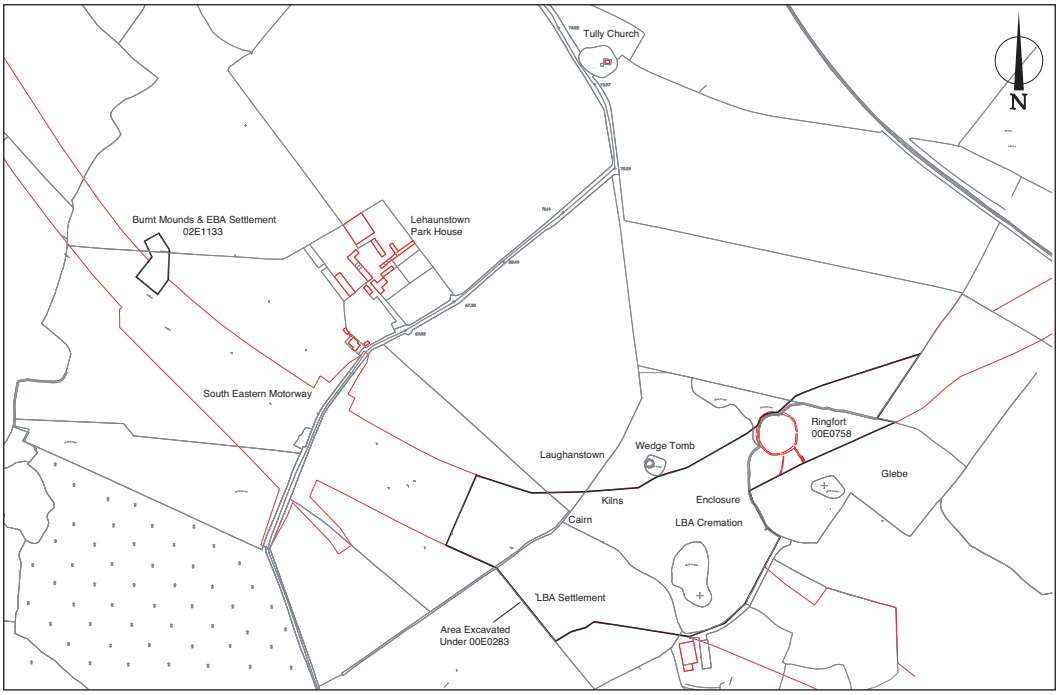
# 6. From mountain to sea: excavations in the townlands of Glebe and Laughanstown, County Dublin

*Matthew Seaver*




*Illus. 1—Location map showing the excavated areas at Glebe and Laughanstown* (Valerie J Keeley Ltd, based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map)

The townlands of Glebe and Laughanstown can be found up the narrow winding Tully Lane in the foothills of the Dublin mountains (Illus. 1). This area is on the route of the M50 South Eastern Motorway and was the focus of major archaeological excavations between 2000 and 2002 by Valerie J Keeley Ltd for the NRA and Dun Laoghaoire-Rathdown County Council. The investigations uncovered a fascinating range of sites and artefacts ranging in date from the Neolithic period to the 18th century AD.[1] A large team was involved in the excavations and a considerable number of specialists in animal and human bone, charcoal, artefacts, seeds and radiocarbon dating have all contributed to the project.

Excavations at this site were carried out after aerial, geophysical and topographical surveys identified it as being a place where significant archaeological remains were likely to be found. Excavations were concentrated in five fields to the south of a prehistoric wedge tomb of Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age date. The area itself is rural, containing a

[1] Glebe NGR 323620, 222892; Laughanstown NGR 323490, 222814. Height 49–60 m OD. Excavation Licence Nos 00E0283, 00E0758 and 02E1133. Excavations included RMP DU026-026 and proximity to RMP DU026-024 and RMP DU026-025.

