

## 10. Politics, wealth and expansion: the archaeology of a multiperiod enclosure at Rochfort Demesne, Co. Westmeath

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*Illus. 1—Location of the Rochfort Demesne multiperiod enclosure, Co. Westmeath (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map)*

Archaeological excavation of a multiperiod enclosure, previously recorded as a ringfort (Record of Monuments and Places no. WM026-051), was necessitated by the construction of the N52 Mullingar Belvedere Road Improvement Scheme. The excavation was conducted by Valerie J Keeley Ltd in 2005–6 on behalf of Westmeath County Council and the National Roads Authority (NGR 242772, 247101; height 108 m OD; ministerial direction no. A006/003; excavation reg. no. E3315). The site was located in Rochfort Demesne townland, Co. Westmeath, c. 1 km east of Lough Ennell and some 6.5 km south of Mullingar town (Illus. 1 & 2). The field containing it bounded the western edge of the existing N52 road.

The enclosure was located on a glacial hillock amid gently undulating ground, with lower flat ground to the north and south. The ground immediately west of the site rose to a level slightly above the enclosure interior, while that to the east sloped gently down to the existing road. The surrounding landscape has been subject to land improvement works and landscape management. Thus the ground is better drained and the vegetation more characteristic of parkland than would have been the case in the early medieval period. This



*Illus. 2—Aerial view of Rochfort Demesne multiperiod enclosure, looking west to Lough Ennell (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)*

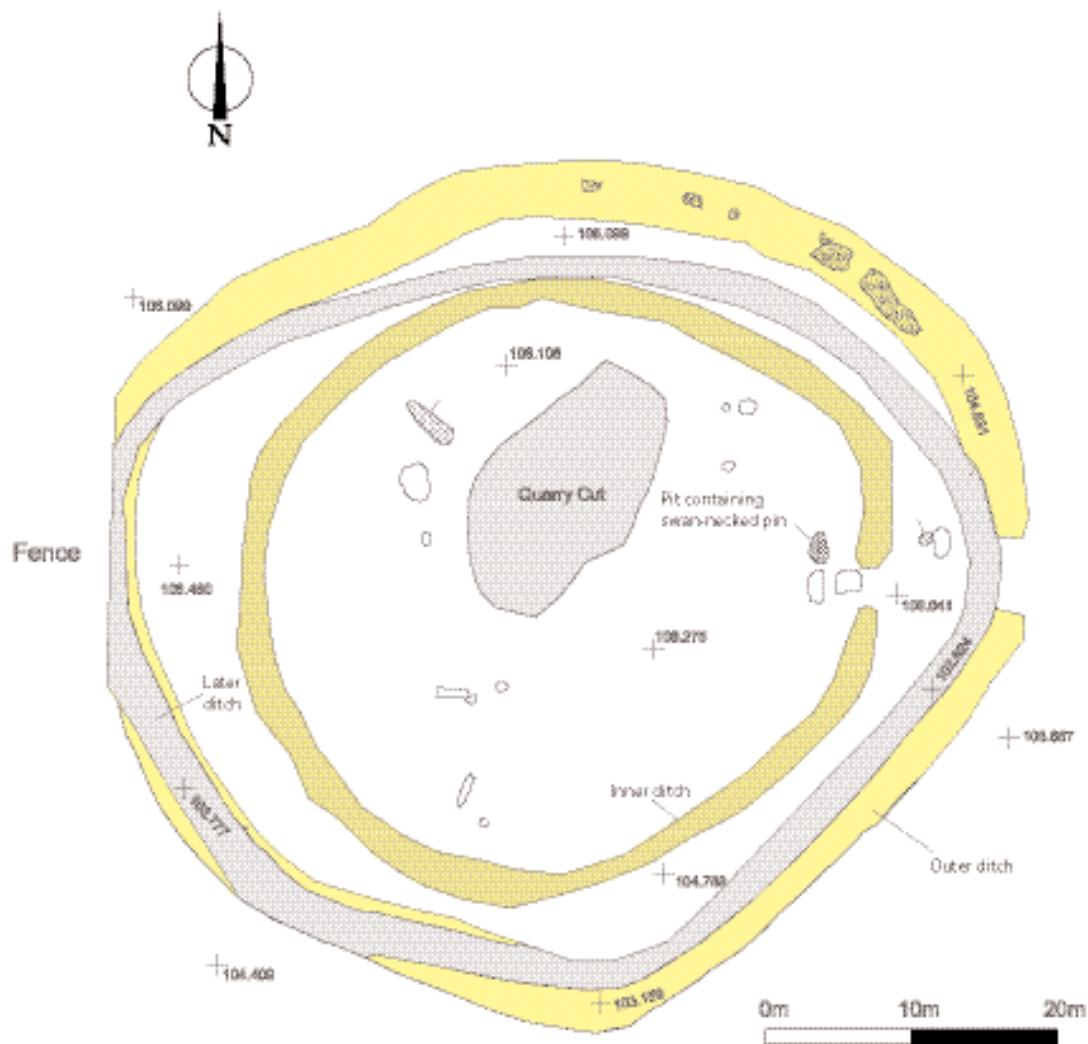
paper presents a provisional interpretation of the site as the field records, finds and samples are currently undergoing post-excavation analysis. A full presentation of archaeological findings will be published on completion of this work.

