

## 5. Excavation of a ringfort at Leggetsrath West, County Kilkenny

Anne-Marie Lennon

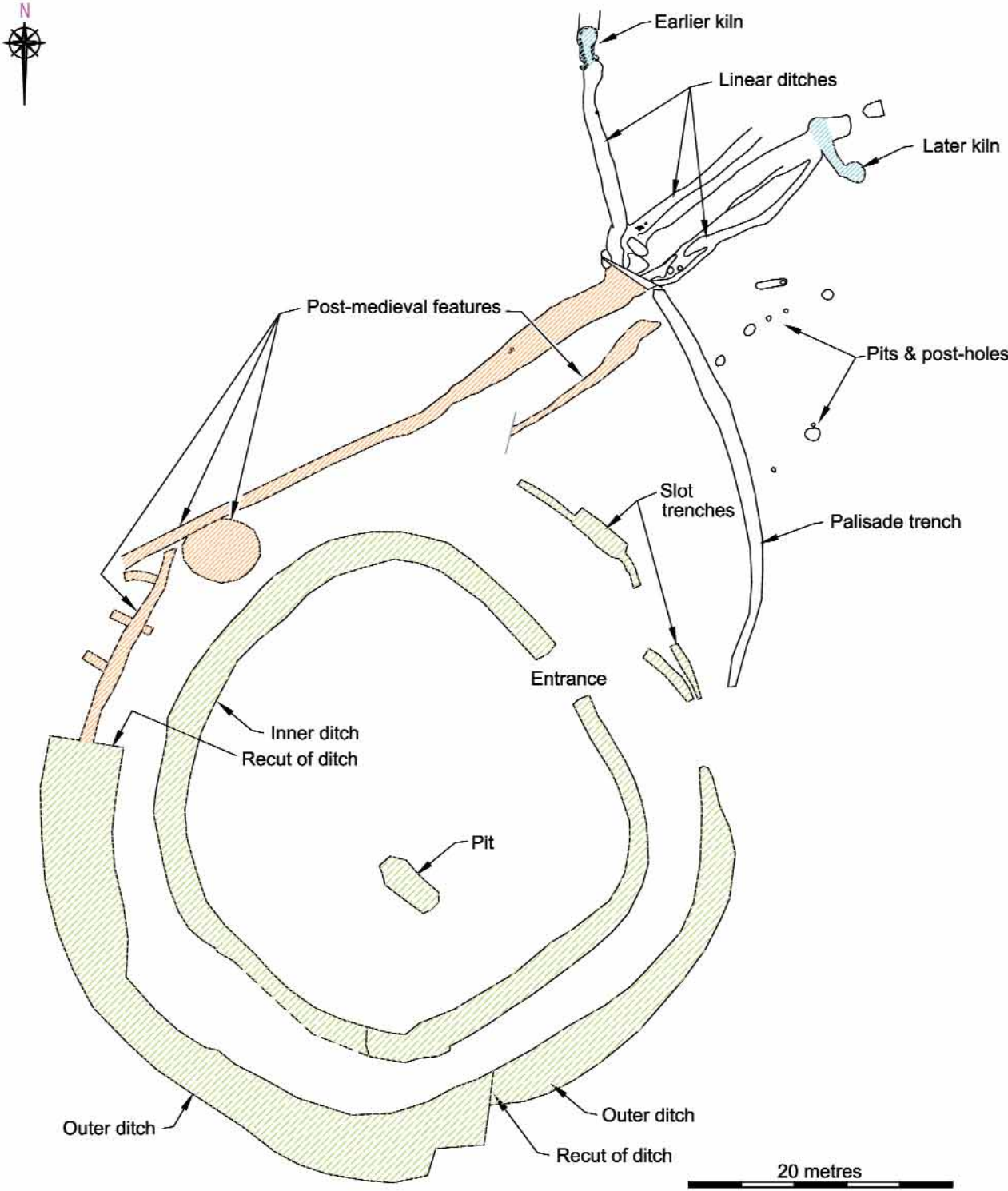


Illus. 1—Location of the Leggetsrath West ringfort, Co. Kilkenny (based on Ordnance Survey Ireland map)

The ringfort at Leggetsrath West was situated to the east of Kilkenny city, on the proposed route of the N77 Kilkenny Ring Road Extension (Illus. 1). The site was identified in a preliminary archaeological assessment of the road corridor as an area of potential archaeological interest. It was the only high point, a naturally occurring hillock, along the route of the proposed road. The site was in an area of rough grazing, which was bound to the east by the Fennell stream and to the west by Hebron Industrial Estate. Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd carried out investigations in 2004 when the gravel hillock was topsoil stripped, revealing a bivallate (double ditch) ringfort dating from the early historic period (NGR 252383, 155983; height 58.47 m OD; excavation licence no. 04E0661). The ringfort was delimited by two concentric ditches set 4 m apart, with an overall diameter of 54 m. Archaeological excavations were funded by the National Roads Authority through Kilkenny County Council.

