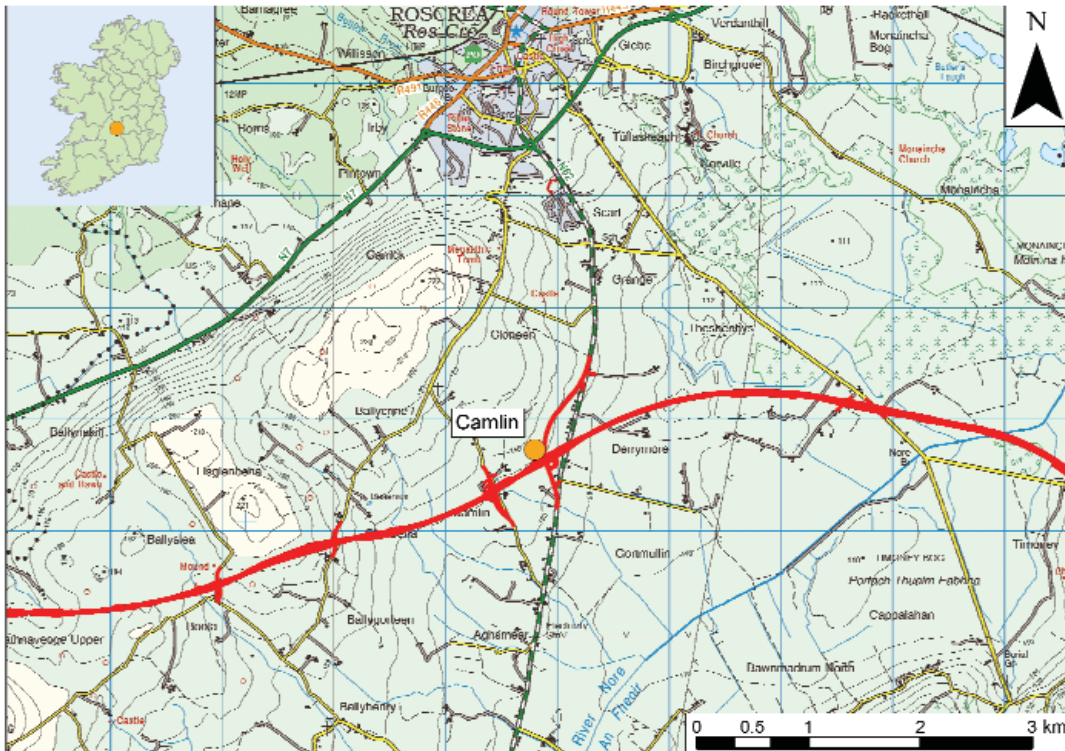


13. Camlin 3: a cemetery-settlement in north Tipperary

Colm Flynn



Illus. 1—Location of the cemetery-settlement at Camlin 3, Co. Tipperary (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map).

Camlin 3, c. 3 km south of Roscrea town, Co. Tipperary, was located on the east-facing slope of a natural ridge of high ground that runs from the Devil's Bit mountain range south-west of Camlin to Roscrea in the north (Illus. 1). The location has commanding views to the east and south-east and overlooks bogland immediately to the east. Camlin was situated close to the important early medieval routeway known as Slighe Dála. The well-known Early Christian monastic site at Moinaincha is less than 3 km to the north-east, and a known archaeological site at Camlin is described as a levelled 'Ringfort (possible, site)' (Record of Monuments and Places no. TN017-031) in the *Archaeological Inventory of County Tipperary* (Farrelly & O'Brien 2002, 85). Archaeological testing by Valerie J Keeley Ltd in advance of the construction phase of the N7 Castletown–Nenagh: Derrinsallagh to Ballintotty road scheme confirmed the presence of a large archaeological site at the location of the known monument, and several other concentrations of prehistoric and historic archaeological features were also identified. These features were excavated subsequently by Valerie J Keeley Ltd in July 2007–July 2008 on behalf of Laois County Council and the NRA.¹ On excavation the possible ringfort was shown to be the remains of a so-called

'cemetery-settlement', an early medieval site type that has been identified on numerous road schemes throughout the country in recent years (e.g. Seaver 2006; O'Neill 2007; O'Sullivan 2007b, 90–3; Clarke & Carlin 2008).

