

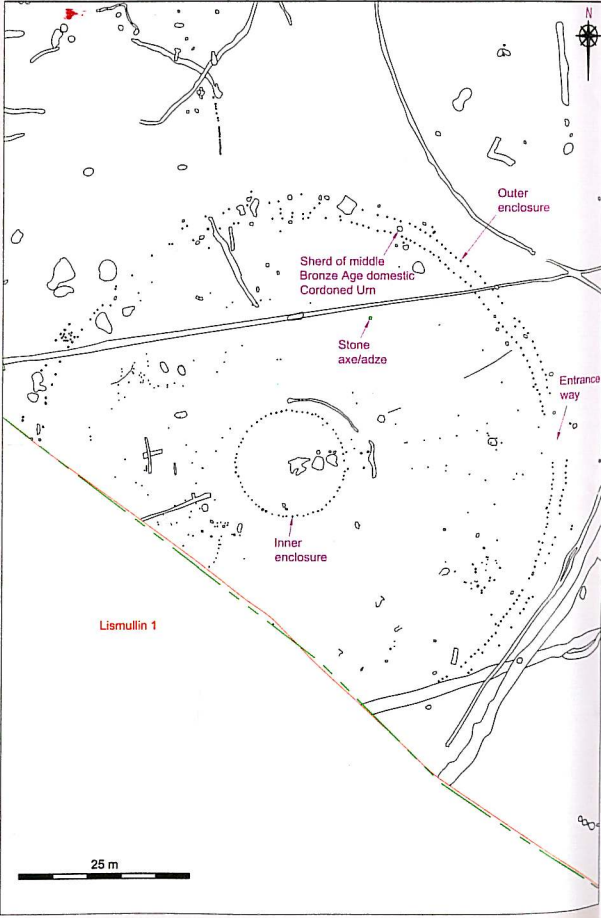


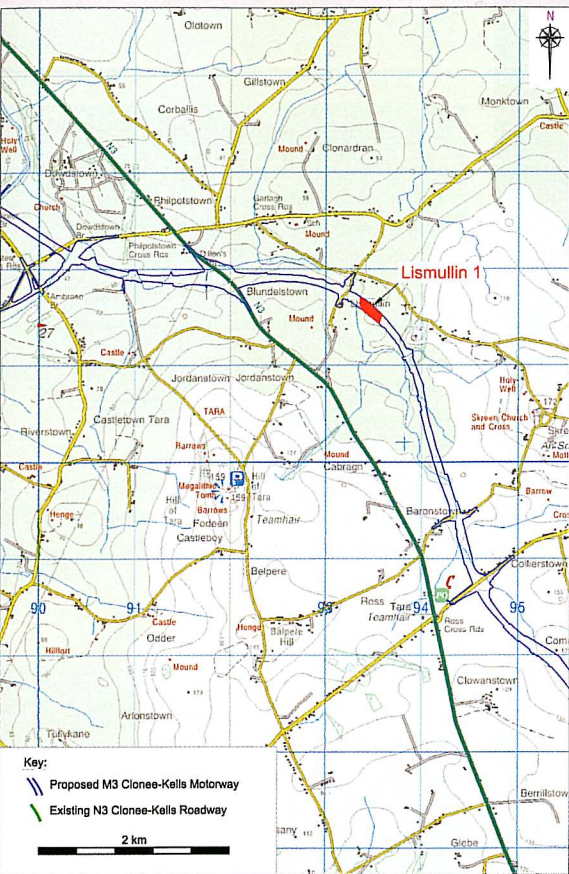
Aidan O'Connell of Archaeological Consultancy Services describes the newly discovered ceremonial enclosure on the route of the M3 near the Hill of Tara in County Meath.

# Iron Age enclosure at Lismullin, Co. Meath

Archaeological excavations in advance of the Dunshaughlin–Navan section of the M3 Clonee to North of Kells Motorway Scheme have revealed the presence of a large, post-built ceremonial enclosure dating from the early Iron Age in the townland of Lismullin. The post enclosure was formally reported to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, under Section 14(A) of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act 2004, in April of this year. The site has been the subject of much recent speculation and comment from within the archaeological profession and from the media and general public, rekindling once again the debate on the route of the proposed M3 motorway.

To date, a pre-excitation plan of the enclosure has been completed and a sample of post-holes have been excavated. The enclosure has been given a temporary protective covering of polythene, and at the time of writing a decision on any future work at the site is pending from the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in consultation with the National Museum of Ireland.





Opposite, top: Aerial view of enclosure with archaeologists protecting features with plastic (photo: Studio Lab).

Opposite, bottom: Detailed site plan.

Left: Location map.

Below left: Archaeologists cleaning outer enclosure stake-holes in preparation for preliminary drawing (photo: M. Deevy).

