Although the parish of Clontuskert is known today for its association with the ecclesiastical foundation, recent archaeological discoveries have uncovered evidence of people in this landscape for as long as there has been a population on this island. Given its geographical location alongside one of the great routeways of the West, the river Suck, this is not surprising (Figure 1). However, in order to understand the history of settlement in Clontuskert, it is necessary to look at the wider picture, at the arrival of these first humans to Ireland and the environment they found themselves living in.

The First Arrivals

The European continent has been inhabited for about 700,000 years, but the earliest evidence we have for human settlement in Ireland dates to sometime around 7,000 BC (about 9,000 years ago), a period of time known as the Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age. Up until the Mesolithic, the country would have been covered with ice, although it is thought that some parts of the south of the country would have been ice-free and may have been receptive to human habitation. About 15,000 years ago, the ice sheets covering...
Ireland started to melt or evaporate and about 1,000 years after that, the climate began to warm considerably. Plants, including shrubs such as juniper and birch flourished. Animals, including the Giant Deer and reindeer, arrived via a land bridge (or bridges) from western Britain to graze on open meadowlands. Between 10,500 and 10,000 years ago, the temperature dropped again and a short Ice Age occurred. Due to the consequental loss of its food supply, the Giant Deer became extinct and reindeer also disappeared at that time. About 9,000 years ago, pine, elm and other species of trees appeared, marking the beginning of a long-term process of afforestation. The migration of species continued. Red deer, boar, bear, red squirrel, pine marten, wolf, fox, stoat and birds of prey took up residence. The lakes and rivers created by the melting ice sheets teemed with fish, and game birds would have been present in abundance.

The first humans are likely to have been short-stay, seasonal hunting and foraging parties who followed the migratory animals. They may have been guided here by the mountains along the eastern seaboard, visible from the west coast of Britain at that time because of lower sea levels. Between 8,500 and 7,700 years ago, the sea level rose and permanently severed the land bridges with Britain. This, perhaps more than any other event in history shaped the future of our country: we were now an island.

The clearest evidence we have for a more permanent human presence on this new island was found at Mount Sandel, Co. Derry. On a ridge overlooking the River Bann, the remains of circular hut sites, hearths and storage pits and stone artefacts, including flint blades and axeheads, were found during an excavation in the 1970s. Although it was commonly thought that Mesolithic people were nomadic ‘hunter-gatherers’ and moved from place to place depending on the seasons and seasonal
resources, it has been suggested that the settlement at Mount Sandel functioned as a type of ‘base camp’ where the inhabitants exploited the food resources of a wide area over much of the year. During the excavation, the bones of salmon, pig and eel, hazelnut shells and water lily seeds were found, which indicate that the site was occupied all the year round, rather than seasonally. Similar evidence was found at Lough Boora, Co. Offaly, Dalkey, Co. Dublin and at coastal sites in counties Kerry and Louth. The wide geographical distribution of these sites demonstrates that the population was not confined to one place, but was mobile and likely to have used the coast and the extensive network of rivers and lakes to get around. The remarkable find of a Middle to Late Mesolithic dugout canoe, at Carrigdirty on the Shannon Estuary, demonstrates the kind of transport used.

Often when archaeologists look for signs of an organised society, they look to burial practices and rituals associated with the dead. As recently as 2003, the first conclusive evidence for Mesolithic burial in Ireland was uncovered during an excavation in the townland of Hermitage, just south of Castleconnell, Co. Limerick. The cremated burials were accompanied by votive offerings of stone axes and flint tools and a wooden post had been used as a grave marker over one of the burials. Before Hermitage it was thought that Early Mesolithic society was too unsophisticated to bury its dead in this ritualised manner but the evidence implies that society was sufficiently stable and evolved to do so. A low population may be one of the reasons there is so little evidence for burials dating to this period, as it is estimated that only about 7,000 people were living here during that time.

