

Significance of Testing Results

5

5.1 Introduction

Current evidence from the investigations indicates that a number of the discovered sites along the route of the M3 have the potential to reveal significant results. Part 5 is intended as a preliminary discussion of some of these sites. The sites discussed below are a selection from throughout the scheme which broadly represent the range of site periods and site types. In advance of full-scale excavation, much of this discussion is tentative and it is likely that many of the interpretations below will change following further investigation and excavation of the sites.

The most spectacular results to date are the three large enclosure complexes revealed in plan by geophysical survey on the Dunshaughlin-Navan section (Section 2) and subsequently confirmed by testing. It is proposed to carry out further geophysical survey at a number of sites prior to excavation. Also it is acknowledged that sites not included here will reveal significant results upon full excavation, but for the present there is not sufficient information on these sites to generate discussion.

5.2 Prehistoric

Prehistoric settlement

Our knowledge of prehistoric settlement in Ireland has changed dramatically in recent years, largely as a result of archaeological investigations on large-scale developments. In particular, recent excavations in advance of road schemes have uncovered significant new evidence of Neolithic and Bronze Age buildings or houses.¹ Both Neolithic and Bronze Age buildings have been identified on the M3. As yet no Iron Age buildings have been identified.

¹ *Hughes forthcoming; Cotter forthcoming; Roycroft 2003.*

As on most major developments burnt mounds are one of the most common monuments revealed. Despite numerous excavations throughout Ireland of this predominately Bronze Age monument, many questions remain about their use.¹ In advance of excavation, it is difficult to assess the potential of any of the individual burnt mounds on the M3 contributing to this debate.

The date of the majority of sites currently classified as prehistoric on the M3 has not yet been confirmed. However, an assessment of a selection of sites is made below on the basis of preliminary identification of pottery and the site plans etc.

A small Neolithic site was identified at **Dunboyne 3** on the southern end of the scheme in Section 1. The site, located in proximity to the River Tolka, consists of cluster of pits and possible postholes within which sample excavation produced eight sherds of Neolithic pottery, a struck flint blade and fragments of burnt animal bone. It is not uncommon for such artefacts to be found in apparently isolated pits some of which have been interpreted as burial sites. However, while a building plan was not identified in testing it is possible that the features may be part of a Neolithic house.

Two possible Neolithic buildings were identified just south of Kells at **Gardenrath 2** and **Townparks 5** (Section 4). Gardenrath 2 consisted of a series of postholes and slot trenches forming an L-shape that may be the corner of a rectangular structure. Prehistoric pottery recovered from the slot trenches suggests a Neolithic date. At Townparks a slot trench for a large, somewhat irregular, sub-rectangular structure (8m x 5m) was identified. Sherds of prehistoric pottery and a struck flint flake also suggest a Neolithic date.

Just north of the River Boyne at **Ardsallagh 2** (Section 2) a c. 9m diameter circular ditch with postholes and pits was found. This structure is currently interpreted as a Bronze Age roundhouse, although no artefacts were recovered and the diameter of the enclosure is slightly large for a house (Fig 5.1). Another interpretation is that this is a barrow. Possible cremation pits approximately 50m north of the structure may support this interpretation.

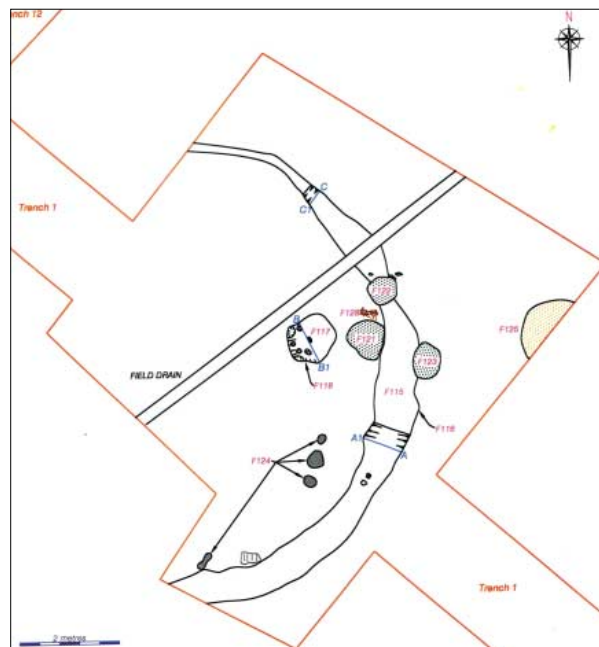


Fig 5.1: Possible Bronze Age roundhouse at Ardsallagh

¹ Cross May, Murray, Ó Néill and Stevens 2005.