### **Excavation results**

The principal features preserved at the site consisted of three concentric subcircular ditches with the truncated remains of two banks. The area enclosed by the ditches contained several cut features, though post-medieval quarrying had destroyed much of the interior archaeology (Illus. 3 & 4).

#### *Inner ditch*

The innermost ditch represented the earliest phase of enclosure activity on the site. It had an average internal diameter of 38.9 m and was subcircular in plan, with a causewayed entrance to the east. The line of the ditch curved in an even, gradual manner along the higher contours of the hillock, with a perceivable kink within c. 7 m of either end of the causewayed entrance. It followed the upper change of slope surrounding the site, where the natural rise up to the site flattened out. A maximum width of 2.4 m and depth of 1.55 m were recorded. The profile varied and displayed both a V- and a U-shape. A U-shaped profile with a relatively wide, flat base was characteristic along the eastern segment of the ditch cut. The entrance was formed by a 2.6-m-wide causeway of uncut natural subsoil. Both terminals of the ditch were similar in form, with relatively straight courses of ditch ending in rounded terminals.



*Illus. 3—Plan of excavated features at Rochfort Demesne (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)*

Some 59 layers/lenses of stratigraphy were identified within the ditch fill. The sequence of these deposits was fairly consistent, with some minor variations and irregularities along the circuit of the ditch. Four major phases of activity were identified within the ditch fill. Direct evidence for a relationship between this ditch and the interior bank associated with the later outer ditch was found in the southern part of the south-western quadrant. Here the later bank extended over the ditch cut, forming part of the fill of the innermost ditch. This indicated that the interior bank and the outer ditch were constructed later than the interior ditch.

#### *Outer ditch*

The outer ditch had an average internal diameter of 50 m and was subcircular in plan. A portion of an associated inner bank survived in the south-western quadrant of the site. The



*Illus. 4—Aerial view of Rochfort Demesne multiperiod enclosure, looking east to the existing N52 (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)*

ditch tended to follow the change of slope at the foot of the site, so that the inner cut melded into the natural steep slope. This gave the impression of a raised platform-type interior when viewed from the south and east (Illus. 5). The effect added up to 2.5 m to the height of the associated interior bank when viewed from the exterior. A break in the ditch cut on the east side formed an entrance causeway some 6 m in width. The ditch cut presented a U-shaped profile, with occasional bedrock outcrops forming an uneven base on the eastern side of the site. The dimensions of the ditch varied from 3.1 m to 3.95 m in width and from 1.7 m to 1.82 m in depth.

The bulk of the ditch fill was comprised of deliberate backfill material containing animal bone, except for a few deposits of silt present at the base and sides of the ditch cut. These basal layers were similar throughout the ditch. The backfill appeared to have been deposited in four phases.

#### *Later ditch*

The latest ditch had an internal diameter of 49.8 m and was also subcircular in plan. It cut through/overlaid both the inner and outer ditches. Finds from the fill of this ditch indicate that it was dug during the post-medieval period, probably in the 18th century. The inner ditch cut was partially lined with a revetment wall constructed of unworked, randomly coursed limestone (Illus. 6). The wall contained a maximum of three courses and measured 0.25 m in width and 0.58 m in height.