Below right: General site plan.

broadly contemporary with the post enclosure. An L-shaped souterrain passage was located at the brow of the north-west-facing slope overlooking the River Gabhra. In addition, thirteen clay-cut kilns have been recorded across the site. While some have the classic 'figure-of-eight' shape associated with cereal-drying kilns of early medieval date, there is enough variety in their construction to suggest that, when post-excitation analysis is completed, a more diverse date range and variety of functions may become apparent. Interestingly, a projecting ring-headed pin of possible late Iron Age date came from the backfill of an elongated kiln adjacent to the north side of the post enclosure. A range of linear features and gullies of post-medieval date have also been excavated across the site.

### The enclosure

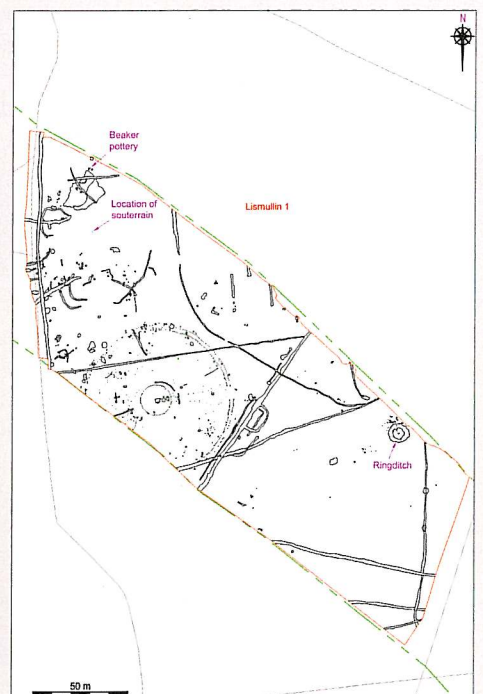
The enclosure occupies a natural saucer-shaped depression at the west of the site, surrounded on all sides by a ridge of higher ground. Both the enclosure and this high ridge extend beyond the south-western site boundary. There are three surviving enclosure elements:

- ◆ an outer enclosure, 80m in diameter, defined by a concentric double ring of post-holes;
- ◆ a central inner enclosure defined by a single ring of closely spaced post-holes;
- ◆ an eastern entrance.

### The site

Lismullin 1 is located 850m to the north-east of the existing N3, 9km south-east of Navan and 9.75km north-north-west of Dunshaughlin. It is 2.1km north-east of the Hill of Tara and is bounded to the north-west by the River Gabhra. The total area under investigation covers 27,360m<sup>2</sup>. In addition to the enclosure, a range of features dating

from the final Neolithic/early Bronze Age, the later Bronze Age, the early medieval period and the post-medieval/early modern period have been identified. Final Neolithic/early Bronze Age activity consists of a pit at the northern corner of the site that contained numerous sherds of domestic Beaker pottery. A small ring-ditch located at the south-east of the site is as yet undated but may prove to be





Left: Enclosure with protective plastic temporarily removed (photo: Hawkeye).

Below: Selection of outer enclosure post-holes excavated for dating material (photo: ACS Ltd).

Bottom: Selection of outer enclosure stake-holes excavated for dating material (photo: ACS Ltd).

Opposite, top: Late Iron Age ring-headed pin from kiln adjacent to enclosure (photo: M. Deevy).

Opposite, bottom: Site from south-east, showing ring-ditch in foreground and enclosure in background (photo: ACS Ltd).

The two outer enclosing rings are 1.5–2m apart, and individual post-holes are arranged at 0.4–1m intervals (averaging 0.6m). A sample of 25 post-holes from the outer enclosure have been excavated. These average 0.21m in diameter and 0.2m in depth, but range from smaller examples less than 0.15m in diameter to larger post-holes up to 0.29m wide. Charcoal from post-pipes associated with two of the post-holes has been dated to 520–380 BC and 490–370 BC, placing the enclosure firmly within an early Iron Age context.

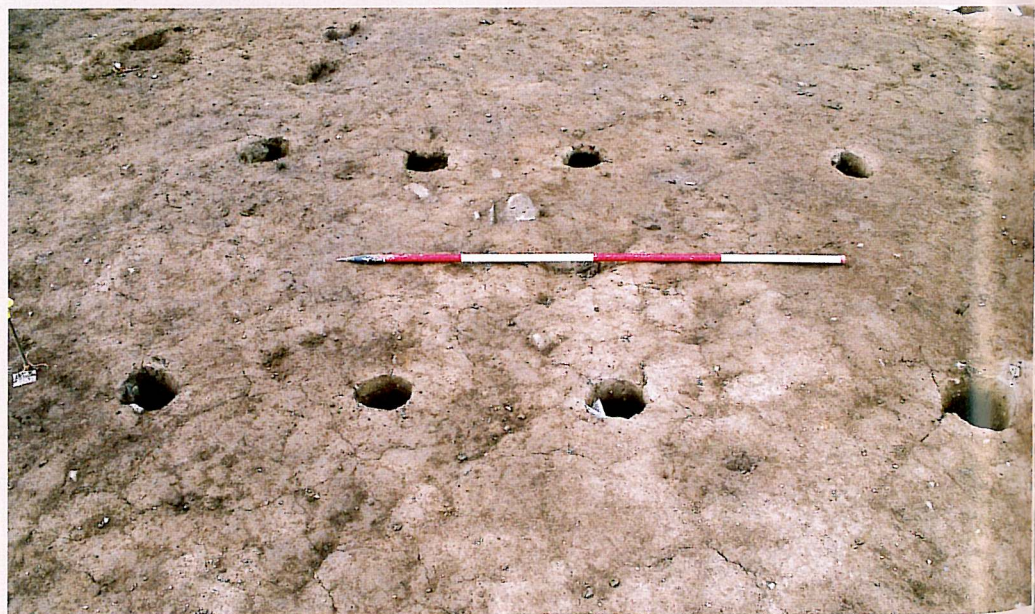
The enclosure entrance is located at the east and is defined by a gap in the (outer) double ring with a slightly funnel-shaped avenue of post-holes narrowing towards the inner circle. At a point about 4m from the inner circle, a slot-trench traverses the avenue. This may have supported a screen restricting the view from the entranceway into the inner enclosure.