Possible Bronze Age pottery was recovered from a pit at **Baronstown 1** (Section 2). The pit was not stratigraphically related to the main enclosure, which is currently interpreted as a ringfort and discussed below under early medieval settlement. It is not uncommon to find earlier features under ringforts¹ and this pit may be an indication of such earlier activity or it may yet be revealed that the main enclosures are also Bronze Age.

Two probable roundhouse slot trenches (8m and 6m internal diameter), pits and other features were identified at **Boyerstown 3** west of Navan (Section 3). Flint artefacts recovered from topsoil adjacent to one of these probable houses and the shape and size of the structures may suggest a prehistoric date. However finds of flint are not that unusual on early medieval roundhouses.

A large area of prehistoric settlement activity has been identified at Kilmainham south-west of Kells (Section 4). A small group of postholes, some of which contained struck flint, may represent a Neolithic or Bronze Age building at **Kilmainham**. Bronze Age activity was revealed by pottery from shallow pits, a burnt mound and possible cremations at **Kilmainham 1**.

Prehistoric burial sites

Ring-ditches are the most common burial site identified on the M3, however, further investigation of numerous possible cremation pits may show that unenclosed burials outnumber ring-ditches. Modern agricultural practices have largely removed any upstanding features that may have been associated with these monuments. It would also appear that some sites may not have had any surface marking originally.

A ring-ditch 1.25m wide and enclosing an area 17m in diameter, was identified at Raynestown 1 (Section 1). Bronze Age pottery, burnt stone and animal bone were recovered from a number of the fills of this ditch. A second ring-ditch with an internal diameter of 5.4m was located centrally within the larger enclosure (Fig 5.2). On the present limited information a number of possible interpretations for this site emerge.

It could be a roundhouse within a small enclosure², however, on the current evidence the excavator favours the interpretation of it being a form of burial site.³

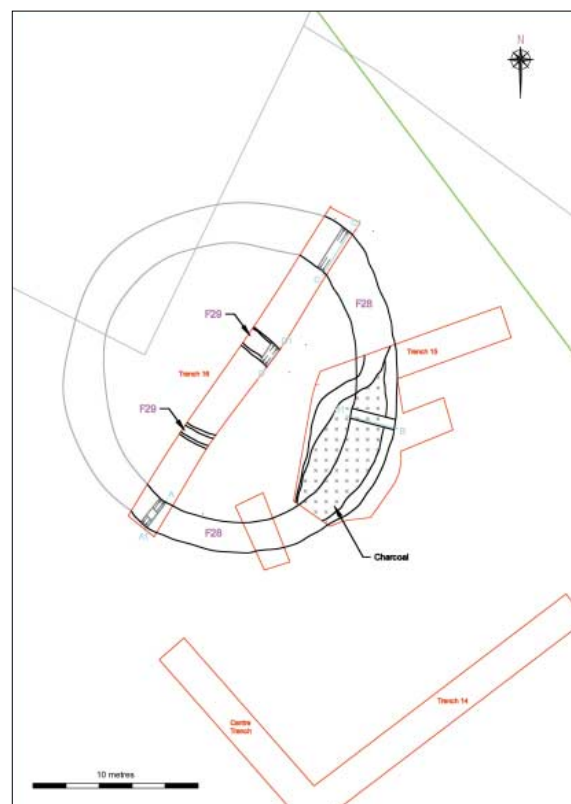


Fig 5.2: Raynestown ring-ditch

¹ For example, see Ballyhenry, Co. Antrim, Lynn 1983 and Lislackagh, Co. Mayo, Walsb 1995.

² For example, Carrigilliby, Co. Cork, O'Kelly 1951 and Aughinish Island, Co. Limerick, Kelly 1975.