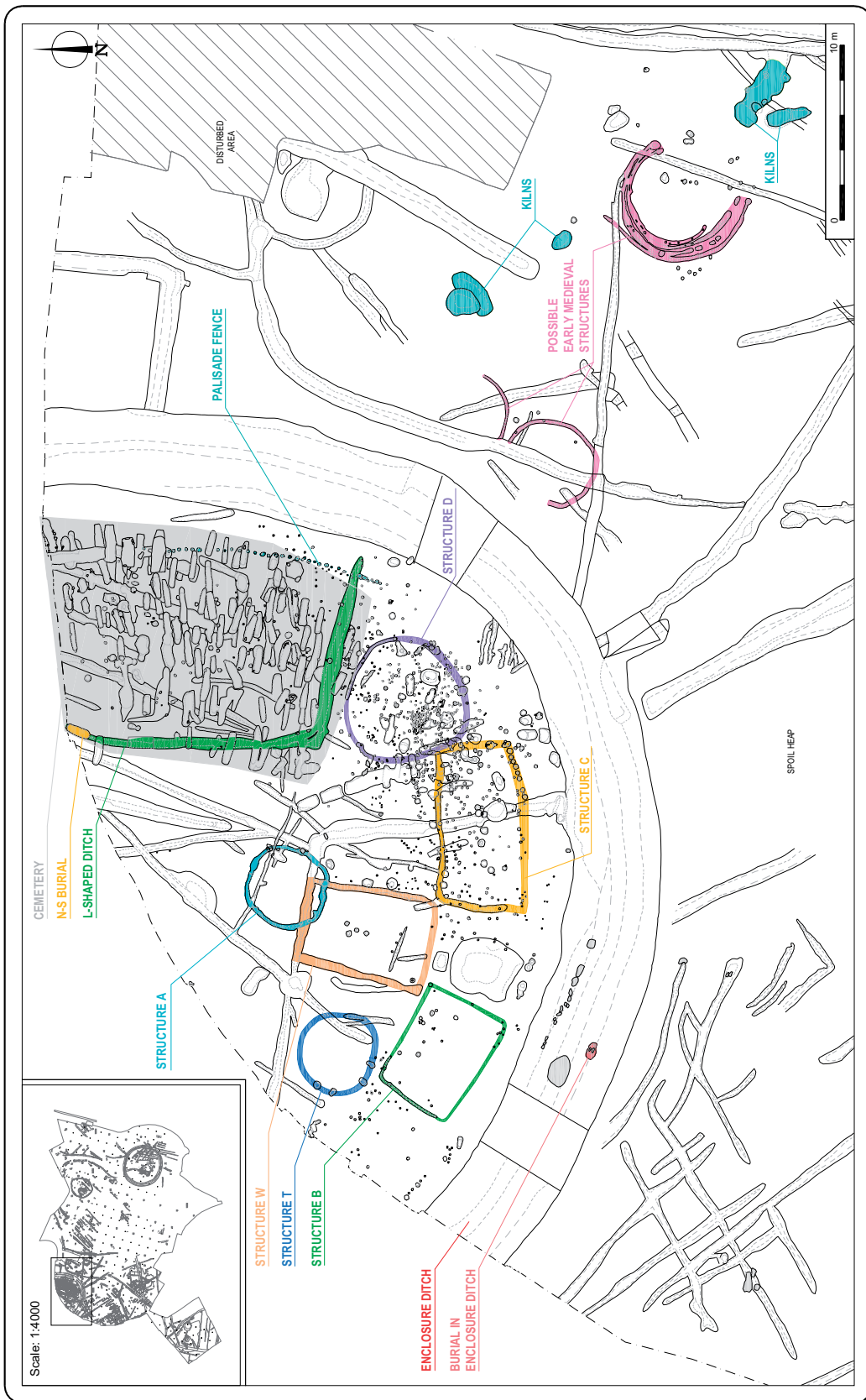
The cemetery-settlement

Approximately half the area of the monument described in the *Inventory* was affected by the road project, whilst the other half remains undisturbed under pasture fields (Illus. 2 & 3). A ditch and remnants of an internal bank forming a subcircular enclosure were identified by excavation. Within the excavated area the interior of the enclosure measured 42 m north-east–south-west and 24 m north–south. Including the ditch, the entire enclosure measured 50 m north-east–south-west. The bank had been mostly destroyed in recent times but measured approximately 3.5 m in width and survived to a height of 0.25 m. Owing to disturbance of the underlying archaeology by later agricultural activity, the bank material contained slag, iron knife blades and a large quantity of animal bone and disarticulated human bone.

