Co. Limerick occupies a roughly rectangular area along the southern side of the Shannon estuary, with a small area on the northern bank of the river to the north-west of Limerick City. In terms of its topography it might be characterised as having an upland periphery and lowland interior. The Slievefelim Mountains occupy the north-eastern extremity of the county with the Galtee and Ballyhoura Mountains defining its south-eastern limits. The Lough Gur area forms the border from north-west Cork into south-west Limerick, with an area of upland extending north from them along the Kerry border. The central and northern area of the county is generally low-lying and undulating grassland on a limestone bedrock, with central Limerick having a number of minor peaks, such as Knockfeerina. A number of south to north flowing rivers drain into the Shannon estuary, with the two most significant of these being the Maigue and to the west of this the Deel. The only lake within the area of the county which might be described as being in any way significant in size is Lough Gur in the east of the county.

It is probable that for many people the most readily identifiable part of Limerick’s archaeology is its prehistory, and there can be no doubt that many advances in our understanding of Irish prehistory have been as a result of research on sites in Co. Limerick. Research on prehistoric material has a long tradition which can be traced back to the eighteenth-century antiquarian interest in Lough Gur, and on into the early nineteenth century with Crofton Croker’s attempt at a systematic listing of sites in the Lough Gur area in the 1930s with further work carried out at Lough Gur by Harkness in the 1860s and Windele at the turn of the century. DTJ. Westropp’s work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is of significance to virtually all aspects of the archaeology of Limerick. The beginning of this century also saw the publication of P.J. Lynch’s listing of megaliths in the county. However, the beginning of systematic modern research on the prehistoric archaeology (and indeed the archaeology of other periods) of the region can be regarded as commencing with the programme of excavation carried out between the 1930s and the 1950s. M.J. O’Keeley survey of the barony of Small County in eastern county Limerick which was published in the 1940s provided much information on the prehistoric monuments of the area and (as will be referred to again) was a significant step in the assessment of all the archaeology of the county. As will be referred to again below the survey and excavation work carried out by the team led by Margaret Gowen in advance of the construction of the gas pipeline across east-central Limerick in 1986 produced material of major importance. Important research on the Neolithic and Early to Middle Bronze Age of the region has been carried out by Eoin Grogan of UCC. Rose Cleary of UCC has been engaged in a continuing programme of research and excavation at Lough Gur.

At present no Mesolithic material has been positively identified in Co. Limerick. The discovery of the rectangular plank-built house at Tankardstown in the course of the construction of the gas pipeline has put our understanding of the Early Neolithic in Limerick on a new level and provided evidence for activity in the area in the early fourth millennium BC. Circular and rectangular houses of different form but possibly similar date were excavated by Ó Ríordáin at Lough Gur in the 1940s and 1950s, and have
been the object of recent study by Grogan and Eogan. The passage tomb on the summit of Duntryleague Hill in the southeast of the county is the only definite example of its class in Limerick. There are a number of hill-top cairns in the county of uncertain but probably prehistoric date, with those on the summits of Temple Hill in the Galtee Mountains, Sefin in the Ballyhoura Mountains and Knockfeerina in central Limerick being significant examples.