Although as yet we have no evidence for Mesolithic houses or burials or boats in Clontuskert, recent excavations in the townland of Urraghry, carried out as part of the N6 Galway to
Ballinasloe Dual Carriageway road scheme, uncovered stone tools which have been dated to the Early Mesolithic. The tools, which included a small blade, were made from chert, a brown-black sedimentary rock which produces sharp edges for cutting or scraping. The artefacts were found on low-lying reclaimed peatland and are directly comparable to stone tools found during excavations at both Lough Boora and Mount Sandel. They are regarded as significant finds in terms of Irish archaeology and show that people were in this landscape from earliest times, no doubt using the Suck and nearby Melehan rivers to get around.

The Neolithic

If the Mesolithic marked the arrival of the first humans, the Neolithic (or New Stone Age) saw those people make a significant impact on the landscape. This period, which lasted from c. 4000-2400 BC, is characterized by a change from a hunter-forager lifestyle to an agriculture-based economy. We have evidence for cereal cultivation (wheat, barley, corn), the domestication of animals (cattle, pig and sheep/goat), and land management (large-scale woodland clearance and the construction of drystone boundary walls). Stone axes were used for felling and ring-barking trees during this land clearance or landnam phenomenon associated with the first farmers. These axeheads would have been inserted into wooden hafts and secured with either sticky resin or tied with a leather binding. Evidence for the earliest use of a simple wooden plough (known as an ‘ard’) was also found at Belderg, Co. Mayo. For the first time we have the appearance of pottery in the archaeological record. These changes in the way people lived led to an increase in population and sufficient social organisation to construct sophisticated community monuments such as the passage tombs of the Boyne Valley. It is generally thought that this
new economy came about as a result of influence from continental Europe, where agriculture was well-established at that time. Excavation has shown that people lived in substantial timber houses, usually constructed from oak posts (we know from the pollen record that there was no scarcity of trees for use as raw material). These dwellings were either circular or rectangular in shape and more often than not, built as single farmsteads rather than in a village-style arrangement. Examples of rectangular houses have been found at Tankardstown, Co. Limerick and Newtown Co. Meath, while excavations at Belderg Beg, Co. Mayo uncovered evidence for an enclosure with an internal circular structure.

Although no Neolithic monuments have been recorded from within the parish of Clontuskert to date, a number of artefacts have been recovered which provide us with evidence for a human presence in the area at that time. In the late 1930s, a group of turf cutters found four stone objects lying in the peat in Kellysgrove Bog (Plate 1). This 'hoard' consists of three stone axeheads and a
polished stone sickle. The latter may be unique in the Irish archaeological record. It appears to be made from porphyry, a large grained igneous rock. One of the main sources of this rock is Lambay Island, off the coast of Co. Dublin. Although research is at a preliminary stage and any comparisons may be misleading, it is clear that the sickle was a high status object and symbolically important to the local population when it was deposited in the bog almost six thousand years ago.

The axeheads in the Kellysgrove hoard are honed from limestone, shale and tuff. Although limestone is a native stone, neither shale nor tuff is found in this part of Co. Galway. The tuff axehead is particularly interesting, as the closest source for this material is to be found in western Britain. Known as 'Langdale' tuff, it is a pale green stone found high up on the fells in the Lake District in Cumbria and was exploited from earliest times for axe production. Axeheads from the Cumbrian 'axe factories' have been found across Ireland and Britain and it seems that the sites where the stone was quarried or perhaps the stone itself, were of special significance to Neolithic people. The Kellysgrove example may have its origins in western Britain and arrived here as a result of established trade and exchange networks during the Neolithic period. Some axeheads, particularly those made from rare or unusual stone such as jadeite are likely to have been highly prized objects and used during ceremonial activities. There is considerable evidence for an organised stone axe trade in Ireland during the Neolithic and it is likely that people used coastal, river and esker systems as distribution routes. Axeheads of Irish origin have been found as far north as Orkney.
Approximately twenty years after the stone axeheads were found, a lozenge-shaped javelin head, crafted from a creamy grey polished chert, was recovered from the same bog (Plate 2). This beautiful object is further evidence of human presence in the area during the Neolithic period. Polished, lozenge-shaped arrowheads such as the Kellysgrove example are a particular Irish type. Although many had a practical function, some have been recovered from megalithic tombs where they accompanied burials. It is possible that someone crossing the bog simply lost the javelin head on their journey. However, given the quality of the artefact, it is just as likely that it was deposited in the bog as a votive offering. The practice of deliberate deposition of objects in water and watery places like bogs was quite common in the Neolithic. As we will see from the evidence from Clontuskert, it was a practice that continued into the following Bronze Age.