The enclosure ditch varied in size, from 6 m wide and 2.2 m deep in the south-west to 1.9 m deep and 5 m wide in the north-east. At its lower levels the ditch fills were waterlogged, resulting in the preservation of a number of wooden artefacts. Although no break was identified in the ditch in the excavated area, it became shallower to the north. A geophysical survey carried out in the field immediately north of the excavation area identified a potential entrance in the north-east quadrant of the enclosure (Illus. 4). Near the western end of the excavated portion of the ditch a crouched inhumation burial of an adult male was identified, lying west–east within a pit grave cut into the fill of the ditch



Illus. 2—Elevated view of Camlin 3, looking south-west (AirShots Ltd).



Illus. 3—Post-excavation plan of Camlin 3 (Valerie J Keeley Ltd).



Illus. 4—Greyscale image of the results of geophysical survey at Camlin 3 (© M Leigh Surveys Ltd/Valerie J Keeley Ltd).

approximately 0.3 m above its base. Further east along the ditch at the same level a possible wooden bowstave and three narrow wooden rods were found, each about 2 m in length. Other finds from the lower levels of the ditch included sharpening stones, iron knife blades, bone pins and a decorated bone spindle-whorl.

When the spread of disturbed bank material was excavated at the eastern side of the enclosure, a cemetery and a north-south-aligned palisade fence line became apparent (Illus. 2 & 3). The bank material sealed the easternmost graves, indicating that it may have post-dated the cemetery. First edition Ordnance Survey maps of the area, drafted in the 1830s, depict a bank at this location, indicating that it was visible until modern times. A bank and ditch are the principal elements of a ringfort; the identification of graves under the bank, however, provided evidence of a potential pre-ringfort phase at the site. A number of the graves had destroyed earlier post-holes, some of which were part of the palisade. Other post-holes truncated by graves were related to activity earlier than the cemetery. This sequence provides three phases of activity at the site: a primary phase consisting of post-holes possibly related to unidentified structures, a secondary phase consisting of the establishment of a cemetery, including graves that destroyed some of the earlier post-holes, and a third phase marked by the creation of a large bank that extended over the easternmost graves. The bank was presumably contemporary with the creation of the large enclosure ditch, which would have produced the soil required for the bank. It is possible that the enclosure ditch identified in the course of the excavation had superseded an earlier, smaller ditch, which could have been contemporary with the cemetery and the earlier post-holes.

The graveyard was defined by an L-shaped ditch, which, at its eastern limit, terminated 2 m short of the enclosure ditch. As it continued outside the excavation area to the north it became narrower and shallower. We can assume that this ditch was originally intended as a boundary around the graveyard but became obsolete as the community's need for burial space grew. This L-shaped ditch was subsequently backfilled and was cut by a row of later graves. At Mount Offaly, Cabinteely, Co. Dublin, Conway (2000) identified enclosing ditches around an early medieval cemetery. These ditches also had graves cutting their fills, similar to Camlin 3. The main concentration of burials was contained within the area defined by the L-shaped ditch. Some graves, however, were situated outside this area to the south, where they cut archaeological features within the interior of an earlier subcircular structure (structure D).

In total 151 human burials were excavated in the cemetery. Overall, the state of preservation of most of the skeletal remains was poor. As some of the grave-cuts were very shallow and a large quantity of disarticulated human bone was recovered during the excavation of the enclosure, it is likely that the total number of burials was originally greater. The burials appeared to continue northwards outside the excavation area, so the total number of skeletons in this cemetery cannot be established without further archaeological investigation.