#### *Internal features*

The mixed stony subsoil and bedrock of the interior was truncated by small-scale



*Illus. 5—The southern sections of the inner and outer ditches, looking south-east (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)*



*Illus. 6—The remains of the revetment wall lining the inner side of the post-medieval ditch (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)*

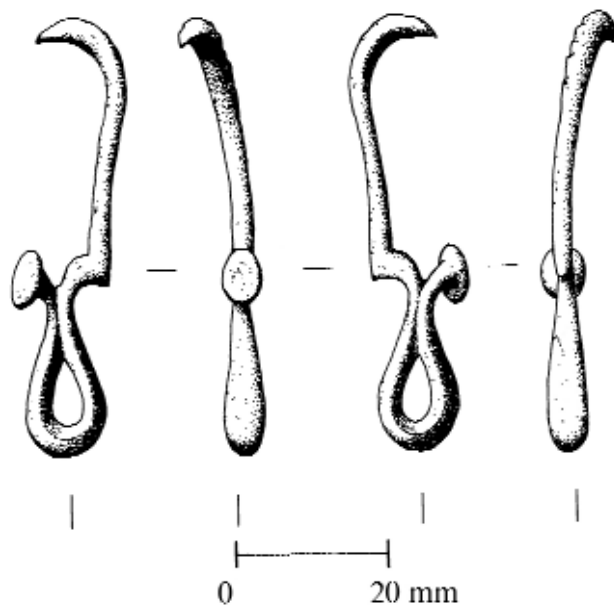


*Illus. 7—A rubbish pit containing animal bone (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)*

quarrying, stone clearance and tree root activity. The first-edition Ordnance Survey six-inch map records the presence of trees over the site, and the roots would presumably have favoured cut archaeological features over bedrock. Consequently, there was a lack of stratigraphy within the interior.

A total of 83 cut features were identified within the line of the outer ditch. Of these, 21 are provisionally interpreted as definite archaeological features, 17 as possible archaeological features, and the remaining 45 as natural features. The archaeological features generally consisted of small rubbish pits (Illus. 7). There was no direct evidence for substantial structures and the spatial distribution of the features did not indicate any discernible pattern.

Owing to a lack of stratigraphy across the interior of the site, the phasing of the internal features is not readily apparent. A few features, such as three hearths present over the backfilled inner ditch, may be associated with later activity, while two pits positioned across the entrance causeway of the inner ditch, one of which contained a possible Iron Age swan-necked pin (described below), may represent the earliest activity at the site. At the time of writing, a radiocarbon date of AD 680–890 (SUERC-8588; see Appendix 1 for details) has been returned for a sample from a pit at the centre of the site. (Additional radiocarbon dates not available at the time of writing are included in Appendix 1 for completeness—Eds.)



*Illus. 8—Possible Iron Age swan-necked pin recovered from a pit just inside the entrance of the inner ditch (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)*

