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# **ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS**

**MULTIPLE IMPACTS,  
POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

Edited by Nathan Schlanger  
and Kenneth Aitchison

# 3. The impact of the recession on archaeology in the Republic of Ireland

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## 1 Introduction

This paper provides a brief overview of the organisation and structure of archaeology in the Republic of Ireland; it assesses the impact of the recession on the practice of archaeology in Ireland and will attempt to consider the prospects for the future. The Republic of Ireland is an interesting case study as the sustainability of the economic model that supported archaeological activity has been challenged by the global banking crisis and a domestic economic downturn. This has led to a collapse in the amount of archaeological work being commissioned from private sector archaeological consultancies and a consequential steep rise in unemployment among the archaeological profession in Ireland.

The paper is written in a personal capacity and should not be seen as an expression of the views of the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland or its members.

## 2 Organisation and structure

Archaeological services in the Republic of Ireland are provided by a state-supervised private sector. This model of organisation was effective and adaptable in the face of the unprecedented economic growth experienced in the country in the era of the so-called “Celtic Tiger”. The construction projects stimulated by this economic growth led to the completion of thousands of excavation projects annually and the employment of large numbers of archaeologists, particularly in the private sector.

The emergence of a private sector in Irish archaeology was not the result of an explicit policy but was a response to the requirements of developers, initially public sector development agencies and later private sector developers, for archaeological advice and excavation services in the late nineteen-eighties. Its emergence was facilitated by a general reluctance of state bodies or universities to get involved in the direct provision of archaeological services to mitigate the archaeological impact of proposed developments and the insistence by the relevant statutory bodies of the application of the “polluter pays” principle. These actions associated with the transposition of the European Union Environmental Impact Assessment directive into Irish law in 1989 and the placing the national Sites and Monuments Record on a statutory footing (as the Record of Monuments and Places) in 1994 created a market for archaeological services.

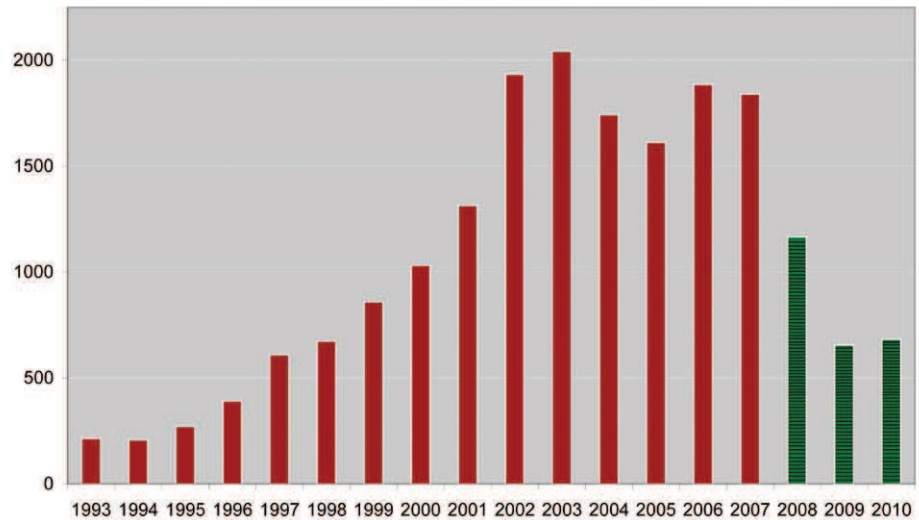
## 3 Scope of private sector activity

Archaeological services to the public and private sectors are generally provided by commercial companies and sole traders. The services provided by these companies generally include archaeological assessment and evaluation, archaeological excavation and post-excavation services. Assessment of the scope of commercial

archaeology in the Republic of Ireland is hampered by a lack of data and research.

Anecdotally the most significant aspect of the archaeological business in Ireland is the provision of excavation services. Archaeological excavation can only be carried out with a permit granted by the Minister for Environment, Heritage & Local Government in accordance with the provisions of the National Monuments Acts (1930-2004). Summary reports on each excavation have to be published in the annual *Excavations Bulletin*. Research suggests that more than 90% of the excavations carried out each year are in response to the requirements to comply with development consents (Eogan 2008). As these excavations are generally carried out by archaeologists operating in the private sector the *Bulletin* is a good proxy for the health of the commercial archaeology in Ireland.

