

**Title** Early and later medieval historical research on the M3: sources, contexts and analyses

**Speakers** Anne Connon and Margaret Murphy

Anne Connon has an MPhil in early Irish history and old Irish from University College Dublin and is in the final stages of completing a PhD at the Centre for Medieval Studies in the University of Toronto. Between 2003 and 2005 she worked as a project historian on the Discovery Programme's Medieval Rural Settlement Project. Currently lecturing part-time in medieval history at the National University of Ireland, Galway, Anne also works as a freelance historical researcher on archaeological projects centring around sites that range in date from the sixth century to the sixteenth century.

Margaret Murphy is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin where she completed a BA and PhD in the department of Medieval History. In 2003 she took up a position as one of the project historians on the Medieval Rural Settlement Project at the Discovery Programme. Since 2006 she has been working as a freelance historical researcher for a number of private and public sector archaeological, historical and heritage organisations. Her expertise is in the economic, social and agrarian history of Ireland in the later medieval period.

**Organisation** Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd

**Road Scheme** M3 Clonee to North of Kells

A number of excavated sites along the M3 have shown evidence of occupation and/or use during the medieval period, i.e. from c. AD 400 to c. 1600. This presentation will provide a brief overview of the historical research carried out in relation to these sites on behalf of Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd and Meath County Council. The principal aims of this research are to locate material relating to the ownership, occupation and exploitation of specific sites, to provide information relating to settlement in the wider and regional contexts of the sites and to identify ways in which the archaeological and historical analysis of these sites may contribute to an improved understanding of current research questions.

In the early medieval period County Meath comprised the core of the ancient kingdom of Brega, a region that also included parts of south County Louth and north County Dublin. Ruled by the dynasty of Síl nÁedo Sláine, Brega was an over-kingdom, which encompassed a number of smaller sub-kingdoms. The boundaries of these smaller units are often very unclear to modern observers, and the location of even the most important royal centres within them are frequently unknown. It is, therefore, not always evident how the newly discovered sites along the M3 fit into this network of overlapping territories. However, by combining evidence from sources as diverse as saints' lives and annals, saga tales and genealogies, and placenames and praise poetry it is possible to try to place the new sites within a specific sub-kingdom, and, sometimes, to even link them to a specific branch of the ruling dynastic family. Baronstown and Phoenixtown, for example, can be situated within the sub-kingdom of Cenél Lóegairi, and suggestions can be made as to which dynastic offshoot of Cenél Lóegairi the sites were associated with. Taken in conjunction with the archaeological evidence resulting from the recent excavations, this research may deepen insight into early Irish settlement at varying levels of the status scale.

After 1169 Meath was comprehensively settled by the Anglo-Normans and it is possible to trace and explore aspects of this colonisation in a variety of different documentary and cartographic source materials ranging from the chronicles of the late 12th century to the surveys of the post-Cromwellian period. The primary unit of landholding in this period was the manor and the townlands in which several of the medieval sites on the M3 are located can be identified as components of manors. For example, Castlefarm was positioned close to and in all probability, formed part of, the manorial demesne of Dunboyne; Roestown was situated on the periphery of the manor of Dunshaughlin; Phoenixtown was the holding of a free tenant of the manor of Martry (Lower Navan).

The information provided by the recent excavations at these sites (by Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd and Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd) combined with analysis of the documentary sources presents the opportunity to gain a better knowledge of the operation of the manorial system and in particular may add to our understanding of low-status sites, continuity of occupation from pre- and post-invasion, and undefended house clusters.