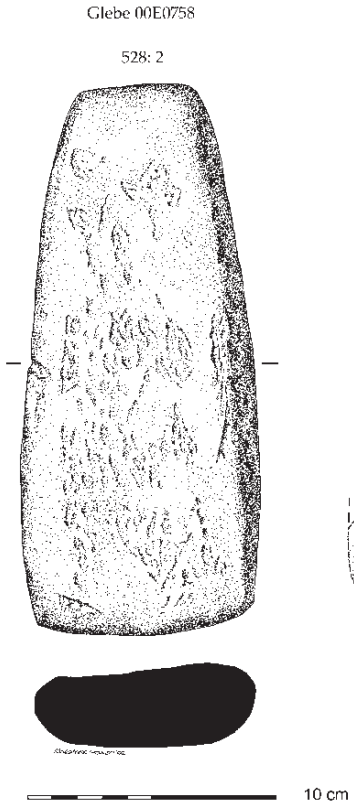
*Illus. 2—Aerial view of excavated areas at Glebe and Laughanstown from east* (Studio Lab)

mixture of arable and pasture land with granite furze-covered hills to the south (Illus. 2). The Loughlinstown and Shanganagh rivers run on either side of the site and the latter's wide flood plain extends into Carrickmines and Laughanstown townlands.

## Prehistory

### *Tools and trees—the Neolithic (4000–2400 BC)*

The earliest people to leave a monumental presence in the area were the Neolithic builders of the megalithic portal tombs at nearby Brennanstown, Ballybrack and Kiltiernan. While there was no evidence for Neolithic buildings within the excavated area, artefacts were plentiful in the ploughsoil. Objects of probable Neolithic date included a number of broken and complete stone axeheads of varying sizes (Illus. 3), which suggests that different types of woodworking were carried out. Flint tools included different types of scrapers, leaf-shaped arrowheads, blades and waste products from making these objects (Illus. 4). A collection of flint scrapers was found within the cavity left by a burnt-out oak tree, indicating that specific tasks were performed in a woodland area, with the tools having been placed at the base of trees perhaps either for storage or to prevent injury to feet from their sharp edges. A number of potsherds from the tradition known as Western Neolithic were also found and suggest that there may be the remains of a settlement beyond the edges of the excavated area.




*Illus. 3—Stone axeheads from Glebe* (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

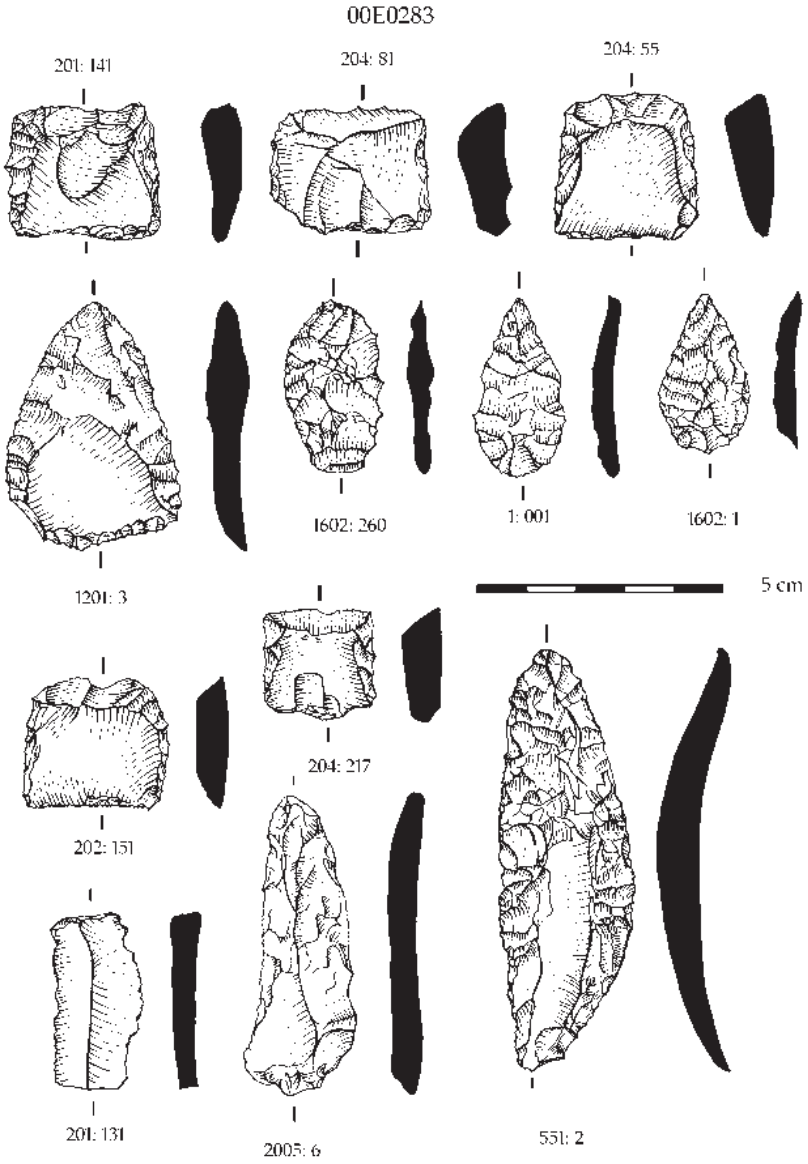
*Home, bone and stone—the Bronze Age (2400–600 BC)*