Fig. 1. Annual totals of excavations reported in the *Excavations Bulletin* (red); annual totals of archaeological excavation permits issued by the Dept. of Environment, Heritage & Local Government (green) [data for 2010 are a projection based on the first 10 weeks of the year].



These data reveal (Fig. 1) that between 1995 and 2002 the numbers of archaeological excavations carried out grew by an average of 30% per annum, between 2003 and 2007 the numbers of excavations stabilised at a level above 1,500, with annual fluctuations in the order of +/- 15%. Data provided by the Department of Environment, Heritage & Local Government show that the number of excavation permits issued in 2008 was 37% less than in the previous year and that there was a year-on-year reduction of 44% in 2009. In real terms the level of archaeological activity has reduced to levels last seen by the profession in the late 1990s. Projections for the current year suggest that there might be slight increase in the number of excavations carried out.

This growth in archaeological excavations impacted on employment levels in Irish archaeology. Research carried out as part of the “Discovering the Archaeologists of Europe” project in 2007 has shown that commercial archaeological companies employed 974 staff in the Republic of Ireland (McDermott & La Piscopia 2008, 20 ff.). Follow up surveys by the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland in 2008 and 2009 suggest that the reduction in excavation activity has led to a consequential reduction in employment levels in the private sector where employment fell by 80% in the two years following the collection of the “Discovering the Archaeologists of Europe” data (Eogan & Sullivan 2009; Eoin Sullivan pers. comm.).

It is difficult to make an assessment of the scale and scope of the private sector in Irish archaeology as, apart from employment surveys, no research has

been undertaken. National Roads Authority data reveals that sixteen different archaeological companies have won contracts to provide archaeological services on national road schemes in the last 15 years. One area where data can be collated is in tender submission for public sector contracts where in accordance with European Union procurement rules companies are required to provide information on their turnover and staff numbers to demonstrate their competence to undertake the contract being tendered for.

Data available to the author shows that between 1999 and 2006 the self-reported levels of employment in companies tendering for projects in the south-eastern region rose from an average of 84 to 161. In the corresponding period average annual turnover increased from €0.81 million to €6.94 million. At face value these figures suggest steady growth in terms of employment and revenues. However, they figures only tell part of the story as an examination of the employment statistics at individual company level show that over this period there were large annual fluctuations. Similarly, analysis of the self-reported turnover figures show that companies experience large fluctuations in the order of -40% to +200% year-on-year. These figures suggest that for companies tendering to provide archaeological services to mitigate the impact of major road construction projects, the archaeological industry is a challenging one where on-going commercial health and the ability to provide employment for archaeological professionals is dependant on winning at least one large contract on an annual basis.

## 4 Discussion

The Republic of Ireland is a small open economy. Over the past fifteen years there was significant growth in investment by the public and private sectors. Private sector investment was largely in property and was driven by low interest rates, the availability of credit, a stable macro-economic environment, high levels of employment and high levels of consumer spending. Public sector investment was facilitated by booming tax receipts (mostly so-called transaction taxes) and a structured approach to investment through seven-year National Development Plans.

The global economic crisis has hit Ireland particularly hard because of the specific local conditions. For the archaeological profession the impact has been compounded as since 2007 archaeological works have been completed on many of the significant motorway projects; this coincided with the reduction in investment in private sector development projects due to the global economic downturn and banking crisis. The collapse in tax revenues has meant that the public sector has not been in a position to invest in other public projects that might require archaeological services. The impact of the recession can be seen in the reduction of about 66% in the number of archaeological excavations being carried out and a drop of 80% in employment levels in the private sector. At least one established archaeological services company is being wound up and a second company has sought protection from their creditors in the courts.

