

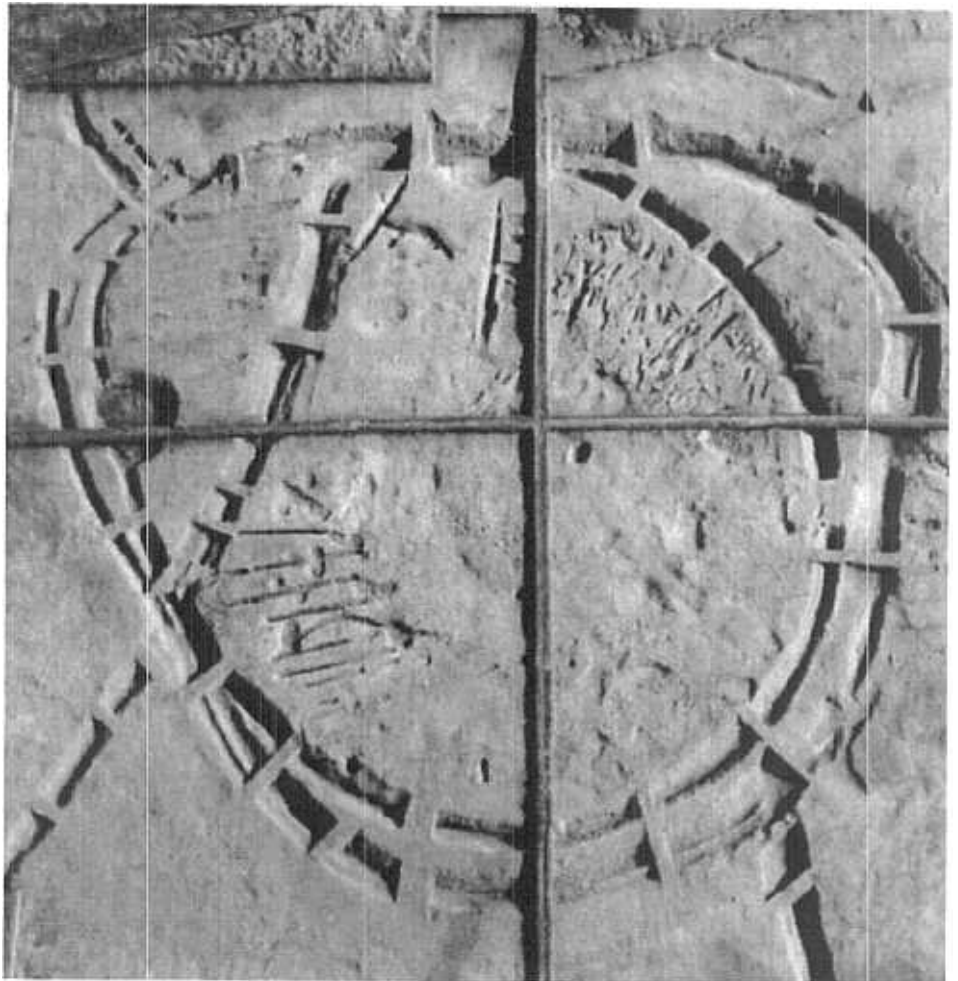
Linda Clarke of Archaeological Consultancy Services describes the excavation of a cillín site in advance of road construction

An early medieval enclosure and burials

Johnstown, Co. Meath

As work on major road schemes throughout the country continues apace, the advance archaeological investigations are continuing to identify long-forgotten monuments which are shrouded in mystery. One such site was excavated along the line of the new M4 in County Meath, in the townland of Johnstown, south-west of the town of Enfield, on the Edenderry road. The excavation was carried out by Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd on behalf of Westmeath County Council and was funded by the National Roads Authority in advance of the construction of the new M4 Kinnegad–Enfield–Kilcock Motorway Scheme. This site was identified during an initial paper survey by Valerie J. Keeley Ltd in 2000 as an oval or subrectangular level area, slightly higher than the land to the north and west, defined on the east by a low ridge 3m wide and 30m long. It was known locally as a cillín burial-ground which was normally used for unbaptised children. The site is known as ‘Scaruppa’ (Mr John Daly of Enfield, pers. comm.).

A geophysical survey of this site, carried out between 21 and 30 January 2002, detected a large double-ditched enclosure on the flat top of a low rise in the middle of the field and c. 20m north-west of the area which was known locally as the cillín burial-ground. The survey also showed the position of several former field boundaries



Aerial view of site

and the remains of heavy ploughing (burials cannot easily be detected via geophysics). The site was subsequently archaeologically assessed, which resulted in the excavation of four test trenches. These confirmed the presence of all the cut features (i.e. enclosure ditches) that were identified through the aerial survey and the geophysical survey and also confirmed the presence of burials within the site—not in the area traditionally identified as the cillín burial-ground but within the newly identified enclosures.