³ Report on Archaeological Assessment at Testing Area 11 Section 1 Clonee-Dunshaughlin, M3 Clonee-North of Kells.

A much larger (*c.* 30m diameter), apparently penannular, ring-ditch was identified by geophysical survey at **Berrillstown 1** (Section 2) (Fig 3.9). The road has been moved to avoid this enclosure which will be preserved *in situ*, however, it was investigated as part of the testing phase along with a number of possible cremation pits upon which there will be an impact. The enclosing ditch measures over 6m wide by 0.6m deep and a rim sherd of Beaker pottery was recovered from one of the upper ditch fills. A possible cremation along with unburnt animal bone was identified within the enclosed area. The pottery recovered indicates a late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age date for the barrow.

A more typical ring-ditch (11m diameter) of probable Bronze Age to Iron Age date was identified at **Ardsallagh 1**, over 1km north of the River Boyne (Section 2). Cremations and extended inhumations were identified both inside and outside this enclosure. One of the cremations contained in an urn was located outside the ring-ditch within a pit, which was badly truncated by ploughing. The geophysical survey of the site shows that the ring-ditch is respected by a later field boundary indicating that a mound was extant at the time of construction of that boundary (Fig 5.3).

A site interpreted as a Bronze Age cremation burial was identified at **Collierstown 2** (Section 2). It consisted of a single pit containing a small upright pot (*c.* 0.30m diameter) filled and surrounded by charcoal-rich soil. No other features were identified in the vicinity but it is possible that it is part of a small cemetery or that it is related to the Bronze Age element of Baronstown 1 located 80m to the north.

A probable small stone-lined cist with adjacent stone settings and *in situ* burning was identified at **Gardenrath 1** (Section 4). The cist was formed of irregular-shaped small stones and had collapsed or been damaged by ploughing so it was not possible to examine its contents during testing (Fig 5.4). However, its small size suggests a prehistoric burial, possibly of Early Bronze Age date.

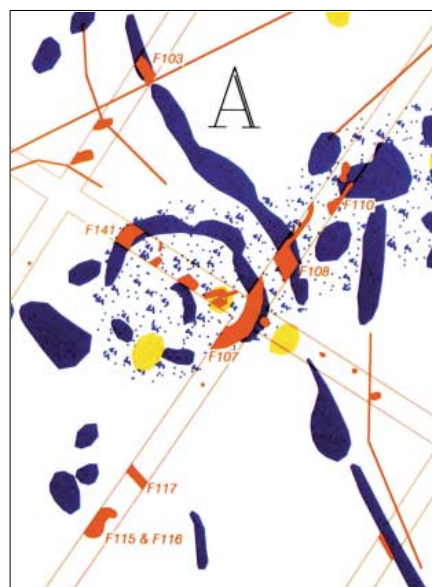


Fig 5.3: Ring-ditch at Ardsallagh respected by disused field boundary. Identified by geophysical survey as possible site (blue) and confirmed in testing (red)



Fig 5.4: Possible cist grave at Gardenrath

5.3 Early Medieval

Early medieval settlement

Traditionally studies of early medieval settlement in Ireland have focused on classic type-sites, such as ringforts, crannógs and ecclesiastical enclosures. It has been suggested that other nucleated or village-like settlement forms (the baile of early medieval texts) emerged, particularly towards the end of the early Middle Ages (c. 1000 AD), when ringforts had been abandoned.¹ Recent NRA projects elsewhere in Ireland have identified unusual, complex enclosures that may have enclosed such nucleated settlements, or they may have been farm estate centres or specialist production (i.e. metalworking) sites. Most of these sites also produce burials, indicating a more complex site use.² There have been several discoveries on the M3 that may represent similar exciting evidence for early medieval settlements.

Roestown 2 (Section 2) a large enclosure complex which is bisected by the existing N3 (Fig 3.5) was identified by the geophysical survey. The site is situated on a slight terrace adjacent to what was formerly Redbog, north of Dunshaughlin, approximately 3km from Lagore crannóg. The main focus of the site consists of a large D-shaped enclosure (c. 70m x 55m) with a number of internal divisions and external annexes, some of which are likely to have been animal enclosures.