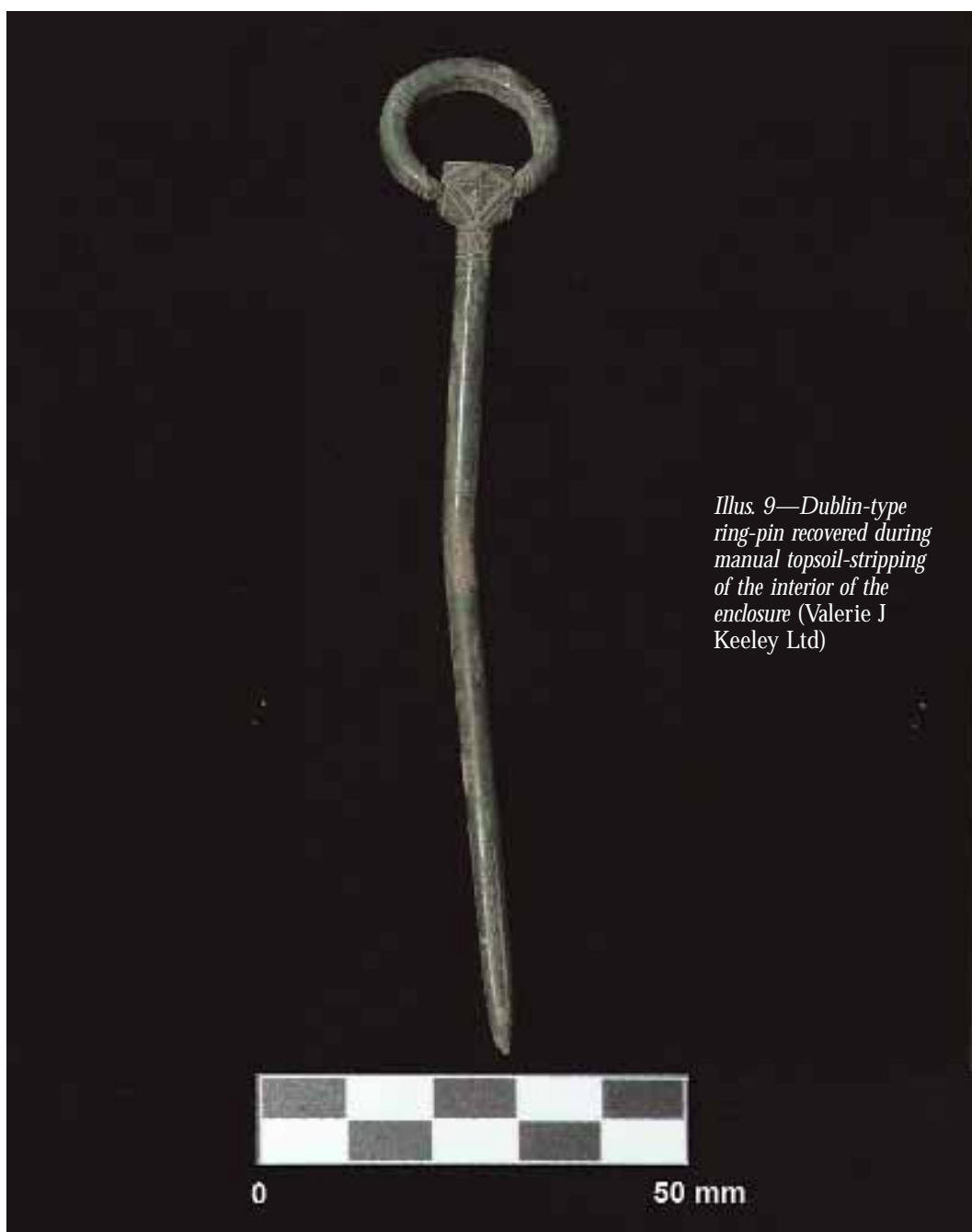
## Artefacts

The excavation produced a varied artefact assemblage, ranging from the possible Iron Age swan-necked pin to a round of modern ammunition. Fragments of decorated bone combs, a metal buckle, bone and metal needles and a blue glass bead were also recovered. Two finds are worthy of particular mention, however: the swan-necked pin, for its academic interest, and a copper-alloy ring-pin, for its beauty and standard of preservation.

The swan-necked pin was found in the bottom fill of a pit just inside the entrance causeway of the inner ditch. The pit was oval in plan, measuring 2.4 m north-south by 1.2 m, and is provisionally associated with an adjacent pit 0.2 m to the south. Both pits shared similar dimensions and contained a single fill of mid-brown gritty clay with animal bone inclusions.

The swan-necked pin (Illus. 8) consists of a teardrop-shaped ring-head, an angled shoulder section and a shank that curves at the bottom. Some faint possible decoration is visible under a microscope. Such artefacts are widespread but not numerous. Some 37 examples are recorded from Ireland (Raftery 1994). Most of the Irish examples are stray finds and there is considerable variety. The Rochfort Demesne pin is reminiscent of a type known as Hallstatt C pins, which have a broad provisional date estimate of 500 BC-AD 400. Dating samples from the pit are currently being analysed and the results should shed some light not only on this particular find but also on the dating sequence of similar finds within Ireland.

The second find to be discussed is a well-preserved ring-pin, found in topsoil during manual topsoil-stripping of the interior, to the south-west of the centre of the site. Its preservation is excellent and the artefact retains its original surface (Illus. 9). The find consists of a pin with a loose swivel ring inserted in a perforated head in such a way that it can move freely. There is a bend in the middle of the shank, which is probably part of the

