

# The Half-Baked Cake?: Perspectives on the Publication Crisis in Irish Archaeology

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## Introduction

One of archaeology's core functions is the generation of public knowledge of our past and all practitioners are well aware that providing for this through publication is one of the key challenges that faces us at this moment. There has undoubtedly been a huge amount of positive work carried out in Ireland over the past fifteen years and the profession has been transformed beyond recognition from where it was prior to the Celtic Tiger. But I thought I would focus on my own experience of grappling with the issue of generating public knowledge through archaeological publication, mainly from the perspective of my recent work on the INSTAR Kilkenny Archaeological Project but also from a number of other angles.

There are three key questions that I will deal with:

1. Firstly, do we actually really understand the depth of the publication crisis we are currently in?
2. Secondly, do we fully understand what has caused the problem?
3. And finally will the proposed new legislation to consolidate, revise and extend the National Monuments Acts ensure that the publication crisis will be dealt with effectively and will it ensure this never recurs again?

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## **What is the extent of the publication crisis?**

The big problem in this regard is that we have no up to date nationwide statistics on where we stand at present *viz a vis* publication, which is not surprising given the flood of compliance-related archaeological investigations that have been carried out throughout Ireland.

We are still at the stage where we are lacking even the most basic information on

- How many archaeological investigations have taken place in Ireland?
- How many of these are actually worth publishing?
- How many sites are at the stage of post-excavation where they could be published?

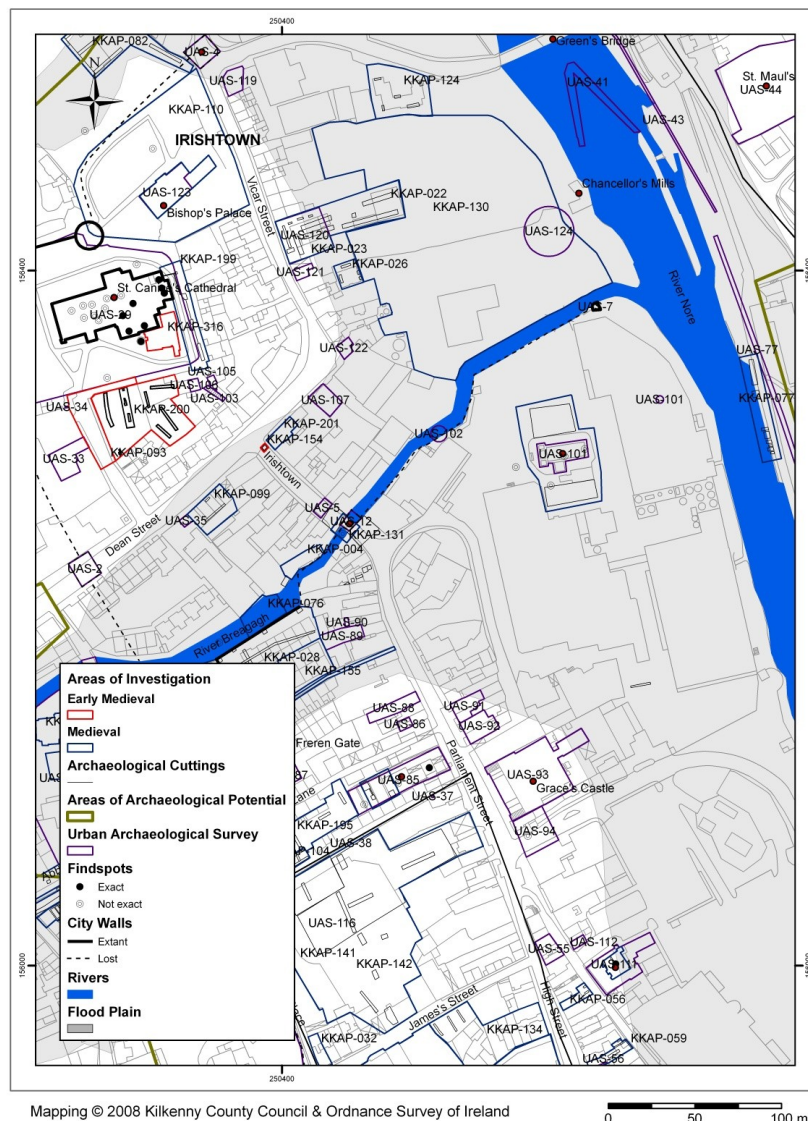
We do have some scattered data from a number of sources though it has to be said its scope and quality varies greatly:

