



Shane Delaney and Niall Roycroft hope that a new site on Dundalk's Western Bypass will cast new light on early medieval settlement

# Early medieval enclosure at Balriggeran, Co. Louth

**I**rish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd (IAC), commissioned by Louth County Council and the National Roads Authority, undertook route-wide archaeological testing in advance of the proposed M1 Dundalk Western Bypass, Co. Louth, in spring 2002. The largest site discovered was a previously unknown enclosure in the townland of Balriggeran, approximately 2km north-west of Dundalk.

IAC returned to this site in August 2002, and in May 2003 completed full archaeological excavation of the 2.3ha site in advance of road construction.

## Landscape and topography

The main focus of the site occupied a very gentle knoll on low-lying ground, at the bottom of a wide topographical basin. The

knoll is, in fact, immediately flanked on the north-west and south-east by lower, boggy land. The north-western wetland is L-shaped, measuring c. 190m by 40m east-west with a similar area north-south. The south-eastern wetland measures c. 120m by 40m north-south. These two areas of 'linear' wetland effectively form a funnelling boundary if approaching the site from the south-west.

The main focus of the site was located at the 'pinch point', where the two wetland areas are closest together.

The general location of the site is well sheltered from the prevailing south-westerly winds, and its aspect is favourable for all-day sunlight. The drift geology is composed of well-drained sandy gravels.

#### Main site area overview

The site comprised an oval outer enclosure measuring c. 90m by 80m, within which an inner enclosure described a circular area c. 50m in diameter. The inner enclosure ditch had two distinct phases. On the south-western side there was a grand 'droveway' entrance arrangement. Subsidiary entrances (breaks in the encircling ditches) are implied on the south-east side, adjacent to the bog, and to the north-west. Between the two encircling ditches there were a number of

Opposite left: View of entire site, looking west, showing the western and eastern enclosures.

Below: The western enclosure (50% excavated), with field boundaries to the east.

(photos: Studiolab)

'partition' enclosures, one of which was D-shaped.

#### Inner enclosure ditch

The inner enclosure ditch marked a circular area c. 50m in diameter. The ditch was c. 0.5m wide at its base and defined a rough 'C' shape. A curving ditch to the east of the 'open' side of the 'C' may represent the remains of the eastern side of this enclosure.

The inner enclosure ditch was subsequently recut with a ditch up to 4m wide by 1.4m deep. The recut ditch fill contained occasional iron fragments (including slag), two copper-alloy pins, glass beads, a spindle-whorl and possible net-weights, all of which appear to be of early medieval date. There was a notable absence of animal bone from the ditch fill; animal remains were almost always limited to teeth. Considering, however, that elsewhere on site human bone was found to have decayed almost completely, it is likely that ground conditions had not allowed animal bone to survive. No sign of a bank was noted.

#### Pottery

A large number of sherds of bucket-shaped pottery were recovered from the inner ditch fill and from other contexts throughout the site. This pottery is all coil-built and is of both fine and coarse fabric. It is characteristic of so-called 'souterrain ware' of the early medieval period: many sherds are soot-blackened from burning, while some of the base sherds display characteristic grass impressions. Over 700 pieces, including base, body and rim sherds, have been recovered. Although generally plain, a number of the sherds are decorated with simple scallop-pattern rims and it is suggested that these may be late in the sequence. As pottery has been recovered throughout the site it is hoped that a development sequence may be established.

#### Outer enclosure ditch

An outer enclosing ditch was dug c. 20m from the western side of the inner enclosure. This was U-shaped in profile, 3–4m wide by up to 1.3m deep. It ran to the north-west and became shallower as it approached the edge of the wetland, its end probably defined by a





pool of standing water or bog. It appeared to have silted naturally and very few finds were recovered from its fill.

### Entrance area and features between the inner and outer enclosures

#### *Entrance area*

An entrance feature, taking the form of a parallel-ditched droveway, crossed the outer ditch (and presumably bank) on the south-western side by means of a causeway. Two post-holes were excavated between the termini of the outer ditch and these may have formed part of an entrance 'gate'. There was evidence for a later narrowing of the main entrance 'gateway' (through the recutting and extension of the external ditch).

#### *D-shaped enclosure to the south of the droveway*

Two curvilinear features to the south of the droveway formed a D-shaped enclosure, possibly for stock, with an entrance to the south-east. Both the parallel droveway ditches and the D-shaped enclosure were filled with homogeneous sterile silt (probably colluvial in origin) and appeared to have gone out of use for the subsequent phases.

#### *Partition ditches to the north-west of the droveway*

To the north-west of the droveway, two

phases of a partition ditch were excavated. Both stopped approximately 1.5m short of the outer ditch, possibly reflecting the presence of the outer enclosure bank. The effect was to create a roughly square paddock/field, 15m by 15m. Finds from the fill of these ditch cuts included a fragment of a lignite bracelet, a stone pin and probable souterrain ware.

#### **Inner enclosure: internal features**

##### *Structures*

There was no clear evidence for any 'domestic' buildings or hearths within the main enclosure. The centre and highest point of the enclosure was devoid of archaeological features. This could indicate the presence of a structure preventing the sinking of pits, etc. In addition, the lack of post-holes/structural cuts in this area could suggest another method of building, perhaps with stone or timber sill-beams, evidence for which has been completely removed.

