

4. Archaeological discoveries on a new section of the N2 in Counties Meath and Dublin

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Archaeological investigations in advance of the N2 Finglas–Ashbourne road scheme revealed approximately 20 new archaeological sites interspersed along the route (Illus. 1). Their date range indicates that there was intermittent human activity in the Finglas–Ashbourne area during at least the past 5,000 years. The diverse nature of this activity is reflected by a range of site types, including short-term dispersed occupation pits and features, burnt mound sites, small-scale kiln and industrial sites, and extensive habitation complexes, as well as sites of ritual, burial or ceremonial significance.

The N2 road scheme comprises c. 17 km of dual carriageway extending NNE from the existing N2/M50 junction in Dublin, bypassing the busy and congested town of Ashbourne, Co. Meath, on its western side before rejoining the existing N2 north of the town. The archaeological works for the scheme were carried out on behalf of the National Roads Authority and Meath County Council.

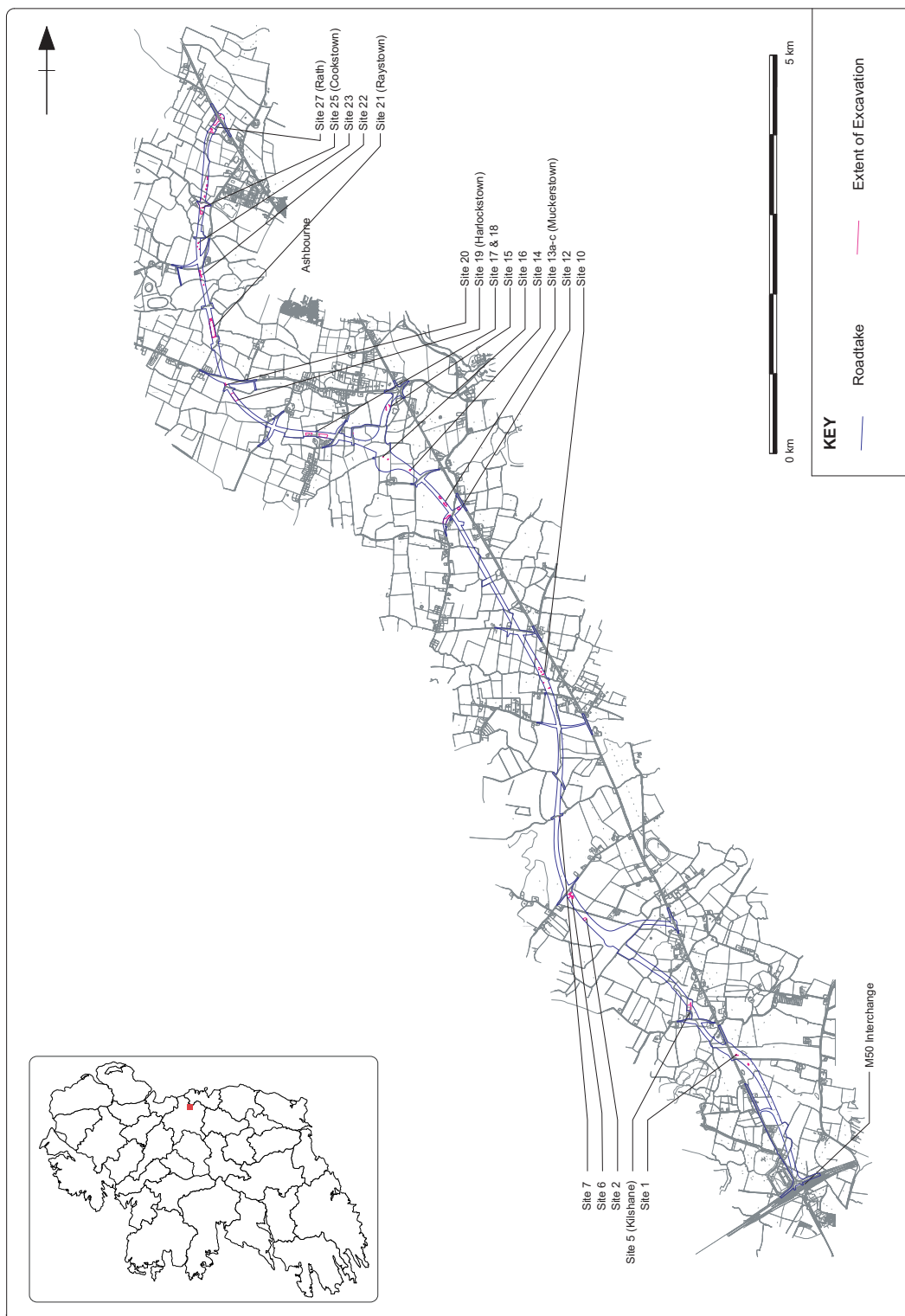
All the sites discussed here were fully excavated during 2004 and 2005 by Cultural Resource Development Services Ltd (CRDS Ltd). Preliminary archaeological investigations for the scheme commenced in 2001, however, with a contribution on archaeology to the Environmental Impact Statement prepared by Valerie J Keeley Ltd. Subsequently, an aerial survey of the route was carried out by Margaret Gowen & Co. Ltd in 2001, and an extensive geophysical survey of the route was carried out by GSB Prospection Ltd in 2002. Cumulatively, these investigations identified a number of existing and new archaeological sites along and adjacent to the route. In order to investigate their potential, and that of the entire route, an extensive programme of test excavations was carried out between August and November 2003 by Judith Carroll Network Archaeology Ltd.