More substantial evidence was found for the settlement of the area by Bronze Age people. Megalithic wedge tombs such as the Laughanstown example (immediately to the north of the road corridor) are found within a distinct group within the Dublin and Wicklow mountains region and may have been built in the very early part of this period (Stout and Stout 1992). These tombs would probably have acted as shrines for local family groups. The Laughanstown example was the only recorded site from this period in the immediate area prior to our excavations. The project was to considerably expand on this as shall be seen below.

*Home*

Evidence for earlier Bronze Age (2400–1500 BC) settlement was found 65 m south-east of the wedge tomb in the form of a scatter of post-holes, a hearth containing pottery of the Beaker tradition and a number of flint scrapers. These post-holes suggest short fences rather than a formal building; charcoal from one of them was dated to the earliest part of this period (see appendix). This type of evidence suggests that small encampments of people lived close to the wedge tomb at roughly the same time as its construction. A plough-damaged stone enclosure (described below) post-dated the Beaker site. Interestingly, some of the stones used to form the enclosing wall were reused artefacts such as a broken quern-stone (Illus. 5) and a stone axehead.

Some 500 m to the west of the megalithic tomb, on the edge of the marshy flood plain running to the Shanganagh river, more pottery from the Beaker and Vase traditions was found along with considerable numbers of flint scrapers and a cup-marked stone. The




*Illus. 4—Flint artefacts from Laughanstown* (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

people who used and disposed of these pots tended cattle and sheep whose teeth were the only surviving bones in the acidic soils.

In the Middle to Late Bronze Age (1500–600 BC) there is evidence for intense activity in the fields surrounding the wedge tomb. On the hill-slopes to the south, a settlement was excavated. Here, two sub-circular post-built houses were revealed along with fencelines and other post settings. One of these buildings had a hearth placed off centre. Artefacts recovered included a circular sandstone disc, sparse sherds of Late Bronze Age pottery and an elegant flint knife. The main tree species, identified by analysis of charcoals from the site, were oak, elm and hazel. A collection of charred weeds, indeterminate cereals, barley and an oat grain were found within a large post-hole in the larger of the two structures. A Late Bronze Age date was obtained from this material (see Appendix 1).

*Illus. 5—Saddle quern deposit on Late Bronze Age settlement, Laughanstown* (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

Between the two structures, an elongated pit contained a collection of densely-packed complete and incomplete saddle querns and their rubbing stones. These saddle querns were used to grind cereals and consisted of a large trapezoidal granite boulder with a smooth concave hollow, which would have contained the cereal grains that were then ground with the aid of a rubbing stone. These objects are rarely found in their original contexts making these examples significant. Placing symbolic objects such as querns in pits, doorways, ditches and graves is something that was repeated at many Irish and British Bronze Age sites and may have been done in commemoration of an event such as a death or leaving a settlement, or ensuring fertility of people or the land.