The inner ring has a diameter of 16m and contains a number of internal features, including three possible pits that appear to have charcoal-rich upper fills and are orientated towards the eastern entrance. There are additional clusters of post-holes, stake-holes and pits between the inner and outer enclosure elements, but no clear patterns have been identified. Two artefacts have been recovered from the enclosed area: a sherd of middle to late Bronze Age domestic pottery was collected from the surface of a pit between the two outer rings, and a fragment of a rectangular stone chisel or adze came from the subsoil surface within the northern area of the enclosure.

The Lismullin enclosure appears to represent a single phase of construction and a relatively short period of use. It seems that the rings of posts were free-standing, as there is no

indication of a slot-trench between them to support a timber or wattle facing. In addition, the use of large numbers of relatively small posts and their close spacing suggest that there would have been little additional need to define the enclosed area or its circular manifestation.

The choice of location is also important. The enclosure occupies a discreet sheltered position, with the surrounding higher ground giving the effect of an amphitheatre. This suggests that the activities taking place within the enclosure could be viewed from the outside. The purpose of the blocking screen (if it is associated with the enclosure) at the end of the entrance may have been to restrict the movement of people from the outer enclosure to the central area. It may have represented a solid boundary between the area utilised in





relatively small posts at Lismullin is very different to the large timbers that are characteristic elsewhere, most strikingly in the 'Forty Metre Structure' at Navan Fort. Furthermore, the use of free-standing timber as the apparently sole construction medium at Lismullin differs from the complex of earthworks and slot-trenches to be found elsewhere. This serves to underline the unique nature of Lismullin and its significance in the Irish archaeological record.

### The broader landscape

The site is located c. 500m from the defended hilltop of Rath Lugh, which currently dominates the south-eastern views from it. In addition, the defended hilltop enclosure at Rathmiles is 1.9km due west of the Lismullin enclosure entrance, and the Hill of Tara is visible 2.1km to the south-west.

The defended sites at Rath Lugh and Rathmiles, together with the defensive earthworks of Ráith Lóegaire, Ringlestown Rath and the Riverstown linear earthwork, have been viewed in the context of defensive outposts on the periphery of the Tara hinterland dating from the final few centuries BC and the first few centuries AD. Ceremonial activity at this time was centred on the Hill of Tara. The earlier date of the Lismullin enclosure, its contrasting construction and siting and its location on the opposite side of the Gabhra Valley would suggest a separation

of ceremonial activity within the Tara landscape.

The Lismullin post enclosure is one of the most exciting archaeological discoveries of recent times. It is to be anticipated that the thorough excavation of the site, including extensive palaeoenvironmental and geoarchaeological studies, detailed topographical survey of the site and the surrounding terrain, appropriate geophysical survey of the adjacent area to the west using a method such as caesium magnetometry, and full publication of all the results, will make an important contribution to Irish prehistoric studies. A decision on any further works is eagerly awaited.

### Acknowledgements

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the context of congregation and procession (i.e. the east/west-aligned avenue) and the inner ceremonial space.

The construction and siting of the Lismullin enclosure suggest that it was custom-built to serve the possibly short-term needs of its builders: a bespoke monument, tailor-made for a particular set of events in a carefully chosen landscape setting.

Post enclosures form components of a variety of ritual and ceremonial sites in the middle Iron Age, including Sites A and B, Navan Fort, Co. Armagh, Dún Ailinne, Co. Kildare, Raffin, Co. Meath, and the Rath of the Synods, Tara, Co. Meath. The Rath of the Synods, Tara, may be of particular importance owing to its proximity to Lismullin: the second phase of activity comprises three apparently successive circular timber palisade enclosures, 25m, 16.5m and 30m in diameter, that have very general similarities to the inner enclosure at Lismullin.

Despite this apparent similarity in construction, however, the differences between these sites and Lismullin are striking. The deliberate choice of a discreet landscape setting is in stark contrast to the location of other Iron Age ceremonial enclosures on prominent hilltops. In addition, the use of