### Historical and archaeological background

The early historic period in Ireland is dominated by the introduction of Christianity in the fifth century AD. Apart from church sites, the settlement evidence of the period is



Illus. 2—Plan of excavated features at Leggetsrath West (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

dominated by two categories of monument: the ringfort and the crannóg. Approximately 1,200 ringforts (also known as raths) are known from County Kilkenny, including one excavated at Loughboy (Record of Monuments and Places [RMP] No. KK019-040), approximately 1.5 km south of Kilkenny city (Cotter 2000). Only one possible crannóg has been recorded in the county, a site identified by aerial photography at Loughmerans (RMP No. KK014-063) to the north of the city. More than 200 church sites have been identified in County Kilkenny. The most famous of these establishments was Cill Chainnigh, or 'the Church of Canice'. The *Annals of Ulster* recorded the death of Canice in AD 599 or 600; however, it cannot be positively ascertained whether Canice or one of his followers founded the monastery in Kilkenny.

The majority of Irish ringforts were probably constructed and occupied during a 300-year period from the beginning of the seventh century to the end of the ninth century (Stout 1997, 29). This view is supported by the fact that the majority of excavated ringforts have provided dates from the second half of the first millennium AD. The site at Leggetsrath West would appear to fall within this time span. The artefacts recovered and the radiocarbon dating place the occupation of the site somewhere between the mid-seventh century and the late ninth century, with it possibly continuing in use into the 11th century.

## **Excavation results**

### *Inner ditch*

The inner ditch (Illus. 2 & 3) measured 34 m east–west by 32 m and enclosed the summit of the hillock. The profile of the inner ditch varied from the east to the west side of the site. On the east side it was U-shaped and shallowest: 0.8 m deep and 1.1 m wide. On the west side the ditch was V-shaped and deeper: 1.4 m deep and 2.3 m wide. It was filled by numerous layers of compact silty clay, loose silty gravel, layers of stone and fine silt. The evidence suggests that the ditch filled in over a short period of time.

### *Outer ditch*

The outer ditch formed a semicircle at the base of the slope, enclosing the east, south and west sides of the site. It was absent on the north side, where the gradient of the slope was sharper. This outer ditch measured 54 m in diameter. The east sector was U-shaped in profile—1 m deep and 1.5 m wide—and was similar in depth to the corresponding segment of the inner ditch. The outer ditch was recut on the south and west sides. The recut was V-shaped—2.3 m deep by 5 m wide—and terminated sharply at each end. The fills recorded from the recut were similar to those in the shallower, eastern part of the ditch, consisting mostly of layers of compact silt and clay, silty gravel, loose stone and fine silts.

### *Interior*

The only archaeological features recorded in the interior of the site were two pits (Illus. 2), one cut into the fill of the other. The earlier and larger pit was 1 m deep, 2 m long (east–west) and 1.7 m wide. It had been truncated at the eastern side by post-medieval gravel quarrying. The pit was filled by several silt and gravel layers. A rudimentary drystone wall-facing, two to three courses high, survived for a length of c. 2 m along the north side. Two post-holes were uncovered, cut into the north and south-west corners of the pit. The



*Illus. 3—Aerial photograph of archaeological features at Leggetsrath West (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)*

pit may have been used for storage, with posts and the stone walling possibly supporting a roof or canopy. The later pit was 0.6 m in diameter and 0.2 m deep and was cut into the upper fills of the larger pit at its western end.

### *Entrance*

The entrance was represented by a 3 m-wide gap in the inner ditch. It faced north-east and had a commanding view over the surrounding area. There was no evidence of any associated entrance features, such as a gate-house or gate-posts. Nor was there any type of prepared surface leading into or away from the ringfort. The only associated features were external slot-trenches flanking either side of the entrance and respecting the curve of the inner ditch. These were set at a distance of 5 m from the edge of the ditch and extended for a length of 5–6 m. They had a maximum width of 0.6 m and were 0.3 m deep. Both trenches showed evidence of having been recut. The fills of the trenches were similar, comprising silts and gravels with charcoal inclusions. The only direct evidence that the slot-trenches contained upright posts was a shallow post-hole found in the eastern trench.