Sites generally regarded as datable to the Late Neolithic and Early to Middle Bronze Age (c. 2500–1500 BC) form the bulk of the positively identified prehistoric monuments in the county. The excavations on the Knockadoon peninsula at Lough Gur already referred to provide evidence for domestic settlement of the Late Neolithic/Beaker period within circular earthen and stone enclosures. Inhumation burials in association with Neolithic and Beaker pottery were found at Caherguillamore (to the west of Lough Gur) by Hunt and Ó Riordáin in the 1940s. There are currently a total of seven wedge tombs in the centre and east of Limerick, with the example at Lough Gur having been excavated by Ó Riordáin and Ó hÍdeachda in 1955. Also datable to the Late Neolithic/Beaker period is the large banked stone circle at Grange immediately to the west of Lough Gur, which was also excavated by Ó Riordáin. The other stone circles of free-standing form and the standing stones occurring in the county (with a notable concentration in the Lough Gur area) could also be assigned to the general time frame under discussion. There are at present three examples of stone rows in the county, with a recently identified example being at Graig in south-central Limerick. Ó Riordáin argued for a Neolithic to Early Bronze Age date for the small crannog he excavated at Rathjordan in the 1940s, which consisted only of a stone layer over peat and
Ring-barrows form a major component of the prehistoric archaeology of Limerick, with particular concentrations in the east and south-east of the county. Ó Riordáin commenced systematic work on these in the 1930s with his work at Rathjordan and Lissard involving excavation and the identification of clusters of this site type. Air photographic work and field survey carried out in the course of the construction of the gas pipeline has allowed the known distribution of ring-barrows to be greatly extended, with important research having been carried out by Eoin Grogan. The group of ring-barrows at Elton should be noted in this context. Research currently being undertaken in UCC by Martin Doody on more air photographic material is further increasing the known number of ring-barrows in the east-central Limerick area.

Excavation has indicated a possibly extended period of use for this site type, with Neolithic material having been found at Rathjordan, with one barrow at Lissard producing definite Early Bronze Age pottery and the results of the pipeline excavations indicating a generally Early to Middle Bronze Age date for the excavated ring-barrow and ring-ditch features. Isolated urn, cist and pit burials also occur.

Far fewer field monuments can be definitely assigned to the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age periods of Limerick's prehistory, although the finds of Late Bronze Age material such as the gold gorget from Tory Hill and the occurrence of La Tene Iron Age material in the Lough Gur area indicates significant activity in the region. A number of fulacht fiadha were excavated in the course of pipeline construction and could possibly be dated to the period under discussion. In the early 1980s air reconnaissance work by the Ordnance Survey led to the discovery of a major hillfort at Ballylin to the north-west of Ardagh, which consists of two widely-spaced concentric enclosures. Another possible hillfort is located on Tory Hill. Excavation of stone enclosures on Aughinish Island in the early 1970s by E. Kelly of the National Museum resulted in the discovery of possible Hallstatt Early Iron Age material in association with Late Bronze Age material of the mid first millennium BC. Ó Riordáin's work at Cush in the 1930s resulted in the discovery of a bone plaque with La Tene-style decoration under one of the excavated barrows, indicating a date in last century BC or first century AD.

One of the main questions to be looked at in an assessment such as this is the archaeology of ringforts in Co. Limerick. M.J. O'Kelly's survey of the barony of Small County and O'Dwyer's study of earthworks in the vicinity of Pallas Green in north-east Limerick (published in the late 1950s and early 1960s) provided evidence for the occurrence of significant numbers of circular earthen enclosures consisting of a platform surrounded by a ditch with only slight traces of a bank, if such occurred at all. Recent fieldwork in central Limerick has tended to reinforce this pattern.

Only a very small proportion of ringforts in Limerick have been excavated, and these are subject to the same problems of chronology which affect this site type throughout the country. Well-known ringfort excavations in the county producing evidence which can be taken as indicating a generally Early Historic date are those by Ó Riordáin at the complex of conjoined ringforts at Cush in the 1930s and by Stenberger at the site at Raheenmadra in the 1960s. More recent excavations of ringforts in the county have been undertaken by Elizabeth Shee-Twohig and Rose Cleary of UCC. The conjoined sites at Cush produced evidence for round and rectangular houses and stone-built souterrains, with the site at Raheenmadra having a stone-built souterrain and evidence for a round house. The major piece of eighth-century metalwork known as the Ardagh Chalice was found in a ringfort near Ardagh in 1868. A number of stone forts or cashels occur in the county, with the two examples at Carraig Aille (east of Lough Gur) which were excavated by Ó Riordáin in the 1940s being datable to the Early Historic period and the stone enclosure around the remains of a medieval castle at Milltown near Askeaton possibly also belonging to this category.