The Bronze Age

It is evident from the surviving monuments, combined with the artefactual evidence, that Clontuskert enjoyed a kind of a ‘Golden Age’ in the centuries that followed the Neolithic. In archaeological terms, this period of time is known as the Bronze Age (approximately 2,200 - 500 BC), so-called because of the first appearance of objects made from bronze to appear in the archaeological record. As well as this new metalworking technology, the Bronze Age is marked by the emergence of new types of monuments, some of which are still visible in the fields around the parish.

The most common Bronze Age monument in Ireland is known as a *fulacht fiadh* and is generally identifiable in the field as a horseshoe shaped mound of burnt stone and charcoal sometimes enclosing a rectangular trough, cut into the ground and which can
be lined with wood or stone to hold water. They are invariably located close to a water source as this was central to their function.

Several interpretations have been put forward to explain the origins of the name. Although *fulacht* can be translated as ‘pit’ or ‘trough’, *fia* is thought to derive from ‘fian’ meaning ‘a roving band of hunters’ or ‘*fiadh*’ meaning ‘of the deer’ or ‘of the wild’. Mythology associates these places with the Fianna and Fionn Mac Cumhail.

Although opinion is often divided as to their use, it is generally thought that these monuments played some role in the cooking or feasting process. Experiments carried out at Ballyvourney, Co. Cork in 1954 showed that if heated stones were placed in the water-filled trough, water would boil in a short space of time. The stones were then taken out and cast aside (resulting in the characteristic horseshoe shape surviving today). A joint of meat, wrapped in straw to protect it, was then cooked in the boiling water. The experiment showed that a leg of mutton weighing 4.5kgs took four hours to cook and was, apparently, ‘highly edible’.

Although the cooking site hypothesis is generally accepted, recent excavations have led to a re-examination of the monument type. In particular, the lack of animal bone from some sites has led some archaeologists to suggest that these were not cooking sites at all but prehistoric saunas, baths or birthing pools. Others have suggested that they were used for dyeing or tanning or for the processing of fats or for soap-making. Recently, an experiment was carried out by two Galway based archaeologists to determine whether they could have been used for making beer.

Radiocarbon dates from these sites indicate a predominance of use during the second millennium BC, although there is some evidence to suggest that they may have been constructed during the Iron Age and medieval periods.
Fulachta fiadh are rarely found as isolated monuments and usually occur in groups of four or more. Where research has taken place, they were found in association with stone circles and burial monuments in Cork and Kilkenny and with settlement sites in Limerick. Until recently, only one fulacht fiadh was known from the whole of the parish, located in Barnpark townland, immediately southeast of Caltraghgarraun Fort (Figure 1). It is probable that the extensive programme of land reclamation carried out in the area during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries destroyed others. A second fulacht fiadh was discovered during excavations in the townland of Urraghry in 2006, which was radiocarbon dated to the Early Bronze Age. Analysis of the charcoal from the site showed that oak, ash, hazel and alder were used for fuel to heat the stones and the wood is likely to have been gathered for the fire in the immediate area. The species identified could have originated from hedgerows or scrubland (ash) or from mixed woodlands (oak and hazel) nearby. Alder prefers wetter, marshier ground and may have grown on land closer to a water source. Although fulachta fiadh are not settlement sites, they are evidence for human presence in the landscape of Clontuskert approximately four and a half thousand years ago.

Clontuskert is fortunate in that a number of burial monuments, known as barrows, cairns or tumuli, survive (Figure 1). In general, this monument type is a rich source of information on past societies. A barrow is generally defined as a mound of earth or earth and stone, which is generally associated with burial. A cairn may be loosely interpreted as its stone equivalent and the word ‘tumulus’ is often given to a mound of earth or earth and stone, which cannot be classified as a barrow or a cairn. These monuments sometimes occur in isolation, as we find in the townland of Ardranny Beg, (Plate 3) or in groups, such as the group
of four found on the eastern side of the parish, comprising Barrow 2 (Somerset townland), Barrow 3 (Somerset townland), Barrow 4 (Coolbeg townland) and Barrow 5 (Barnaboy townland). These mounds can cover single burials but more often contain the remains of a number of individuals buried at different periods of time.