A large-scale archaeological excavation with a team of 40–60 people was subsequently carried out on this site from 22 April to 11 October 2002. The excavation revealed an extensive settlement site which was reused intermittently as a burial site. There was no evidence for a church or any similar structure so it cannot be interpreted as an ecclesiastical site. The enclosures represented three phases of activity.

Phase 1

This enclosure had an approximate diameter of 60m and was defined by a small, shallow ditch with a maximum width of 2m and a maximum depth of 0.8m, U-shaped in profile. This ditch was cut by the phase 2 enclosure ditch to the north-west and by the phase 3 enclosure ditch. A large proportion of the phase 1 ditch was only visible in the base of the phase 3 ditch and therefore its exact shape and extent were difficult to establish. A small entrance, 3.2m wide, was visible within this enclosure to the north.



Phase 2

This enclosure was sub-oval in shape with a maximum diameter of 57m. The ditch was U-shaped in profile and had a maximum depth of 1.1m and a maximum width of 2.5m. This ditch cut the phase 1 ditch to the north-west and was itself cut by the phase 3 ditch to the north-west and north-east. Two entrances were identified within this enclosure: the first was located to the north and had a maximum width of 1.4m, while the second was located to the south-east and had a maximum width of 3.4m.

Phase 3

This enclosure was D-shaped and had a maximum diameter of 60m. The ditch was U-shaped in profile with a maximum depth of 1.8m and a maximum width of 5.3m. This ditch cut both the phase 1 and phase 2

ditches. No entrance was identified although there was a significant rise in the base of the ditch to the north-east that could possibly be interpreted as an entrance.

Burial-grounds

Two separate burial-grounds were also identified within this site. The first, which contained the majority of burials, was contained within the phase 3 enclosure. A total of 424 burials were exposed within this area, and the vast majority were in a likelihood early medieval in date, based on the alignment of the burials (the majority of which were string burials and were aligned approximately east-west) and on the wear on the teeth. This area was probably also used intermittently as a burial-ground until pre-Famine times. Two burials recovered from the base of the enclosure ditch suggest that this ditch was open and in use at the same time as the burial-ground.

The majority of burials exposed had no associated finds. Fragments of slag were obtained from the grave fill of a very small number of graves, and a single decorated bone bead and tiny fragments of decorated bone comb were recovered from two separate graves.



Top: view of large excavated ditch and gravel bank which contained cillín burials.
Left: burials within the enclosure.

The second burial-ground was located within the area identified locally as 'Scaruppa' (a gravel bank 3m wide and 30m long), traditionally recognised as the location of the cillín burial-ground. Burials were recovered from the area immediately north-west to north-east of the gravel bank and also from the gravel bank itself. The burials exposed north to north-west of the bank were contained within a large ditch, the function of which is as yet unclear. This feature spanned the entire width of the road (c. 85m) and extended beyond the road-take, with a maximum width of 6.9m and a maximum depth of 2.7m. Sixty-one baby burials and two adults were exposed here. Shroud-pins were recovered with the majority of the baby burials exposed within this area, which would suggest that they were of a much later date (100–200 years ago) than the burials which were exposed within the enclosures described above. Nails (in some cases up to 30) and traces of timber were also recovered in association with these burials, which would suggest that they were contained in coffins.

Settlement

No structures were exposed within the site but settlement evidence was identified in the form of refuse pits and smelting pits. Approximately two tonnes of waste slag and furnace bottoms were recovered (mostly from ditch fill and from a working surface that sealed the phase 3 ditch), suggesting that this was an important industrial site. The majority of the finds were recovered from the ditch fill and included rotary quern fragments, bone pins, metal pins (including a highly decorated ring-pin), shroud-pins, a bone needle, bone, glass and



stone beads, pottery fragments (most of which were North Leinster cooking ware), knife blades, loom-weights and coins. Animal bone, butchered bone and cremated bone were also recovered.

A large timber structure (the exact function of which is unclear) was also exposed at the base of the large ditch immediately north to north-west of the gravel bank. This feature was a wedge-shaped plank-built trough-like structure measuring 3m by 1.5m and surviving to a maximum height of 0.4m. A stone loom-weight and animal bone were recovered from its fill. The exact function of this timber structure is unknown, but it is presently being interpreted as a cesspit or as some type of water management feature.

The excavation of this site highlights certain questions. Why was such a major

site forgotten about? Where did these people live? Why were they buried here? Some knowledge of this site must have survived in local folklore as it was reused as a burial-ground up until the turn of the twentieth century.

The excavation of this site was fully completed by 17 October 2002. Further interpretation awaits the results of the post-excavation analysis that is currently under way. ■

Above: selection of finds recovered from the site including bone needles, bone pins, a spindle-whorl, beads and a decorated medieval ring-brooch.

Below: decorated copper-alloy annular brooch.

