

11. Ancient peoples, hidden landscapes—the archaeology of the M7/M8 motorway scheme

Sylvia Desmond

This paper briefly describes the archaeological findings on the M7 Portlaoise–Castletown/M8 Portlaoise–Cullahill motorway scheme. At the time of writing, archaeologists are still on the ground working on this large scheme so what follows are purely preliminary findings. These are very exciting, however, and I hope to convey something of the thrill that archaeologists experience when revealing previously unknown sites and artefacts. I will also consider how archaeologists interact with the landscapes in which archaeological sites and artefacts are found, and will attempt to explain the total disappearance of these sites from the landscape and from any written or oral record.

The scheme consists of 41 km of motorway and 11 km of side roads. It runs from Portlaoise in the east to Borris in Ossory in the west and extends as far south as Cullahill (Illus. 1). The route for the motorway crosses the midlands of Ireland, passing through County Laois and through many areas of archaeological potential, as highlighted by a detailed environmental impact assessment. Research revealed that the chosen route would directly affect three known archaeological sites: two enclosures at Derrinsallagh and the possible location of a 12th-century battle site at Ballinagowl, Oldglass. The enclosures had already been affected in the past by the building of secondary roads—the R435 at Derrinsallagh and the R433 at Oldglass.

A comprehensive testing strategy was developed with Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd (ACS Ltd), who carried out the testing and subsequent archaeological excavation on the route on behalf of Laois County Council and the National Roads Authority. The aim was to examine the various types of landscape encountered and to have adequate time and resources to complete all archaeological excavations prior to construction.

The route runs through the rich farming landscape of Laois, with its many fields either in pasture or under tillage. There were also areas of scrub, bog and marsh to be tested, however, and other areas had been subject to intensive tree-planting in recent years. Several low-level aerial surveys carried out at varying times of the year had highlighted a large potential archaeological complex beside the existing N8 in the townland of Oldtown, just beyond the village of Cullahill, but it was possible to avoid the archaeological features within this complex, which consisted of several large enclosures, by a slight realignment of the route in this area (Courtney 2006, 110–13). It should be pointed out at this stage that in the initial planning of the route great care was taken to avoid all known archaeological sites, where possible. In this way not only Oldtown but also a large early medieval and later Norman site at Aghaboe was completely avoided, as was an ecclesiastical centre at Aghmacart and a tower house at Gortnaclea.

Other investigative methods, such as ground-probing radar, indicated the presence of other possible sites along the proposed route. Four sites uncovered at Cuffsborough (Illus. 2) proved to be part of a major Bronze Age archaeological landscape consisting of a settlement, *fulachta fiadh*, pits, ditches and a well. The most successful assessment method, however, was centreline testing, which consists of the excavation of a central trench, 2 m in



Illus. 1—Location of principal archaeological sites on the M7 Portlaoise–Castletown/M8 Portlaoise–Cullahill motorway scheme, Co. Laois (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map)



Illus. 2—Aerial view of the Bronze Age site uncovered at Cuffsborough 4 (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)



Illus. 3—Centreline testing on a section of the M7 Portlaoise–Castletown/M8 Portlaoise–Cullahill motorway scheme (Narrowcast)



Illus. 4 (left)—A perforated stone disc found at Derryvorrigan (Kildare County Council)

Illus. 5 (below)—Excavation of a fulacht fiadh trough (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)



width, along the entire length of the scheme, with offset trenches at right angles at intervals of 15–20 m (Illus. 3). This central strip was carried out by machine, under the guidance of experienced archaeological teams. Ninety-eight archaeological sites were discovered. It must be stressed that all of these sites consisted of subsurface remains, with no above-ground expression, and all were entirely unknown prior to testing.

Excavation results

Unfortunately, no evidence for any sites dating from the Mesolithic period was revealed, although intensive testing took place in the floodplains and along the banks of major rivers such as the Nore. Within the landtake for the scheme only a few Neolithic sites have been



Illus. 6—Mechanical lifting of an entire furnace from Derrinsallagh 4 (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

revealed. One of the most interesting is that at Derrivorriggan 2 (NGR 226811,186190; height 136 m OD; ministerial direction no. A015/084; excavation director Anne Marie Lennon), where a very fine perforated stone disc was recovered from a pit (Illus. 4).