What is clear from the excavated graves is that the people interred at Camlin 3 were Christian; all except one were interred in the traditional Christian manner, lying west-east (with the head to the west). Whilst a minority were flexed burials, the majority were extended supine. Several graves had evidence of stone cobbles lining the sides of the grave, others had possible stone 'ear muffs' against the sides of the skull, and one had evidence of plank lining. Grave-goods were identified in a minority of cases, and slag was found in several grave fills. Over 20 grave fills contained one heavily corroded iron nail or pin, which



Illus. 5—Glass beads recovered from the grave of a juvenile burial (John Sunderland).

may suggest the presence of burial shrouds. Knife blades or other iron tools (possibly awls) were found at the right hip of five extended adult skeletons. This suggests the presence of a belt, on which the knife or tool hung. Four blue glass beads and one white bead were found with the poorly preserved skeleton of a juvenile (Illus. 5).

One skeleton was not interred according to typical Christian burial traditions. This individual was buried in a grave cut into the L-shaped ditch, 13.5 m west of the enclosure ditch, in effect on the boundary or periphery of the communal graveyard. The skeleton was of an adult, was in a crouched position and was aligned north–south, with the head at the south, typical of a pre-Christian burial tradition. Several explanations for this anomaly can be suggested: the deceased was from outside the community, suffered from a perceived abnormality, had committed a crime, or was not Christian, living in a mostly Christian community.

In total six structures were identified within the enclosure (Illus. 3). Two were circular or subcircular (structures A and D) and three were rectangular (structures B, C and W). The shape of the sixth structure (structure T) was unclear but it was probably subcircular. Structure A was circular, measured 5 m in diameter and may have functioned as a domestic dwelling. It was located centrally within the enclosure and was stratigraphically the earliest structure identified. A linear ditch that was probably contemporary with structure A was truncated by structural elements of structure C. Structure T was approximately 5 m in diameter. Later linear features that truncated structure T also truncated structure A, suggesting that these structures may have been contemporary.

Structure D was subcircular and measured 7 m in diameter. It contained numerous stake-holes that occurred in clusters, two of which were around hearths, while one cluster

was aligned south-east-north-west, possibly functioning as an internal screen dividing the structure for distinct purposes. Structure D also contained several pits, presumably for storage; the largest and deepest of these contained an almost complete set of red deer antlers, with several points missing. Worked antler points were found in both structure C (see below) and structure D, as well as in the enclosure ditch fills. Several decorated animal bone and horn artefacts were retrieved from contemporary features internal and external to structure D. Two of these bone artefacts appear to have functioned as handles for metal tools. Structure D may have been a multi-purpose building providing space for domestic activity and possibly specialised bone-working.

Structure B was 7.5 m long and 5.5 m wide. The foundations were shallower than those forming the other five structures within the enclosure, suggesting that it may have had a more temporary purpose than the other structures.

Structure W was 5 m long and 4 m wide and had an entrance in its southern wall. The eastern wall was situated close to the north-western corner of structure C, which indicates that these structures may have been contemporary.

Structure C was an east-west-aligned rectangular building and was situated 2.5 m north of the enclosure ditch. A concentration of material associated with metal- and bone-working was located in the south-east quadrant of the enclosure. Structure C may have functioned as a work-shed related to metalworking; evidence of smelting and possible secondary smithing was found at its eastern end. This consisted of complete and damaged knives as well as slag and hammerscale (a by-product of smithing consisting of tiny fragments of metal, which are often found in the immediate vicinity of the smithing hearth and anvil). The northern wall of structure C was situated over an earlier inhumation burial, one of the westernmost burials, possibly related to the final phase of burials.

Stratigraphically the circular structures appeared to pre-date the rectangular structures. As stated previously, ditches related to structure A were earlier than the foundation elements of structure C. The northern foundation trench of structure W truncated the slot-trench forming structure A. While structure C post-dated one of the westernmost burials of the cemetery, other graves disturbed layers of occupational debris within the interior of structure D, indicating that they post-dated the abandonment of this structure.

The relationship of structures B, C and D with the enclosure ditch and bank is unclear. Before structure C was identified, a 0.2-m-thick layer of bank material and a bank foundation layer of stony, redeposited natural clay were excavated. These layers sealed structure C, suggesting that the creation of the bank post-dated the abandonment of the structure. Metalworking features which were probably contemporary with structure C were truncated by the enclosure ditch and were also sealed by the bank foundation layer and bank material. The skeletons that were found within the interior of structure D post-dated it and were also sealed by the bank material. It is possible that the bank and enclosure ditch post-dated the cemetery and the identified structures if, as has been previously suggested, the enclosure ditch replaced an earlier smaller ditch. This bank and ditch could have formed a later ringfort, with the focus of its activities possibly lying outside the area of excavation.