Further evidence for Late Bronze Age settlement was uncovered in the wedge tomb field: a low, oval stone enclosure measuring (30 m in diameter), which contained a cluster of post-holes and a pit containing another rubbing stone (Illus. 6). The stones of the enclosure covered the remains of the Beaker associated settlement mentioned above. More Late Bronze Age pottery was found throughout this rocky field, including two large broken pots in pits.

*Bone, death and burial*

Laughanstown also produced evidence for burial practice in the Bronze Age. The excavated interments were all cremations, a funeral rite which dominated in the middle and later parts of the Bronze Age. While we do not know the beliefs of the mourners at these occasions, it is possible to understand to a certain extent how people thought about death from the nature of the burial, what objects were present and how the burnt bone was treated. The burials on this site were not within formal cemeteries as we understand them but were

*Illus. 6—Late Bronze Age stone enclosure from east, Laughanstown* (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

buried under stone cairns, in undecorated pots or in pits. None had accompanying objects. While stone mounds marked some graves, others were simply placed within gaps in the rocks or small stone-lined pits. All the cremations contained heavily crushed burnt human bone with fragments of burnt animal bone (Illus. 7). The pattern of cracking on the bone caused by the cremation in all cases suggest that the body had not decayed when it was burnt. That is, the bodies had not been displayed or temporarily buried for a period before being cremated, as seems to have occurred in some prehistoric societies in Europe. The graves of Laughanstown were part of the fields, stones and earth, in contrast to those within later Iron Age and Early Christian cemeteries when burial in a special plot of ground, set aside for that purpose, became the norm, as it remains today. They also contrasted with an Early Bronze Age cemetery elsewhere on the route close to Leopardstown where there was a small cemetery of considerably less crushed cremations in decorated pots.[2]

In the south-west of the field containing the wedge tomb, a stone cairn was excavated. Measuring 15m by 15m, it had been heavily disturbed by the construction of an Early Christian cereal-drying kiln and by medieval field boundary construction. A cremation of at least one adult in a stone-lined pit immediately east of the cairn stones was dated to the Early Bronze Age. Some decorated Vase Urn potsherds were found underneath the cairn material while within it, the upper decorated section of a pot type known as a Cordoned Urn was discovered. These pots were often used to contain cremated human bone in this

[2] Site excavated on M50 route by Fiona Reilly, Valerie J Keeley Ltd, at Carmanhall, County Dublin, Excavation Licence No. 01E0076.

*Illus. 7—Early Bronze Age cremation, Laughanstown* (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

period and the Laughanstown example was probably a burial disturbed by later activity.

Another cremation of at least one person was found on a rock outcrop to the east of the cairn, within the same field. It was partly contained within an upright plain pot sitting on a flat slab in a shallow pit. A radiocarbon date obtained from the bone indicates that the individual lived in the mid tenth to early ninth centuries BC. A third adult cremation was found in the west of the townland in a simple pit and was radiocarbon-dated to the Middle Bronze Age (see Appendix 1).

*Burnt mounds*

Burnt mounds or *fulachta fiadh* are one of the most commonly excavated Bronze Age site types in Ireland yet are still imperfectly understood. They are usually characterised by heaps of burnt stone mounded around a trough often lined with wood, clay or stone. The troughs were used to heat water with hot stones and are often close to a natural source of water or a high water table. They formed an integral part of life throughout the Bronze Age and their function remains disputed. Cooking meat, processing wool, leather or textiles made from plant fibres and even saunas have all been suggested.

Two separate burnt mounds were excavated in the west of Laughanstown and are part of a cluster of at least five that were found further west on the route. The first example had circular troughs and a number of stake-hole structures and was dated to the Early Bronze Age. Alder charcoal was common and suggested a damper local environment to the aforementioned oak, hazel and elm on the better drained slopes to the east and south.

