

FINAL REPORT on the  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION of a  
*FULACHT FIADH*  
HILL OF RATH 1, Co. LOUTH  
NORTHERN MOTORWAY  
GORMANSTON to MONASTERBOICE  
00E0942

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Valerie J. Keeley Ltd  
Archaeological Consultancy  
February 2004

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION of a  
*FULACHT FIADH*  
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GORMANSTON to MONASTERBOICE  
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00E0942



National Roads Design Office			
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ID	FILE No.		

Project Director: Valerie J. Keeley Ltd  
Site Director: Kieran Campbell

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## SUMMARY

This report details the final results of licensed archaeological excavations undertaken at Hill of Rath Site 1, Co. Louth, on the route on the Northern Motorway, Gormanston to Monasterboice, on behalf of Meath County Council. The excavation was conducted by Kieran Campbell under Licence No. 00E0942, for Valerie J. Keeley Ltd., as part of the archaeological work preceding the construction of the Northern Motorway in Co. Louth. Hill of Rath Site 1 was identified during licensed archaeological monitoring of topsoil stripping along the route. The site most likely constitutes that of a badly disturbed *fulacht fiadh*; a sub-rectangular cut in the subsoil filled with burnt mound material may have been a trough.

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

- Figure 1      Site location on route of the Northern Motorway, Gormanston to  
                    Monasterboice
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- Figure 3      Profiles and sections of possible trough and stakeholes

## INTRODUCTION

This report details the final results of the archaeological excavations undertaken at Hill of Rath Site 1, Co. Louth, on behalf of Meath County Council. Archaeological monitoring of the initial programme of topsoil stripping preceding the construction of the Northern Motorway, Gormanston to Monasterboice was recommended in *Archaeological Assessment, Environmental Impact Study, Northern Motorway, Co. Meath* (Valerie J. Keeley Ltd. 1998, 16). A potential *fulacht fiadh* site was identified on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2000 during archaeological monitoring of topsoil stripping conducted by Kieran Campbell, under Licence No. 00E0282, for Valerie J. Keeley Ltd. (2002a). The site was subsequently excavated over two days (30<sup>th</sup> June and 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2000) under Licence No. 00E0942, held by Kieran Campbell.

The archaeological brief for the site included the following measures; to fully excavate all archaeological features discovered in the area, to record all archaeological features or deposits which became apparent during excavation, and to compile a report detailing all of the above.

## SITE LOCATION

*Townland:* Hill of Rath  
*Parish:* Tullyallen  
*Barony:* Ferrard  
*County:* Louth  
*NGR:* 305330 278332  
*O.S. 6" Sheet:* Louth 24

The site was located in a low lying area which is now made up of large tillage fields due to the removal of many field boundaries in recent times (Fig. 1). There is a very slight slope eastwards for 250m down to a stream, which forms the townland boundary with Killineer. To the west there is an increase in slope as the land rises to the Hill of Rath road. The 1938 revision of the O.S. six-inch map shows a double ditch with a stream running west to east at, or very close to, the *fulacht fiadh* site. There is no longer a surface trace of this ditch. A culvert under the motorway is proposed at this location. The site was at the western edge of the road take in the field immediately north of the large Hill of Rath excavation (Licence No.00E0535 held by



Carmel Duffy), 130m to the south, which was in progress at that time. A further burnt mound feature, a single pit, was uncovered during topsoil stripping at the field boundary 180m to the north of this site (Valerie J. Keeley Ltd. 2002b).

## EXCAVATION

When the site was first exposed, it appeared as a sporadic spread of heat-fractured stones and dark soil contained mostly within a 14m<sup>2</sup> area on the western side of the road take. A dense concentration of burnt stones, 2.8m (east-west) by 1.7m (north-south), was exposed 9m from the edge of the road, with smaller lighter spreads occurring to the east, south and north. A small deposit of ash with charcoal, less than 0.5m in extent, was noted 23m north of the main spread. Following discovery, the 'hazard tape' marking the site appears to have come adrift and the site suffered some damage when dumper trucks were driven over it. The lighter scatters of burnt stone and the charcoal and ash deposit were removed by this traffic.

On the western side of the road, exposed in the sides of the V-shaped drain, burnt mound material comprised part of the fill of a buried field ditch. This deposit was contaminated by modern material, e.g. fence wire. Burnt stones were also visible in the ploughsoil west of the road take, the stones extending at least 3m beyond the limit of the road.