Summary of archaeological discoveries

Given the breadth of evidence revealed and the limited length of this paper, it is proposed to present a preliminary overview of the findings and subsequently to discuss some of the more interesting sites and artefacts in greater detail.

Prehistoric sites

Most of the new sites revealed were prehistoric in date, or at least had a primary phase of activity during the prehistoric period. With the exception of two burial ring-ditches at Coldwinters, Co. Dublin (Record of Monuments and Places [RMP] No. ME014-015), and Killegland, Co. Meath (ME045-002), comparatively little prehistoric activity had been recorded in the vicinity of the route in advance of the N2 investigations. The earliest site discovered along the route was Site 5, a Neolithic (3200–2800 BC) henge or ritual enclosure at Kilshane, Co. Dublin. Excavation revealed an intriguing ritual and burial site, and a summary of the findings is presented below.



Illus. 1—Location of N2 Finglas–Ashbourne road scheme, Counties Meath and Dublin (CRDS Ltd, based on Ordnance Survey Ireland map)



Illus. 2—Overhead view of deep pits or wells at Site 13b, Muckerstown, Co. Meath (Hawkeye)

Many of the other prehistoric sites were of Bronze Age date. These included some very large, deep, waterlogged pits or wells of Middle Bronze Age date (Illus. 2) discovered at Muckerstown (Site 13b), Co. Meath. The pits produced an assemblage of unique wooden artefacts that are discussed in greater detail below.

The most ubiquitous prehistoric site type in Ireland is the burnt mound, and five sites of this type were found interspersed along the route in the townlands of Coldwinters (Site 1), Co. Dublin, Ward Lower (Site 7), Co. Dublin, Harlockstown (two sites—Sites 20 and 31), Co. Meath, and Baltrasna (Site 15), Co. Meath. Burnt mounds are largely dated to the Bronze Age, though some earlier and later examples are recorded. They are generally interpreted as cooking sites, but alternative processes that use quantities of hot water—such as saunas, leather preparation, cloth-fulling and cloth-dyeing—have also been proposed.

Other prehistoric sites along the scheme included a small isolated pit at Ward Upper (Site 6), Co. Dublin, which produced c. 600 sherds (representing 24 vessels) of Late Bronze Age pottery (c. 1150–800 BC). The pit may simply have been used for refuse, but given the extent of the pottery assemblage it could also be interpreted as reflecting a more complex ritual deposition in the landscape. Extensive Bronze Age and Iron Age burial and habitation complexes were discovered at Harlockstown (Site 19) and Rath (Site 27), Co. Meath, and these sites are also discussed in more detail below.

Early medieval sites

Prior to the N2 investigations, early medieval activity in the Finglas/Ashbourne landscape was represented by ringforts, souterrains and early church sites extensively listed in the RMP (ringforts at Wotton (ME045-022) and Muckerstown (ME045-021), a cropmark enclosure at Killegland (ME045-003), a souterrain at Baltrasna (ME045-026), and early



Illus. 3—Segment of ringfort ditch at Cookstown, Co. Meath—an early medieval farmstead enclosure partly underlying a modern farmstead (Hawkeye)

church sites at Donaghmore (ME045-008), Killelland (ME045-004) and Cookstown (ME045-001)). New archaeological sites revealed by the N2 investigations add considerably to this evidence. At the southern end of the scheme, a small, multi-phase cereal-drying kiln and metalworking site (Site 2) was found on a slight rise in the townland of Cherryhound, Co. Dublin. This industrial site had three main phases of activity—a phase of metalworking to the east, followed by phases of kiln activity at the western end of the site. Associated houses and settlements were not discovered but may have been located nearby beyond the road corridor.

