what we found

in brief:

Some of the findings on the **Drogheda Bypass.**

1. Bronze Age enclosure

Aerial view of Bronze Age enclosure

at **Lagavooren**. (Photo ACS Ltd)

2. Skeleton

Central burial to the **Claristown** ring-cairn.

(Photo ACS Ltd)

3. Neolithic building

Archaeologists working on the Neolithic

building uncovered at **Coolfore.**

(Photo VJK Ltd)

background

Aerial view of **Balgatheran Lake** and the completed motorway. (Photo StudioLab)

The M1 Drogheda Bypass is 21 km long, crossing the **Boyne Valley** to the west of the town of **Drogheda** where it forms part of the motorway between **Dublin** and **Belfast.**

The archaeological excavations were undertaken in 2000 to 2001 by **Valerie J Keeley Ltd (VJK Ltd), Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd (IAC Ltd)** and **Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd (ACS Ltd)** on behalf of the **National Roads Authority, Meath** and **Louth County Councils.** The route passes through the immediate Drogheda hinterland where virtually all upstanding archaeological sites have been destroyed over 1,000 years of intensive ploughing. The works prior to the construction of the motorway revealed a rich archaeological landscape which had lain hidden beneath the ground.

To summarise - the sites discovered have been separated into single phase activity areas of which included 37 settlement sites, 12 burial/funeral/ritual sites, 22 burnt mounds (*fulacht fiadh*) and 44 where various types of archaeological 'activity' were noted.

NRA
National Roads Authority
An tÚdarás um Bóithre Náisiúnta

NRA
National Roads Authority
An tÚdarás um Bóithre Náisiúnta

© Ordnance Survey Ireland & Government of Ireland permit number EN0045206.

For more information please contact:

Archaeology Section
National Roads Authority
St. Martins House
Waterloo Road, Dublin 4

Tel: +353 1 660 2511
Fax: +353 1 668 0009
Email: info@nra.ie
Web: www.nra.ie

archaeological
DISCOVERIES

NDP
NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN
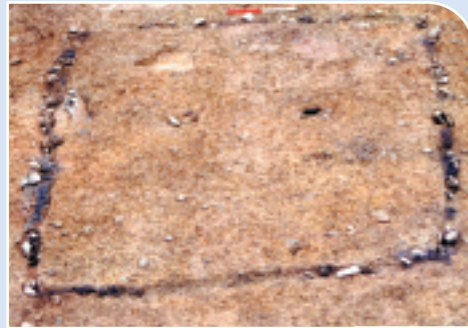
EUROPEAN UNION
COHESION FUNDS

neolithic
buildings and burials

The core zone of Neolithic occupation lay across the width of the **Boyne Valley** from the high ground near **Balgatheran Lake** (north) to **Platin** (south).

Adjacent to Balgatheran Lake were three sites on high ground in **Coolfore** and **Balgatheran** townlands. This zone overlooks a great stretch of the **River Boyne**, from the **Irish Sea** to **Dowth, Newgrange** and **Knowth**, and over to the **Hill of Slane**. At Coolfore two rectangular Neolithic buildings measuring 8 m by 6 m and 5 m by 4.6 m were discovered. Both were built with a slot trench containing posts and vertical planks. There were four, possibly five buildings at Balgatheran. These buildings represent the first unambiguous evidence from Ireland for domestic houses built by people that used Late Neolithic pottery called 'Grooved Ware'. Each Balgatheran building had internal hearths but two appeared to be associated with linear fences which led to a large hearth, set inside a 'windbreak' structure of stakes. The circular buildings are similar to the 'timber circle' dating c. 2600 BC found at **Knowth**.

On the southern side of the River Boyne, archaeologists uncovered a Neolithic building at **Sheephouse** and evidence for another at **Platin**. At **Rathmullen** there were three cremation or cooking pits and pits with Neolithic pottery was also found at **Lagavooren**.

Rectangular Neolithic building exposed at **Coolfore**. (Photo VJK Ltd)

Circular Neolithic building recorded at **Balgatheran**. (Photo VJK Ltd)

bronze age
enclosed and unenclosed settlements

The evidence for Bronze Age occupation on the northern high ground overlooking the **Boyne Valley** comes from 12 burnt mounds (*fulacht fiadh*), which often included multiple pits and troughs. There was also evidence for burial, seen by cremations in pots uncovered at **Balgatheran** and **Hill of Rath**.

Nearer to the River Boyne, roughly along the present east–west N51 road were two ring-barrows at **Tullyallen**. The first had a 1.5 m wide ditch defining a circle 9.5 m wide internally containing a central cremation in a pottery vessel. The second was a partial exposure of an 11 m wide (internally) causewayed barrow ditch. It is likely these barrows were deliberately placed to be seen from the River Boyne east to west routeway.