The second burnt mound had a rectangular trough and two very large waterholes (Illus. 8). The latter are large pits, often with sloping sides, dug down below the water table to

*Illus. 8—Burnt mounds and troughs under excavation, Laughanstown* (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

provide access to water. They are similar to other examples excavated in Ireland and Britain. These were associated with a broken Late Bronze Age pot. Charcoal from the trough produced a radiocarbon date at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age (see Appendix 1). A considerable depth of silt was deposited over the top of this site. This suggests either land clearance upslope causing water to wash displaced soils downhill or climatic change leading to a sustained wetter period. The latter phenomenon is known from palaeoenvironmental evidence—including changes in plant pollen found in peat bogs—and through excavation.

## Crops, cows and churches—early medieval settlement (AD 400–1200)

In the period surrounding the coming of Christianity, Laughanstown became the centre of an ecclesiastical complex at *Telach na n-Espac* or Tully, which later became the parish church. The placename translates as Hill of the Bishops and is listed in early historical sources. It was an important religious centre in the territory of the people who called themselves *Uí Briúin Chualann* (Smyth 1994). From the eighth century it was linked with the cult of St. Bridget and about two hundred years later was under the control of the Hiberno-Norse. The complex is 480 m north of the excavations and includes two impressive crosses, a church and large ditched enclosures that are visible as cropmarks from the air (Swan 1997). A further significant church site with the remains of a round tower lay to the south of the excavations at Rathmichael.

The excavations uncovered four figure-of-eight earth-cut drying kilns (Illus. 9). These simple structures used low heat to dry wheat, oats and barley. This job was essential to prepare cereal for milling in the prevailing damp climate. The dates and form of the kilns are similar to clusters of recently excavated early medieval examples and imply large-scale crop growth in the earlier part of the first millenium, probably pre-dating the ringfort in Glebe townland described below. Three kilns were associated with a distinctive cluster of post-hole and stake-hole groups that were radiocarbon-dated to the sixth and seventh

*Illus. 9—Early medieval drying kiln, Laughanstown* (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

centuries AD (see Appendix 1). The clusters of post-holes may be the remains of a raised timber structure which supported a field granary. These features were common in late prehistoric and early historic Europe.

Charcoals from common hedgerow species such as hawthorn, blackthorn, ash and hazel were identified, suggesting the existence of organised fields bounded by hedges or areas of regenerating scrubwood.

*Glebe ringfort*

A substantial ringfort was excavated on the townland boundary between Glebe and Laughanstown. Ringforts are the most common early medieval field monument but this is the first example in County Dublin to have been fully excavated. The ringforts and their associated fields formed enclosed farmsteads. The size and number of enclosing banks could be an indication of the status of the inhabitants, although even the smallest were occupied by farmers of status. It is often thought that the townland system of land division crystallised during the early medieval period. The townland of Glebe seemed to have been formed from the ringfort and its associated distinctly curvilinear fields. The western part of the townland boundary curves gently incorporating the ringfort and a substantial area to the south. This curve is depicted on the earliest map of the townland divisions in the area, Sir William Petty's *Down Survey* map (1655–56), and this is also the parish boundary between Tully and Rathmichael. This exciting discovery shows what is hidden within the hedgerows and fields of County Dublin.

The ringfort was situated on a steep north-facing slope and was defined by a ditched enclosure measuring 46 m in diameter internally. There was a surviving bank on the western side and a south-east facing entrance gap in the ditch. There were no indications that a palisade topped the bank and it could have been crowned by a lighter fence or hawthorn hedge. However, a post-built fence or palisade on the northern side overlooked a steep natural hollow below. Large quarried slabs and boulders had fallen into the

expanded terminals of the ditch and these suggest that the bank at either side of the entrance was revetted with stones. The heavily ploughed interior had an off-centre cluster of post-holes, a hearth and a pit which were suggestive of a house.

Two smaller ditches radiated away from the ringfort on the flat level ground to the south and represent field enclosures. These almost certainly had low banks, which could have been topped by hawthorn or blackthorn and these species were evident in wood charcoal found on the site. The curving hedgerow of the townland boundary complemented one of these, suggesting a large elongated field enclosure attached to the south side of the ringfort. A stone-lined post-hole marking one of these boundaries contained material which was radiocarbon-dated to between the late seventh and late ninth century AD (see Appendix 1). Samples taken from burnt deposits within the ringfort suggested occupation of the site belongs within this date range.