At Cookstown, Co. Meath, at the northern end of the scheme, the geophysical survey revealed a circular enclosure (Site 25) located partly within the roadtake but extending under an inhabited farm to the west of the road. Excavation confirmed that this enclosure was an early medieval ringfort (Illus. 3). A ring-pin and the ring portion of a second pin were recovered from primary ditch fills.

The most extensive and significant early medieval settlement complex was uncovered at Raystown (Site 21), Co. Meath. This was a greenfield site before the N2 investigations and was first identified during the geophysical survey of 2002. The initial survey was subsequently extended to areas outside the roadtake in order to define the full extent and nature of the archaeological features. Approximately one third of the site was within the area affected by the road scheme and this area was fully excavated during 2004 by CRDS Ltd. The excavation director, Matthew Seaver, discusses the results of the Raystown excavation more extensively elsewhere in this volume.

Medieval and post-medieval sites

The medieval period is well represented, particularly at the southern end of the road scheme, by upstanding monuments such as Dunsoghly Castle (DU014-00501), Co. Dublin, and Hiberno-Norman mottes at Donaghmore (ME045-007), Co. Meath, and Kilshane (DU014-001) and Newtown (DU014-013), Co. Dublin. Newly discovered medieval sites recorded along the scheme at Cookstown (Site 25), Baltrasna (Site 17/18) and Muckerstown (Site 12/13a), Co. Meath, add to this picture of medieval settlement. Cookstown was a multi-period site with an important phase of medieval rural activity and settlement. The sites at Baltrasna and Muckerstown were interpreted as medieval farmsteads. The evidence at Baltrasna represented the remains of a field system and cobbled laneway from the late medieval period. The site at Muckerstown consisted of the yards, kitchen gardens and infields of a medieval and post-medieval settlement. This site produced about 2000 sherds of medieval pottery of predominantly local wares, dating from the 13th/14th centuries. The new evidence from the scheme augments the picture of high-status, defensive mottes and castles by revealing dispersed medieval rural settlements and farms.

Kilshane Henge

The earliest and one of the most significant sites from the scheme was a Neolithic ritual enclosure (Illus. 4), 37 m by 27 m, discovered at the southern end of the scheme at Kilshane, Co. Dublin (NGR 311010, 242951; height 81.3 m OD; excavation licence no. 03E1359 extension; Excavation Director Dermot Moore). The artefactual evidence from pottery and stone tools indicates that this site had its origins in the Middle Neolithic period



Illus. 4—Elevated view of irregular henge enclosure at Kilshane, Co. Dublin (Hawkeye)



Illus. 5—Animal bone layer undergoing excavation at Kilshane Neolithic henge, Co. Dublin (Hawkeye)

(3200–2800 BC), but it also saw intermittent activity during the Late Neolithic and Early and Middle Bronze Age periods. The enclosing ditch was formed by the excavation of a series of intercutting and overlapping ditch segments. With the exception of some ‘cleaned-out’ cremation pits and a crouched inhumation burial, all thought to have been of Early Bronze Age date, few features were recorded within the interior. A unique element of this site was the recovery of approximately 300 kg of cattle bone from the base of the ditch segments (Illus. 5). Sherds from globular bowls dating from the Middle Neolithic were also discovered in the ditch fills, sealing the animal bone, and these indicate a similar deposition date.

This is the largest assemblage of Neolithic animal bone from Ireland to date. Approximately 40 to 50 immature cattle are represented, and these were deposited in the ditch segments in both a disarticulated and an articulated state. In some instances, certain bone types, such as long bones, were grouped together. According to Dr Finbar McCormick (Queen’s University, Belfast) the bone was defleshed, but there is little evidence for bone disease or butchery. The bone must have been covered over very soon after its deposition, as there is little evidence for animal gnawing of the bone. Nearly all of the animals were slaughtered at 18 months old, indicating that the event took place in the autumn. The absence of butchery marks on the disarticulated cattle bone and the presence of articulated animals indicate that the bone assemblage is unlikely to represent the remains of feasting. The evidence would suggest that the animals were slaughtered, disarticulated (in most cases), defleshed and deposited in the ditch segments, and that they represent the remains of animal sacrifice.