- The 2002 Unpublished Excavations report by Ian W. Doyle, David Jennings, and Jackie MacDermott assessed sites that were excavated between 1930-1997 and came to the conclusion that there were just 81 sites of national significance that required publication.
- The 2006 Foresight 2020 report estimated there were 3,000-4,000 unpublished excavation reports for Ireland as a whole, and that it was 'unlikely that many of these will ever be published'. Figures weren't put on the amount that would actually be worth publishing however.
- Most recently there has been the monumental EMAP project – 402 'significant' Early Medieval sites excavated between 1930-2004, of which about 50 or so have been 'relatively well' published.

In the urban context Waterford, Dublin, Galway and Cork have been all well served with publications though outside of these centres the picture is much bleaker.

We have figures from a number of heritage council unpublished excavation assessments:

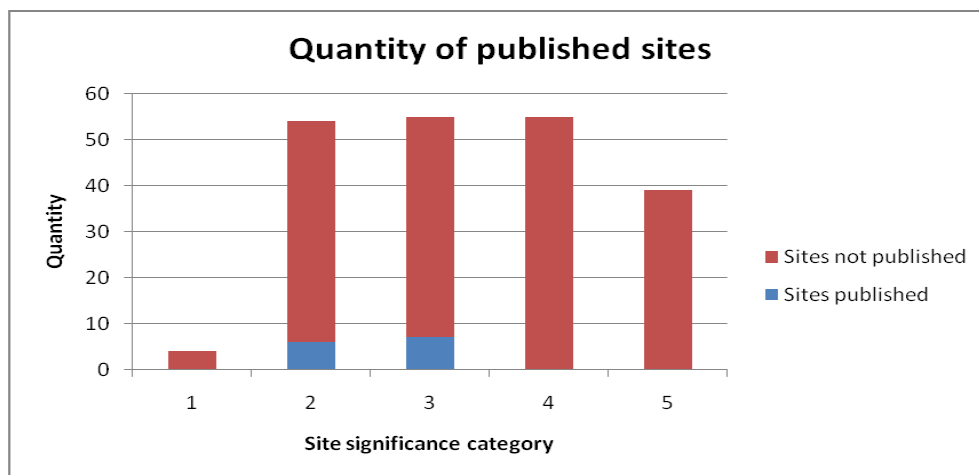
- At Drogheda between 1968-2003 118 licenced excavations took place, about which there have been 5 substantive publications.
- At Limerick there have been 135 excavations between 1978-2003, approximately 8 publications have been issued.



*GIS map from the Kilkenny Archaeological Project*

My own project, the Kilkenny Archaeological Project (KKAP), has looked in detail at the situation in Kilkenny City and we've collected and managed all of the 'raw' data on the city's archaeological record using the well established methodology of database and GIS. This involved 429 individual archaeological discoveries, 212 of these were excavations, surveys etc. that had been made between 1968-2006. The information on the corpus of c.37,000 artefacts, 1,300 human skeletons and the excavated palaeobotanical material is also included

One of the most important purposes of the project was to figure out how many of the city's investigations would be worth publishing and based on empirical criteria it was estimated that 54% (113) of the 212 modern investigations had produced results that clearly fitted the bill.

