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<td>Warren, Graeme; McDermott, Conor</td>
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Excavations at the Upper Lake, Glendalough, Co. Wicklow 2010–2012

Glendalough Valley Archaeology Project
Newsletter 2, October 2012
Background

Since 2010 the UCD School of Archaeology have conducted small-scale archaeological excavations on the lawns adjacent to the Upper Lake car park at Glendalough. These excavations sought to examine some potential archaeological features identified in the geophysical surveys (see GVAP Newsletter 3) and to clarify the date of some of the upstanding archaeology visible on the surface. The Glendalough landscape as it appears today is a product of a complex history and has been substantially shaped by the competing demands of industry, tourism and agriculture over the last 200 years. This has had a significant impact on the archaeological monuments now visible and how they have evolved over time.

We have excavated seven trenches in total in this area, totalling some 250 square metres. It should be stressed that these are small excavation trenches and more research is required in some areas to fully explore the structures and other features uncovered.

Results: Cross bases and paths

Today three simple stone crosses set in low stone cairns form an approximately north-south line across the lawn today to the west of the stone ‘caher’ and are amongst the first monuments encountered by most visitors. Based on their morphology the crosses themselves are likely to be around ninth–tenth century AD in date in age, but the age of the cross bases (cairns) on which they are set was not clear: some people thought that they might be leachts, open air altars associated with pilgrimage or memorial and dating from the early medieval period. Other people, however, were worried that earlier editions of the Ordnance Survey maps depict the crosses in inconsistent locations, and argued that at least some of the cross bases might have been affected by more recent transformations of the landscape, possibly associated with early antiquarianism, or tourism. A two storey hotel (Grants Hotel) stood in woodland close to Reefert church to the immediate south of this area until the early twentieth century and may have prompted extensive landscaping.

Community and schools outreach

Working at Glendalough means that we are working in the full view of the public – locals, tourists, hill walkers, families and children. Many are fascinated to see archaeology being carried out, and are full of questions. Working in collaboration with Dr Thomas Kador we have successfully raised grants from UCD, the Heritage Council and the OPW since 2010 to engage staff members in an outreach capacity. We have coincided our fieldwork with Heritage Week and run multiple daily tours of our excavations for casual visitors. We have also brought local schools and other community groups on organised programmes. In 2011 and 2012 we have presented results of our research in the area in an evening seminar at the Glendalough Visitors Centre. In 2012 a blog offered day by day updates on the excavation, and this will continue to be updated as post-exavcation work continue: http://www.ucdblogs.org/glendalougharchaeologyproject/blog/

A school group from Wicklow Educate Together National School on a guided tour of the excavations during the summer of 2012.
Our excavations have shown that one of the geophysical anomalies in this area was a stone path. This initially appeared to be clearly aligned on the cross base and seemed to point to the location of Reefert Church in the other direction.

The path was laid on an old land surface, buried by a deep accumulation of topsoil. It has a small paved area to one side, possibly associated with a small stone cairn. The path was interrupted by NNW-SSE aligned drainage ditches, which are clearly later than the path and are probably Nineteenth or early Twentieth Century. Excavations in 2012 demonstrated that the path runs beneath the stone cross base, and is therefore earlier than this feature. This raises lots of questions about the apparent alignment of the path on this cross base. Is this just coincidence, or did something else mark this location?

In 2012 we examined the construction of the cross base itself, removing a section of the cairn without impinging on the cross or its supports. This categorically demonstrated that the cairn is recent, with Twentieth Century material recovered from its lowest levels. This may either mean that the entire cross and cairn have been moved to this location from another spot, or that an existing cross (and base?) in or near this location was very substantially rebuilt in the Twentieth Century.

Within the cairn, and in association with modern material, we found a bullaun stone. Bullauns are early medieval/medieval in date and are strongly associated
with religious sites, often being found on the periphery rather than within them. Many bullauns are known from the area surrounding the main monastic complex at Glendalough, this is the first from the Upper Lake area. The bullaun was clearly not in its original context, but we do not think it has been moved very far. As well as the bullaun, we have found 4-5 small fragments of medieval pottery in this area, and one sherd of Neolithic pottery. This is the first clear evidence for prehistory in this part of Glendalough Valley.

The ‘caher’

The caher is the circular stone walled monument that stands in the centre of the lawns at Glendalough. The caher is very substantially reconstructed and as encountered today is a very unusual monument. The low grass and stone bank that lies beneath the formal stone and earth wall, however, may potentially represent an earlier structural feature. We excavated a very small trench against the caher in 2012 and were surprised to find evidence of a substantial ditch, into which stones had collapsed, presumably from the adjacent bank. The ditch contained charcoal and burnt bone and we look forward to obtaining a radiocarbon date from this material.

A series of agricultural furrows and ditches running up to the stone path excavated in 2009.

Agricultural Features

Many of our excavation trenches have revealed evidence of comparatively recent (Nineteenth and Twentieth Century) agriculture. This evidence takes the form of plough furrows, spade dug cultivation, drainage ditches, and possible evidence of open ridge and furrow systems. These features, which correspond to anomalies on the geophysical survey, demonstrate how heavily this area was farmed, and this has clearly had a significant impact on the survival of monuments in the area. In 1870, Colles stated that:

“The ancient ‘Pilgrim’s Road’ extended northward across the valley from the Righfeart church to the river which connects the two lakes, and was bordered by a laine of carn and crosses, which still remain, as do a couple of caiseals, apparently sephulchral enclosures, in the adjoining fields. But the southern half of the road has been destroyed, and its site ploughed over in the last few years; and unless some protector arises the carn and caiseals will be cleared away one of these days”.

Sadly, one of the caiseals has vanished, and the pilgrims road itself is now lost.
Discussion

Our excavations at Glendalough have been very successful. We have demonstrated that the cairns associated with one of the simple crosses are recent, and we might therefore question the date of the other cairns. We have demonstrated a potentially important ditch immediately adjacent to the caher, which may help demonstrate early activity in this area. In general, working within this landscape has demonstrated the significant impact of industry, agriculture and tourism in conditioning the survival and form of the archaeological monuments. To a large extent the visible landscape of Glendalough is a product of these last two hundred years of activity. The presence of prehistoric pottery also reminds us of a much longer story of human occupation. More excavation in the area will be required to clarify these issues.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to OPW, NPWS, UCD, the Heritage Council, Campus Engage, the National Monuments Service and the National Museum of Ireland for permissions, access and financial support. We would also like to thank all of the staff and students who have contributed to the Field School over recent years.
A sherd of an Early Neolithic ceramic probably dating to before 3,000 BC.

Further Reading

Some of the early archaeology of the Upper Lake is reviewed by Harney (2011).


Further information

The excavations discussed here were undertaken in Lugduff townland, Upper Lake, Glendalough, Co. Wicklow under excavation license number 10E0311 (2010-2011) and Ministerial Consent E4431 (2012).

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Further detail on archaeological sites in the Glendalough Valley can be found on the Archaeological Survey Database at www.archaeology.ie. Glendalough Valley forms part of the Wicklow Mountains National Park under the management of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Recommended citation: