

## 9. Iron Age toe-rings from Rath, County Meath, on the N2 Finglas–Ashbourne Road Scheme

*Holger Schweitzer*

The discovery of a female burial, accompanied by three copper-alloy toe-rings, was made during excavations in Rath townland in County Meath.<sup>1</sup> The site was located 0.5 km north of Ashbourne on either side of and adjacent to the current N2 road to Derry (Illus. 1). The excavation was undertaken as part of a programme of archaeological investigations carried out between April and October 2004 in advance of construction of the proposed N2 Finglas–Ashbourne Road Scheme by Cultural Resource Development Services Ltd on behalf of the NRA and Meath County Council.

The excavation area was situated on gently sloping terrain with the northern part of the site on the crest of a hill, which extends to the north-west from the excavation area. From the highest point of the site the ground gently slopes to the north, east and, more steeply, south towards a roughly east-flowing stream at the base of the hill. The hilltop possesses excellent views in all directions, with the Dublin Mountains and the Sugarloaf to the south visible on most days.

Within the excavation area extensive archaeological activity of mainly Bronze Age and Iron Age date was encountered. Features uncovered on site included possible steam lodges, ring-ditches, three large waterlogged pits, of as yet unknown purpose, and industrial activity.

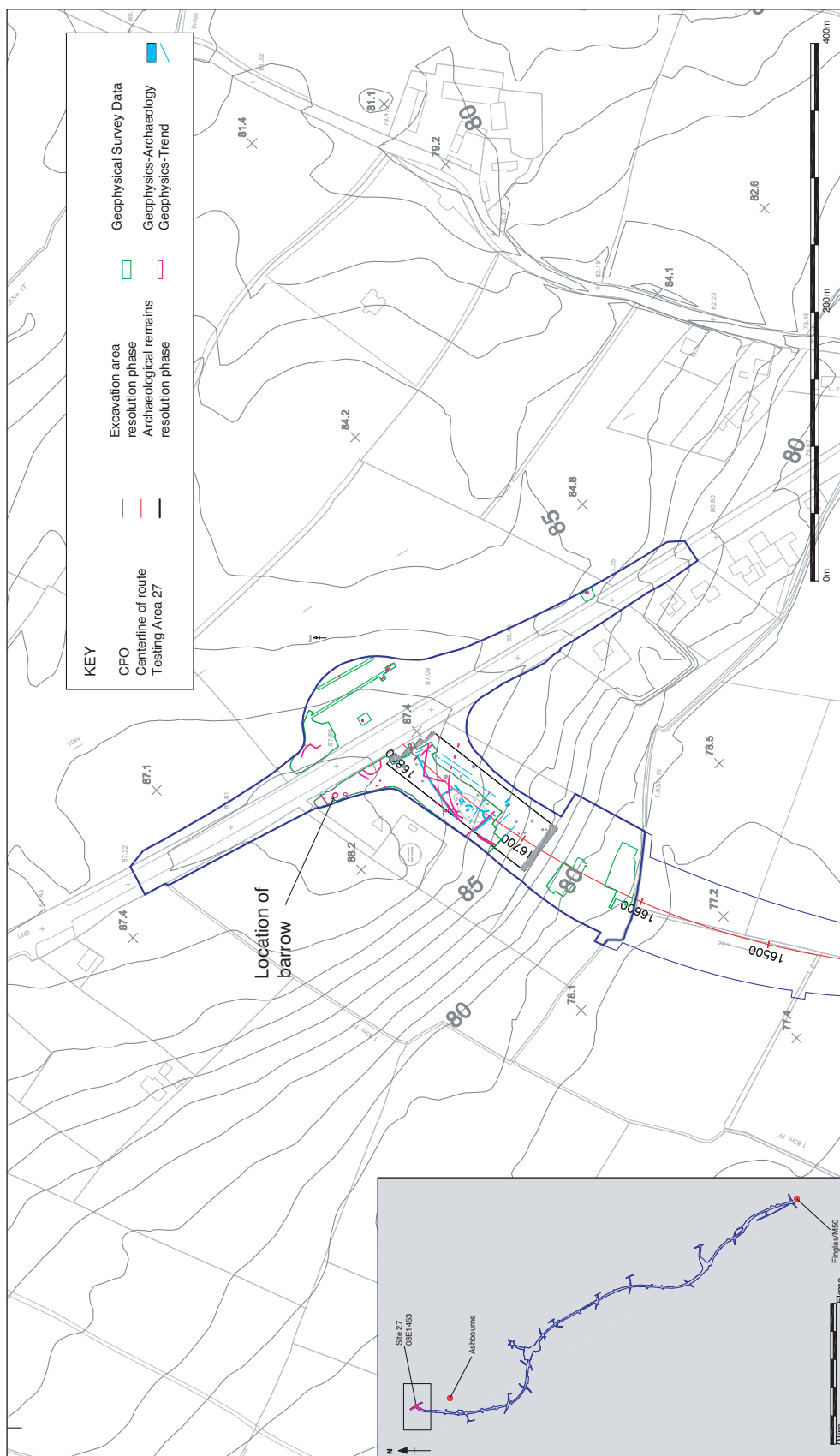
On the highest point of the excavation area three ring-ditches of varying size and shape were discovered and represent a prehistoric cemetery site. Ring-ditches and barrows are a common feature of prehistoric funerary practice in Ireland. Some of these typical Bronze Age to Iron Age burial monuments, so-called ring-barrows, consist of small artificial mounds with a surrounding circular ditch. Some show evidence for external surrounding banks while others only consist of a circular ring-ditch. The evidence for the funerary activity varies in nature from simple cremation pits to cremation urns to inhumations placed in any location in the immediate vicinity of, or even within the enclosing ring-ditch.