The impact of the recession on the private sector in Irish archaeology has been deep; however, the figures have to be seen in the context of the profession having gone through a period of unprecedented growth and expansion over the previous ten years. This is, of course, cold comfort to those colleagues who have lost their jobs or whose income has been substantially reduced. However, it should be

acknowledged that the “Celtic Tiger” years were good for archaeology in Ireland; not only did it provide employment opportunities for professional archaeologists but it led directly to the generation of significant new data. Unlike much of Western Europe up to the late twentieth century the Republic of Ireland had a largely rural character, a low population density and an economy based for the most part on the export of primary agricultural products, principally meat and dairy products. The form of agriculture practised was low-intensity and did not require large-scale mechanisation. Apart from the construction of canals and railways and some limited industrialisation, Ireland was not generally affected by the nineteenth century industrial revolution. The last fifteen years witnessed the type of urban, industrial and infrastructural developments that many other countries went through in the middle of the twentieth century. However, in the case of the Republic of Ireland this economic expansion took place in the context of a developed regulatory framework and an adaptable professional archaeological structure that was able to respond to the scale of development to ensure that all significant archaeological impacts were appropriately mitigated.

The challenges for the years ahead are manifold. Firstly, the profession must lobby to ascertain that the legislative and administrative structures are in place that will ensure that development in the future is subject to the same level of archaeological assessment as took place before and during the boom; it would be easy for some policy makers to argue that, in the changed economic circumstances, this level of archaeological assessment was a hindrance to future economic development. The Minister for Environment, Heritage & Local Government has received government approval to draft a new National Monuments Act that is intended to provide a more efficient and streamlined legislative framework for the protection of archaeological heritage in the twenty-first century and to provide for greater recognition and protection for archaeology (including landscapes) under planning legislation. Historically the administration of archaeology in the Republic of Ireland has been underfunded at central and local government level, and in the current climate the likelihood of securing additional posts is low – nevertheless, there may be scope to re-deploy some public sector staff to new areas of responsibility. A logical legislative framework and an efficient and responsive administration will ensure the optimum level of protection for the archaeological heritage and will benefit the profession as a whole.

Secondly, the data generated through the compliance-driven excavations has to be secured and made available for future study. The provision of secure long-term storage for archaeological artefacts and archives has been a perennial problem. The National Museum of Ireland has recently acquired a lease on an 18,000 m<sup>2</sup> building which is being fitted out as a Collections Resource Centre, the National Monuments Service will sub-let part of the building for the storage of the “paper” archives from excavations; therefore for the first time there will be a single location containing archives from excavations.

Thirdly, the free exchange of data between the different sectors in the archaeological profession has to be maintained and fostered. Unlike some other countries the degree of co-operation between the academic and commercial sectors in Irish archaeology has been close; the academic sector has also taken a close interest in seeking to develop the profession as a whole (University College Dublin 2006, Royal Irish Academy 2007). This data generated from compliance-driven archaeology during the years of the “Celtic Tiger” has re-invigorated academic research and has opened up many new avenues of investigations. Already a number of

innovative projects have sought to harness the knowledge value of the flood of data that has been produced over the last fifteen years, to integrate it with existing data sets and to revise existing narratives incorporating this data. Much of this work has been enabled through funding provided by the Heritage Council through its archaeological grants schemes and through the Irish National Strategic Archaeological Research Programme (INSTAR) (<http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/archaeology/research-funds-grants/instar-web-archive/>). This work is particularly important, as it demonstrates to policy makers and the public that the money spent on archaeology in the context of development, yields data that can be transformed into knowledge through analysis, which then enables us to refine our understanding of how society developed on the island over the past ten millennia.

Discoveries made during the last decade and a half have been exhibited in the National Museum of Ireland and local museums and this has heightened to awareness and understanding of archaeology nationally and locally among the general public; the National Roads Authority also has been particularly successful at disseminating information at a local level. Funding for this sort of research and dissemination can be particularly vulnerable in straightened economic times, and while budgets to the Heritage Council have been cut over the past two years it has been possible to maintain these programmes.

Undoubtedly the global economic crisis has had a significant impact on the archaeological profession in Ireland. The challenge now is to ensure that the significant benefits that accrued in the previous period of growth are consolidated so that when conditions improve we are in a position to provide the archaeological services that society requires and to continue to contribute to the building of an awareness of our shared national and European heritage.

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