The upper fills of the ditch, particularly to the east, contained numerous sherds of pottery and a large assemblage of stone tools. The pottery from this layer included 17 Early Bronze Age Food Vessels (2400–1700 BC), sherds of Vase Urns and Encrusted Urns, as well

as twelve Middle Bronze Age Cordoned Urns (2000–1400 BC). Although Food Vessels are occasionally recorded in domestic contexts, it is predominantly a funerary ware. The excavation director, Dermot Moore, suggests that a nearby Early and Middle Bronze Age cemetery may have been cleared out and the contents deposited into the upper fills of the enclosing ditch.

This site appears to be unique, with few obvious Irish parallels. It is comparable to a small group of henges or embanked enclosures, a site type interpreted as being of ritual, ceremonial or burial significance because of the large internal area of the enclosures, the absence of finds from the interiors and the non-defensive nature of the banks. Recorded examples are generally much larger than the Kilshane site, however. The segmented nature of the ditch may also invoke comparisons with the much larger British or European causewayed enclosure sites, interpreted as possible cattle marts or community meeting places. These sites also have limited evidence for internal structural remains but have evidence for the deliberate deposition of pottery, human bone and animal bones in the ditches and in pits. An Early Neolithic causewayed enclosure site was recently discovered at Magheraboy, Co. Sligo (MacDonagh 2005, 17–20), and this site was also interpreted as of ritual significance, with deposits of flint arrowheads, pottery and deliberately broken porcellanite axeheads.

The Kilshane henge may have served as a community meeting place for ceremony and/or burial during the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods. Environmental evidence suggests that the landscape was heavily wooded during this period, so the Kilshane site would have been a large clearing in the forest. Did the local community congregate at Kilshane for an event each autumn or at certain other times? Did each family group walk to the site and bring along an animal that they had herded through the forests and countryside? Was it a dispersed community, and from how far did its members travel? There are no known Neolithic sites in the immediate vicinity, but did people come from nearby Neolithic complexes such as Knowth and Newgrange, 32 km to the north-west, or from houses at Coolfore, Co. Louth (Ó Drisceoil 2002), 26 km to the north-east, and Newtown, Co. Meath, 25 km north-east (Gowen & Halpin 1992)—or from much further afield? The cattle bone could be interpreted as a deliberate symbolic deposition, and there may have been games and sports associated with the killing. Were all the animals killed at or near the site, and could they have been offered up in thanks for a good autumn harvest or in appeasement after a bad one? In addition to ceremonial activities, did the community meet to trade and barter animals and tools, and generally exchange ideas and skills? We can only imagine the festival atmosphere at the site, which was certainly an important local focus for community activity.

Prehistoric Harlockstown

An important prehistoric complex was discovered at Harlockstown (Site 19), Co. Meath. This site (NGR 305304, 250560; height 70.82 m OD; excavation licence no. 03E1526 extension; Excavation Director David O'Connor) was first identified by geophysical survey (Illus. 6), and subsequent excavation revealed a very close correlation between the survey results and the actual site features. Harlockstown was a multi-period and multi-functional site. Primary features comprised an Early Bronze Age circular enclosure (radiocarbon-dated



Illus. 6—Elevated view of prehistoric complex at Harlockstown, Co. Meath, showing Early Bronze Age circular enclosure (left) and square Iron Age enclosure (right) (Studio Lab)

to 1960–1690 BC, Wk-16288; see Appendix 1 for details) cut by a square Iron Age enclosure where extensive metalworking activity took place. Excavation revealed that the circular enclosure was a burial monument with a cremation pit and two inhumations within the interior. There was no evidence for a mound, but the upcast material from the ditch may have been thrown into the enclosure and the burials inserted into the mound material.

The inhumed individuals were placed in a crouched position in stone-lined graves and were accompanied by substantially intact decorated pottery vessels known as Food Vessels (Illus. 7). The vessels have been identified as a ribbed bowl and a necked bipartite bowl with a cruciform motif on the base (E Grogan and H Roche, pers. comm.). Both individuals were adults, one of indeterminate sex but more likely female (radiocarbon-dated to 2120–1870 BC, Wk-16290) and the second possibly male (L Fibiger, pers. comm.). Food Vessel burials are not unusual in Ireland, with dates generally clustering between 2460 BC and 1980 BC. Such inhumations can be found in unmarked or flat cemeteries, or beneath cairns with either burnt or unburnt remains. The pots were originally referred to as Food Vessels because it was assumed that they contained a food offering for the spirit of the deceased. This has yet to be substantiated by any conclusive evidence from residue analysis, however.