The majority of the burial evidence at Rath was concentrated at a barrow measuring 3 m in diameter with a surrounding circular ditch and evidence for a central mound (Illus. 2). Since the latter has long been ploughed out, it was only evident by infill deposits, which had entirely filled the surrounding ditch. Following excavation of all the ditch fills it was established that several phases of burial activity had taken place within it. It was clear that the northern half was used over a lengthy period of time for the deposition of cremated human remains.

Following a primary phase of burial activity the ditch appears to have backfilled almost entirely in a short period of time. This seems to indicate the presence of at least a central mound with up-cast material slumping back into the ditch relatively shortly after the erection of the monument. Three further re-cuts into the ditch, with associated burial

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<sup>1</sup> NGR 305049, 254101. Height c. 86 m OD. Excavation Licence No. 03E1214.



Illus. 1—Location plan of the excavated Iron Age barrow burial with toe-rings in Rath townland (Cultural Resource Development Services Ltd, based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map)

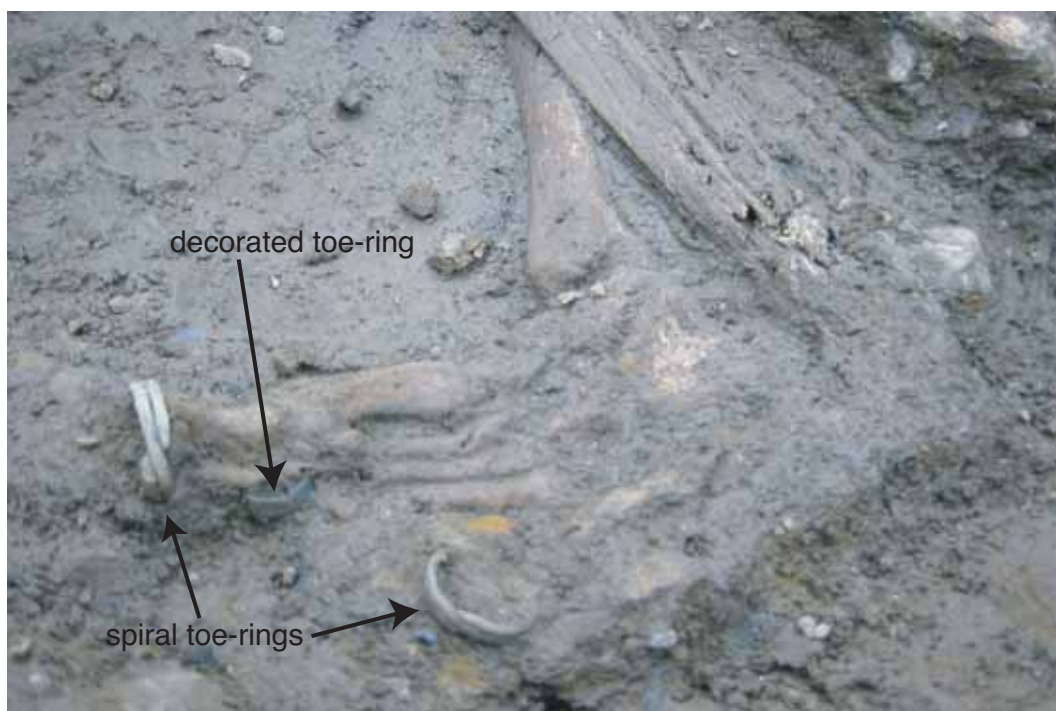


*Illus. 2—The excavated barrow in Rath townland showing the location of the burial with the toe-rings (Cultural Resource Development Services Ltd)*



*Illus. 3—Decayed skeletal remains of the crouched burial with toe-rings (Cultural Resource Development Services Ltd)*





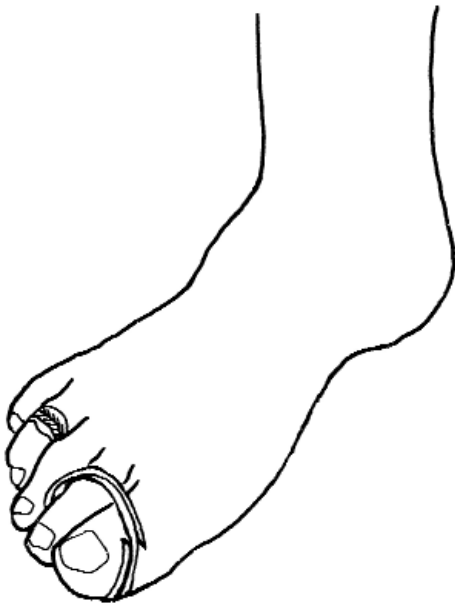
*Illus. 4—Detail of the toe-rings on the crouched burial (Cultural Resource Development Services Ltd)*

activity in the form of cremated bone, were evident in the northern half of the ring barrow. The only evidence of burial activity in the southern half of the ditch was represented by a crouched inhumation with the grave dug through the completely backfilled ditch.

The badly decayed remains of the skull and upper body were discovered during the excavation of a box-section through the ditch. Due to the poor preservation of the skeletal remains the excavation of the burial was carried out by osteoarchaeologists in order to maximise the information that could be obtained. The first stage of the excavation was carried out by Linda Fibiger with Laureen Buckley continuing the recording and lifting of most of the burial.

The grave was cut through the fill of the southern section of the barrow ditch and the skeleton was lying in a crouched position on its right side (Illus. 3). It was orientated north-south with the head to the north. As already mentioned, most of the bones were badly decayed and in many cases little more than a trace remained on the surrounding soil. The excavation of the hands showed that they had been clasped together underneath the chin. Since most of the skeletal remains were badly decayed the analysis of sex and age of the skeleton proved difficult. A definitive determination could not be reached but it appears probable that it was the skeleton of a woman. Age was determined with the help of the teeth and it is estimated that the individual was between 21 and 25 years of age at the time of death. The living stature is estimated at approximately 1.61 m, while the cause of death was not apparent in the surviving skeletal remains.