To the east and south of the enclosure other features and structures were identified. Most of these structures were partially enclosed by a network of double ditches, and some were located near cereal-drying kilns. Some of these features are quite probably contemporary with the enclosure and cemetery. They provide us with a picture of a substantial early medieval community working the land, raising cattle, hunting deer, making knives and



Illus. 6—Decorated silver and bronze dress-pin. The ring is 17 mm in diameter (Valerie J Keeley Ltd).

other metal objects, and trading with skilled exponents of other crafts. Items such as a silver and bronze decorated dress-pin, which was retrieved from within the enclosure ditch, may have required a level of skill too advanced to have been manufactured at this site (Illus. 6).

Conclusion

The siting of a cemetery within a settlement has until recently been considered quite rare in an Irish archaeological context. Recent excavations at Knowth (Stout & Stout 2008) identified an early medieval ‘secular cemetery’ that was superseded by an early medieval enclosure. Although there is evidence at Camlin 3 for activity prior to the cemetery, it is highly likely that the L-shaped ditch demarcating the cemetery also allowed contemporary non-burial activities to take place in its environs. The presence of slag in some grave fills indicates that metalworking may have been taking place when the cemetery was still in use. This provides us with evidence of domestic and possibly industrial activity occurring contemporarily with a functioning cemetery.

At Ballykilmore, Co. Westmeath, post-holes belonging to an earlier wooden structure were identified beneath a rectangular stone-built church (Channing & Randolph-Quinney 2006). It is possible that these post-holes were part of an earlier church. At Camlin 3 structure C was also rectangular, formed by wooden posts and, similar to medieval churches, aligned east-west. We have no definitive evidence of ecclesiastical activity at Camlin 3, however, and no evidence that structure C performed a religious function, while the abundance of domestic artefacts indicates that Camlin 3 was solely a secular settlement and cemetery. It is known that secular Christian cemeteries were in use in Ireland from the

arrival of Christianity in the mid-fifth century and were still in use in the eighth and possibly the ninth century (O'Brien 1992).

At Camlin 3 we have identified structures that potentially pre-date this secular cemetery (structure A and possibly structures D and T). It is also possible that structure D was contemporary with some of the earlier burials but pre-dated later burials. Structures C, B and W could post-date the cemetery, and this would explain the truncation of an earlier grave by the slot-trench of structure C. A final phase of archaeological activity at Camlin 3 could be represented by the deepening and widening of a pre-existing ditch and the creation of an internal bank.

Archaeologists rarely get an opportunity to excavate the environs of a large site, identifying potentially related dwellings and features. At Camlin 3 we have identified 12 structures (six internal and six external) that we believe are related to the early medieval phase of activity. Scientific dating will either confirm our suppositions or cause us to reinterpret them. But it is possible that at Camlin 3 we have identified the holding of a successful early medieval *bóaire* (prosperous farmer) (Kelly 2000, 23), or someone of even higher status. The cemetery could represent the familial burial place. The structures outside the enclosure could represent the dwellings of his bonded servants, the *dóer* (unfree servants) (ibid., 11). Taking into account the possibility that other ringforts and enclosures in the area may also have had external dwellings (the *Archaeological Inventory* lists 27 ringforts and 14 enclosures within 6 km of Camlin) and may also have been contemporary with the early medieval site at Camlin 3, the cemetery at Camlin 3 may have been used by a substantial rural community in a time when religious influence had not yet ensured that the deceased were interred in consecrated ground.

Acknowledgements

Over 50 people were involved in the excavation at Camlin 3, and grateful thanks are owed to all of them. Site Supervisors Paolo Ciuchini, Eileen McKenna, Malachy Byrne and Agata Raclaw deserve special mention, as do Oscar Ryan and Lukasz Konopinski for the illustrations. Thanks also to Senior Archaeologist Eamon Cotter, Logistics Manager Fiona MacCauliffe and staff at Valerie J Keeley Ltd.

Note

1. NGR 213798, 185726; height 140 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3580; ministerial direction no. A038; RMP no. TN017-031.