The external form of barrows varies and consequently, they are known as ring-barrows, ring-ditches, bowl-barrows, bell-barrows and disc-barrows. The Somerset/Coolbeg group are almost identical in form, comprising flat-topped oval mounds of earth and stone and are classed as bowl-barrows. The Barnaboy barrow comprises a flat internal space which is enclosed by a series of banks and external ditches and is a ring-barrow. The Ardranny Beg barrow, which is the largest of all of the burial monuments in the parish, is also oval in shape but has a round top, although it too belongs to the bowl-barrow class.
Two of the Somerset/Coolbeg barrows (Barrows 3 and 4 respectively) are located on the summit of an esker running parallel to the modern road. A third barrow (Barrow 2) is located to the south across from the site of Somerset House, on the summit of another esker and next to a fast-flowing stream. The fourth barrow of the group (Barrow 5) is located on flat ground in Barnaboy, in a marshy field immediately west of the townland boundary with Coolbeg. Barrow 4, which some locals believe is the burial place of a king, is clearly visible in the distance. The Ardranny Beg barrow (Barrow 1) is located on flat ground, with higher ground to the north and on the edge of a marshy area, which may be an old lake bed. One of the most striking features of the surviving barrows in Clontuskert is their association with water and watery places. An ancient river bed can be traced from the southernmost barrow in Somerset townland (Barrow 2), from where it moves northwards, passing along the eastern side of the esker, where the other two barrows are located. This river bed can be seen from all of the barrows in the group and suggests that they were deliberately placed along it. A possible barrow in Kellysgrove is located on the highest point of land in the parish and overlooks not only the River Suck, but the vast expanse of Kellysgrove Bog. The geographical siting of the Clontuskert barrow group concurs with evidence from other sites in Ireland and abroad, which show that barrows are closely related to the local topography of rivers, lakes and eskers. At Rathjordan, Co. Limerick, a four-barrow cemetery excavated by Séan P. Ó Riordáin in the late 1940s was situated on a low ridge, overlooking a marshy area beside the Camoge River. In the early 1990s, a barrow cemetery was excavated in the townland of Mitchelstowndown West, near Knocklong, Co. Limerick. The cemetery comprised 53 small barrows, located on a series of low natural platforms on the banks of the Morningstar River. Clusters
of barrows are recorded from around Lough Ennel in Co. Westmeath and Lough Mask in Co. Mayo. There is also considerable evidence to show that barrows were specifically sited close to smaller bodies of water, such as pools and streams. This deliberate selection infers that these monuments functioned as more than burial monuments. The siting of barrows in prominent places such as ridge tops or hill tops, with views in all directions, would seem to suggest that they functioned as territorial markers. Just as rivers and streams today mark townland, county or provincial boundaries, it is also likely those barrows situated on the banks of rivers and streams marked the location of tribal boundaries in the past. In this study area Barrow 2 is located beside a stream which demarcates not only the present boundary between Somerset and Graveshill townlands, but also the parishes of Clontuskert and Kiltormer. Barrow 5 is located on the present boundary between Coolbeg and Barnaboy. Although it seems incredible, it is likely that these boundaries as we know them today reflect the boundaries created by our prehistoric ancestors millennia ago.

The burial monuments of Ardranny, Somerset, Coolbeg and Barnaboy, like their counterparts all over Europe played an integral part in the ceremonial lives of local communities. The building of a monument may be symbolically regarded as the creation of another world, a place for the dead to go. The worlds of the living and the dead were separated from each other by the physical boundary of the ditch enclosing the mound, a characteristic feature of the barrow monument type. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence exists which suggests that a number of standing stones were associated with the Ardranny Beg barrow (S. Madden and J. Flaherty, pers. comm.). The possible occurrence of stones like these, which are closely associated with ritual, re-enforces the
idea of a barrow as a place of worship.