During the excavation of the feet three copper-alloy rings were found at the toes of both feet (Illus. 4). Two of these rings are almost identical with one found encircling toes on each foot. Both are spiral-rings roughly of the size and shape of modern key rings. Due to the poor skeletal preservation of the left foot bones it was not possible to determine the



*Illus. 5—Artist's sketch of the toe-rings in use, based on their position on the excavated skeletal remains (Cultural Resource Development Services Ltd)*

original location of the ring on this foot. The spiral-ring on the right foot, however, was located *in situ*, meaning that it had been found in the same position as it was at the time of the funeral. The ring was still in an upright position and clasped around the tips of at least two toes (the big toe and the one next to it). Laureen Buckley deduced that the ring would have encircled the top half of the big toe as well as the tips of the second and possibly the third toes (Illus. 5). The third toe-ring, which was decorated with a herring-bone motif, was also found on the right foot, encircling the toe next to the little toe (Illus. 4 and 5).

All bones except the feet were removed individually by Laureen Buckley. It was decided that the feet with the toe-rings would have to be lifted separately as a block and excavated by the osteoarchaeologist in the Conservation Laboratory of the National Museum of Ireland.

The presence of the two almost identical spiral-rings could indicate that they were part of some kind of footwear. The position of the spiral-ring on the right foot with the ring on the tips of at least two toes shows that it was not worn as a toe-ring as such, because it would have slid off the toe. It also appears that it would have been extremely uncomfortable and would have made walking extremely difficult. For this reason two models of interpretation seem likely at the moment. One possibility is that the rings were put in this position especially for the funeral. Another explanation may be that the two spiral-rings were attached to sandals. In this case the rings would only have enclosed the tips of the toes loosely, giving the appearance of toe-rings. Sandals would also have left all the toes exposed so that the decorated toe-ring was visible. Since such footwear would probably still be uncomfortable, such sandals may have been reserved for ceremonial or funeral use.

The date of the burial is currently unknown as initial radiocarbon dating samples from the bone material proved unsuitable for successful analysis. It is hoped that the processing of a second bone sample will lead to a successful outcome. No comparable burials have been found in Ireland, but similar burials with single toe-rings have been found on various sites in Britain from Iron Age contexts (mainly late first century BC to the first half of the first century AD), including Poundbury Hill (Farwell and Molleson 1993) and Maiden

Castle (Wheeler 1943), both in Dorset. Like the burial of an Iron Age warrior found at Alloa, Scotland (Mills 2003), all of the British toe-rings appear to have been found associated with male burials. In some instances these have been interpreted as attachments for a single sandal. One of the few female burials with toe-rings was recently discovered at Mine Howe on Orkney, Scotland. Similar to the burial at Rath the Mine Howe burial, which dates to c. 100 BC/AD 100, was found with a copper-alloy toe-ring on one toe of each foot (Card and Downes 2004; N Card, pers. comm.).

The wearing of a single sandal appears to be a symbol of sovereignty as far back as the ancient Greeks. This tradition was still alive in medieval Ireland where the single sandal was associated with kingship and the 'Otherworld'. Evidence for this is a 10th-century king of Dublin, called *Amlaib Cúarán*, whose name when translated means Olaf the Sandal. O'Brien (1999) therefore associates the occurrence of toe-rings in Iron Age burials with the wearing of a single sandal as a symbol of status or rank.

As the Rath burial is the first recorded burial in Ireland with toe-rings it underlines its importance. In an international context, it deserves close attention, as it was seemingly a woman buried with three toe-rings, two of which may have been part of sandals, while the British parallels indicate that wearing single toe-rings was associated with male burials. Further research and specialist analysis may allow a closer interpretation of their original use. Were the rings only put in this position for the funeral or were they attached to sandals indicating the rank or status of the buried person within the local society? Was there a cultural connection between the buried individual and contemporary British communities? Are we looking at an Iron Age 'princess' of Rath?

## **Acknowledgement**

I am indebted to Victor Buckley for drawing my attention to archaeological parallels.