The prehistoric crannog at Rathjordan has been mentioned above, with the dating of the two crannogs at Lough Gur being uncertain. Various references indicate the existence of a number of other crannog sites in the county.

There are a number of examples of Early Historic ecclesiastical architecture in the county. Round towers survive at Dysert (near Croom) and Ardpark (in the south-east of the county) with a destroyed site at Sinegal near Limerick city. Dysert and Ardpark have surviving...
churches, with churches datable to this period also occurring at Clonkeen, Killulta and Donaghmore (the last mentioned being to the south of Limerick city) with the eastern church at Mungrat also falling into this category. The remains at Ardpatrick are within a major ecclesiastical enclosure. The churches are generally unelaborate in style, with Clonkeen being notable for its Romanesque western doorway.

The whole of present day Co. Limerick was affected by the Anglo-Norman conquest and settlement of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, with the earthworks at Shanid Castle representing a major motte and bailey site with another motte at Pallas Grean, while the earthwork at Kinfinane, which consists of a central motte-like structure within concentric banks may also date to this period. The possible existence of the circular earthen defensive Anglo-Norman enclosures known as ringworks has been postulated at Raheen where a tower house is located within a circular earthwork and also at Adare where the thirteenth-century keep is within a ditched enclosure, but both of these examples are uncertain. The polygonal keep and enclosing curtain wall constructed on top of the motte at Shanid can be placed in the early thirteenth century. Central Limerick has a number of moated sites, which have been generally dated in other areas to the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Excavations by O’Riordain and Hunt at Caherguillamore in 1940 produced evidence for two possibly thirteenth- to fourteenth-century rectangular stone-built houses which formed part of a larger settlement complex.

The work of T.J. Westropp at the beginning of this century should be noted in relation to the medieval archaeology of Co. Limerick. His papers on the churches and castles of the county are an important historical source in carrying out research on the archaeology of Limerick.

The later medieval period saw the building of significant numbers of tower houses, with many being relatively simple in form such as the example at Beagh on the Shannon estuary, but interesting in their architectural detail. This period also saw the construction of more major examples of defensive architecture such as the O’Brien’s castle at Carrigogunnel with its keep and other buildings within an enclosure on a rock outcrop to the west of Limerick City. Other important examples of late medieval defensive architecture which might be mentioned here are the Desmond castle at Newcastle West and the castles at Glenogra and Ballygrennan.

Both present research and the evidence gathered by T.J. Westropp would appear to indicate that a significant number of the country houses marked on OS maps are very likely to be successors to medieval or seventeenth-century buildings.

Significant developments in ecclesiastical architecture can be seen towards the end of the Early Historic period with the foundation of the Cistercian Abbey of Monasteranenagh in 1148. This building is an important example of Transitional and Early Gothic architecture. The other Cistercian foundations in the county at Abbeyfeale, Abington and Ballingarry are fragmentary or destroyed. Other late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century foundations which should be mentioned are the church of the Knights Hospitallers at Hospital with its examples of thirteenth to fourteenth-century effigial sculpture and the Augustinian convent at Old Abbey. There are many surviving examples of medieval parish churches in the county with most being relatively simple in form.

The medieval period saw the development of a number of urban centres such as Newcastle West, Askeaton, Adare, Kilmallock, Rathkeale and Croom. Kilmallock is of particular importance as it preserves part of its town wall together with one of the town gates and a number of medieval town houses. Of the various examples of ecclesiastical architecture in these towns the important friaries at Kilmallock, Adare and Askeaton should be particularly noted.

By the end of the seventeenth century a number of the village settlements of the present day Co. Limerick landscape (such as Old Kildimo, Loghill and Dromcolliher) were in existence. The industrial archaeology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Limerick will hopefully receive increased attention in the future, with a number of significant surviving buildings such as the watermill at Croom.