To the south of the river, the valley was intensely occupied over a distance of 1.5 – 2 km with both enclosed and unenclosed settlements. Unenclosed settlement sites were discovered at **Rathmullen, Kilsharvan, Lisdornan,** and **Sheephouse,** showing several oval-circular buildings (Rathmullen was 13.5 m in diameter), drip gullies, Beaker period pits and at least two wells. Enclosed settlement was found at **Rathmullen, Sheephouse, Kilsharvan** and **Lagavooren.**

At Rathmullen, possibly dating to the Early Bronze Age, there was a very well built palisade fence defining a polygonal structure 27 m by 22 m. Externally, there was an annex of paired posts and a cobbled surface. At Sheephouse, Kilsharvan and Lagavooren, the circular ditched enclosures were 30 m to 40 m across. The Late Bronze Age enclosures at Sheephouse and Lagavooren appear to have had internal palisades backed by bank material. In the centre of all the enclosures were post-hole buildings 8 m – 10 m across, often with drip gullies.

Possible ring-barrows were also found at Sheephouse and there were ten burnt mounds uncovered to the south of the River Boyne.

Bronze Age enclosure ditch excavated at **Sheephouse**. (Photo IAC Ltd)

late iron age
roundhouse and ring-cairn

Underneath a tree planted on a clearance cairn in **Claristown** a Late Iron Age roundhouse was discovered that had been transformed into a Late Iron Age - Early Medieval ring-cairn monument. This stunning site was set in the middle of a plateau, centrally placed between the **Nanny** and **Delvin Rivers** looking out towards the **Irish Sea**. The roundhouse was probably built around 100 – 50 BC with four concentric rings of posts. It was 11.58 m in diameter, had an external drip gully and a porch-hall entrance faced east. Inside, partition walls defined a probable sleeping room, a small 'waiting room', a large empty 'audience chamber', and a cooking area seen by three hearths. In the possible 'sleeping room' a centrally placed sunken hearth contained a buried human infant, dating from first to fourth century AD.

The building remained in use for several hundred years until around AD 300 – 400, when it was demolished and a circular layer of stones was laid where the building had stood. Through this platform base, a large stone-lined and stone-filled burial pit was sunk, containing a large human adult male, laid supine, east to west with the head to the west in a very Christian manner.

A huge bonfire was then made on the stone platform and many finds and animal bones show a great gathering and much feasting. After this the monument was created by digging a circular trench to contain a palisade made of paired posts and possible wattling. The palisade appeared to act as a revetment holding back an external bank or ring-cairn of stones. Inside the palisade a small central cairn was thrown up. There are obvious similarities in both date and construction between Claristown and the Royal Site at **Navan Fort** (Site B), Co. Armagh. Was there a similarity in status and function?

During the fourth and fifth centuries AD nine Christian style human burials were set immediately outside the main ring-cairn. There were two double-male burials, both covered with mounds of stone. Two pieces of clear glass, possibly Roman imports, were recovered.

A second group of four graves, dating from the fifth to seventh century AD were set 10 m to the south of the cairn.

Close up of ring-cairn uncovered at **Claristown**. (Photo ACS Ltd)

early medieval
ecclesiastic estate, burials and buildings

Early medieval conjoined post-hole building discovered at **Platin**. (Photo IAC Ltd)

Five sites in **Mell, Hill of Rath** and **Balgatheran** all appear to show a unified rectilinear field system containing numerous dispersed buildings, stock enclosures, small 'booley'/shepherding huts and considerable evidence for metal working. There are no ringforts but there was a large 35 m long souterrain discovered at Mell. The souterrain incorporated a constriction and a drain and ended in a circular corbelled chamber. The impression is that this whole area may have formed part of an estate connected to the ecclesiastic centre at **Monasterboice**.

Also at **Mell** was a small ring-barrow of Later Iron Age type. Next to this was an oval, deep-ditched 'arena' 15 m long where an internal fence separated the space into two. In each internal space a large post had been set. Although perhaps built much earlier, blue glass beads indicate an early medieval use for this monument. Could it have been used as an arena for animal baiting? Or was it converted into a squashed figure of eight covered building?

Next to these two Mell monuments were ten early medieval human burials and several pits. One of the burials was accompanied by a silver zoomorphic, or animal shaped, pin.

The unusual site discovered at **Platin** seems to indicate a huge figure-of-eight building, approached by a large and formal driveway. The ditches seem to represent drip gullies rather than any defensive arrangement. The first building is around 12 m in diameter, with central post-hole and hints of concentric rings of further post-holes. Inside the door was a large trough full of burnt stones, animal bone and metalworking slag. Later, the building was extended to the west and stake-holes in the drip gully show the post and wattle walling very well. The extension area measured about 10 m by 9 m and included a pair of central posts with suggestions of concentric rings of posts. Just inside the external entrance was a large well or trough. The last phase on this site revealed evidence of extensive metalworking in the form of furnaces and slag.

No sites dating to the medieval period were found but a small number of medieval finds were recovered from a site in **Balgatheran**.