Muckerstown wooden artefacts

Two large waterlogged pits or wells, each approximately 2.5 m in depth, were the primary features revealed at Site 13b in Muckerstown, Co. Meath (NGR 307851, 249310; height 70.27 m OD; excavation licence no. 03E1331 extension; Excavation Director Caitríona



Illus. 7—Burial with Food Vessel pot at Harlockstown, Co. Meath (CRDS Ltd)

Moore). One of the pits was lined with a wooden panel, possibly wattlework (radiocarbon-dated to 1390–1080 BC, Wk-16818), and both may have been accessed by sloping sides laid with fine metal surfaces. Their purpose is uncertain and they may simply have functioned as wells, as they were deep enough for the extraction of groundwater. An alternative processing function—such as basketry, tanning, dyeing or flax preparation, which all use watery pits—is also possible. Both pits produced organic materials, including worked wood, but one of the pits produced a unique assemblage of 130 basketry artefacts.

These artefacts have been analysed by Caitríona Moore and Dr Ingelise Stuijts, who found that they were very deliberately constructed composite artefacts, comprising three elements: a bundle of woody twigs, a thicker central spine and a twisted branch or withy looping around the bundle (Illus. 8). They were primarily made from four species: willow, broom, ash and alder.

One of the artefacts has been radiocarbon-dated to the Middle Bronze Age period (1600–1210 BC, Wk-15499) and, as such, appears to be a unique artefact type with few Irish or European parallels. Their function is uncertain and they compare most closely with a broom called a besom, familiar from folklife evidence in Ireland. It is certainly intriguing that 130 of these objects were discarded or ritually deposited in this pit. The ritual deposition of



Illus. 8—Wooden basketry artefact from Site 13b, Muckerstown, Co. Meath (CRDS Ltd)

artefacts in watery locations is well attested in prehistoric times and the objects may therefore have had a non-functional, symbolic significance (C Moore, pers. comm.).

Prehistoric Rath

An extensive prehistoric complex was discovered at Rath (Site 27), Co. Meath, at the northern end of the scheme, where the new road rejoins the existing N2 (NGR 305049, 254101; height 86 m OD; excavation licence no. 03E1214 extension; Excavation Director Holger Schweitzer). The site complex extended over a large area measuring c. 280 m by 100 m, extending northwards from a stream and rising to a hillcrest with panoramic views. The primary features on site included a possible sweat-lodge adjacent to the stream, three ring-ditches on the highest point of the ridge, a metalworking area, a cereal-drying kiln and some deep, waterlogged pits (to the north of the existing N2). This site produced an extraordinary array of high-status finds, including a female buried wearing toe-rings, an unusual copper-alloy La Tène fibula, segmented faience beads and some prehistoric wooden vessels (radiocarbon-dated to 390–190 BC, Wk-16824).

Sweat-lodge?

Holger Schweitzer, excavation director, interpreted one of the structures as a sweat-lodge. The site was beside the small stream and the building was defined by a circle of large post-holes with a hearth located between two of the post-holes (Illus. 9). The hearth was defined by a double ring of stake-holes and had a flue extending into the interior of the building. The building was surrounded by a curving ditch that may have channelled water from the adjacent stream. The basic principle of such a sweat-lodge or sauna was that stones were heated on a hearth, water poured onto the stones and steam channelled into the lodge via the flue. A trough and a mound of discarded burnt stone were located outside the building.

A disc-headed brooch and fibula were recovered in the vicinity of the building. These dress-fasteners may have been lost during dressing and undressing associated with a sauna.



Illus. 9—Sweat-lodge at Rath, Co. Meath: a circle of post-holes within a narrow enclosing ditch (Hawkeye)

The fibula is of late La Tène type and came from the adjacent terrace leading down to the water. Approximately 30 fibulae are known from Ireland. Preliminary examination of this new fibula indicates that the type is unique in Ireland and is paralleled only by British finds (B Raftery, pers. comm.). The introduction of the fibula brooch to Ireland during the Iron Age is thought to reflect changes in clothing such as the wearing of finer wool and linen garments.

Also from this site, recovered from the fill of a small ring-ditch to the north of the building, were three tiny segmented faience beads. Faience is a glass-like substance that is made from simple elements but can be very difficult to produce. The beads from Rath are of an unusual form; they are made from several discs fused together. They appear to be of European morphology but may have been made locally (A Sheridan, pers. comm.). Irish and British faience dates from the Early Bronze Age period (1900–1500 BC). Unusually, however, the Rath beads have come from a context dated to the Iron Age (740–360 BC, Wk-16317). Faience is regarded as a symbol of status but it may also have been worn as a talisman in life and death.