Two substantial post-hole structures were uncovered on the western side of the enclosure. The first was solidly built of nine posts (three rows of three) forming a rectangle c. 5m by 4m. The second structure was of four posts forming a square approximately 2.4m by 2.2m. The spacing between post-holes in both structures was similar, generally c. 1.5m, and

Above: The eastern enclosure, looking west, showing burials and nine-post structure (photo: Studiolab).

the post-holes were generally 0.4m wide and up to 0.5m deep. The fills consisted of a silt with few inclusions or charcoal, suggesting the deliberate removal of the posts. No function is apparent for these structures but suggestions range from corn stands or granaries to funerary platforms.

#### *Cemetery*

The south-western area was occupied by a small cemetery, c. 15m by 15m, of east/west-aligned graves (heads to the west). Forty-nine grave-cuts have been identified, and it is clear that there was a main burial phase, with burials in rows, and a later phase in which graves of a slightly different orientation were not only cut into the previously used area but also dotted around the cemetery area. Some of the graves were lined with smallish, flat stone slabs. Bone preservation was characteristically very poor; often only teeth or tooth enamel remained within the graves. Where it was possible to tell, it was noted that all the bodies were supine with the heads to the west, in the Christian tradition. Generally no finds were recovered from the graves but one grave fill

contained a sherd of probable souterrain ware. The cemetery population comprised both juveniles and adults.

It is suggested that the cemetery is early medieval in date, possibly containing an extended family from all phases on site. However, their location within the enclosure does not necessarily imply that all the graves were contemporary with the use of the site. A number of graves to the north of the main cluster were aligned slightly more north-east to south-west and it is suggested that they are child burials, perhaps indicating the later use of a known burial area (possibly as a *cillín*).

#### *'Industrial area'*

The north-eastern zone was used for 'industrial' activities. The evidence for this consisted of six large, trough-like pits, some with corner post-holes indicating a lining, and an extensive 'black' spread containing frequent inclusions of charcoal and burnt stone (generally reddened and heat-shattered sandstone). Finds included iron slag and sherds of probable souterrain ware.

The actual activity represented here is not, as yet, totally clear. The pits were not in the lowest area of the site and the heating of water

does not seem to have been their primary function. In addition, no furnaces were found in the immediate vicinity and slag was present in minimum quantities. It is suggested that a small-scale industry, perhaps forging/iron tool-making and repair work, was being undertaken here. Evidence for on-site metallurgical activities was also uncovered during trial-trenching to the north of the main enclosure, where a large iron ore roasting oven was found. The structure was poorly preserved but contained a bowl for the fire/heat source and very large quantities of iron slag. It is probable that this relates to a primary activity associated with the internal industrial activity.

#### **Field boundary ditches**

To the west of the outer ditch were the remnants of a number of field divisions. The ditches appeared to have demarcated a rectilinear pattern of small 'fields' and had silted naturally. A spindle-whorl of early medieval type was recovered from the fill of what appeared to be the latest in the sequence of cuts present.

#### **Western enclosure**

The western enclosure was roughly circular, measuring c. 50m by 45m, with an entrance to the west. No features of archaeological significance were revealed from the centre of the enclosure and it is suggested that it may have been used as a stock corral. Along the eastern arc of this enclosure ditch a number of regular ridges of unexcavated natural geology were noted. These 'interruptions' may have functioned as mini-causeways, allowing people access to the stock area while preventing cattle from crossing the ditch, but they have yet to be satisfactorily explained. Oddly enough, the eastern arc of the first phase of the main inner enclosure ditch was also cut by these 'interruptions'.

#### **External features—kilns**

To the south of the 'western enclosure' was a corn-drying kiln. The structure was roughly figure-of-eight-shaped, with a larger bowl containing a heat source and a slightly smaller bowl containing charcoal-rich fills with carbonised grain.

On the high ground to the west of the 'western enclosure' two circular, shallow

and bowl-shaped pits, c. 0.5m in diameter and containing almost 100% charcoal fragments, were exposed. These features show signs of *in situ* burning so they are probably starter fires for charcoal clamps or pit ovens.

#### **Seventeenth–twentieth-century landscaping and drainage works**

The site was abandoned during or at the end of the early medieval period. The next identifiable phase appears to have been landscaping, perhaps in the seventeenth/eighteenth century. This caused widespread truncation of the site and promoted extensive peat growth in the wetland areas. These wetland areas were subsequently drained by four large ditches during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



Right: The site under snow, looking east-north-east. The site is at the bottom of a natural basin (photo: N. Roycroft).

Below: Work in progress, planning stone-lined (east/west-oriented) grave (photo: N. Roycroft).



#### **Conclusions**

These are the preliminary observations of the results from a recently completed excavation at Balriggeran, Co. Louth. A comprehensive environmental strategy was adopted throughout the excavation and it is hoped that a more complete picture of the local early medieval environment can be constructed.

This site is significant because of the scale and completeness of the remains uncovered, the variety of activities undertaken and the quantities of finds (especially pottery) recovered. It has also been possible to tentatively place the main focus of the site within the landscape by showing that a sheltered site seems to have been deliberately chosen at a central point to control a large and fertile basin: the opposite of a traditional hilltop ringfort. Post-excavation work is in its early stages but it is hoped that the project will provide an important addition to our understanding of early medieval enclosed settlement. ■