Another extensive multi-enclosure site was also identified by geophysical survey at **Dowdstown 2** (Section 2) immediately south of the River Boyne (Fig 3.7). The site appears to have commenced as a circular enclosure of approximately 40m diameter which was later enlarged to form a D-shaped enclosure (60m x 40m). Attached to this D-shaped enclosure is a larger rectilinear enclosure that may have functioned as an animal pen. It is less clear whether a further rectilinear field identified by the geophysical survey to the north of this complex is contemporary. Further ditches to the north have been confirmed by cartographic analysis and testing to be related to the 18th-century demesne parkland. This site appears to provide a wonderful opportunity to explore the relationship between ringforts and later D-shaped enclosures.

The third complex of enclosures identified by geophysical survey was at **Baronstown 1** (Section 2) adjacent to the road that runs between the village of Skryne and the Hill of Tara (Fig 3.6). The main focus of the site is a circular enclosure approximately 40m in diameter. A number of other ditches were identified by the geophysics and testing outside this enclosure which appear to annex or enclose this main enclosure. The sub-circular shape of the modern field (c. 200m diameter) within which Baronstown 1 is located may also be shown to have originated as part of this site but it could also be coincidental. The date of the main enclosure is still unclear. In size and shape it resembles a ringfort. The only diagnostic find from the site was a sherd of probable Bronze Age pottery from a pit not stratigraphically related to any of the enclosures. As discussed above, it is not uncommon to find earlier features under ringforts and this pit may be an indication of such earlier activity or it may yet be revealed that the main enclosures are also Bronze Age.

¹ For example, see Doberty 2000.

² For example, Raystown, Co. Meath on the N2 Finglas-Ashbourne; Jobstown, Co. Meath, Clarke 2002; Killickaweeny, Co Kildare, Walsh and Harrison 2003 and Balbriggan, Co. Louth, Delaney and Roycroft 2003.

Late Iron Age-Early Medieval burial site

At least three extended inhumations, two in stone-lined graves, oriented E-W were identified by testing at **Collierstown 1** (Section 2). These previously unknown burials had no surface indication, however, they were located adjacent to a small mound (c. 8m diameter and 1m high). A hand-excavated trench across the mound did not reveal any evidence of burial, enclosing ditch or function. Despite the lack of evidence this mound is still considered to be a possible prehistoric burial site. However, it is also possible that the proximity of the cists to the mound is coincidental. This earthen mound is one of four in the field, all located parallel to, and approximately 10m from the Collierstown road and it is possible that they are related to ditch clearance for roadside drainage. If the mounds are barrows their location in a row parallel to the road is unusual considering that the nearby stream, perpendicular to the road, is the townland boundary, where barrows might be more typically located.

Extended supine inhumations in stone-lined graves, on an E-W orientation, are typically dated from the fourth century AD onwards.¹ In some cases, these may have been the burials of the earliest Christians, during the Iron Age/Early Christian transition. It is also interesting that these graves are often placed on or close to Bronze Age or Iron Age burial mounds or standing stones, suggesting that communities sought to establish a link with the ancestors at a time of social and ideological change.

5.4 Medieval

In recent years, archaeologists have become increasingly interested in medieval rural settlement in Ireland.² However, the amount of excavated medieval rural settlements remains low. The majority of townland names in Meath are Anglo-Norman or English forms, many containing personal names such as Garretstown and Boyerstown as illustrated below.³ This is not surprising considering the extent of colonial settlement in Meath nor is it surprising that a number of medieval sites have been identified on the M3, five of which are discussed below.

A medieval settlement was initially identified by the geophysical survey at **Castlefarm 1** just south of Dunboyne (Section 1). The test excavation confirmed that it consists of a group of pits, postholes, deposits and ditches defined to the south by a large ditch containing much animal bone, charcoal and some metalworking waste. Worked antler and a portion of a bone pin were also recovered (Fig 5.5). The excavator has suggested that the site may represent agricultural activity associated with the original Anglo-Norman manor of Dunboyne in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.⁴



Fig 5.5: Medieval worked antler and a bone pin fragment from Castlefarm

¹ O'Brien 1992.

² O'Connor 1998.

³ EIS M3 Dunshaughlin-Navan.

