

### 3. The role of the National Museum of Ireland in archaeological excavations

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*The Collins Barracks premises of the National Museum (National Museum of Ireland)*

The National Museum of Ireland has a number of statutory functions relating to the conduct of archaeological excavation and post-excavation work. The Museum's role is set out in the *National Monuments Acts 1930 to 1994* as well as in a number of ministerial policy documents. The Museum was established in 1877 and consists of four curatorial divisions, including the Irish Antiquities Division, which is its archaeological section. The specialist staff and collections of the other three divisions may also be of relevance to excavators. These are the Natural History, Art and Industrial, and Irish Folklife Divisions. The National Museum is under the aegis of the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands.

In Ireland, all archaeological objects which are found, and which have no known owner at the time when they are found, are the property of the State. The National Museum is the statutory authority with responsibility for the care of archaeological objects. It is also the State's repository for all archaeological objects both from excavations and other sources. The Museum has a consultative role in the issuing of archaeological excavation licences by Dúchas and has particular requirements in relation to standards of finds retrieval, storage, conservation, cataloguing and publication. These requirements may vary in relation to different types of site and with the scale and nature of development and discovery. However, the costs relating to excavation, conservation, scientific research and publication



*Conservation of a wooden vessel containing 'bog butter' at the Museum (National Museum of Ireland)*

must be borne by the developer in accordance with the 'polluter pays' principle now enshrined in EU heritage and environmental law.

The National Museum's concerns in relation to excavation standards, methodology and artefact care extend to all aspects of excavation practice. All documentation in relation to excavations must be sent both to Dúchas and the National Museum. This includes licence applications, method statements, planning conditions, maps, find catalogues and preliminary and final reports. (The production of these reports is a standard condition of the excavation licence.)

Any alteration of an archaeological object for purposes of scientific dating, conservation or analysis is subject to licensing by the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands. The export of archaeological objects for any purpose is also subject to licensing and applications in both categories are processed by the National Museum. (Relevant licence application forms are available from the Duty Officer, National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin 2.) All archaeological objects must be in a fully conserved condition at the time when they are deposited in the Museum. Deposition will normally happen once all recording, analysis and reporting of the objects has been completed and should be done without undue delay.



*Conservation lab at the Museum (National Museum of Ireland)*

The National Museum has played a significant role over the years in the development of underwater archaeology in Ireland. It continues to contribute to the development of archaeological strategies to deal satisfactorily with Ireland's extensive underwater heritage, both maritime and inland, and to address challenges to this heritage in the context of development. The Museum's staff liaise closely with the Underwater Archaeology Unit of Dúchas the Heritage Service on these matters. As in the case of terrestrial sites, archaeological objects from the sea are the property of the State except in circumstances where there is a known owner. The Director of the National Museum also has a statutory function in salvage law under the terms of the *Merchant Shipping (Salvage and Wreck) Act 1993*. This allows the Director to claim objects that he considers to be of archaeological or historic interest, which have been deposited with a Receiver of Wreck. The treatment of finds and potential finds in the context of maritime development – or from any aquatic environment – requires careful assessment and consultation with the Museum at the earliest possible stage of project planning. Waterlogged archaeological material requires specialised professional conservation that, in some instances, is only available through the Museum's conservation department.

Applicants for excavation licences are bound by the conditions concerning archaeological objects which attach to all excavation licences. Archaeologists who have not previously worked in Ireland are encouraged to read the sections of relevant national policy documents (DAHGI 199a & DAHGI 199b) and the *National Monuments Acts 1930 to 1994* which bear upon archaeological objects and their treatment. In particular, attention is

drawn to the definition of an archaeological object as defined in the Acts. The definition is very broad. It governs not only artefacts but also archaeologically significant ecofacts (e.g. plant remains and human or animal remains), and is not limited by the date or age of an object. Therefore objects of all types and periods should be retained. In addition to the Acts and published policy documents, the National Museum's *Advice Notes for Excavators* (NMI 1997) describes the proper care, packing and storage of archaeological objects destined for the national collections.

The National Museum will be happy to provide advice to archaeologists on any aspect of the Museum's statutory responsibilities as well as on particular sites or discoveries as circumstances require. Questions often arise on receipt of a licence application and the accompanying method statement, or in the course of an archaeological excavation, but are best addressed before either the application is made or the fieldwork is commenced. Licensees are encouraged to make use of this facility as early as possible and to consult the Museum as well as Dúchas about major developments in archaeologically sensitive areas and development sites which may have a high artefact-bearing potential. This will inform appropriate finds excavation, recording and conservation strategies. The Museum's archive is also available for consultation, by appointment, in the course of archaeological assessments – including environmental impact assessments, during reporting and analysis, or other research. The research facilities include topographical files arranged in order of townland on a county by county basis, relevant material from the Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photography (CUCAP), as well as extensive archaeological collections and their records. The Museum has extensive archives, not replicated elsewhere, relating to both archaeological excavations and objects. It is essential that all of this information be considered at an early stage in road schemes to inform route selection and any subsequent excavation strategy.

The National Museum's Head of Conservation and his staff are available to provide advice to excavators on archaeological conservation, particularly in instances where especially fragile or important material is encountered. Funds for conservation work and any other analyses and procedures must be supplied from the excavation budget and licensees should retain their own professional conservators to perform this work. The Museum does have specialised conservation facilities, however, which may be made available to outside conservators by arrangement.

The National Museum is represented on a Licence Interview Board established by the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands to assess the competency of prospective licence holders. Among other themes, candidates are questioned on issues relating to archaeological objects and their care in the course of excavation and post-excavation work.

Dúchas and the National Museum work closely together in the pursuit of their respective responsibilities for the protection of the archaeological heritage. These commitments arise from both national and international legislation.