There are numerous references to these monuments in Irish folklore, some of which may infer one of the many roles they played in contemporary society. A barrow known as Carn an Chluiche in the townland of Knock North, Co. Mayo is said to commemorate a legendary hurling match between the Tuatha Dé Danaan and the Firbolg, for example and was not raised for a burial at all. In some cases, a natural feature such as a hillock was ‘sanctified’ by the construction of a ditch and/or bank around it and subsequently used as a focus for ritual activity. Examples were found through excavation at ‘Daithi’s Mound’ within the Rathcroghan complex in Co. Roscommon and at Carrowlisdoaun, Co. Mayo.

A possible example of one of these ‘sanctified’ natural features is located in a field just south of Clontuskert Abbey, in Abbeypark townland (Plate 4). Comprising a large mound, enclosed by a narrow bank, it is said to have been the inauguration
mound of the O’Kellys, ancient rulers of Uí Maine. Its association with a ruling dynasty suggests to some extent that this may have been used or identified as a burial/ceremonial place in prehistory.

Evidence for the existence of more burial monuments that have not survived centuries of human occupation can be found in the Irish names for Kellysgrove (Tuaim Catraí or ‘Catraigh’s mound’) and Gortnahorna (Gort an Charna or ‘the cairn field’). Gortnahorna merely suggests that a burial monument once stood there, the mound at Kellysgrove allows us to speculate on the origins of the people living in the area almost four thousand years ago. The Catraigh are reputed to have been one of the enslaved tribes of the Uí Máine (in whose territory Clontuskert lies) and were descended from the legendary Fir Bolg. The Fir Bolg were thought to have been a tribe with agricultural roots and are associated with the goddess Tailtiu, foster-mother of Lugh, the sun god. Her palace was to be found at modern-day Teltown, Co. Meath. The Cathraigh lived on the shores of the Suck (at Tuaim Catraí and at Porta Fidigi on the opposite side). Although the exact location of Catraigh’s mound is now lost, it may have been located at the site of the cilín or children’s burial ground in Kellysgrove. It is situated on one of the highest points of land in the parish, with extensive views in all directions, which studies have shown is the preferred location for prehistoric burial monuments. In addition, unbaptized children were often buried in these so-called ‘pagan’ monuments as they were seen as otherworldly places. Although the name has not survived, a place called ‘Carnemucklagh’ (from Carn na Muice, meaning the ‘Cairn of the pigs’), located between the modern townlands of Coolbeg/Somerset/Barnaboy, is recorded on the seventeenth century Down Survey map of the area and points to further evidence for the presence of a burial tradition there.
A possible example may be found in the townland of Corrabaun, on the northwestern side of the parish. Identified during an aerial survey in November 1987, it comprises the remains of a sub-circular or D-shaped enclosure, a number of smaller circular enclosures and a series of small rectangular divisions, which may represent the remains of a field system. Bronze Age fields are typically small and rectangular. They are frequently coaxial - that is, they form a system where the boundaries of adjacent fields make a series of long, roughly parallel lines.

Although two other field systems have been recorded from Clontuskert parish (at Abbeypark and at Templepark, they are likely to be associated with ecclesiastical activity in the area and date to the medieval or post-medieval period.

Evidence for a Middle to Late Bronze Age encampment was uncovered recently, which throws further light on the prehistoric settlement of the parish. The remains of two hearths, a series of pits and postholes and a possible structure, were identified in Mackney townland in 2006. Although it is common to find evidence for plant remains such as cereal grains at a settlement site dating to this period, only one fragment of a hazelnut shell was recovered from samples analysed, which may support the idea that these sites were temporary in nature. As was the case from the Early Bronze Age fulacht fiadh in nearby Urraghry, oak charcoal was the main species identified from the hearths. Hazel, alder, blackthorn/cherry, ash, willow/aspen, holly and birch were also present. The dominance of scrub woodland species from the Middle to Late Bronze Age samples suggest the landscape was quite open, although oak woodland was still widespread.

