

Presentation to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Local Government - Wednesday 2 February 2005

Chairman, thank you for the invitation to address your committee as CEO of the Discovery Programme. The Discovery Programme is a public institution for advanced research into Irish archaeology.

Institutional history of the Discovery Programme

We were established in May 1991 as a non-statutory body on the personal initiative of Taoiseach Charles J. Haughey. In 1993 responsibility was transferred to the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht. In 1996, under Minister Michael D. Higgins, we became an autonomous Company - the Discovery Programme Ltd – to be funded through the Heritage Council. We now operate completely under the aegis of the Heritage Council, as confirmed to the Dáil by Minister Síle de Valera on 21 February 2001.

Governance

We are audited by the C&AG and, in accordance with a Memorandum of Understanding of 1998, a small number of administrative matters still require the approval of the Department. Otherwise we are an independent body.

We have a Council, representing twelve archaeological institutions north and south - universities, museums, government departments, learned and professional societies, etc. This group can, additionally, co-opt up to four distinguished archaeologists from abroad. That Council appoints five members of a Directorate/Board of Directors. Three other members are appointed by the Heritage Council, as is the Chairman, who must be approved by the Minister for heritage matters. The Heritage Council has decided that one of its appointees will always be its Chief Executive.

Unfortunately our current Chairman, Dr Michael Ryan, cannot be here today but is very willing to speak to the committee on another occasion if that would be useful.

Remit

As distinct from the other public bodies that deal with Irish archaeology, the Discovery Programme's sole remit is to engage in full-time archaeological and related research, in order to enhance our knowledge of Ireland's past. Our only other concern is to communicate the results of that research, as appropriate, to scholars and the public.

Work

We do our work by identifying major issues about which there is a lack of knowledge and establishing research projects to investigate those matters. A dedicated specialist staff is recruited for each project. To date six major projects have been established as well as some smaller ones, covering many parts of Ireland. The results have been published in six books and six issues of an in-house scientific journal. Several other ancillary educational and popular publications have been issued, and the staff has written over two hundred other articles in various external outlets. At this moment, four more books are at the publishers, three books are in various stages of drafting, others are in preparation, and the seventh issue of the in-house journal will be published later this year.

Tara

Since our inception we have had a Tara Project, investigating both the archaeological remains as well as the literary and historical sources. Three of our books and many of our research reports have dealt specifically with Tara, and a major study dealing with the kingship of Tara in the period AD 400 to 800 will be published later this year. I think we can claim that we have done more research on Tara than everyone else put together. Our work on Tara has included all forms of survey, excavation, and study of the ancient and modern historical sources for the site and its hinterland. One example of the results of this work is that, before we started, only about thirty individual monuments were known on the Hill and there was, effectively, no understanding of their chronological relationship. The number of known sites on the Hill now stands at about one hundred and twenty and we have an overall model of their development through time, which can be tested by excavation in the years to come. In addition, there has been a growing appreciation that the Hill of Tara itself is just the dominant element of a wider surrounding landscape of related ritual and settlement sites, which seems to extend from Ringlestown Rath to the west, along the Riverstown linear earthwork to Rathmiles to the north, and onwards to Rath Lugh and Skreen to the east.

The M3

The Discovery Programme is a research institution and has no function in planning or development matters; it is certainly not a campaigning body. Nevertheless, given our major involvement with Tara, we felt that it was appropriate for us to make our views known at the motorway planning stage. The Discovery Programme involves individuals who, in their separate capacities, have taken differing positions and roles in relation to the M3 debate but, as a corporate body, we said, both in written objections and at the oral hearing, that we were against the route subsequently approved. However, once the decision on that matter had been made with due process, we believed that we had no further role and that it would be beyond our powers to engage in the controversy that subsequently emerged. Although both sides in that debate have frequently referred to us, we have scrupulously avoided any further public comment on the matter.

We would, however, wish to reiterate the following points:

1. It would be hard to overstate the national and international importance of Tara.
2. The Hill of Tara is only one element of a wider related archaeological landscape, the additional richness of which is continually being further revealed.
3. The Discovery Programme, of course, welcomes the development of our national infrastructure but is occasionally disappointed when, even in good faith, a major cultural asset is depleted by such development.
4. We would assert that, in the event of any impingement on such an extremely important asset, the very least that can be expected is that the highest possible standard of archaeological investigation and mitigation be deployed.

Dr Brian Lacey
Chief Executive Officer
The Discovery Programme