To the east of the slot-trenches, and respecting the curve of the hill, was a curvilinear ditch, 0.7 m wide with a maximum depth of 0.7 m. It extended for a length of 50 m, terminating sharply at the base of the slope to the north of the ringfort, and was filled by compacted, charcoal-flecked, silty clays. This curvilinear trench may have been used as a palisade trench holding upright timbers, but no evidence of post-holes was found in the base of the trench.

### *Cereal-drying kilns*

A series of intercutting linear field ditches were uncovered at the base of the hillock, to the north-east of the ringfort. They were orientated north-east–south-west and north-west–south-east and had been filled in by compact silt or silty clays with few inclusions. Two of the ditches had cereal-drying kilns built into the upper fills.

The two cereal-drying kilns were uncovered to the north and north-east of the ringfort (Illus. 2), at a distance of c. 40 m. The earlier kiln (radiocarbon-dated to AD 790–1030; see Appendix 1 for details) was keyhole shaped and comprised a single bowl or drying chamber with a connecting flue. It had an overall length of 4.6 m (north–south). Remains of a stone lining survived on the sides of both the drying chamber and the flue, but many of the stones were displaced within the fill. They were large, subrectangular limestone blocks showing evidence of heat fractures. The fire for drying the cereal was lit at the edge of the flue.

The later kiln was radiocarbon-dated to AD 1000–1270 (see Appendix 1). The kiln was 6 m long, orientated north-west–south-east, and comprised two roughly circular bowls with a connecting flue. The larger bowl was used as the drying chamber, and the hot air was directed from the smaller fire-bowl through the flue to the drying chamber (Illus. 4). The smaller fire-bowl showed evidence of *in situ* burning. The remains of a stone lining were found in the flue, comprising a row of angular, heat-shattered limestone blocks set on edge and pressed against the sides of the flue.

A scatter of pits and post- and stake-holes was uncovered to the south of the later kiln, beneath a layer of silt, 0.3–0.4 m deep in places, that had built up around the base of the hill. These features were randomly positioned, forming no definite pattern. Two pits showed evidence of *in situ* burning, suggesting that they may have been used as roasting ovens. Charred cereal grains recovered from these pits were similar to cereals found in the kilns.



*Illus. 4—Later cereal-drying kiln radiocarbon-dated to AD 1000–1270 (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)*

### *Post-medieval features*

A series of shallow, linear agricultural trenches and a gravel-extraction pit, all dating from the post-medieval period, were uncovered to the west of the ringfort. A linear trench, also of post-medieval date, was identified to the north of the ringfort entrance. It is likely that the linear ditches were part of land drainage practices, draining surface water downslope from the higher ground. The easy access to the gravel on the hill appears to have encouraged attempts to extract gravel from the site for local use.