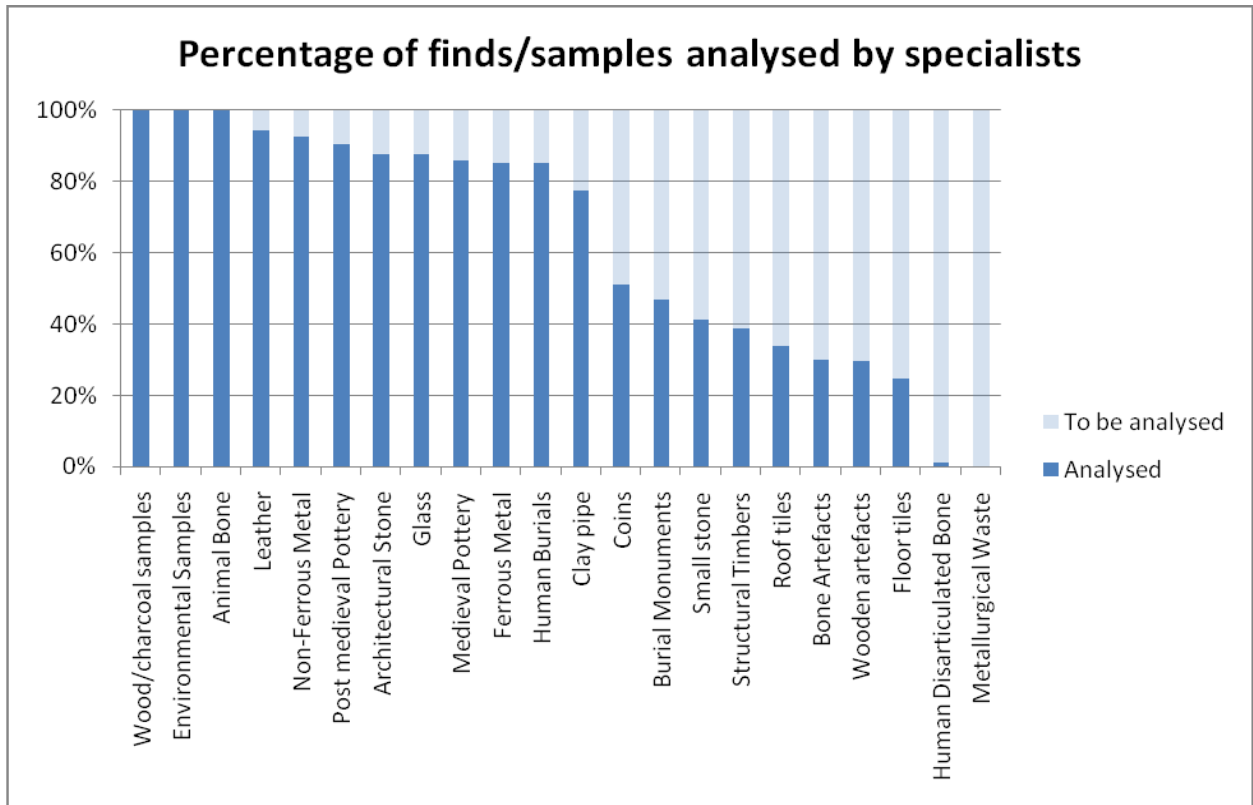


*Quantity of published vs unpublished sites Kilkenny City per significance category. Category 1 is of international significance and so forth.*

However, just 10 of these have to date been published and there are another 6 expected out in the next couple of years.

The particular methodology which we used also allowed us to go into greater depth than might normally be the case and we were able to quantify exactly what needs to be done in order to get the material published .

So, for instance we were also able to find out that 73% of significant sites were at the final report stage and 88% of excavated material has been subjected to specialist analysis.



*Chart showing the percentage of archaeological materials from Kilkenny city that have been analysed vs those awaiting analysis*

From a nationwide perspective it is very difficult to put an accurate figure on the publication rate per significant site but it would certainly be in the order of one out of every twelve, at best.

So whilst there are some positives I think you can get a general sense from all of these figures that we are in a very deep hole in terms of archaeological publication and the first thing that is obviously required is a nationwide survey in order to gain a clearer picture.

Let's look at it from a purely economic standpoint – and I wonder what would 'An Bord Snip Nua' or the comptroller and auditor general make of it?

The *Research Needs in Irish Archaeology* identified a figure of about 30 million euro a year being spent on compliance archaeology – so a total of about 450 million euro since 1995. It was estimated in the UK that every square metre of finds retrieved cost in the region of £120,000. It is probably a lot more for Ireland.

So what exactly is there to show for the investment of about half a billion euro in archaeology? Can we really continue as a profession to amass greater and greater amounts of data at enormous cost to the general public without giving anything of substance back in return? *The number of pieces of information we collect about the past may increase incrementally – our understanding does not.*

## **Question 2: Do we actually fully understand what has got us to this point?**

Again we have very little reliable information on this question but there are some common anecdotal reasons which are backed up to a certain extent by surveys from the UK such as the 2001 *From the Ground Up* CBA survey:

- Lack of resources
- Lack of time
- Lack of confidence to publish
- Lack of relevant support structures
- High costs involved in publication
- A common reason also is where the developer simply will not pay the post-excavation costs.
- And then there's the large cohort of site directors who directed excavations on behalf of archaeological contractors but who have never been given adequate resources to finalise their sites.