There is substantial evidence from other parts of the country to suggest that Bronze Age settlements may be found close to cemeteries of the same date. At Rathcroghan, near Tulsk in Co.
Roscommon, the barrow called 'Dumha Shelga' and three smaller barrows are surrounded by the extensive remains of an ancient field system. Excavation of a Bronze Age ring-ditch in Ardsallagh townland, Co. Meath uncovered the remains of two Bronze Age houses located in close proximity to the burial monument. Here, the doorways of the houses faced the entrance to the ring-ditch. This may be interpreted as a powerful symbolic commentary on the worlds of the living and the dead in the second millennium BC. Support for this link between the worlds of the living and the dead has also been found at sites excavated at Chancellorsland, Co. Tipperary, Charlesland, Co. Wicklow and Ballyveelish, Co. Cork. This comparative evidence highlights the potential for finding settlement evidence close to the burial monuments of Clontuskert.

Evidence for Late Bronze Age settlement on lakes and lakeshores has also been found through excavation, at Ballinderry, Co. Offaly, Lough Eskragh, Co. Tyrone and Rathfran, on Lough Gara, Co. Sligo, for example. These sites, known as crannógs, are
often discovered during drainage operations or during dry summers when water levels are low. Although none has been recorded to date, it is likely that sites like this are preserved, but as yet remain undiscovered, in the bog land of the parish.

The vestiges of the Bronze Age people which survive in Clontuskert parish are supported by a small number of artefacts which are held at the National Museum of Ireland (Plate 5). A decorated socketed bronze axehead recovered from the townland of Gannaveen is characteristic of the Dowris phase of the Late Bronze Age. Socketed axeheads vary in size and shape and consequently would have had a variety of uses in woodworking. Some have been found with other objects deposited in hoards and these are generally thought to be associated with some kind of ritual or ceremonial activity and may have been prestige items used as symbols of power and wealth between tribal groups, just as the Neolithic examples from Kellysgrove were (Plate 6). Two more bronze artefacts, a dagger and a bronze palstave were recovered from Cloonascragh townland, in the southeast of the parish. Although it appears the artefacts were found at the same time, they were located a short distance away from each other, close to the banks of the River Suck. The dagger has been classified as Harbison's Type Corkey, a more developed type of object dating to between 2000-1500 BC. Palstaves have a very specific period of use and appear in the Irish archaeological record at the very beginning.
of the Late Bronze Age, c.1000 BC. These objects were likely to have been regarded as high status objects and many were formally deposited in the landscape as votive offerings, maintaining a link with the preceding Neolithic.

Although water and watery places would appear to have been the favoured location for votive deposition, as we have seen from Gannaveen, dryland sites were also chosen. Preferred locations on dry land include rock fissures or outcrops, groves, caves or earlier monuments.

Furthermore, there is considerable evidence to show that these places were favoured over long periods of time, sometimes millennia. Just why certain locations were selected is not known. Studies carried out in different parts of Europe have shown that areas may have been divided along gender lines, with certain ‘sacred’ areas accessible only to men or women. During the Later Bronze Age in southern Scandinavia, for example, bogs were predominantly associated with females and rock outcrops with males. Although this would be difficult to prove with the evidence we have from Clontuskert, it nonetheless illustrates how differently prehistoric societies interpreted the world around them.

The Iron Age

Just as the Bronze Age was characterised by the appearance of bronze in the archaeological record, the transition to iron-working marked another step towards a more developed society. The Iron Age spans a period of approximately one thousand years, from 500 BC to 500 AD and can be further broken down into two main phases; the Early Iron Age (sometimes known as the Hallstatt phase) and Later Iron Age, which is characterised by the proliferation of stone and metal artefacts decorated in what has
become known as the 'La Tène' style. New tools such as rotary querns appear in the archaeological record and new monument types such as linear earthworks and decorated monumental stones, like the Turoe Stone, appear in the landscape. It is thought that it was during this time the foundations of a language, the ancestor of modern Irish, were established.

At Corlea Bog, near Kenagh in Co. Longford, an extensive oak plank trackway was built in 148 BC and used 'for the passage of wheeled vehicles'. Evidence for the first use of chariots may be implied by the small number of bridle-bits or horse-bits, sometimes found in pairs, which are characteristic of the Iron Age. Two block-
wheels, fitted with a sleeve for the axle, were found in a bog at Doogarymore, in Co. Roscommon, dated to c. 400 BC, and are also likely to have come from a vehicle of some kind.