The excavation uncovered a shallow sub-rectangular cut (757) in natural subsoil, 2.4m by 1.5m and 0.25m deep, filled with burnt mound material (758) (Figs 2, 3; Appendix A). The sides of the cut sloped *c.*45° at the west but were otherwise very gradual. The base was level to slightly undulating with a slight depression in the south western quarter. This cut coincided with the dense concentration of burnt stones (noted above) observed at the time of discovery. It is highly likely that this feature was truncated during topsoil stripping and was also damaged by the subsequent traffic over the site.

There were eight stakeholes or postholes that occurred in three groups at, or close to, the edge of the sub-rectangular cut (Figs. 2, 3; Appendix A). Two stakeholes (770, 768) were situated at the southwest margin of the cut, three (782, 784, 786) at the northeast and three (775, 778, 780) at the north west. The holes ranged in diameter from 0.05m to 0.18m and in depth from 0.05m to 0.32m. The stakeholes had fills of a

firm grey clay with occasional to frequent charcoal inclusions and occasional burnt stones. No artefacts were recovered from the site.

## CONCLUSION

Both the location of the site and the composition of the deposits make it likely that the site is that of a badly disturbed *fulacht fiadh*. The name of these sites is derived from references in Early Irish literature to cooking sites for deer, which were used by the Fianna (Mitchell and Ryan 1997, 220). A variety of uses have been proposed, however the principal interpretations are as cooking sites and saunas (Buckley 1990, Barfield and Hodder 1987, Brindley 1989-90). The common elements on *fulachta fiadh* sites include a trough in which water was heated using fire-baked stones. The fire-shattered stones were discarded once beyond use, and are frequently found as a mound of burnt material. Troughs may be clay, wood or stone-lined, ranging from simple pits to more elaborate forms. Generally, they date from the Early to Late Bronze Age, particularly the latter. Before the clearance of the field boundaries, the site at Hill of Rath 1 was situated close to a ditch with a running stream in a low-lying area. Spreads of burnt stone were evident prior to the excavation, however some of these were removed by traffic over the site. The cut (757), although damaged, had an approximate sub-rectangular shape and probably represented the base of a trough. Its broad dimensions would support this interpretation. The results of specialist analysis of charcoal samples are pending and will be presented as an Appendix.

Three *fulachta fiadh* were excavated as part of the nearby Hill of Rath excavation (00E0535), with one site, an intact *fulacht fiadh* with mound and timber-lined trough located c.200m to the south of the site described here. This excavation recovered evidence for extensive settlement in this area during the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, settlement previously signalled by the Hill of Rath urn cemetery uncovered in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The *fulacht fiadh* that this report deals with, designated Hill of Rath Site 1, was c.500m north of the supposed site of the urn cemetery and is another indication of the broader settlement pattern in the area.



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## APPENDIX A: LIST OF CONTEXTS