Which brings me to my work on the M1 motorway, which I would suggest has to be one of the most intractable and frustrating cases in Irish archaeology over the past couple of decades.

Between 1999-2001 I excavated 13 sites on the M1 motorway outside Drogheda. These were spread over two schemes, the Dunleer-Dundalk motorway and the Drogheda Bypass.

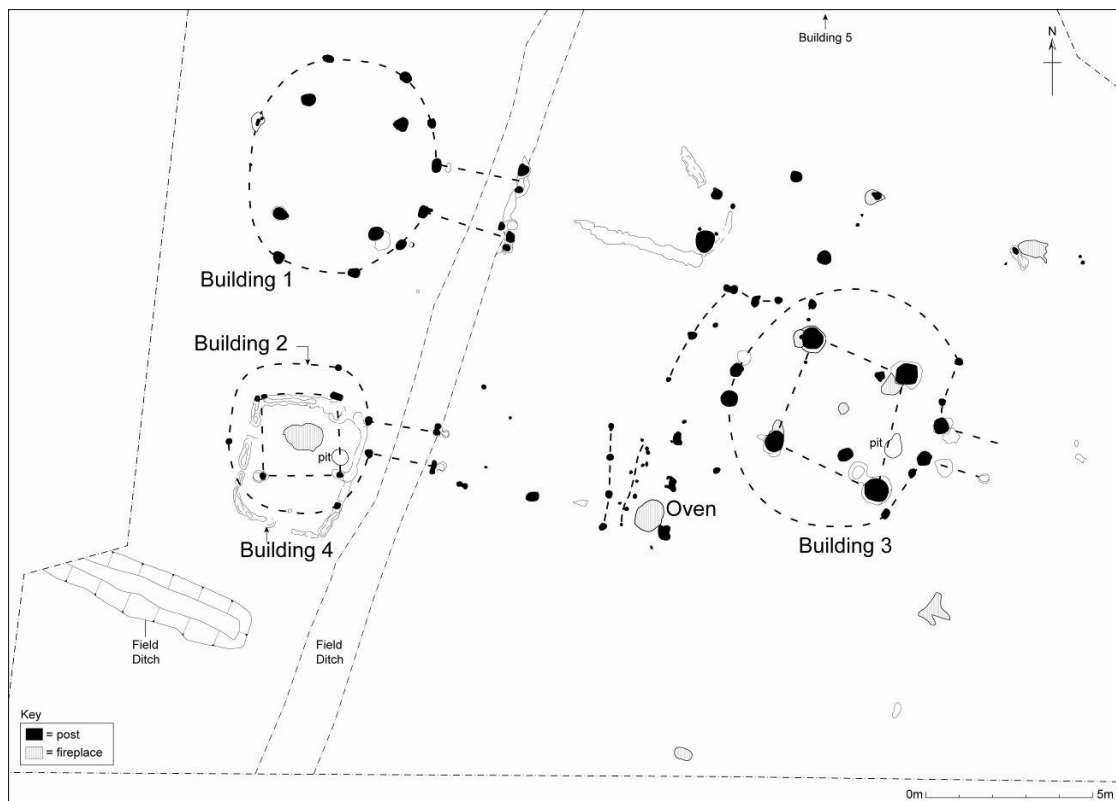


*Souterrain excavated at Whiterath, County Louth*

This included Whiterath, a major Early Medieval settlement enclosure with some spectacular finds and Coolfore, a neolithic settlement for which I have published two preliminary accounts. Another site at Balgatheran was one of just a handful of Late Neolithic Grooved ware settlements in the country [a preliminary report on this site will be in the next Louth Archaeological journal].



*Excavations underway at Coolfore Neolithic House, Co. Louth*



*Plan of Late Neolithic 'Grooved Ware' settlement at Balgathieran, Co. Louth*

To date there have been no final reports issued for any of these sites, and as I understand it, for the 120 or so excavations that occurred along the course of the two schemes.

And this is despite the fact that many of these sites are directly associated with the *Brú na Bóinne* world heritage site, a fact alluded to in its recently published Research Framework.

I have been trying to make progress on this matter for seven years now. I am unfortunately not in a position to provide all of the relevant details as I have been threatened with legal action by the archaeological company involved for discussing the matter with the NRA and the local authorities.

But suffice to say I have written on numerous occasions to the archaeological company - they say that there was not adequate funding given by the local authorities for post-excavation completion.