### **Palaeoenvironmental evidence**

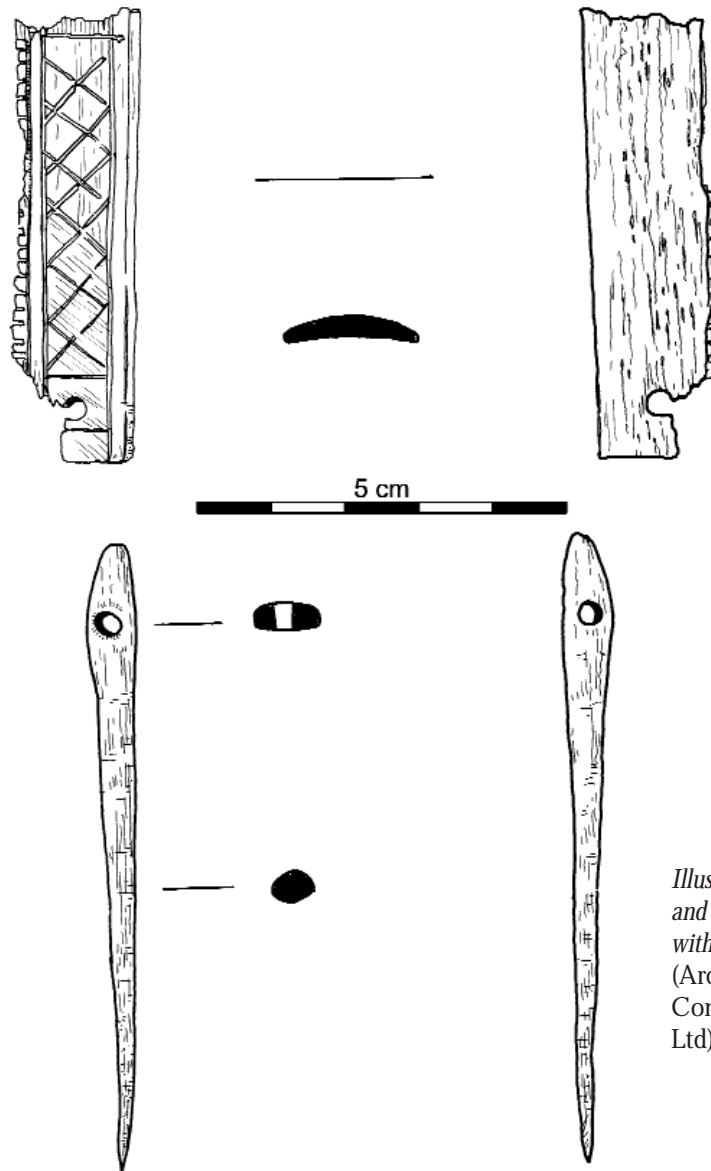
The palaeoenvironmental evidence from the site consisted of charred cereal grains that were concentrated in a few pits and in the two cereal-drying kilns. All of the recovered cereal remains were most likely intended for human consumption and are typical of crops cultivated during the early historic period. The presence of only a small percentage of typical weed seeds in the fills of the kilns suggests that the cereal crop at Leggetsrath West was cleaned before drying. There was a predominance of oats and wheat from the earlier kiln, with barley recovered to a lesser extent. The grain recovered from the later kiln was mainly oats and barley, with a few wheat grains. The charcoal found in the fills of the kilns, pits and post-holes probably represents the wood used for fuel. It is typical of a scrubland environment: a predominance of hazel, with oak, cherry/plum and guilder-rose to a lesser extent. The wood species identifications, along with the shell of a species of land snail found in soil samples from the site, suggest that the immediate environs of the ringfort were shaded by scrubland at the period when the kilns were in use.

The faunal evidence (animal bone) recovered from the ringfort was unexceptional, with cattle, sheep/goat, pig and horse corresponding to the established pattern of animal husbandry for an early historic farmstead. The presence of bird bone is interesting, although only a very small amount was recovered. The species identified included domestic fowl, raven, woodcock, Brent goose and a rook, and all had been previously identified from sites of this period. Fish bone—eel, salmon and trout—recovered from the large pit on the ringfort interior were all of freshwater fish, indicating the exploitation of the nearby River Nore.

### **Artefacts**

The artefact assemblage, although small, produced some very interesting finds. The earliest finds recovered were chert knives, artefacts commonly found throughout the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods. These blades possibly date to later prehistory and are indicative of earlier human activity in the general vicinity of the ringfort. Two of the chert blades, along with a blue glass bead, were from fills of the linear field ditch that had the later of the two kilns built over its upper fills.

Two pottery sherds of Bii amphora ware (mid-fifth/sixth century AD), used to hold wine or olive oil, were recovered from the inner ditch; the first find of imported Mediterranean pottery from this period in south Leinster. The nearest other find of this ware in the south-east was from excavations at Cormac's Chapel, Cashel, Co. Tipperary



*Illus. 5—Bone needles  
and composite bone comb  
with incised decoration  
(Archaeological  
Consultancy Services  
Ltd)*

(Hodkinson 1994). Although weathered and residual from the ditch fill, they represent inland trade along the River Nore and are likely to be contemporary with the earliest phase of occupation on the site.

The other artefacts recovered were typical of the assemblages recovered from ringfort excavations in Ireland and included a composite bone comb with incised decoration, a gaming-piece and a loom-weight. The outer ditch produced iron knives and bone needles (Illus. 5). Iron and copper-alloy objects and medieval pottery were also found, but these were unstratified.

The most interesting unstratified find was a cast copper-alloy ring-pin, which was crutch headed and stirrup ringed (Illus. 6). The decoration on the ring-pin consisted of parallel grooves at the middle and ends of the ring. This form of decoration appears to link this ring-pin with ring-pins of the baluster-headed and polyhedral-headed classes, on which this form of decoration is common. By contrast, the form of decoration of the ring of the



*Illus. 6—Decorated copper-alloy ring-pin dating to the 11th century AD (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)*

Leggetsrath West pin is very rarely employed to decorate the rings of stirrup-ringed pins, on which dot-and-circle motifs are almost universally employed. The pin dates to the 11th century and was made in Dublin. Parallels for this type of decorated pin are known from elsewhere in Ireland, but most examples have been found in Dublin and its immediate hinterland. Most of the pins tend to be found at aristocratic sites such as Ballinderry and Togherstown, Co. Westmeath, and Knowth, Co. Meath. Finds tend to be coastal suggesting that the ringed pins may constitute evidence for maritime trade. However, all but one of the small number of finds from Munster are from ecclesiastical sites, such as Church Island, Valentia; Skellig Michael and Ardfert Cathedral, all in County Kerry, and Liathmore, Co. Tipperary (N Kelly, pers. comm.). This suggests that these pins are high status objects and may have come to Leggetsrath West by means of trade or political or religious interaction in the 11th century, during the last phase of occupation at the ringfort.