Iron Age Ireland was traversed by five major routeways, one of which, the Sli Mhór, cuts across Kellysgrove townland on the northeastern side of the parish. Situated on the Esker Riada, a glacial ridge laid down during the last Ice Age, this ancient routeway runs from east to west across the country. Although very little survives intact today, the Sli Mhór is likely to have connected to a series of other routeways that may survive within existing road systems. This can clearly be seen in Kellysgrove, where it survives in a section of the minor road that connects the R355 to Pollboy Bog, just northeast of Ballinure Bridge. The Glan-Urraghry road is also built on the summit of the same esker system (Fig. 2.)

Evidence has also been found for a number of man-made structures, known as ‘toghers’ which cross Kellysgrove Bog. Although dated to the medieval period, a togher or trackway, known as ‘the Monk’s Pass’, was uncovered during drainage work in the summer of 1946. It is thought to have linked the monastic settlement at Clontuskert with the esker system and Teampollin in Pollboy townland to the east. The togher is also likely to be linked with a number of fording points on the Suck.

During an underwater survey in 1991, a number of artefacts were recovered which indicated that both Pollok’s Ford and Reilly’s Ford were in use at the time the Monk’s Pass was constructed. However, it has been suggested that both were likely to be much older in date and probably linked to a series of routeways which provided dry passage across the bog and may have been in use as far back as the Neolithic period. Although nothing dating to the Neolithic was found, a bronze sword, pottery fragments dated to the Bronze Age and a bronze dagger were
recovered from the Roscommon side of the River at Coreen Ford, which clearly indicates that this place was known as a crossing point at that time.

Although we know from excavation that people continued to live in crannógs and in the latter stages, ringforts, we have very little evidence of their day to day lives, especially during the Early Iron Age. Most of the evidence available comes from funerary monuments. The change in burial practice that characterised the transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age is not evident in the Early Iron Age. Burial ritual appears to have played a less formal role and excavation shows us that the dead were cremated and interred in simple pits or in pre-existing burial monuments e.g. Carrowbeg, Co. Galway and Kiltierney, Co. Fermanagh. There is some evidence to suggest a change from cremation to inhumation occurred in the Later Iron Age. At Knowth, Co. Meath for example, at least twenty burials were found lying in flexed positions in simple pits in the ground. It has been suggested that the decline of cremated burials and the increase in inhumation after the beginning of the first millennium AD can be attributed to Roman
There is possible evidence for a burial monument dating to the Iron Age in Barnaboy townland. The Barnaboy barrow is a typical ring-barrow, comprising a central area, enclosed by a ditch and low outer bank (Plate 7). A possible entrance is visible in the northwest. It is located on flat, marshy ground within sight of the large barrow on the summit of the esker to the west (Barrow 2). Its location in the landscape is fairly typical of larger ring-barrows, although many are also found on hill slopes, hilltops and, in keeping with the tradition of the Bronze Age, close to sources of water. The presence of a possible Iron Age funerary monument in a location with a relatively high number of Bronze Age examples indicates the importance the area held for the population over an extended period of time.

The symbolic importance of these monuments is also reflected in the fact that some of these barrows, cairns and tumuli were used as inauguration mounds and places of assembly by the ruling royal families from the Iron Age onwards. These dynasties tended to commandeer existing burial monuments and ceremonial landscapes as inauguration and assembly places so that they could imbue the new ‘candidate’ with a history and a historic reference point. The use of earlier monuments reflects the symbolic power that they held, in some cases, thousands of years after they were constructed. They are often associated with stone ‘thrones’ or chairs, inauguration stones and even sacred trees which formed part of the inauguration ceremony. One of the best-known examples is the Magh Adhair, southwest of Tulla in Co. Clare. This flat-topped barrow is associated with Adhar, a Firbolg prince. It became the place of inauguration of the native princes of Thomond, including Brian Boru, from c. 877 AD to 1570 AD. A mound or barrow known as Carn Fraích (Carnfree), near Tulsk,
Co. Roscommon was the inauguration place of the O’Conors, kings of Connacht, from the later prehistoric period until the seventeenth century. It is no coincidence therefore, that the family most often associated with Clontuskert’s long history, the O’Kellys, had their inauguration place at the mound just south of the Abbey, in Abbeypark townland. Uí Maine was the kingdom of O’Kelly (Ua Ceallaigh), founded by Máine Mór in 357 AD, on lands appropriated from the Fir Bolg. It included most of east Galway and southern and central Co. Roscommon. Under his leadership, the kingdom of Uí Maine prospered and eventually covered one third of Connacht. The stones on the summit of the Abbeypark mound may have been used during the inauguration ceremony.