⁴ Report on Archaeological Assessment at Testing Area 1 Section 1 Clonee-Dunshaughlin, M3 Clonee-North of Kells.

The geophysical survey carried out as part of the Environmental Impact Statement identified a probable medieval moated site (c. 60m x 60m) (Fig 3.8) at **Garretstown 1** and the road was moved to avoid the square enclosure. A number of features likely to be associated with the moated site were identified by the testing including a field system, a smithing hearth and a possible charcoal-manufacturing kiln.

A small-scale, apparently unenclosed, medieval settlement was identified by testing at **Trevet 1** (Section 2). The remains uncovered have been heavily disturbed by modern farming but appear to represent one or more rectangular stone-footed buildings. The pottery recovered indicates a 13th/14th century date. The recorded archaeological monuments in the townland¹ and historical evidence indicates that Trevet was an important Anglo-Norman settlement site² and the excavator has suggested that these buildings may represent small houses of the type occupied by English manorial tenants.³

A small-scale medieval settlement was identified at **Boyerstown 1**, west of Navan adjacent to the existing Athboy Road (Section 3). The site consisted of low stone walls, metalled areas and deposits of midden material containing animal bone and 13th /14th-century pottery.

Another medieval site in the form of a road and probable field boundaries was identified at **Phoenixtown 2** between Navan and Kells (Section 4).

5.5 Post-Medieval/Early Modern

The post-medieval and early modern periods are represented by a number of sites throughout the scheme, principally small vernacular houses, the majority of which are not upstanding and were identified by map regression testing. The M3 crosses the disused 19th/20th-century Midland Great Western Railway line between Dublin and Cavan. While the track itself has long been dismantled some of the associated features such as bridges and gateways survive (Fig 5.6). One interesting post-medieval site identified by the testing at Rath Hill south of Dunshaughlin (Section 1) consists of what appears to be the stone foundations of a circular building with adjacent spreads of industrial waste, possibly indicating an industrial rather than domestic function (Fig 5.7).



Fig 5.6: Gate on disused 19th century railway



Fig 5.7: Stone foundations of circular building, possibly 17th century, Rath Hill

¹ Moore 1987.

² Bbreathnach 1999.

³ Report on Archaeological Assessment at Testing Area 4 Section 2 Dunshaughlin-Navan, M3 Clonee-North of Kells.

5.6 Monuments within the broader landscape surrounding the Hill of Tara

Newman in his detailed archaeological survey of the Hill of Tara also examined a broader landscape of about 100km² around the hill (study zone 2). Using aerial photographs, maps and other sources, he identified 23 new archaeological sites in this broader landscape with a minimum of 18 of these considered as potentially prehistoric monuments, most probably ritual sites with some possible settlement sites. The remaining 5 were circular enclosures, identified as cropmarks, of unknown date.¹ The Dunshaughlin-Navan section of the M3 overlaps with this study zone for approximately 11km of its length, from Clowanstown townland north of Dunshaughlin to Ardsallagh townland south of Navan.

The M3 archaeological investigations (using aerial photography, maps, archival sources, but also geophysical surveys and test trenching) have now identified 25 new archaeological sites within the relatively narrow band encompassed by the road landtake (an area that covers 1.6% of Newman's broader study area). Approximately 17 of these sites are currently identified as prehistoric sites. The majority of monuments on the Hill of Tara itself are also thought to date to the prehistoric period and to have been burial or ritual monuments. While ritual monuments occur in the surrounding area Newman suggested that the hilltop was especially set aside as a ritual area, and that contemporary settlement sites were located in the surrounding hinterland.²

Neolithic

The earliest known monument on the Hill of Tara is the Neolithic passage tomb, the Mound of the Hostages, and it is likely that the broader landscape surrounding the Hill of Tara has been occupied since at least this period. Although no sites dated to the Neolithic have yet been found on this section of the M3, it is possible that some of the small settlement sites identified in the river valley could be of this early prehistoric date.

Bronze Age

It also seems likely that Bronze Age settlements, activity areas and ritual monuments have been located in the wider landscape. Approximately 10 sites are currently interpreted as Bronze Age with 4 burnt mounds and the possible burial and settlement sites described above - Ardsallagh roundhouse, Ardsallagh ring-ditch, Collierstown pot burial, Ardsallagh and Berrilstown cremations. As discussed above, Baronstown also had Bronze Age activity.

