

Megaloceros giganteus on the loose



Fig. 1: Distribution of Giant Irish Deer find spots in Ireland. (Eachtra Archaeological Projects)



Fig. 2: Chop-marked antler from Ballyoran Bog. (Eachtra Archaeological Projects)

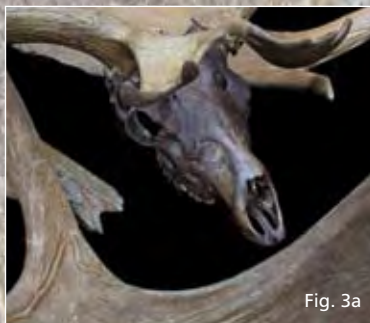



Fig. 3a



Fig. 3b



Fig. 4: Wooden trackway/platform. (Eachtra Archaeological Projects)



Penny Johnston, Bernice Kelly and John Tierney of Eachtra Archaeological Projects report on the discovery of Giant Irish Deer on the M8 Rathcormac/Fermoy Bypass.

In August 2004 skeletal remains of Giant Irish Deer (*Megaloceros giganteus*) were discovered on the route of the M8 Rathcormac/Fermoy Bypass in lacustrine (lake) deposits approximately 1–1.5 m beneath peatlands at Ballyoran Bog, Co. Cork. This is a small fen bog that formed in a narrow pass in the foothills of the Nagles Mountains. The deer remains included two complete skulls, significant portions of two more skulls, three almost complete antlers and four post-cranial bones (bones situated behind the skull). Together these represented at least six individual Giant Deer, all adult males.

The recovery of several deer skeletons in one location is relatively common: over 100 individuals have been found at the most famous find spot, in Ballybetagh Bog, Co. Dublin. Most examples of Giant Irish Deer from lake deposits beneath peat bogs date to the period between 11,750 BP (Before Present) and 10,950 BP and the Ballyoran Bog examples fit into this date range; antler from the collection had a radiocarbon age of 11,139–10,962 BC (11,124 ± 61 BP).

Distribution

There is a concentration of Giant Irish Deer find spots in the Limerick region and the recovery of skeletal remains from Ballyoran Bog extends this distribution pattern slightly. The distribution map of Giant Irish Deer finds indicates a range associated with fertile soils, and it is suggested that access to suitable grazing was crucial to the survival of the deer populations. Current theories

suggest that c. 11,000 BP there was a stadial (an even colder period during an ice age) that affected climate and vegetation and depleted the deer's food resources, eventually leading to their extinction.

Worked Antler

While the deer pre-dated the earliest human settlement of Ireland by several thousand years (the earliest recorded sites from the area are Mesolithic flint scatters c. 15 km away), their remains were later found and used by humans. At Ballyoran Bog a fragment of Giant Irish Deer antler with a chop-marked edge was found near the interface between the peat and underlying clays. The chopped antler was found at the very lowest layer of a deposit of brushwood, located several metres away from the Giant Irish Deer find spot, which occurred 1.5 m below the bog surface and directly above the grey clay underlying the peat. The wood was deposited in the context of growing fen peat and it was interpreted as a possible trackway, or platform.

Wood

Wood samples from the possible trackway/platform were identified as alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and willow/poplar (*Salix/Populus*), both of which are trees that generally grow in damp places and can tolerate intermittent waterlogging. The wood probably grew at the site, or very close by. Radiocarbon dates from the wood were returned as 8280–7965 BC for wood from the lower layers and 3012–2761 BC for the upper layers. These dates are very early, and while the wood in the trackway/platform may have been old natural wood preserved in the bog, the early dates also beg the question of whether the site was formed naturally.