The woman with rings on her toes

One of the most spectacular finds from this site was the burial of a woman in the fills of a small ring-ditch at the north of the site (Illus. 10). The woman was found lying on her side in a crouched position with clasped hands placed under her cheek. On her feet were three copper-alloy toe-rings—two plain spiral rings and a third ring decorated with a herringbone motif. On the right foot, the spiral ring encircled the big toe as well as the tips of the second and possibly the third toe. The decorated toe-ring encircled the fourth toe (Schweitzer 2005, 97, illus. 5). A possible fragment of leather was recorded at her heel. It was not possible to establish the position of the other spiral toe-ring because of the poor preservation of the skeletal remains of the left foot.



Illus. 10—Female burial with toe-rings, Rath, Co. Meath (CRDS Ltd)

The closest parallels for this burial are a small number of high-status Iron Age burials from Britain at sites such as Poundbury Hill (Farwell & Molleson 1993) and Maiden Castle (Wheeler 1943). Most of these burials are male with a toe-ring on one foot, and the rings are interpreted as attachments for leather sandals, which were a sign of sovereignty. However, a burial of a female wearing toe-rings was recently discovered under the floor of a late Iron Age metalworking site at Minehowe, Orkney (Card et al. 2005, 326). Given the paucity of Irish parallels for the woman at Rath, it is tempting to speculate that she was a royal visitor from Britain or at least had very strong cultural connections with that island. The bone has not proved suitable for dating so the burial is dated by comparisons only. Scientists at Bradford University are carrying out isotope analysis on her teeth in order to help build up a picture of her diet, which may yield clues as to her cultural background.

The presence of the fibula and the faience beads indicates that the Rath habitation and burial complex was occupied and used by a high-status wealthy community. Given the exclusively British parallels for the fibula and the burial with toe-rings, it seems possible that this community had strong cultural or trading connections with that island.

Rural medieval settlement at Cookstown

Cookstown (Site 25), Co. Meath, located at the northern end of the scheme, was a multi-period site with an important phase of medieval rural activity (NGR 304938, 253010; height 76.27 m OD; excavation licence no. 03E1252 extension; Excavation Director Richard Clutterbuck). In addition to the aforementioned early medieval ringfort (Illus. 3), the site also had evidence for extensive prehistoric and medieval phases of activity.



Illus. 11—Schematic drawing showing the early medieval ringfort and the row of medieval buildings (Structures I–IV) with infields and kitchen gardens at Cookstown, Co. Meath. Structure I is the building interpreted as a forge (CRDS Ltd)

About 30 m east of the ringfort, a row of medieval structures with infields and kitchen gardens was revealed (Illus. 11). The structures were defined by shallow, enclosing slot-trenches (probably used to hold wooden walls). Richard Clutterbuck, excavation director, has interpreted one of the buildings (Structure 1) as a forge. Central to this structure was a shallow subrectangular trench with silty lower fills, which contained large quantities of iron slag. This may have been used as a quenching trough to cool down the molten metal during manufacture. The central area, which was raised, contained four large post-holes that probably held the base posts of a table. Cookstown produced a large assemblage of metal objects, including knives, a pair of scissors, hooks and nails, and it seems likely that some of these were made on site. In addition to large quantities of slag, some copper was also recovered from the forge, and archaeometallurgical analysis is proposed to assess the types of metalworking that took place here.

The row of buildings fronted onto what is interpreted as a medieval laneway. Few medieval rural buildings or settlements have been excavated to date in Ireland, so the results of the excavation and post-excavation research should greatly enhance our understanding of the nature of medieval rural settlement.

Conclusions

All of the sites discussed above were unknown in advance of the N2 Finglas–Ashbourne road scheme and indicate that human activity in the area was more extensive than previously understood. Additionally, many of these were new site types, not previously recorded or reflected in the RMP for this area, and their discovery has demonstrated that there was greater social diversity and complexity than previously thought. The investigations clearly reveal the potential of future archaeological works to alter our perception and understanding of past societies. It is likely that specialist post-excavation analysis for the N2 project will shed further light on these sites and the activities and ways of life of the people who occupied or visited them. The post-excavation phase of the project is well under way and it is intended to publish the results of the excavations more fully in due course.

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