In common with many other road schemes, a large number of *fulachta fiadh*, or burnt mounds, were uncovered. Over 50% of the archaeological sites on the scheme fall into this category. *Fulachta fiadh*, for those not familiar with the term, are low mounds of burnt soil and heat-cracked stone, often associated with troughs cut into the subsoil, sometimes lined with stone or wood. Frequently located in wetland areas or beside streams, these sites used the high water-table of these settings to naturally fill up the troughs. Heated stones were then placed in the water to raise the temperature. It was the cleaning out of the resulting heat-shattered stone debris from the troughs that helped to create the low mounds (Illus. 5). The troughs may have been used for domestic purposes such as cooking, but other uses suggested for these rather enigmatic archaeological sites range from semi-industrial activities like brewing and textile manufacturing to use as saunas or sweat-lodges. Radiocarbon dates for a number of the sites excavated on the scheme have placed them within the Bronze Age period. (Additional radiocarbon dates not available at the time of writing are included in Appendix 1 for completeness—Eds.)

The townland of Cuffsborough provided further evidence for Bronze Age activity. Four archaeological sites were excavated here, all within a 600 m radius. One of the most impressive sites revealed here was Cuffsborough 4 (NGR 234325, 182818; height 110 m



Illus. 7—Cobbled yard and well at Bushfield or Maghernaskeagh (Kildare County Council)

OD; ministerial direction no. A015/074; excavation director Deirdre Murphy), which was a palisaded structure, 16 m in diameter, comprised of 23 post-holes and a 1-m-wide entrance. Archaeological excavation also revealed a centrally placed post-hole over 1 m in width and depth (Murphy 2006).

One of the most exciting sites on the scheme was located at Derrinsallagh—a large iron-working site, Derrinsallagh 4, with a number of intact furnaces (NGR 225054, 185661; height 121 m OD; ministerial direction no. A015/070). One of these furnaces was lifted in its entirety for analysis (Illus. 6). A detailed sampling strategy drawn up by Dr Effie Photos-Jones and ACS Ltd, under the guidance of Anne Marie Lennon, the director of all of the archaeological excavations within Derrinsallagh townland, should enable the history of this iron-working site to be reconstructed on a micro level. A possible source of bog ore used in the smelting process on this site has now been identified. This townland proved to be very rich also in other archaeological remains. One of these, Derrinsallagh 3 (NGR 224975, 185916; height 122 m OD; ministerial direction no. A015/069), a large early medieval ringfort with associated cereal-drying kilns, was excavated, together with a Bronze Age cremation cemetery, a possible Bronze Age habitation site and other prehistoric features.

The other main site types revealed during testing were enclosures. While many of the smaller enclosures are Bronze Age in date and may prove to be related to settlement/habitation or funerary rituals, others clearly fall into the early medieval period. There are a significant number of enclosures within the environs of Oldtown and Parknahown townlands, close to Cullahill. If we take into consideration the new



Illus. 8—Excavation of large enclosure at Lismore 1/Bushfield or Maghernaskeagh 1 (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

archaeological sites revealed during testing and excavation within these two townlands, the number of possible early medieval enclosures now totals approximately 10.

The post-medieval period, from the early 16th century onwards, was also represented by a very fine cobbled yard, well and house remains in the townland of Bushfield or Maghernaskeagh (Illus. 7). It should be noted that the location of this site was pointed out by the present landowner, highlighting the importance of talking to and seeking information from landowners.

The same landowner was also able to confirm that a nearby large enclosure and cemetery at Lismore 1/Bushfield or Maghernaskeagh 1 (Illus. 8) was known to his family, although no trace of this site was visible above ground (NGR 228757, 185518; height 141 m OD; ministerial direction no. A015/111; excavation director Ken Wiggins). Geophysical survey outside the roadtake for the scheme has confirmed that this large early medieval enclosure—the Lios of Lismore—measures 93 m by 76 m. Two other major enclosures with cemeteries were excavated on the scheme at Killeany 1 (Wiggins 2006) and Parknahown 5 (O'Neill, this volume). These three large sites contained over 600 inhumations, and it is likely that more burials lie outside the excavated areas. No evidence for church or other ecclesiastical buildings has been discovered on any of these three sites.