Numerous animal bones were found, mainly from the ringfort ditch. These showed that cattle, sheep and pig were kept. Analysis of the bones showed evidence for butchery of all of these animals. Smaller numbers of deer, goat, horse, cat and dog were also present. Middens of seashells showed that the people living in the ringfort used the seashore as a further food source. This is about 3 km east as the crow flies. Within the ringfort, the remains of a newborn infant were found buried in a pit, evidence of a personal tragedy which happened at this place.

A reasonably rich assemblage of artefacts was recovered. These included personal objects of adornment and dress such as bone pins, parts of ringed pins for closing cloaks, and blue glass beads from necklaces (Illus. 10). The spinning of wool is suggested by a stone spindle whorl and iron slag associated with smithing means that tools were repaired on site. A burnt, broken rotary quern was also found. These were for hand use in grinding cereals used in everyday preparations of porridge, breads and cakes. Soil samples taken from features on site contained small amounts of charred oat, wheat and barley, confirming that these cereals were grown locally and were processed or at least consumed on site.

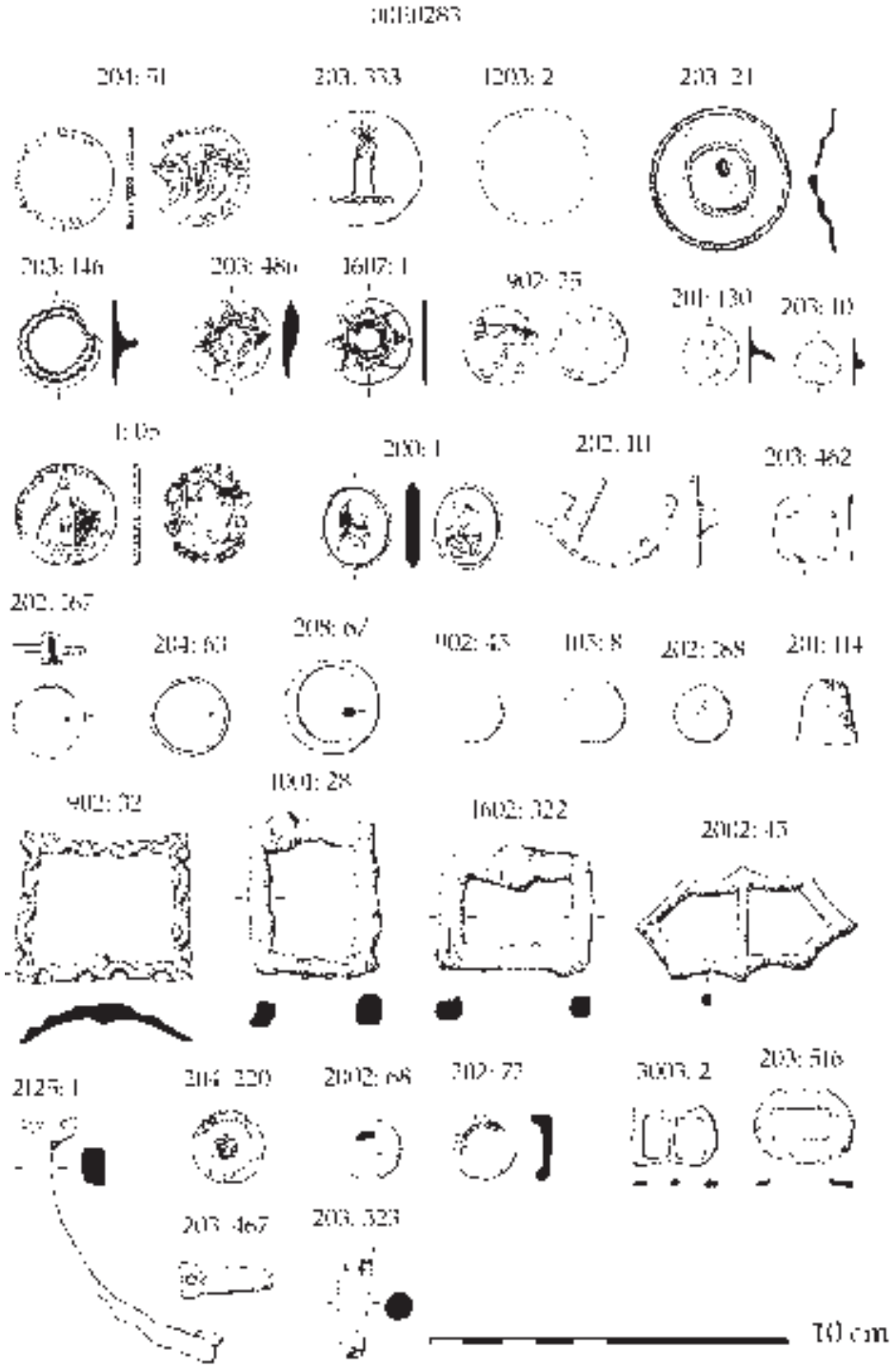
The most unusual objects found during the excavation were decorated fragments of bone. Two bones were inscribed with dot decoration while another had a raised cross formed by four C-shaped motifs (Illus. 11). A further example was inscribed with the word *Deo* and a chi-rho symbol. The form of these may suggest the inhabitants had a knowledge of church manuscripts or art objects. Decorated bones, sometimes referred to as trial pieces, have been found on rural and urban sites of the period and were often part of the manufacture of objects in metal or other materials. It is much rarer, however, to find specific Christian symbols which suggest that the site was dependent on the church site at Tully or at Rathmichael.

