

A review of the Discovery Programme 1991-2007 – paper read to the ‘Future Projects Seminar’, 1 May 2007.

I want to thank all of you for coming today, especially on behalf of those of us who are actually paid to work for the Discovery Programme. Of course, there are many people in the audience who have done various pieces of work for the DP but who did not get paid for it, such as the members and past members of our Directorates and Councils and members and past members of our various committees. We are extremely conscious of the fact that as well as being of enormous practical support to our work, this involvement by our colleagues from all sectors of the profession is one of the real strengths of our organisation. We continually strive to ensure that this is not just a one way communication and, increasingly, we have been trying to repay some of that support through: collaboration on various research projects, particularly making survey equipment and training available, or simply by giving lectures and seminars on our research.

To use a wedding metaphor, I'm not sure if my role here this morning is that of Best Man or Father of the Bride but, whichever, I've been asked to make this short contribution to extoll the virtues, and maybe point out some of the embarrassing weaknesses, of the organization.

The main purpose of today's seminar is to look to the future but, before we begin the process of identifying what might become our next suite of projects, it was felt that we needed some sort of review of how we've evolved since our establishment.

In ten days time, we will be marking that allegedly sweetest of all anniversaries, the Discovery Programme's sixteenth birthday. I take the 11 May date from what might be described as our founding constitutional document: *The Discovery Programme: Strategies and Questions* booklet, published in May 1992. In his foreword, Prof. Eogan points out that it was on 11 May 1991 that the then Taoiseach, Mr Haughey, initiated our organisation. I don't know how widely it is known but during the homily at Mr Haughey's state funeral last year, when his various cultural achievements in government were being listed, the only organisation that was actually mentioned by name was the Discovery Programme.

It might be worth reminding ourselves what the state of Irish archaeology was in 1991; that was the year for instance when we got two serious but popular books on our subject - Michael Ryan edited the beautiful *Illustrated Archaeology of Ireland* (1st edition) and in Northern Ireland Jim Mallory and Tom McNeill published their comprehensive *The Archaeology of Ulster*. Perhaps the best snapshot of archaeology that year, however, can be got from the 1991 *Excavations* bulletin. Although only 147 excavation licenses were issued that year (nearly 3,000 north and south last year - 2006), already some of the pressures which would later become the tidal flow - even the tsunami - in the years to come were already becoming apparent. Excavations were carried out by the state institutions and universities north and south, DOENI, NMI, OPW as it still was, QUB, UCC, UCD, Ulster Museum, Limerick City Council, Waterford City Council. Only one commercial company, ADS, is specifically mentioned, working both north and south of the border, but the bulk of the work in 1991 was carried out already by what appear in the bulletin as independent archaeologists, the names of many of whom would become familiar in the coming years as the founders, owners and staff of the various commercial archaeological companies and consultancies that we all know now. It was a very different time and one of the major questions we have to ask ourselves is, if the DP as planned then (or as it developed) is still necessary now. Despite, or maybe specifically because of, the changed circumstances I would like to anticipate the answer to that question as a strong yes, although that is obviously a matter for discussion here today.

The initial panel set up by Mr Haughey to plan the Discovery Programme decided after lengthy deliberation and examination of the various questions besetting Irish archaeology in 1991 and 92 that the settlement archaeology of the later prehistoric period – the so-called ‘core period’ - should be the principal focus for initial study, and that there would be a notable emphasis on the west and more particularly the southwest of the country. The work would be undertaken, to quote the *Strategies and Questions* booklet, ‘so that in a few years time significant increases in our knowledge of it can be demonstrated’. Fifteen years later, we are obliged to ask ourselves if that ambition was achieved? My own view is that, while of course more can always be done, the answer must be broadly yes.

In 1997 for instance Prof. Waddell wrote about Eoin Grogan's North Munster Project - since fully published - that:

research has identified a number of distinct patterns in the later prehistoric landscape and, indeed, augmented the numbers of some monument types considerably: 29 hillforts are now known, an increase of 900% since the project began.

And again:

Detailed survey has revealed an apparent hierarchy of settlement including large hilltop enclosures over 5 ha in extent, small prominently sited enclosures, and smaller settlements.

The same project included the pioneering Shannon intertidal survey by Aidan O'Sullivan which produced astonishing evidence from the Mesolithic to post-medieval times.

Speaking about Martin Doody's significant excavation of the site at Chancellorsland as part of the Ballyhoura Hills Project [published in 2008], Prof. Waddell said:

It seems that such oval or subrectangular enclosures may prove to be a new late prehistoric monument type, some apparently associated with barrows.

On Claire Cotter's excavation of Dún Aonghasa as part of the Western Stone Forts Project, the reports of which are currently being finalized for publication, Prof Waddell said the:

investigations produced just one of the many surprises of the Discovery Programme. The Cliff-top site was occupied and enclosed in the later Bronze Age, many centuries before the conventional Iron Age date often quoted for the great multi-vallate stone fort ...

At Tara, just one of the results of Conor Newman's extensive work was that the then thirty or so known monuments on the hill has been increased to about 120, and the complete absence of an understanding of the chronological relationships of those monuments has been replaced by an overall model of their development through time, which can be tested by excavation in the years to come, such as the small but very fruitful work by Helen Roche on Ráith na Rí. The work of Edel Bhreathnach and her

colleagues has considerably increased our knowledge of the powerful if enigmatic Tara kingship and its prehistoric roots.