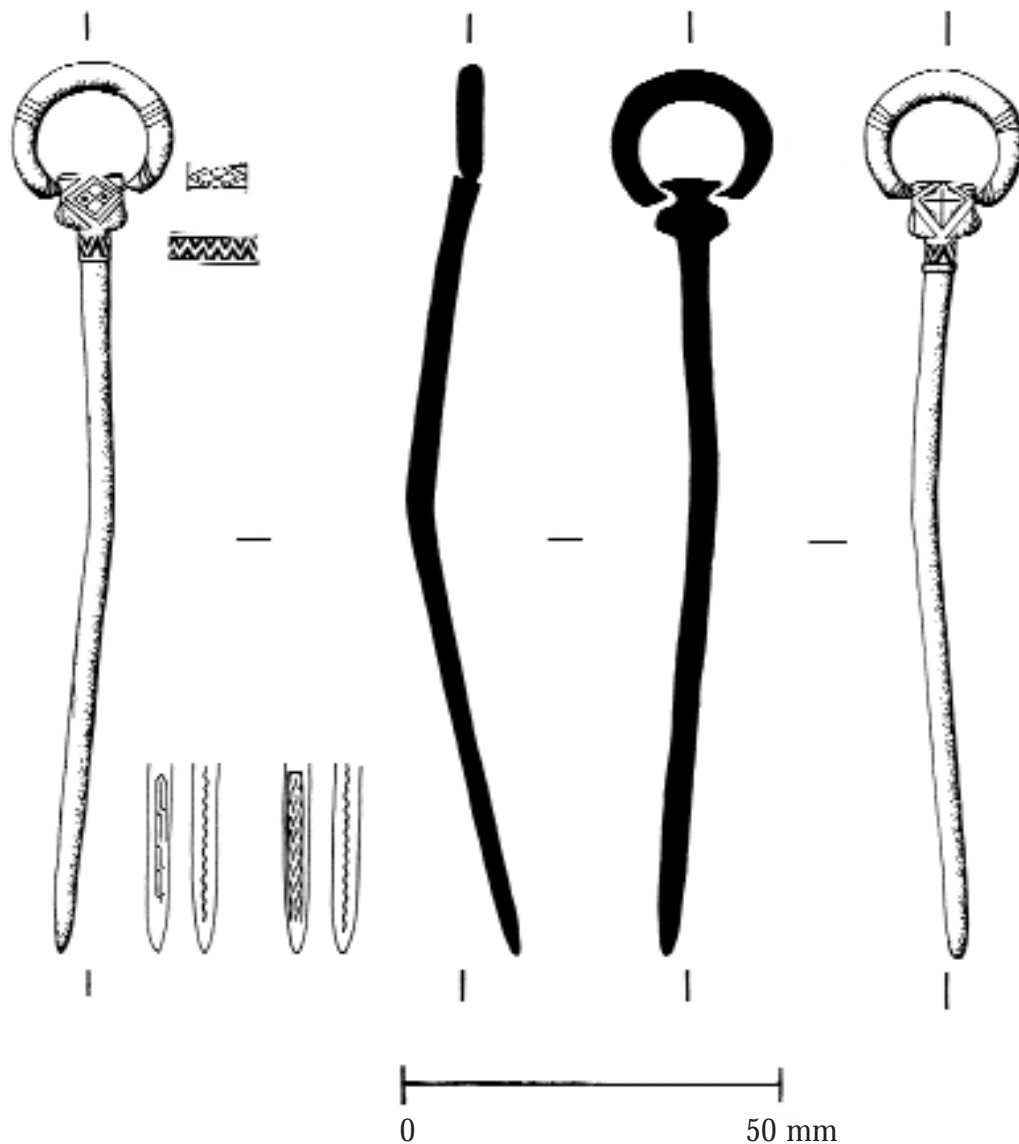


*Illus. 9—Dublin-type ring-pin recovered during manual topsoil-stripping of the interior of the enclosure (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)*

design. Simple motifs have been employed by the metalworker to decorate the ring, pinhead and shank (Illus. 10).

The find is provisionally interpreted as a Dublin-type ring-pin dating from the 10th century AD. The find-spots of similar artefacts appear to spring from the pages of a Viking sea-saga as their distribution mirrors the western sea-routes used by the Vikings for trade and settlement. The Rochfort Demesne ring-pin is best viewed as part of the wider cultural exchange in the Hiberno-Viking area of influence that came about as a consequence of the more permanent Viking settlement in Ireland in the 10th century.