Killeany 1 is a truly impressive site, set on a low hillock (NGR 235901, 186994; height 92 m OD; ministerial direction no. A015/061; excavation director Ken Wiggins). It is over 150 m in diameter, with an enclosure ditch up to 1.5 m deep and 3 m wide in places (Illus. 9). Yet no record of any of these sites exists, and no local folklore refers to them. While the



Illus. 9—Enclosure and cemetery at Killeany 1 (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

townland name of Killeany incorporates the Irish term *cill* for church, no trace of any such church has been located, despite very intensive archaeological excavations and investigations. We must ask ourselves how and why such a large, obviously important, site virtually disappeared not only from the landscape but also from local memory. We could ask the same about Parknahown 5, which would appear to have had prehistoric origins and during the early medieval period became a settlement site, then later a major cemetery (see O'Neill, this volume).

Are we dealing with a different site type here: large cemetery sites not attached to any church or ecclesiastical foundation such as a monastery? These sites are not ringforts: their size alone puts them into a different category. But what category? Put simply, they are very large enclosed cemeteries with some slight evidence for settlement. Whether this settlement is earlier than, contemporary with or later than the burial phase will be ascertained during the coming months of post-excavation analysis. What is evident from the many road schemes throughout the country is that the sites described above are not isolated incidences. Perhaps we are dealing with large secular sites whose importance imbued them with sufficient prestige to become cemeteries for the wider population. But we must ask what it was that made these sites important. Was it the landscape setting of the site, or perhaps the fact that the remains of a prehistoric monument on the site gave it added ritual significance? Could these locations be linked in any way to what we may term 'sacred places', used from the prehistoric to the medieval periods, only to be subsumed into the farming landscape of what was to become County Laois in the post-medieval period?

I suggest that they might indeed be sacred locations, which have once again been discovered after many hundreds of years of obscurity. The loss of knowledge about these

sites may possibly be linked to the Famine period, when small landowners were forced to abandon the land they knew and worked, taking with them the histories and stories of such sites. Or indeed it may be that with no church associated with these sites they simply faded into obscurity, their banks and ditches gradually being eroded and filling up, no longer the focus of a local population. We should not so readily separate the sacred and the secular, however, for one lies within the other, one is part of the other. Together they form the landscape within which archaeologists work.

We must also look at how archaeologists interact with the landscape. While we cannot see our newly discovered archaeological sites and landscapes through prehistoric or even medieval eyes, we should attempt to attune ourselves to their present landscape setting. The archaeological site, if possible, should be perceived from different directions, approached from lower ground and looked down on from surrounding hills, to experience different aspects of the present-day landscape. We should ask what can be seen from the site, what land forms or geological formations catch our attention, and, in general, how do we feel when standing on that site, looking at the surrounding landscape. We should attempt to visualise how these sites would have looked in the early medieval landscape, monumentalised by large, deep enclosures and massive banks. Each site was specifically positioned, possibly in a place that already had importance. The low rise of Killeany 1 is very visible in the landscape. It stands out very clearly in an area of bog and bog margin. Likewise, Parknahown 5 is located on a flat plateau, overlooking a steep escarpment to the River Goul below. We should allow ourselves to feel the *genius loci* or spirit of such places because our interaction with the present-day location of a site and its current landscape setting can influence how we interpret a site.

Conclusion

It is hard to convey the sense of excitement felt when almost 100 unknown archaeological sites are found and then fully excavated, not to mention the many hundreds of archaeological artefacts recovered. These discoveries should not be looked at as isolated sites but rather as part of an archaeological landscape stretching from prehistoric times to the 19th century. This perspective places people back into what are currently fields of pasture and tillage or areas of bog and marsh, seemingly uninhabited yet resounding with silent echoes of past lives, practices and rituals.

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