Iron Age

Although Tara was undoubtedly significant in the Iron Age (the period of construction of Ráith na Ríg and the Rath of the Synods), no contemporary settlement sites have yet been identified on the scheme. However two burial sites discussed above under other periods, Ardsallagh ring-ditch and the Collierstown stone-lined graves, may also be Iron Age in date.

¹ Newman 1997, 183.

² *Ibid.*, 181.

Early Medieval

During the early medieval period the Hill of Tara rose to prominence as a symbolic and ideological power centre, being the focus of public assemblies, inaugurations and other political events. The hilltop itself may not have been the focus of any major monument building activities, although Tech Cormaic may have been a royal enclosure and the prehistoric mounds undoubtedly were seen as being of significance and may have been ‘reactivated’ in some ways.

Bhreathnach’s historical research has established the basis for our understanding of the political organisation of the early medieval kingdoms in the region.¹ However, relatively little is known archaeologically of the early medieval occupation and landscape usage around the Hill of Tara. The M3 investigations have identified several sites that may date to the early medieval period, including the enclosure complex at Dowdstown (adjacent to the River Boyne), the stone-lined graves at Collierstown and the possible large ringfort at Baronstown (under the hill of Skreen).

Medieval

Bhreathnach’s research has also indicated that Anglo-Norman settlement in the broader landscape around the Hill of Tara, was based on both continuity with the political territories of the pre-Norman era and on the topographical features of the landscape itself.² It is likely that some Anglo-Norman settlements were located on or close to earlier sites.³ Although just outside Newman’s study area, the nearby Anglo-Norman settlement at Trevet is situated on a historically significant pre-Norman site. The M3 investigations have identified a small medieval building in this townland. The medieval moated site identified at Garretstown is also nearby.

Post-medieval/Early Modern

Five sites identified in this area are vernacular buildings and small-scale industrial sites of post-medieval or early modern date. In this period the landscape surrounding the Hill of Tara witnessed some of the most profound changes, including land enclosure, roadway and rail construction and some industrial activity. The archaeological investigation of vernacular buildings and industrial sites is relatively new in Ireland and has the potential to reveal new insights into activities of recent centuries that have hitherto been largely ignored by archaeologists.

5.7 Conclusion

Previous research had demonstrated the high potential for new monuments all along the M3. The M3 investigation’s geophysical survey spectacularly illustrated the potential for new sites previously unidentified or unidentifiable by other forms of non-invasive investigations. The test trenching confirmed and clarified the results of the previous investigations but most significantly identified numerous new sites that eluded non-invasive techniques. Each phase of archaeological investigation has added clarity to the evolving archaeological record.

¹ *Bhreathnach 1999.*

² *Ibid., 14.*

³ *Ibid., 17.*

The next phase of archaeological work will include metal detection surveys and ‘ploughed’ field walking surveys and these will provide further information on the sites identified, however, it is only through excavation and post-excavation that the significance of the approximately 160 sites may be understood. Nevertheless the results to date have indicated sites which have the potential to significantly contribute to major areas of research. One example outlined above (Dowdstown) is the early medieval settlement site where it may be possible to examine the transition between settlement forms.

Clearly the M3 Clonee-North of Kells road scheme is not an archaeological research project. The sites being investigated are not chosen to answer particular research questions nor are they a completely random sample through the county as roads deliberately avoid upstanding monuments and various topographical and other environmental constraints. Yet perhaps because of these factors, linear schemes such as roads have a tendency to highlight previously unidentified monument types, which are changing the face of Irish archaeology. The next phase of work on the M3 has enormous potential to contribute to archaeological research. The research framework approach proposed (see Part 6) will endeavour to ensure that this potential is realised.

Key Points (Part 5)

- Investigations to date already identified sites along the M3 route which have significant archaeological research potential
- Most spectacular results to date are three large enclosure complexes on Section 2 (Dunshaughlin-Navan)
- Full significance of many sites will only be revealed during excavation and post-excavation
- The projects wide archaeological work has enormous potential to contribute to major areas and themes of archaeological research.