*Illus. 10—Dublin-type ring-pin with details of the decoration (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)*

## **Discussion**

The artefactual assemblage and radiocarbon dating suggest that the site was certainly in use from the seventh through to the 10th century AD, with evidence (the swan-necked pin) that the site may have been of importance as far back as the first millennium BC.

The area around the site is well documented historically and is rich in archaeological remains. It was an important centre of power where the Clann Cholmáin kings of the Southern Uí Néill dynasty resided between the eighth and 11th centuries. In the eighth century the royal seat moved from the Hill of Uisneach to Dún na Sciáth ringfort and Cróinis crannog; it was here that the first high king of Ireland, Maelseachlin I, resided in the ninth century, and here also that the later king, Maelseachlin II, lived and died in the

10th/11th century. The close proximity of these sites, with Uisneach the farthest away at c. 12 km, provides a vivid backdrop to the site. The Rochfort Demesne enclosure would have witnessed many of these historical events and it seems likely that those documented individuals had contact with the enclosure and may literally have stepped across the entrance causeway. Ongoing analysis may allow tentative association of the site construction and/or expansion to historical events, such as the relocation of the royal seat from Uisneach.

Expansion of the site seems to have occurred soon after construction of the inner ditch, with little silting or dumping evident within its fill. The second, outer ditch not only increased the internal area enclosed by some 65% but also changed the site from a simple enclosure to a visually striking site making better strategic use of the landscape. The later ditch is deeper and wider, and, because it follows the foot of the small rounded rise occupied by the site, would have maximised the effect of an inner bank, creating a face nearly twice as high. It demonstrates a different mind-set at work; this new mind-set wanted to impress. The revised layout and visual impact of the site would have made a strong and dominant social statement rather than simply providing defence. Furthermore, the lack of clear structural evidence may indicate that large permanent structures or houses were not part of the site, although this lack of evidence may also reflect a bias in feature survival.

If the classic ringfort interpretation does not match the archaeological record, what was the site used for? What purpose did it serve? To address these questions we can turn to the faunal remains recovered from the site. The skeletonised remains of domestic livestock may provide a window on past behaviour at the site.

At a basic level, the presence of butchered animal bone shows that meat was processed and presumably consumed on site. There is much that may be inferred from an analysis of these bones. For example, species, gender, age and method of slaughter, which parts were used or discarded, and whether the carcasses were used solely for meat or processed further may all be deduced. Further processing might provide marrow, fat, hide, horn and bone, and this may reflect economic processes, culinary or dietary practices, and the social status of the site's occupants.

Approximately 200 litres of animal bone were recovered from internal pit features and the fills of the enclosing ditches. Initial assessment indicates the presence of sheep, cattle and pig. Butchery marks are apparent only on some of the bone, and there is evidence that whole limb elements and articulated portions of carcasses were disposed of. This suggests that not all animal carcasses were exploited to their full economic potential; the initial impression is of conspicuous consumption rather than practical necessity.

If the initial impression given by the faunal remains is correct, that some of the animals were butchered for their meat without regard to further processing, then the quantity of bone together with the lack of internal buildings may suggest that the site was used for social gatherings at which feasting took place. Such activities may have served to reinforce social bonds, to cement alliances and allegiances, to display social and economic dominance through the giving of gifts, in this case food, or simply to enjoy the *caic*. Alternatively, feasting may have been ritual or ceremonial, as has been argued for similar high-status early medieval sites elsewhere in Ireland (Crabtree 2004). Ritual feasting would have been beyond the means of the general population; the food, its preparation and the context of its consumption would have been a special event (Dietler & Hayden 2001). The content and context of such feasts may have served to enhance power and prestige, while the expanded site would have given a physical reinforcement to such power.

The location of this multiperiod enclosure within the surrounding archaeological and historical landscape necessitates further study. Post-excavation analysis will attempt to place the site within both its archaeological and its historical context. Analysis of the faunal remains together with the background research will allow a better understanding of the site and perhaps help develop further questions.

Preliminary impressions of the nature of the faunal remains together with the lack of surviving internal structures may not support the traditional concept of ringfort habitation comprising an extended family farmstead. More interestingly, the enclosure records Hiberno-Norse activity and offers a tantalising prospect that the site dates back to the Iron Age. While the archaeological record gives no indication of who bore the cost of constructing and maintaining the site, it does raise questions about politics, wealth and expansion in an important early medieval centre of power in the Irish midlands.

### **Acknowledgements**

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