## Castles, fields and camps—medieval and post-medieval (AD 1200–1800)

Laughanstown was granted to Christchurch Cathedral in the eleventh century by Sigraghre, son of Thorkyll, a Hiberno-Norse noble (Simms 1983). The property remained part of the cathedral following the arrival of the Anglo-Normans who heavily farmed the land for cereals. An assemblage of plough-pebbles—small stones protecting the sides of medieval wooden ploughs—was testimony to this. The lands were administered from the castle located in the nearby Lehaunstown Park House and some field boundaries of this


*Illus. 10—Artefacts from Glebe ringfort* (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)


*Illus. 11—Early medieval decorated bone from Glebe ringfort* (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)




*Illus. 12—Medieval and post-medieval artefacts from Laughanstown* (Valerie J Keeley Ltd)

date were excavated on the site. These boundaries consisted of stretches of ditches which were not continuous, and extensive stone within them and on the surface suggests a large stone and earth bank. Parts of these ditches were revetted with stones. Medieval pottery sherds found in the ploughsoil probably resulted from manuring the fields with refuse. A gold medieval finger ring was also found in ploughsoil—though this was surely an accidental loss.

Other artefacts found in the ploughsoil relate to the nearby military camp at Laughanstown (1796–1801) that was formed to counter a threatened Napoleonic landing at Killiney. These included badges, musket shot, buttons, tokens, coins and gun-flints (Illus. 12). A now disused routeway from the camp through the excavation is shown on 18th-century maps and is partly preserved in the patterning of the field boundaries.

## Conclusion

Before the recent development works in the area—and especially the present road scheme—the archaeology of the locale was largely written using the distribution of known sites and chance artefactual discoveries. The archaeological investigations involved in the construction of the M50 South Eastern Motorway have allowed the creation of a much more diverse picture of the people who lived in this landscape. The excavations have revealed different and exciting aspects of the unwritten history of the townlands of Glebe and Laughanstown. This evidence concerns all aspects of life and death and can be used in the future along with other information from excavations in this rapidly expanding area to provide further insights into the archaeology of the region.

## Acknowledgements

The work was funded by the NRA in association with the European Union and was administered by Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. Artefact drawings are by Alva MacGowan and Margaret Keane for Valerie J Keeley Ltd. Respect and thanks to the excavation and post-excavation team and to the office staff at Valerie J Keeley Ltd.