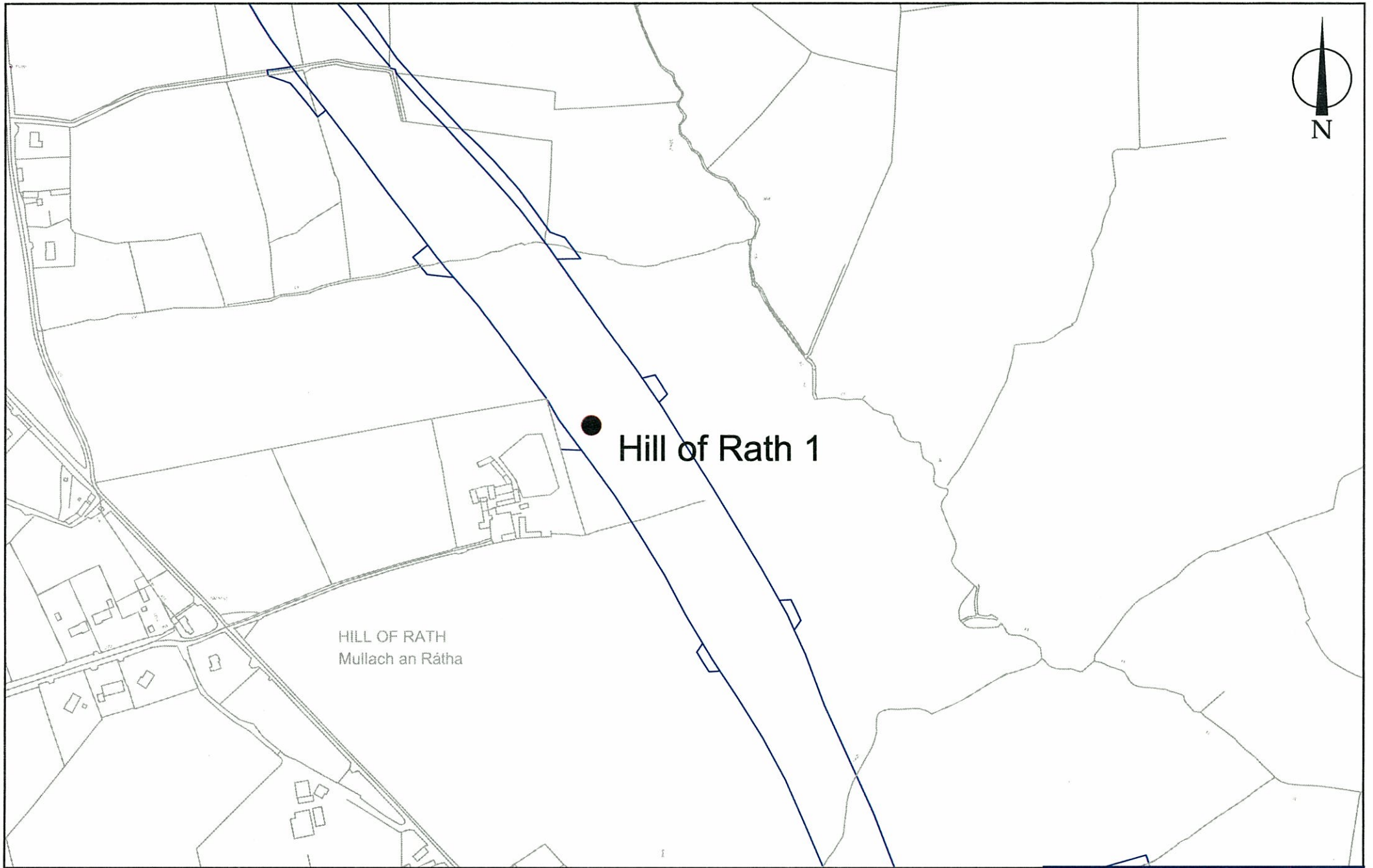
The context numbers used on the site (757-787) were taken from the register on the 00E0535 Hill of Rath excavation.

<u>Context No.</u>	<u>Description</u>
757	Sub-rectangular shallow pit. L 2.4m, W 1.5m, D 0.25m
758	A firm mottled grey/black/orange clay with frequent charcoal, burnt stone. Fill of 757
775	Cut for posthole L 0.18m, W 0.16m, D 0.27m
776	Compact grey clay with orange flecks, frequent charcoal, occasional unburnt wood. Fill of 775
768	Cut for stakehole L 0.08m, W 0.07m, D 0.11m
769	Firm grey clay with orange flecks, occasional charcoal and unburnt wood. Fill of 768
770	Cut for posthole L 0.17m, W 0.16m D 0.32m
771	Firm grey clay with orange flecks, frequent charcoal, unburnt wood fragments at base of posthole. Fill of 770
778	Cut for stakehole L 0.06m, W 0.03m D 0.05m
779	Compact grey clay with occasional charcoal flecks. Fill of 778

<u>Context No.</u>	<u>Description</u>
780	Cut for stakehole L 0.05m, W 0.03m D 0.06m
781	Firm grey clay with orange flecks, occasional charcoal inclusions. Fill of 780
782	Cut for stakehole L 0.12m, W 0.07m D 0.10m
784	Cut for stakehole L 0.10m, W 0.08m D 0.12m
785	Firm grey clay with occasional charcoal flecks and burnt stones. Fill of 784
786	Cut for stakehole L 0.05m, W 0.07m D 0.17m
787	Compact grey clay with frequent charcoal inclusions. Fill of 786

## Figures





<b>Title</b> HILL OF RATH 1, SITE PLAN	<b>Notes</b>	<b>Job/Exc No.</b> 00E0942	<b>Compiled by</b> DE/BK	<b>CAD reference</b> FIG4.dwg	<b>Client</b> MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL
		<b>Date</b> 1/10/02	<b>Scale</b> 1:5000	<b>Drawing No.</b> FIG 1	<b>Project</b> NORTHERN MOTORWAY, GORMANSTOWN TO MONASTERBOICE