I have written to the NRA and they were clear in a letter dated 10<sup>th</sup> November 2004 that funding was provided in the case of the Drogheda Bypass but essentially it is a matter between the county councils involved and the archaeological company because the projects were carried out prior to the NRA Code of Practice.

Meath and Louth County councils simply regard the matter as closed but will work with the NRA in an effort to progress the situation.

I have also written to the National Monuments Service about it on two separate occasions and they clearly do not wish to get involved in what is a contractual matter, other than to say that essentially the buck stops with me as the licence holder and 'The National Monuments Service still wishes to see final reports as per the licensing conditions issued with the original licenses'.

I wrote to the National Museum August 2008, pointing out that I cannot bear responsibility for safeguarding the artefacts indefinitely and I have received no response other than an acknowledgement.

As things stand the NRA are providing assistance to the local authorities and have on a number of occasions attempted to resolve the matter with the archaeological

company. I do not doubt the NRA's commitment but to date according to the authority there has been 'no adequate response' from the archaeological company.

It is difficult to see how the matter will ever be resolved within the present parameters.

All of this gives some indication of the types of practical obstacles that are put in the way of communicating archaeological discoveries to the public and it is clear in my mind that there have been key failures at all levels:

- In the private sector there have been a failure to properly manage the resourcing and implementation of post excavation programmes.
- The state bears a large proportion of responsibility – in my experience there has been no effective regulation of the post-excavation process and likewise little or no enforcement of the licencing requirements as they pertain to reporting.
- In addition the state has also not funded publication and post-excavation for state sponsored projects – from Kilkenny the two largest excavations to have taken place in the city have both run into the sand. The OPW flood relief scheme publication funding was pulled and likewise whether or not there is funding for the post-excavation phase of the 1990-1999 Kilkenny castle excavation project is also unclear at present. And I should add all this happened well before the current economic collapse.

**Will the proposed new legislation to consolidate, revise and extend the National Monuments Acts ensure that the publication crisis will be dealt with effectively and will it ensure this never recurs again?**

There are very few new provisions that have specific regard to reporting and publication in the new bill and there is no sense that the publication crisis, the 'elephant in the room', is being adequately addressed.

I would suggest that sorting out the publication crisis and ensuring such a situation never happens again needs to be at the core of all future policies regarding Irish archaeology.

- Post-excavation should be regulated to the same extent as excavation – this can I believe be legislated for and is surely the only way to ensure that excavation is not just seen as site clearance with a disconnect to post-excavation works
- Secondly, throughout the world it has been clear that it is only the state that can adequately resource archaeological publication programmes –this has been done very successfully for the 1970s ‘rescue’ boom sites in Britain – Chepstow, Hull, Norwich, Trowbridge, Usk, the Greater London Archaeological Publication Programme. Likewise in the United States of America where the National Archaeological Database (National Park Service USA) was implemented.

In this regard should the recommendation in the 2020 Foresight report to establish the Bureau for Archaeological Publication be in the new bill?

- Thirdly, all state tenders should include for publication requirements as well as post-excavation reporting. A recent tender for Roscrea castle stipulated that the potential site director should have published at least one 5000 word paper on medieval archaeology. I would suggest this type of requirement is very welcome in many instances.
- Fourthly, in the absence of publication after a set period of time jurisdiction over the data, which is after all part of Ireland’s heritage, must revert to the state to do with it as it sees fit.

Fundamentally however as archaeologists we need to get rid ourselves of the notion that there is a disconnect between excavation and post-excavation. With this in mind I borrowed the title of this talk from Christopher Tilley’s important 1988 paper

*Excavation as Theatre* (revised and published in 2008), which encapsulates the Irish situation succinctly:

*'the current state of archaeology can be compared to baking a cake. The end product – the cake itself – rarely, if ever gets baked...more and more cooks obtain more and more ingredients for the cake, the flour of artefacts, the eggs of structures, the spices of bone residues... in a frantic attempt to accumulate more and more information 'because it is there', in the erroneous belief that some day the cake will bake itself. What actually happens to the data accumulated has been a secondary issue. The secondary issue needs to become primary'* (Tilley 2008, 76).

#### **FURTHER READING:**

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NOTE: The above is a slightly edited text of a paper which was given at the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland Summer Conference 2009. All matters referred to in the document are supported by documentary evidence in the possession of the author.