different government departments makes such a solution difficult to envision.

Education & Training

The IAI will continue to develop and promote a Continuing Professional Development programme for the profession

The IAI will liaise with 3rd level institutions and the commercial sector to create new models of training, such as exchange and outreach programmes and practitioner teaching programmes.

While it is understood by the IAI that the current model for undergraduate education cannot produce skilled technicians, it is essential nonetheless that dialogue with the 3rd level institutions should encourage a climate in 3rd-level education that ensures that students obtain a firmly grounded, basic understanding of how the practical aspects of archaeological methodology and practice feed into, and is also informed by, the intellectual and academic education of archaeologists. It is considered essential that students learn within an educational framework that creates the basis for the development of their practical and technical professional skills and results in an understanding of how those skills inform the intellectual aspects of archaeological analysis and presentation.

Many students of archaeology at undergraduate level do not go on to work in the profession. Consideration should also be given to the opportunity this presents to raise student awareness of field monuments and their presentation within the landscape and provide those who will go out to work in other fields, professions and disciplines with a real understanding of archaeology as an aspect of cultural heritage.

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Research Frameworks – All archaeological endeavour is research

Most 3rd level institutions include research groups and research networks within their organisation. The IAI, in fostering collaboration across sectors within the profession will seek to encourage the expansion of these groups and create partnerships particularly with the commercial sector.

It is envisaged that such collaboration will not simply involve the exchange of data from the commercial sector to the 3rd level research sector, but will result in truly participative partnerships and the development of research capacity within commercial sector work.

The IAI will examine the principles upon which such research programmes can be successfully incorporated into commercial activity; including co-operative ventures with 3rd level institutions, such as those that are well-established in other disciplines.

The IAI will actively seek to engage in dialogue with other research stakeholders such as the Royal Irish Academy, the Heritage Council and the Discovery Programme to examine the feasibility of developing research frameworks at various levels which can both inform and be informed by the on-going and dynamic programmes of fieldwork in commercial sector activity.



Summary and Conclusions

This Conference occurred at an important juncture for the profession, coinciding with the lead-in to a major Review of Archaeological Policy and Practice called for by Minister John Gormley at the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. It has presented the profession and the Institute with a singular opportunity to devise practical principles for profession-driven actions that can inform and assist the Minister through the process of policy review with securely grounded, confident input from the profession itself.

The IAI is seeking a formative role within the future development of Irish archaeology. With membership extending across all sectors and levels of the profession, it is well placed to provide the forum for continuing dialogue on professional cohesion, development and will actively seek to represent its members in the public domain. The major strength of the organisation is the breadth and diversity of its membership who are now encouraged to engage with the debate and support the IAI in its activities and the professional advocacy it undertakes on their behalf.

Collaboration, research and knowledge generation are the key platforms for a development within the profession that can transform the way archaeology is perceived and conducted as a professional activity. Even without significant changes to the existing structures that underpin archaeological work, the adoption of flexible, open and inclusive working practices in a collaborative environment will result in significant qualitative impacts both for the profession and for the presentation of archaeology to the public.

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