## **Discussion**

The features found on the hillock were cut deep into the natural gravel, which was very soft and prone to erosion. The only features recorded from the interior were two pits; there was no trace of occupation layers, nor was evidence for an enclosing bank uncovered. The entire surface of the ringfort, including the area between the two ditches, was rough gravel with medium to large limestone cobbles protruding from the surface. The gravel nature of the site made it very susceptible to erosion, and post-medieval gravel extraction may have hastened the rate of soil erosion.

The fill of the ditches suggested that when they were no longer required they were allowed to backfill quickly. The radiocarbon dates show that the inner ditch was going out of use sometime between AD 610 and AD 780 (see Appendix 1 for details). Because of the lack of suitable organic material from the base of the ditch, the date was obtained from a secondary fill. The dating sample for the outer ditch was taken from the sediment at the



base, where the ditch had been recut, and gave a date of AD 690–990 (see Appendix 1). The concentric nature of the two ditches and the overlap in dating suggest that their construction was contemporaneous. However, it is possible that the site was extended sometime between the seventh and the eighth century by backfilling the inner ditch, a practice not uncommon in ringforts (Monk 1998, 41). A recut was then made to the outer ditch on the least defensive part of the enclosure and may represent a period in the eighth century when deeper defences were required.

The entrance to the site was a simple causeway formed by an unexcavated gap in the inner ditch. It faced north, taking advantage of the commanding view over the north-east route into the early ecclesiastical settlement at Kilkenny. The entrance was flanked by a probable defensive feature consisting of slot-trenches that may have held timber uprights. A possible palisade trench was found extending the length of the north slope, on the east side of the site, which may also have had a defensive role.

To the north of the site associated peripheral activity was uncovered downslope of the ringfort. The features survived in this area because they were sealed by a deep deposit of silt or hill-wash from upslope. The linear field ditches may represent part of the division of the infield, where small fields tend to radiate from ringforts and were used for grazing and cultivation, often with a kiln for cereal drying built into them (Kelly 1998, 368). The cereal-drying kilns built over the ditches suggest that the field ditches are either contemporary with or earlier than the occupation of the ringfort. It is not uncommon to uncover elements of an earlier field system comprising linear ditches pre-dating ringforts. The earlier of the two kilns has been dated to AD 790–1030 (Appendix 1), well within the known occupation period of Irish ringforts. The later kiln was dated to AD 1000–1270 (Appendix 1). This may place its use at the end of the occupation phase of the ringfort or when the ringfort was out of use but occupation still continued in the vicinity.

The ringfort at Leggetsrath West was clearly of some importance throughout its occupation. Its setting in the landscape is quite deliberate and would have made it prominent and perhaps imposing to some extent. Moreover, the ringfort was situated at the junction of two major early medieval routeways—an east–west routeway from Leinster to Munster at the foot of the Castlecomer plateau and a north–south routeway along the River Nore. As such, a good deal of effort went into defending the site. However, its significance is perhaps best represented by two of the high-status artefacts recovered during the excavation—the sherds of Mediterranean Bii amphora ware and the copper-alloy ring-pin. These finds represent the earliest and latest phases of occupation on the site and clearly indicate the significance of the ringfort over a number of centuries and the extent of trade in luxury items in the region during this period.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to thank James Eogan, project archaeologist, Tramore House Regional Design Office, and Trevor Mbwebwe, WS Akins Ireland Ltd, who contributed to the project in a variety of ways. Particular thanks to the excavation crew and the staff of Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd for their dedication and hard work throughout the project. Thanks also to the following for specialist analysis: Ian Doyle (medieval pottery); Ned Kelly (ring-pin); Dr Eiméar Nelis (lithics); Fiona Beglane and Sheila Hamilton-Dyer (animal

*Settlement, Industry and Ritual*

bones); Orni Akeret, Deborah Jacques and John Carrott of Palaeoecology Research Services (plant remains) and Beta Analytic, Florida, who conducted the radiocarbon dating. Final thanks to Adrian Kenny for the conservation of the metal artefacts and to John Murphy for the illustrations.