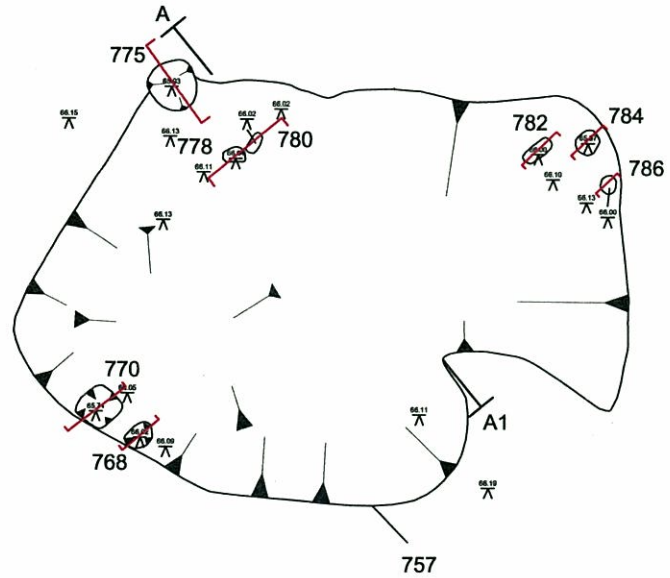


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⊕ 305340.576E  
278337.822N



⊕ 305340.583E  
278334.101N

**Title**  
HILL OF RATH 1,  
PLAN OF EXCAVATED POSSIBLE TROUGH  
AND STAKEHOLES

**Notes**

<b>Job/Exc No.</b> 00E0942	<b>Compiled by</b> DE/BK	<b>CAD reference</b> FIG2.dwg
<b>Date</b> 30/09/02	<b>Scale</b> 1:30	<b>Drawing No.</b> FIG 2

**Client**  
MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL

**Project**  
NORTHERN MOTORWAY, GORMANSTOWN TO MONASTERBOICE



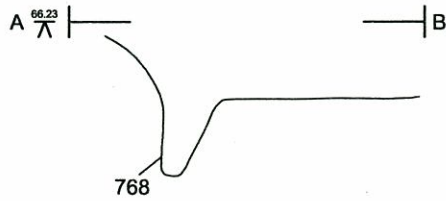
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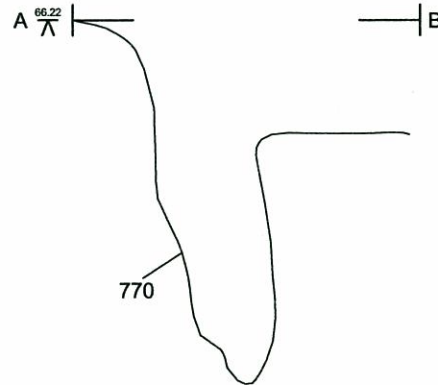
Tel: 056-40236  
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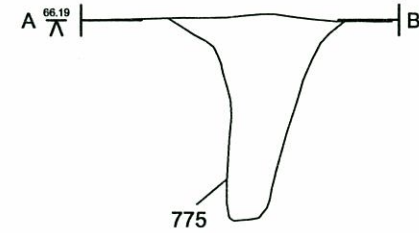
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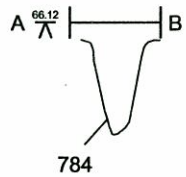
PROFILE OF POSTHOLE 768



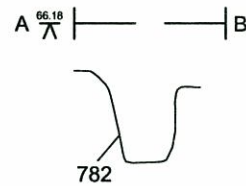
PROFILE OF POSTHOLE 770



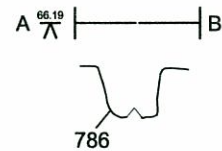
SECTION OF POSTHOLE 775



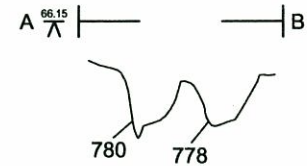
PROFILE OF POSTHOLE 784



PROFILE OF POSTHOLE 782



PROFILE OF POSTHOLE 786



PROFILE OF POSTHOLES 780 & 778

**Title**  
HILL OF RATH 1,  
SECTIONS and PROFILES of POSTHOLES  
and DEPOSIT 758

**Notes**

**Job/Exc No.**  
00E0942

**Date**  
30/09/02

**Compiled by**  
DE/BK

**Scale**  
1:10

**CAD reference**  
FIG3.dwg

**Drawing No.**  
FIG 3

**Client**  
MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL

**Project**  
NORTHERN MOTORWAY, GORMANSTOWN TO MONASTERBOICE



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