Turning to our second phase of projects, the *Strategies and Questions* booklet said:

The enigma of the Irish Later Mesolithic could best be tackled through the search for an inland waterlogged site where it would be possible to supplement our knowledge of a period which is only known by its range of stone tools. A waterlogged site would allow us to fill out our knowledge of the lifestyle and equipment in use between 6500 and 4000 BC.

That statement is almost a 'script', for the locating and excavation of the site at Derragh Island by Christina Fredengren and her colleagues as part of the Lake Settlement Project. The work currently being carried out on the extensive wood samples from that site by Ingelise Stuijts and Claire Anderson should provide answers to many of the issues raised in the 1992 booklet.

The Medieval Rural Settlement Project has also achieved a great deal, such as the interdisciplinary study on the hinterland of Dublin and the richness of the site at Carns in Co. Roscommon. But perhaps I should single out – because initially I was not personally much in favour of it – the work on the manor at Castlemore in Co. Carlow, where to quote Prof. Bruce Campbell of QUB, Niall Brady has 'struck gold' through a combination of applied historical studies and the use of totally non-intrusive fieldwork - geophysical survey and field-walking.

Inter-disciplinarity has been at the heart of DP projects from the beginning, starting with David Weir's pioneering palynological studies in an area of better agricultural land in Co. Louth and, following various other collaborations, continued to the present in the various projects of Ingelise Stuijts. Historical studies have been incorporated in several projects such as Western Stone Forts, Tara, and more recently the Medieval Rural Settlement project. In fact the latter two projects have given us two different models for the 'use' of historical sources. In the Tara project the history and archaeology were, as it were exploited in parallel, whereas in the MRS there is a much more integrated use of the two disciplines.

The Discovery Programme has also taken an active role in the introduction of new technologies and techniques into Irish archaeology. The important pioneering work in that respect by Paul Synnot and Barry Masterson has been more than built on by the highly innovative and imaginative work of their successors, Anthony Corns and Rob Shaw.

As everyone here knows archaeology is a slow business; publication of the results being the slowest aspect of all. But, accepting that, I don't think our record has been particularly bad. The statistics show that since we were set up we've organized 6 major projects and several smaller ones depending on how you count them – including participation in several EU supported programmes such as EPCL, CIPHER and COST. We've published 8 monographs already [now 10], and one other on the BHP is about to appear [published 2008]. Four more are at various advanced stages of preparation. There have been 6 editions of the in-house journal, *Discovery Programme Reports* and 9 booklets of various kinds have appeared. Since 1993, DP staff have published [now over 300] articles on both their projects and private research work. I say approximately because we don't have statistics for the year 2000. In addition DP staff members have published [10] books not connected with their work but, at least to some extent, clearly influenced by the DP ethos, and about [15] editions of different learned journals of various kinds have been edited by members of staff during their employment here.

In the years 1998-9 and again from 2001 to 2005, there were 299 presentations of various kinds by DP staff at conferences, schools, universities, summer schools, and societies etc, all over Ireland and the UK and in 14 other countries from Canada to New Zealand and Russia to the USA. The total number of presentations for the sixteen years' history of the organisation including the years for which we don't have records, must be close to 500 [now over 600].

In recent years, mainly as a result of the enthusiasm of Michael Potterton and Chris Corlett, a series of highly successful - indeed booked-out - thematic seminars have been held in conjunction with the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland to present the results from current excavations. These have built on one particular aspect of the Dublin hinterland medieval study and on the ambition set out for the Discovery Programme by our chairman, Michael Ryan, that we should strive for a closer linking of the work of the

development-led sector with research agendas, particularly the 'harvesting' of the results from the massive number of excavations now taking place; although I know some people do not like that term. That particular aim was the background to the very successful consultative seminar we held as far back as November 2002, which I think we can claim, to some extent at least, formed what might be called the 'prehistory' to three recent important initiatives: the UCD 20-20 study, the RIA's strategy for Irish archaeology and the Heritage Council's national strategy for archaeological research.

In 1992 the *Strategies and Questions* booklet said:

It should be stressed that the various projects cannot be brought to a successful conclusion without facilities for study, conservation, storage, exhibition and publication being part of the Discovery Programme

The original grant for setting up the DP was half a million punts - in current terms €640,000; our allocation from the Heritage Council this year is €1.43 million which is a little over double the initial figure. However, since 2001 we have had to carry all our own accommodation costs, and increasingly we are subjected to more detailed and, therefore, more expensive auditing procedures. The Heritage Council has been very generous in putting occasional extra finance in our way and we have adopted more economical ways of working as well as raising some small additional sums ourselves. Nevertheless limits in resources of various kinds are the greatest brake on our achievements and ambitions. In 1997, John Waddell said about us, 'If anything, the approach of the first Programme may have been too ambitious ...'

I believe the record I've set out here is relatively good. Of course, unless we were complete charlatans, we'd have had to have done something in the fifteen or sixteen years of our existence. The questions for all of you are: was what we did enough; were they the right things to do and can we improve in the future?

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