In 1956, one of the greatest discoveries of the Irish Iron Age, the Somerset Hoard, was found within this rich landscape of prehistoric monuments. The Hoard, which is discussed in detail elsewhere in this book, was recently described as ‘the property of a metalworker…the stock-in-trade of a travelling bronzesmith’ and was not regarded as a ritual deposit. Joseph Raftery, who investigated the findspot on behalf of the National Museum in 1960, regarded the Hoard as ‘booty’. While accidental loss is always a possibility, the long tradition of prehistoric burial and votive deposition in the immediate area must be taken into consideration in any discussion of the Somerset Hoard. Furthermore, the findspot lies in close proximity to the place called ‘Lakefield’, which would support the idea of the Hoard as a votive deposit in a watery place. Deposits of this nature have been identified from different parts of Europe and are generally regarded as ‘non-ritual’ hoards. This interpretation has been challenged in recent years and it has been suggested that these hoards, while certainly associated with metalworkers, should be seen as votive deposits by the very people who made them. Metalworking is a craft that involves specialist
knowledge and was undoubtedly imbued with mysticism. There is considerable ethnographic evidence to support the idea that metalworkers enjoyed a special status in society. The transformation of something solid, like a gold ingot, into liquid and then into something solid again, using fire and water, the very elements that formed the basis for prehistoric religion, must have been seen as something supernatural, involving magical and otherworldly powers. Perhaps further research will show that the Somerset Hoard forms part of the long history of votive deposition in this landscape.

Conclusion

Although what is written here is only a snapshot of Clontuskert in prehistory, there is sufficient evidence to show that people were living in the area approximately 9,000 years ago. Despite the fact that we have not discovered evidence for structures or burial monuments dating to that time, the stone tools found during the excavation in Mackney would seem to indicate the presence of some of the earliest settlers on this island. The artefacts from Kellysgrove Bog appear to be high status objects and although research is at a preliminary stage, they would appear to indicate trade links with the wider world during the Neolithic. Evidence for Bronze Age activity in Kellysgrove, Cloonascragh, Ardranny, Barnpark, Mackney, Urraghry, Somerset, Barnaboy and Coolbeg, points to a considerable presence in the area at that time. It is likely that the location of some of these monuments reflect ancient territorial boundaries, which survive to the present day in the townland boundaries of Coolbeg and Barnaboy and Somerset and Graveshill.

Although its function is still a topic for debate, one of the greatest of all Iron Age finds, the Somerset Hoard, will always be
associated with the prehistory of the parish. This, coupled with the possible identification of an Iron Age barrow in Barnaboy, demonstrates that the area continued to be a focus for ritual activity long after the area was first settled. It was into this environment that paganism eventually gave way to Christianity, culminating in the establishment of a monastic community by St. Baetan sometime in the eighth century.

Without these monuments, it would be impossible to understand the lives of those who came before us. So much development has taken place in the past few years as a result of the economic boom but it is clear that what we have gained materially, we have lost in terms of our cultural heritage. This is not an infinite resource but a vulnerable one, which, once gone cannot be replaced.

Although the wider world may concern itself with the Hill of Tara or the Bremore passage tombs, it should be pointed out that each and every monument is equally vulnerable and equally important. All of the monuments listed here are protected by the National Monuments (Amendments) Acts 1930-2004 and it is illegal to damage or remove them and it is also illegal to use a metal detector in or around them without a licence from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. However, unfortunately, the landscape around them is not subject to the same degree of protection. Research has shown that the location of these monuments was specifically selected and whether they are located on the summits of the eskers that dominate the parish, or along long-forgotten waterways or in the bogs-it is this we need to protect and to ensure that the heritage of the area as a whole is maintained. If this is done, it will ensure that the magical world which is prehistoric Clontuskert survives, so that a more complete picture and not just the briefest of glimpses, can be revealed.