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The Archaeology of Caves in Ireland

Marion Dowd

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The archaeology of caves in Ireland is a ground-breaking and unique study of the enigmatic, unseen and dark silent world of caves. People have engaged with caves for the duration of human occupation of the island, spanning 10,000 years. In prehistory, subterranean landscapes were associated with the dead and the spirit world, with evidence for burials, funerary rituals and votive deposition. The advent of Christianity saw the adaptation of caves as homes and places of storage, yet they also continued to feature in religious practice. Medieval mythology and modern folklore indicate that caves were considered places of the supernatural, being particularly associated with otherworldly women. Through a combination of archaeology, mythology and popular religion, this book takes the reader on a fascinating journey that sheds new light on a hitherto neglected area of research. It encourages us to consider what underground activities might reveal about the lives lived aboveground, and leaves us in no doubt as to the cultural significance of caves in the past.

Marion Dowd is Lecturer in Prehistoric Archaeology at the Institute of Technology Sligo, Ireland. Her doctoral research examined the role of caves in Irish prehistoric ritual and religion. She has directed excavations in many caves, and has published and lectured widely on the subject.

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